The Role of Perceived Control in Co-Production

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Co-production refers to consumers’ involvement in producing and delivering a product/service. This paper examines the role of perceived control in co-production and its effect on consumers’ evaluations of products/services. Most of the past studies have viewed perceived control as a unidimensional construct and have emphasized its positive implications. Drawing from social psychology literature, a conceptual model is developed that depicts how different types of perceived control affect psychological responses (e.g., satisfaction) to co-production differently and how perceived control leads to both positive and negative outcomes for co-producers. Implications for encouraging consumers to co-produce are discussed.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumers have started to play increasingly active roles in the marketplace by pumping gas for their cars, checking themselves in at airports, and designing products such as t-shirts and sneakers. Co-production refers to these participative roles of consumers and has been formally defined as “the degree to which the customer is involved in producing and delivering the service” (Dabholkar 1990, p. 484). While commonly used strategies such as personalization and customization are designed to understand consumers’ preferences and to provide consumers with suitable recommendations, co-production allows consumers to take part in the actual creation, execution, and delivery of the product/service. Thus, the amount of control consumers assume over the product/service is a key difference between co-production and these other strategies.

This paper focuses on the role perceived control plays in co-production. Specifically, it examines how perceived control affects consumer judgments and the conditions under which perceived control leads to positive as well as negative responses. Past studies offer insights into the relation between co-production and perceived control (e.g., Bateson and Langeard 1982; Bateson 1985a, 1985b; Dabholkar 1996; Hui and Bateson 1991; Schneider and Bowen 1995; Silpakit and Fisk 1985), however, they have two shortcomings. First, they have emphasized primarily the positive consequences (e.g., enjoyment, higher service quality) of perceived control (see Godek and Yates 2005 for an exception). Second, they have conceptualized perceived control as one-dimensional. This paper aims to overcome these shortcomings by developing a conceptual framework that uses a multi-dimensional conceptualization of perceived control and shows how different types of perceived control may lead to positive as well as negative consumer judgments.

In social psychology literature, perceived control is viewed in terms of three dimensions: behavioral, cognitive, and decisional (Averill 1973). Behavioral control refers to “the availability of a response which may directly influence or modify the objective characteristics of an event” (p. 293). Cognitive control, on the other hand, is defined as “the way in which an event is interpreted, appraised, or incorporated into a cognitive plan” (p. 287). Lasty, decisional control is “the range of choice or number of options open to an individual” (p. 298). In general, past studies have documented positive reactions (e.g., greater tolerance of pain, reduced stress) in response to increases and negative reactions (e.g., feelings of helplessness, depression) in response to decreases in perceived control (Langer 1983; Hui and Bateson 1991). Burger (1989, p. 254), however, suggests that increases in perceived control may also be seen as undesirable and may give rise to negative responses “when the increase in perceived control leads to a high level of concern for self-presentation, when the person perceives a decreased probability of obtaining desired outcomes, and when the increased controllability leads to an increase in attention to the now-predictable events.” In each of these instances the person may relinquish control, experience negative affect, and perform poorly.

Building on previous work that suggests that giving consumers alternative choices to obtain a product/service increases their decisional control (Kelley et al. 1990; Schneider and Bowen 1995), I argue that providing consumers with a choice to co-produce should increase their decisional control. Given that co-production involves active participation of the consumer in construction of products/services, I also propose that those consumers who actually co-produce should experience higher levels of behavioral control as compared to those who did not co-produce.

Previous research links option to co-produce to overall consumer satisfaction judgments by arguing that customers who are given the option of co-production are more likely to be satisfied irrespective of whether they actually co-produce or not (Schneider and Bowen 1995). In order to capture the underlying processes, I differentiate between two interrelated components of consumer satisfaction: (1) the outcome, and (2) the process of arriving at the outcome (Bendapudi and Leone 2003). I argue that the decisional control that results from the availability of the option to co-produce will positively affect consumers’ satisfaction with the outcome. However, when consumers actually co-produce, the increase in their perceptions of behavioral control will positively affect their process satisfaction.

Three variables are proposed to moderate the relation between co-production and consumer judgments: outcome, self-presentation, and consumer ability. In marketing literature, outcomes are usually differentiated on the basis of whether they exceed, fall short of, or meet expectations (Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman 1993). I hypothesize that increases in behavioral control will lead to an increase in consumer satisfaction when the outcome is as expected or better than expected. However, when the outcome is worse than expected, co-producers may feel that they could have prevented this outcome and/or attained a better outcome if they had chosen not to co-produce or if they had done something differently. In these instances, co-producers will be more motivated than non-co-producers to engage in cognitive control to reappraise the situation. In line with research which suggests that one would feel more regret for those choices, decisions, and behaviors that were under his/her personal control (Zeeleberg et al. 1998a, 1998b, 1998c), I suggest that higher levels of overall perceived control in this case will lead co-producers to feel greater regret than those who did not co-produce.

An increase in perceived control implies that the person will carry greater responsibility for the outcome, which can lead him/her to be more concerned about self-presentation especially in the case of a failure (Burger 1989). Increased control also provides an opportunity for the person to influence the outcome of an event. However, in most cases, this influence is highly associated with the individual’s abilities (Abeles 2003). I suggest that when co-producers are concerned about self-presentation and/or their ability, they will be more likely to relinquish control, experience negative affect, and exhibit poor performance in response to the increase in their behavioral control.

This paper contributes to the literature by identifying a psychological response to co-production and by delineating its effect on consumer judgments. The proposed relations also hold important implications for managers who want to encourage co-production by showing the conditions under which increases in perceived control lead to favorable versus unfavorable outcomes.

References


