

From Control to Co-creation: An Exploratory Study on Challenges Faced by Brand Managers in the Food Industry in the Era of the Connected Consumer

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Abstract

The present work aims to understand the perceptions of managers regarding the presented changes, focusing on the possibility of control in brand management and openness to the co-creation process. To this end, applied, exploratory and qualitative research was carried out, through eight semi-structured interviews with professionals with managerial experience in brand/product management in fast-moving consumer goods companies and professionals with experience in the food industry. The results revealed that managers recognize the power of co-creation but demonstrate difficulties in putting into practice new organic brand management thinking. It was also noticed that the more openness given to co-creation, the less control the organization will have, but the greater the relevance for those involved, and the more interactions that occur, the greater the alignment with contemporary concepts of generating value for everyone, but the protection for organizations will be lower.

Keywords: co-creation, food industry, brand management, consumer perception

1. Introduction

In current times, a lengthy discussion has been underway regarding the impact of continuous technological innovations, which are becoming faster and more integrated, on the different roles individuals play in society. Specifically considering the relationship between consumers and brands, it is possible to observe: on one hand, more active and demanding consumers, and on the other, organizations aiming to develop brands with greater transparency and relearning how to communicate not only with the consumer but with the entire community.

When addressing the topic of brand management, an ongoing discussion in the literature indicates the need to rethink the relationships between consumers and brands. The prevailing management theories advocate for the necessity of establishing a clear image in consumers' minds, managed carefully and consistently (Fisher & Smith, 2011), with the concept of branding strongly associated with the concept of brand positioning. (Kotler et al., 2017). However, the major challenge with this model is that it is becoming increasingly difficult for a company to "control" the image and meaning of its brands, especially at a time when consumers themselves share and comment on content produced by them or others. (Fisher & Smith, 2011).

Thus, some authors argue that brand management needs to adopt a new model in which the brand assumes a consistent personality, even though other aspects may be flexible. (Kotler et al., 2017). Others believe that the fundamentals of brand management were conceived in a linear fashion, considering the different stages through which a consumer should transition sequentially a model created in a time very different from the current reality. (Kapferer, 2004). This same author mentions that brand management emerged during a time of "imperfect information" economy, where all knowledge was concentrated with manufacturers. Today, there is clearly a new lever of power.

Considering the other side of this equation, consumers have also changed their behavior in numerous ways. A consumer may simply engage in commercial transactions with one brand, engage with another, identify with a

third, or, even more profoundly, co-create with their preferred brands. Increasingly addressed, the possibility of the co-creation process can be either direct or indirect. It is direct when the consumer, for example, actively participates in product development. It is indirect when, for example, the consumer discusses the brand in their interactions with others through conversations on social networks or by sharing content. All these interactions have the potential to influence perceptions among consumers and shape the brand itself. (France et al., 2015).

However, highlights the most relevant topics for brand management, despite the growing interest in subjects such as social media, consumer engagement, and brand meaning management, there are few studies that consider the implications of these discussions for managers (Golob et al., 2020). Similarly, Ind et al. (2017) reinforce that although there is research on the value co-creation process, few studies focus on the management of the process.

Therefore, there is an opportunity for a better understanding of this new power relationship between consumers and brands, primarily considering the challenges faced by managers involved in the process. Additionally, it is worth mentioning that this work focuses on strategic discussions and decisions aimed at generating meaning and value for brands, notably through communication. In this sense, one of the main consequences of this new lever of power is to understand the consumer less as a mere "target" of a desired positioning and more as an "active" and "content-generating" agent.

In light of the mentioned aspects, a scenario is consolidated in which consumers are no longer the same, and organizations, along with their managers, need to continuously explore new paths to maintain relevant relationships. These assumptions lead us to formulate the research question of the present study: 'What are the main perceptions of managers regarding the presented changes, focusing on the possibility of control in brand management and openness to the co-creation process?'

Therefore, the general objective of this work is: to understand the perceptions of managers regarding the presented changes, focusing on the possibility of control in brand management and openness to the co-creation process. Additionally, the following specific objectives (understood as support to achieve the general objective) are pursued.) (Nielsen et al., 2018):

- Identify managers' perceptions regarding the possibility of "exerting control" in the new brand-consumer relationship, as well as its implications;
- Identify managers' perceptions of the consumer co-creation process in brand management, as well as their openness to this process;
- Propose recommendations that contribute to the practice of brand management, considering the identified perceptions.

Given the timeliness and relevance of the topic, it is understood that this study contributes to both Academy, by complementing the existing literature on the subject, and to organizations, by providing recommendations on a new possibility of management.

2. Theoretical Framework

To structure the theoretical framework, two blocks identified in the academic literature are addressed: a first is directly related to organizations, focusing on brand management and brief evolution; the process of communication and generation of meanings and the presence of the control item in this process. The second block addresses the new consumer stance, presenting the concept of co-creation and the challenges in adopting this process.

2.1 Brand Management: Concepts and Evolution

Classical brand management encompasses all marketing activities that aim to build, manage, and measure the value of a brand. (Keller & Machado, 2006). It can be understood as the way organizations manage their brands, consisting of a set of implicit assumptions, beliefs, values, and techniques related to the motives (management objectives), concepts (what to develop for the brand), actors involved (organizational structure), and practices to be adopted. (Louro & Cunha, 2001).

The brand management model originated in the 1930s with the proposal of a management responsible for a marketing program focused on a specific brand within the organization. At that time, there was a perceived need for a manager with good coordination skills, focused on tactical actions, observing competitor actions, market trends, and proposing solutions to problems (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2002). Around the 1970s, the concept of brand positioning was introduced, indicating how a company should position its product in the consumer's mind. In the 1980s, brands gained more importance, widening the gap between the concepts of brand and product. In the 1990s, with the increasing fragmentation of media and the emergence of new communication channels, this

gap between what the company plans and what is perceived about the brand further widened (Batey, 2010). Finally, in the current context, brands are presented as a dynamic and social process in which all stakeholders are important, and value is the result of a continuous and interactive process involving various agents (Merz et al., 2009).

However, in seeking to understand beyond these chronological phases, it is worth mentioning some paradigms used for brand management, identified by Louro and Cunha (2001) and updated by Quinton (2013).

According to Louro and Cunha (2001), four approaches to brand management were identified, referred to as paradigms (ways of managing an organization's brands that represent certain assumptions, values, and techniques). The authors started from a matrix considering two main axes: brand and consumer - identifying the extent to which management is focused on each of these elements. Considering the two mentioned axes, they identified four paradigms: (1) Product - brand as a legal entity, with a product-centric mix and a tactical approach, placing strong emphasis on brand elements; (2) Projective - this model considers the intangible assets of the brand but views consumers in a passive manner; (3) Adaptive - this paradigm considers the consumer at the center of the process and listens to them, with the consumer's response being important. It emphasizes the brand image; (4) Relational - this paradigm recognizes an ongoing process involving both the organization and the consumer, with a greater emphasis on interactions. It is a means to create value and meaning.

Sarah Quinton (2013), on the other hand, believes that the complexity of brand management in the digital age is such that there is a need to add a new paradigm to the previous proposal. Consumers can interact with a brand by either purchasing it or not, and the experience can be individual or shared with others. Thus, the author introduces the paradigm of community, involving not only direct consumers but all agents who interact with the brand.

Additionally, when considering the brand management process, certain strategic decisions are made by the company, taking into account numerous factors. Three essential concepts can be mentioned: brand identity, brand positioning, and brand image. Brand identity can be understood as the broadest and deepest part of a brand. It is characterized by a set of associations that the manager plans to create and maintain over time. On the other hand, brand image is related to the perception of that brand (Aaker, 2007). Finally, positioning refers to the intended meaning of the brand in the minds of consumers, considering two main elements: the frame of reference (what the consumer wants to solve with a particular product) and the point of difference (how the brand will be superior to alternatives in the frame of reference) (Tybout & Sternthal, 2006).

According to Berthon et al. (2009), it is worth highlighting that these views consider that the consumer's learning process is facilitated when all communications involving a brand deliver a clear and consistent message. In this perspective, brand management is the process of creating, coordinating, and monitoring interactions between customers and companies. This model emphasizes the need to find and communicate a single brand essence - a simple and consistent communication that can be repeated. (Fisher & Smith, 2011).

2.1.1 Communication and Meaning Generation

Understanding the "brand" beyond just "product" and after presenting concepts of image and positioning, it is worth delving into literature on meaning generation for brands.

According to concepts provided by semiotics, a positioning will not be imposed on consumers. When receiving messages (initially, only the messages from the brand-owning company were considered), consumers actively engage in the construction of meanings. It is expected that from there, they will interpret what was initially intended by the organization (Crescitelli & Shimp, 2012)

Thus, the meaning of a brand represents how it is partly consciously perceived (through a rational process) and how it resonates partly unconsciously (through emotional and non-cognitive actions). The result of this process will be the alignment of the concrete qualities of a product with the abstract qualities of a brand (Batey, 2010). This same author adds that this meaning will result from extracting a series of sources generated by various agents, in addition to the organization itself, such as advertising, packaging, website, real product experiences, and word-of-mouth comments from friends.

Focusing on the brand communication process managed by the organization that owns it, a concept introduced in the 1990s was that of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC). As Khauaja (2008, p. 101) summarizes, this process represents a set of different elements of the brand mix, with its main manifestations being sales promotion, sponsorship, advertising, and point-of-sale actions. The aim is to influence the consumer through all touchpoints with the brand, once again emphasizing the importance of coherence and consistency in this process.

On the other hand, other authors criticize the application of the traditional model in the current scenario. If

traditional marketing communication assumed the premise of interrupting content through advertisements, the reality created by the internet allows each consumer to voluntarily connect and seek the information they need, on demand (Kapferer, 2004). Consumers enjoy this digital freedom and remain permanently connected to other active consumers as well (Kaul, 2015).

Finally, seeking to identify a new communication model, Wind and Hays (2016), after conducting research with experts, suggest a value creation process that would include the concept of different touchpoints but considering certain premises: these premises include having aligned objectives within the organization, incorporating a brand purpose, orchestrating value creation through all touchpoints (understanding that different interactions - whether external or internal - have potential impact and multiplication, and that sources are not clearly differentiated to the consumer), and understanding that it is possible to generate relevant and respectful communication with the wealth of data available.

2.1.2 A Management Historically Based on Control

As previously discussed, the literature indicates that the digital world has a significant impact on brand management and meaning generation. Crescitelli and Shimp (2012) summarize two fundamental characteristics of the digital environment that have brought about significant changes: individualization (each user controls the amount of information they want to receive and the relationships they want to establish with others or brands) and interactivity (communication flow has expanded between any agent, information circulates freely, and it is not possible to control the content or quantity).

Thus, while in the past it was assumed that the audience was passive and that brand managers controlled access to content, today digital media favor an experiential approach, with an active audience seeking specific topics and finding interruptive messages bothersome to their process (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2002). While in the past, communication was understood as the transmission of a message as part of an emission and decoding process, today communication aims to generate and exchange meanings in a context where the consumer assumes a role as a "reader" rather than just a "receiver" (Batey, 2010). Additionally, it can be said that the consumer also takes on the role of "sender".

Controlling the meaning and image of a brand is a much more complex task today than in the past, raising questions about whether having a fixed and singular meaning will still make sense. A brand could be many things to different people if a new model were used that allowed it to be flexible, complex, and even inconsistent. If the intangible and symbolic value of the brand gains more prominence, brands will have more meanings and authenticity by being open sources to the consumer. In contrast, a rigid or fixed brand may not provide space for engagement and co-construction (Fischer & Smith, 2011).

The traditional thinking based on communication campaigns should make room for a new strategy that aims at long-term value creation, including rethinking communication in an environment where the consumer can know as much as the brand manager (Kliatchko & Schutz, 2014). Even the term "management" is being questioned, as it implies control and the use of calculated strategies, elements that are increasingly difficult in a context of greater complexity and unpredictability (Fisher & Smith, 2011).

Vallaster and von Wallpach (2013) also include other stakeholders in this narrative. According to the authors, the simultaneous interaction among different stakeholders has changed brand management: managers can no longer control the meaning of a brand and instead become one of the actors in the process of co-creating meanings. Although the literature and traditional marketing practice traditionally adopt a managerial perspective that creates and communicates the meaning of brands to others, online platforms enable different actors (not just consumers) to have an active role in meaning creation.

In summary, there is an emerging perspective that brands are social processes (organic view) constructed through different stakeholders, and many parts of this process are beyond the control of organizations, with their value being co-created in constant negotiation. While the traditional paradigm of branding is based on control, the organic view shows that brands developed in a space of multiple conversations with different actors gain prominence. Although the manager still holds the responsibility of shaping the brand identity, the process needs to be flexible, evolving with the participation of other agents - and its value will not be solely defined by the organization. Additionally, instead of reinforcing control mechanisms, these managers need to implement new ways that enable external agents to offer ideas and participate in the process (Iglesias et al., 2017).

2.2 Consumers: New Relationships with Brands

2.2.1 The Co-Creation Process

There are numerous changes identified in the relationships between consumers and brands, and it can be

observed that not all consumers engage with brands in the same way or with equal intensity. In academic literature, various terms are used to describe the "new" consumer and the different interactions created, such as: prosumer, protagonist, consumer-actor, post-consumer (Cova et al., 2011). However, even though different terms are used, these authors identify common traits: an active, constructive, and demanding consumer in their relationships with companies; and one who sees brands more as shared cultural property and less as private intellectual property (Cova & Dalli, 2009).

According to research conducted by Merrilees (2016) on the subject, two major areas of academic research have emerged in recent years: the concept of consumer engagement and the concept of co-creation with consumers. Both streams are associated with a new approach that shifts from a consumer-centric view (where consumer needs influence marketing actions) to a consumer-driven approach (where consumers take control of the direction).

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The idea that a brand represents value for the consumer is well accepted in the literature, but the idea that consumers co-create value for brands is relatively recent (Guzmán et al., 2019). This conception arises from the emergence and rapid adoption of digital communications that empower consumers to connect with each other, building communities with shared interests. On the other hand, in an attempt to get closer to the consumer, organizations recognize that they can benefit from this process by gaining insights, reducing risks, and creating value through relevant innovations. Bringing consumer participation to the center of the brand is also a way to ensure the brand's relevance in a new context (Ind et al., 2013).

It is possible to present models that seek to understand the different possibilities of co-creation, and for this framework, two models have been selected: the Consumer Coproduction Matrix (Dellaert) and the Engagement and Value Co-Creation Matrix (Jaakkola and Alexander).

The Consumer Coproduction Matrix, proposed by Dellaert (2018), aims to capture the value created by consumers by considering two dimensions: the extent of consumer activity (high/low) and the unit in which this coproduction occurs (individual/network). Observing Figure 1, when crossing the axes of high/low active consumer with the individual/network axis, four areas are identified: (1) the first quadrant indicates the traditional model, where production and consumption are clearly separated (with low consumer involvement and individual consumption); (2) the second quadrant represents high consumer involvement, still limited to activities for individual use (e.g., customizing a pair of sneakers); (3) the third stage (networked commercial consumption) includes value creation for all, even though individual involvement may be low (for example, cases where data used by streaming platforms generate knowledge about a specific group); (4) finally, in this quadrant, the consumer plays an active role and benefits the entire network (for example, Airbnb).

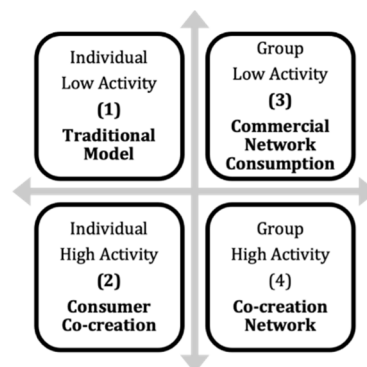


Figure 1. Matrix of co-production with the consumer

Source: Adapted from Dellaert (2018).

A second model to mention is presented by Jaakkola and Alexander (2014), combining the concept of consumer engagement with the co-creation process. According to a study conducted by the authors, four types of engagement behavior and their connections to value creation were identified. The proposal can be seen in table

1.

Table 1. Types of Engagement and Value Creation

Engagement	Definition	Examples and Propositions
Amplifier Behavior	Consumer contributions through resources such as knowledge, skills, and time directly enhance the company's offering beyond the simple transaction.	Consumers inventing alternative uses for products. Proposition: it affects value for the customer and others.
Behavior of Co-development	Contributions from consumers through resources such as knowledge, skills, and time facilitate the development of an offering.	Participation in testing a new product. Proposition: improves the offering and generates value co-creation.
Behavior of Influence	Consumer contributions through different resources, such as knowledge, skills, and time, affect the perceptions, preferences, and knowledge of others.	Consumers recommending certain products or services. Their influence calibrates others' expectations of the company, affecting the interpretation of value.
Mobilizing Behavior	Consumer contributions through various resources, such as relationships and time, to mobilize actions related to the company.	Consumers convincing others to boycott a product. It can affect the contributions of others towards the company, as well as generate a new process of value co-creation.

Source: Adapted from Jaakoola and Alexander (2014).

The first item (amplifier behavior) indicates resources used by the consumer that can enhance the offering provided by the company (for example, by adopting new uses for a product); the second behavior (co-developer) is associated with contributions in the development or improvement of offerings.; the third is influencer behavior: how a consumer will affect the perceptions of other actors about the company; and finally, the fourth is mobilizer behavior, which indicates that not only perceptions will be affected, but others will be prompted to take concrete actions regarding the company. Companies can differentiate their offering by incorporating some of the resources invested by consumers, and the more empowered consumers feel with passion and a sense of “ownership”, the more they will desire to contribute.

However, while the organization presents itself as open and adaptive, relinquishing control can result in following a different direction than planned. In this sense, to prevent the paths taken from being too different from the initial plan, Gyrð-Jones and Kornum (2013) argue that brand co-creation strategies should be based on core elements, aiming to protect the essential and non-negotiable attributes while remaining flexible in other aspects to respond to the new dynamics.

2.2.2 Implementation challenges

Despite the focus on consumer engagement, many managers face challenges in truly allowing consumers to be the real protagonists in their relationship with brands, as brands still exert control and lead that relationship. There is a dominant logic that is brand-centered, contrary to the trend of engagement that puts the consumer at the center of the process (GAMBETTI et al., 2016).

According to research conducted by Biraghi and Gambetti (2017), most organizations are far from realizing the potential of facilitating the co-creation process with consumers and other stakeholders. Current marketing practices seem to adhere to the traditional paradigm of internally devising a positioning and following action plans originating from offices to achieve them. The authors mention that despite an enthusiastic vision to adopt the co-creation process, practices centered and controlled by the organization still prevail. Companies should provide systematic access and availability, literally placing brands in the hands of consumers through relevant content and utilizing various touchpoints.

Another study conducted by Iglesias et al. (2017) identified necessary changes in the style of managers, who need to adopt a more humble, open, and participatory approach. By acknowledging that it is impossible to control all aspects of a brand in the current context, leaders, instead of imposing a vision, should negotiate with different stakeholders to understand the meanings attributed to the brands and reinforce those they believe to be valid. These same authors indicate the importance of the conversational space - the place where organizations and consumers come together (including different moments of interaction and brand interfaces). In this space, the interactions that occur (planned or unplanned) can be absorbed by the organization, and the consumer can share their experience with others. There is fluidity, where influence can be exerted but not control.

Filieri (2012), studied the contribution of the literature on online customers' co-creation and it is the first study in the food sector that analyzes customers' involvement at the “fuzzy front end” of the NPD process. Besides the

research was one of the first studies that provide an in-depth analysis of the results obtained through co-creation initiatives. According to the author, previous marketing studies on online co-creation have mostly focussed on relationships management or on the development of online communities for increasing sales, failing to discuss the innovation potential of online customers' co-creation activities. In innovation literature, some studies have investigated the online customers' co-creation process, focussing on very specific cases, such as: how to involve customers in online design competitions how users innovate the toolkits in a popular game, how companies can engage customers in virtual worlds for innovation purposes, or they studied the differential impact of users experience on the degree of innovativeness of the idea generated.

Finally, Biraghi and Gambetti (2017) argue that a key point in the value co-creation process is reciprocity, representing the company's effort to establish an honest connection with its consumers, through which the brand demonstrates its "human" side, getting closer to people and revealing weaknesses and imperfections.

Thus, after presenting academic references related to the proposed study, it follows for the explanation of the methodology adopted to carry out the research.

3. Methodology

3.1 Characterization of the study

It is possible to characterize the research considering different aspects regarding its nature, its objectives, the form of approach and the technical procedures used. Thus, according to concepts addressed by Nielsen et al. (2018), considering the nature of the research carried out, it is an applied research, that is, aiming to use the knowledge developed and subsequent application of the knowledge generated. In relation to its objectives, an exploratory research was carried out, seeking to clarify concepts and ideas on a particular topic. As for the approach, it is a qualitative study, whose main focus is to interpret a situation, aiming to deepen the questions about a given problem and obtain possible recommendations.

3.2 Technical Procedures

In this study, data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, where a set of questions was formulated while allowing for the capture of information not initially considered in the interview guide (NIELSEN et al., 2018). The interviews were conducted remotely via telephone. To facilitate analysis and record-keeping, the interviews were recorded (with participant consent) and sent to a third party for transcription.

The adopted procedure was content analysis, aiming to critically understand the meaning of certain communications by describing, analyzing, and interpreting messages from a discourse (SEVERINO, 2017). In a qualitative approach, it is worth mentioning that the analysis will be conducted through discursive text and should consider not only the evaluation of the data but also the points raised in the literature review (Nielsen et al., 2018).

To organize the data analysis process, the ATLAS.ti software was used: after each interview, the recordings were transcribed and added to the mentioned software for analysis. Codes were structured, and excerpts from the transcriptions were selected using these codes. Additionally, in order to maintain methodological rigor, several steps and revisions were carried out (a total of six revisions) during the coding process.

3.3 Selection and Characterization of Participants

As a qualitative approach, the unit of analysis selected for this study was professionals with managerial experience in brand/product management in fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) companies. Furthermore, in order to ensure greater similarity within the sample, professionals with experience in the food industry were specifically included.

Convenience or accessibility sampling was used to select experts in the field according to pre-established criteria: marketing executives (in managerial or directorial positions), with extensive experience in the field (over ten years), completed higher education and postgraduate qualifications, current or previous experience in the country's food industry.

Thus, meeting the mentioned criteria, eight interviews were conducted. All the interviewed managers have a postgraduate degree or MBA - either in Marketing or Business Management/Administration. The average experience is 18 years, with an average of 15 years working in medium/large-sized Food/Beverage companies that are well-known for their brands in their respective segments. All the interviewees hold leadership positions, such as Marketing Managers/Directors or, in some cases, professionals who were former leaders in the field and now serve as Business Unit Directors. It is worth mentioning that the group consists of both men and women - for confidentiality reasons and to avoid gender-related issues, all individuals are treated equally in the

descriptions. Although a state of information saturation was reached before the eighth interview, it was decided to proceed according to the initial plan and conduct the proposed number of interviews. However, as limitations of the method used, it is important to note that it will not be possible to make generalizations about the topic or quantitatively validate certain statements.

4. Analysis of Results

Before focusing on the proposed questions, the interviewees were asked to briefly discuss whether they observed changes in brand management over the past decade, and if so, what were the main changes. The interviewees (identified by numbers to maintain confidentiality) were unanimous in recognizing that brand management has changed and, as shown in the table below, the main points spontaneously cited follow. The completed boxes indicate which manager cited which change.

Table 2. Changes cited in brand management

Change Cited (spontaneous)	Interviewee							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Consumer-Brand Relationship/Active Consumer								
Changes/Challenges in brand communication								
Changes arising from the new generation								
Digital Presence/Digital Environment								
Amount of information available to the company								
Speed of change								

Source: Elaborated by the authors (2020).

The main change mentioned - as already clearly evidenced in the academic literature - is that there is a new relationship between consumers and brands. As illustrated by interviewee E5, there is a new power axis in which brands are no longer at the center and have lost space to consumers and society in general. In addition, the consumer is mentioned as being more active and demanding a different approach from organizations:

[...] the brand no longer plays a more protagonistic role as everyone in marketing has always believed, right? [...] the center of power has shifted significantly, the axis; it has been much more shifted today into the hands of the consumer and the general public, of the people, ultimately, than the brands. So the brands, they have been forced to take a stance [...] there is a demand for transparency coming from people, from consumers, so they want to understand where things come from and where they're going. (E5)

As a second aspect mentioned (challenges regarding brand communication), the interviewees argue that, as a result of a more discerning and conscious consumer, brand communication needs to be increasingly authentic and aligned with a specific purpose. Additionally, dialogue is also mentioned as a challenge in communication:

It used to be more of a one-way communication, with brands trying to impose their stories, innovations, and so on. But now it's much more of a conversation, a co-creation, a work of openness. It has evolved significantly. (E6)

[...] whereas before what made a brand known was actually having a million-dollar investment, being able to place a commercial on TV, now what makes it known and successful and achieve awareness, in short, achieve its objectives, is being able to be relevant within people's context at that moment. (E8)

Still considering the issue of adopting a new form of communication, E3 mentioned that due to the characteristics of the digital environment, there are no clear boundaries, and currently, many things are blurred. As an example, E3 mentioned e-commerce, stating that it is not clear what is merely a commercial transaction and what is communication.

In addition to the previously mentioned issues, the interviewees also spontaneously mentioned as challenges: changes arising from generational differences, the large amount of data and information available to organizations, and the speed at which changes occur.

4.1 Perceptions about Control

During the interviews, the term "control" emerged spontaneously when discussing topics such as brand positioning, brand image, and changes in communication.

Initially, the interviewees mentioned the increasing difficulty of "controlling" the brand image, as there are multiple agents involved in the new communication process. Additionally, there is a perception that managing the brand image is no longer solely the responsibility of the marketing department, but involves everyone in the company:

A major concern for companies is managing this, the difference perhaps being that you no longer have complete control. You can still influence, but I don't think you can control all these elements because consumers have a much stronger voice now. They have a significant influence, and there's an entire ecosystem of consumers, customers, and influencers on social media that, in a way, adjust and shape their own positioning. (E3)

What I think has changed is that in the past, brands communicated in a one-way direction, and they didn't necessarily have clear and immediate feedback on how they were perceived. But now, communication channels are multi-directional, right? [...] You can put something in front of the consumer and immediately know if they agree or disagree with it [...] All areas of the company need to have a brand management perspective. (E8)

When discussing one of the main changes identified in communication - the aforementioned interactivity - both positive and negative implications are identified. On the positive side, the opportunity for dialogue generates dynamism and is recognized as a way to connect with consumers and receive more agile feedback, allowing for adjustments in the discourse along the way. Consumer perceptions and reactions are immediate and can be used as learning experiences. However, there is a perception of greater vulnerability and risk for brands, as there is limited control over this dialogue.

In addition to the spontaneous mentions of Control mentioned earlier, when directly questioned about this topic, it is clear to all managers that control exists to a lesser degree (or even no longer exists) compared to the past. However, there are different stances regarding this perception: some managers still believe it is possible to maintain some level of control, while others believe that in order for brand management to be authentic, it is necessary to let go of this aspect.

As a result, the new role of the manager is mentioned in different ways, as summarized in Table 3. By the authors' criteria, the following are the citations of each interviewee on the subject, grouping the managers according to the interpretation of a posture adopted: regulators - interviewees who understand that the manager has less control, but it is still possible to regain it; influencers - interviewees understand that control does not exist, but could influence); and co-managers - perceive shared management of control, either within the organization or with groups in society (brand does not belong only to the company).

Table 3. Control in brand management

Interviewee	Perception of Control	Manager's role
"Regulator" Manager (tendency to maintain control)		
E1	Lower	"[...] ideally, you will listen to the consumers to understand if it resonates or not, if it delivers or not, but the control is still with the brand; the brand manager has the role of bringing these agents together to think about the brand in a unified way, to have an integrated plan, otherwise it becomes a mess [...] at least what it presents outwardly, it has to be fully controlled by the brand, and it's their control." "Do You ensure what comes out of the company, but communication is also about how you are being understood, right? Is what you intended to convey in a campaign or with the launch of a product exactly what stayed in the consumer's mind? And then effectively you have to go into the network and understand how consumers are communicating, and know how you are going to intervene to try to bring back control of the brand into your hands."
E2	Lower	
Manager "Influencer" (tendency to steer the conversation)		

E3	There's no	You don't have control, you manage, you give direction to the company, the brand owner gives the direction of, oh, I want to position myself in this way, speak to a certain audience, have certain visual elements [...] you throw that into a dialogue, which sometimes comes back exactly as you projected, sometimes not. [...] control [...] means no dialogue, I only have one direction, I speak and then I have control. But then it lacks relevance, the consumer doesn't accept it [...].
E4	There's no	I do and I ask everyone to do it is, in some way, to guide the conversation. And you have two moments to guide the conversation: before and during. The after... the after is basically Crisis Committee, it's solving issues [...]. But it's, it's a strange feeling because you don't have 100% control [...] consumers have a voice, a participation, they co-create, so it's another, it's another circumstance, you have to work in different ways, right? So it's... and you have ambassadors too, here on our side, yeah, you have natural brand ambassadors. [...] there's no more that 100% control [...] it's almost like you're straightening things out along the way, right?
Co-manager (tendency to share control)		
E5	Share	Today I see that it's harder to control [...] and actually, it's a transformation of the concept that companies should have, that brands don't belong to them, right? They belong to people. And in that, if you truly want to have a genuine conversation with people, you have to let go of control [...] anyone who thinks they have control over all assets, positioning, expressions of their brand in 2020 is wrong [...] you have control over the epicenter of the story, but in terms of extension, unfolding, it's very difficult. [...] regarding the control of what is being said about brands, well, we don't have any control at all [...] it's a bit of what we talked about, right? The consumer today, they have a voice, so people say what they want. And then, brands become more and more vulnerable in this sense... [...] co-creation is about opening up, listening, and trying to align your truth with what the consumer needs.
E6	Share	In the past, brands used to communicate in a one-way direction, and they didn't necessarily have clear and immediate feedback on how their messages were perceived. Nowadays, communication channels are multi-directional, right? So, you can put something in front of the consumer and immediately know whether they agree or disagree with it [...]. Before, you had brand managers, and now you have a community co-managing that brand. They can love you, they can hate you, and they will say it, they will replicate it, they can take a stand on your brand, and so on. [...] All areas need to have a brand manager's perspective.
E8	Share	

Source: Elaborated by the authors (2020).

As mentioned, the importance of this synthesis is to show that, although everyone verbalizes and recognizes that there is less control compared to the past, different statements indicate varying degrees of openness not only to listen to the consumer but also to share management. It is worth noting again that this is a classification based on the criteria of the authors.

4.2 Perceptions about Co-creation

If, on the one hand, all the interviewees understand that it is increasingly challenging to manage brands and maintain control over communication and the generation of meanings, on the other hand, we also sought to understand the perceptions about co-creation with consumers.

To summarize the responses, Table 4 indicates the understanding of each interviewee regarding the topic. Again, following the authors' criteria and considering the discourse presented, the interviewees were divided into two groups. While all of them acknowledge and recognize the value generated by consumers, five interviewees discuss consumers more as providers of insights, whereas three (the same ones classified previously as co-managers) mention the co-creation process in a collaborative manner: less imposition and more joint construction.

Table 4. Co-creation process with consumers.

Interviewee	Generates Value	Role of the consumer
Consumer as an insights provider		
1	YES	I think that, well, I don't think it's a common thing, but I think that if it's a brand that starts from scratch, and if it can connect with these consumers nowadays, if it can capture something that no one has captured yet, these people don't, but that's something that can be done, I'm thinking... to capture a true insight and bring something of value.
2	YES	I think that, actually, it's not about cocreation, but rather about directing what a brand can advocate for or not. I believe that global brands, with significant investments, may not engage in cocreation per se, but they can effectively engage with consumers through social media and better guide their brand direction.
3	YES	We often rely on what is shared on the internet as part of the creation process because with millions of people constantly creating, sometimes we discover on the internet a recipe, a use, a consumption occasion that people are already engaging in with the brand and you might not even be aware of it.
4	YES	[...] You have to listen to the consumer, but you also have to keep playing your game because you will always hear from the consumer, and the consumer will always complain, you know? They will never tell you exactly what to do. [...] We use it because it validates many internal matters.
7	YES	Today, suddenly, you see the consumer, is, acting directly on that, that project, that conception. So this is the most conceptual part I see of, of differences, now as to tools and how to do, is, for me it is remarkable what happened to the digital. [...] They can bring many insights, many encounters, but they need one, a moderation so that you can put it in a certain way, in this, in a strategic way [...].
Consumer as co-creator		
5	YES	[...] was much more a communication, is, a hand, so, a single hand, brands trying to impose there their stories, their innovations [...] and now much more a conversation, a co-creation, a work of openness, is, has evolved a lot [...] I think it generates value, but it also generates a pressure of fragmentation. [...] You have a pressure, a great pressure, the door is open [...] the demand is there, people, consumers so open to, to discuss and debate, and co-create together with their favorite brands.
6	YES	In the past, it was much more imposition than co-creation, right? Nowadays, we try to co-create to some extent, like 'Let me see how it is, how we can, um, enter into the consumer's voice, understand where they want to go and try to build together'. In the past, no, in the past it was more about imposing, I want to be like this and we're going to communicate like this. So, yes, I think the more open you are to co-creation, the closer you are to the consumer and the more connected your brand will be, for sure.
8	YES	[...] I think the consumer, when they offer this and co-create, it makes much more sense. [...] I think it's much easier for them to connect with something that they are co-creating when they feel that there is a relationship, right? So it's not about the brand being on a pedestal anymore, it's about the brand that I'm embracing, it's the brand that is embracing me, it's the brand that understands me, it's the brand that talks to me, it's the brand that provides a service to me. How can I be relevant to someone if I have my positioning, whether the person wants it or not, and I don't open up space for this dialogue?

Source: Elaborated by the authors (2020).

As mentioned in the Control section, a similar phenomenon can be observed in Co-creation. While everyone acknowledges that consumers can generate value, some managers limit this value to accepting insights and feedback, while only a few actively seek to include them in the process. However, it is important to acknowledge that all interviewees have a clear understanding of the power that conversations between consumers have on a brand or product – whether it is for positive or negative outcomes. This can not only impact the brand perception but also drive or decrease business opportunities:

So I think that if a brand, if the consumer identifies with its brand, and it understands, it serves this

consumer, both in positioning, as in quality of product or service, whatever it is, I think it starts to generate value in its network of influence. (E2)

For better or worse, right? Consumers can either create more value or destroy value, they don't remain passive. There's constant interaction going back and forth... the consumers were creating buzz, which generated more business for us and added value to the brand. (E3)

If you're invited to join and you don't join, it's... anything can happen, right? So, from the famous cancellation, which people encourage you to cancel, it's... From a, a bigger boycott, from a crisis that can be a [...] real crisis in a brand, with a drop in consumption. (E5)

Another aspect to mention is that cocreation can occur with other agents in the process, not just with consumers. E7 mentioned partnerships with major communication players (such as Google and Facebook), E3 cited agile methodology consultancies, while E4 talked about the possibility of collaboration between different brands:

How we convert internal data with other factors, external data, with Google, for example, we work on a business plan with Google, it is a great partner of ours in terms of media presence, just like Facebook as well. (E7)

[...] we describe the problem together and try to delve into it, give me a week to dive into your business and understand the problem, and after that, we already have a week, eight hours a day, every day of the week, with a group of fifteen people, agency people, our internal marketing team, people from the sales environment, and experts in the problem we are addressing. So we bring in a journalist, a photographer, I don't know, and at the end of the week, we have the whole problem dissected, the solutions, and the production of the solution already in consumer format, so we already come out with a campaign. (E3)

[...] today, as it is a much more collaborative world, brands will seek to collaborate with other brands. (E4)

Thus, having seen the codes that synthesize the executives' view on control, as well as openness to co-creation, the following are the conclusions and possible recommendations.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

As mentioned in the academic review, the history of brand management has as its starting point the control of organizations in their relationships with consumers; however, the influence of the internet has reversed marketing priorities (WIND et al., 2003). As consumers gain space in a new scenario, control tends to be shared or even ceded (FISHER; SMITH, 2011). If the traditional brand paradigm is based on control, a new organic vision shows that the brand develops in a space of multiple conversations, with different actors, in a flexible process (IGLESIAS et al., 2017).

Considering the aforementioned results, the research obtained a scenario similar to that presented in the literature: all managers recognize the power of co-creation but - albeit in different intensities - show difficulties in putting a new organic brand management thinking into practice. And paradoxes have emerged: the more openness is given to co-creation, the less control the organization will have, but the greater the relevance for those involved; the more interactions occur, the greater alignment with contemporary concepts of value generation for all (not just for the brand), but the lower the protection for organizations.

Additionally, interviewees who adopt the "co-manager" stance also mention another item in line with the literature: the more control has been shared, the greater relevance the brand will have - positioning consumer participation at the center of the brand is a way to ensure the relevance of the brand itself to the consumer and the community (IND et al., 2013).

Similarly, when addressing the concept of co-creation, although all interviewees claim to recognize the value generated by consumers, they also align with the literature. When questioned about the topic, managers understand the concept in different ways, from co-creation as a possible process for product development to a truly collaborative work. However, despite the different understandings of the concept, managers have something in common: the view that there is an active consumer who expresses themselves more and more (ARVIDSSON, 2008).

The interviews reinforced the point raised by Gambetti et al. (2016): although increased consumer involvement is on the agenda of managers, there are difficulties in allowing consumers to be true protagonists in this process. There is a tendency to maintain control and exert influence, still without truly involving the consumer. New ways that enable agents to offer ideas and participate in the process (IGLESIAS et al., 2017) could be provided - but no examples were mentioned.

It is interesting to note that some interviewees spontaneously mentioned co-creation with other agents (such as:

consultancies, communication partners and even other brands) - apparently, the option to carry out a co-creation process with other partners (still centralized by the company) may be an attempt to maintain control of the situation.

According Wadeisa and Sada (2015) , most of the strategies of managing the challenges of co-creations suggested by existing literature is supported: monitoring consumer-to- consumer communication, proper learning and knowledge support, instituting intellectual property rights, building platforms and virtual environments, clarifying purpose and joint objectives, rewarding structure, top management involvement, collaborative culture and flexible system, promoting transparency, open mindedness/open communication, and selection phase. In addition, based on our empirical findings we identified outsourcing co- creation as a strategy in addition to literature.

As possible recommendations to the challenges mentioned, it is worth synthesizing the main points arising from the literature and the field: (1) seeking a deep understanding of the consumer remains a priority - even with a large amount of data available, it is worth paying attention to insights and spontaneous conversations; (2) more than involving or actively listening to the consumer, it is important to allow them to truly co-manage the brand, systematically fostering actions that assist in this process; (3) the manager needs to adopt an open posture, understanding that the more "shared" the brand is, the more sense it will make to the consumer; (4) orchestrating different points of contact remains a challenge - however, there is room for brands to be more human and also less perfect.

As limitations of the study and suggestions for future research, it is worth remembering that when choosing to conduct a qualitative study, we sought to explore the theme in a structured way, but not aiming at generalization, with the need for quantitative studies for this - the adoption of quantitative methods that allow to validate hypotheses follows as a suggestion. Additionally, although managers with different roles and careers in different companies have been selected, these executives work in large food goods companies, national or multinational, with brands already consolidated - different results could be observed, for example, considering managers of small companies or that acted with brands entering the market. Similarly, the same question may be posed to executives from other sectors.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the study was conducted in the second half of 2020, during the pandemic period. Although nothing has been directly addressed on this topic, it is a conjunctural event in which everyone was immersed.

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Obtained.

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Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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