

## COLLABORATIVE BRANDING

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### **Abstract:**

In the online domain, consumers become pivotal authors of brand stories: they produce brand-related content and widely share it through web 2.0 applications, exchanging opinions, thoughts, reviews, that contribute to (re)define the perceived identity of products. In this context, brand management appears to be as a complex activity, that must be “guided”, rather than “controlled”, co-created, rather than simply imposed. This paper aims to develop a deeper understanding of collaborative branding: How can a company mobilize consumers’ resources, engaging them in creative and innovation processes related to its brand? Under what conditions the co-creation unfolds its potential positively? What are the main managerial challenges that companies must address to start and sustain this process? Through a detailed case-study analysis (the Italian company Moleskine), we identify some relevant implications: brand co-creation is a challenging journey that requires time, effort and resources and a great capacity of adapting and realising fine-tuning processes; it is based on different pre-conditions (the existence of mutual benefits, the transparent and fair definition of reciprocal roles, etc.) and the seemingly paradoxical coexistence of stability and change, control and freedom.

*Keywords: co-creation, consumer-generated content, collaborative branding, Moleskine*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the virtual environments, consumers become pivotal authors of brand stories: they generate brand-related content and widely disseminate it through web 2.0 applications (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Mangold & Faulds, 2009); they exchange opinions, thoughts, reviews, information, sentiment, thus contributing to constantly (re)define the perceived identity of products (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002) as well as brand meaning and equity (Christodoulides, 2008, 2009).

In front of this growing customer power, companies' reactions appear to be still inspired by a mix of fascination and fear. As Muñiz & Schau (2011) outline, while several companies have started to solicit consumer-generated content (CGC) for occasional use in marketing activities (e.g. in advertising campaign), few have actively encouraged customer collaboration in their long-term marketing activities, taking in real consideration the role that firms can play in facilitating CGC endeavors.

This study, drawing upon the value co-creation research stream, intends to investigate the dynamics of a prolonged collaboration with reference to the process of brand development, enrichment and renewal.

## 2. CONSUMER-GENERATED CONTENT AND BRAND CO-CREATION

Brands have traditionally been considered as a firm-owned and controlled asset, that companies can build and manage through carefully coordinated marketing activities.

Consumer Culture theorists' research (e.g., Arnould & Price, 1993; Belk & Costa, 1998) literature on Service-Dominant Logic (e.g. Merz et al., 2009; Payne et al., 2009) and co-creation (e.g. Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Ramaswamy, 2011; Ind et al., 2013; Roser et al., 2009) acknowledge the limitation arising from this perspective.

Latest research on consumer tribes (e.g., Cova, 1997; Cova & Cova, 2002; Cova, et al., 2007) and brand communities (e.g., McAlexander et al., 2002; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001, Adjei et al., 2010; Muñiz & Schau, 2011; Wirtz et al., 2013) illustrates how consumers, further empowered by social media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2013; Habibi et al., 2014), can co-create value, by giving their contribution to new product development process (e.g., Füller et al., 2008), brand meaning (re)definition and other marketing activities (Jawecki & Muehlbacher, 2007).

In this context, where consumers widely generate/disseminate their own contents, brand management appears to be as a far more complex activity, that must be guided, rather than controlled, co-created, rather than simply imposed by managerial dictate (Brown et al., 2003, Asmussen et al. 2013, Christodoulides, 2008, 2009; Fournier & Avery, 2011; Ind et al., 2013).

This change has been described with many terms, among which that of "branding democratization", defined as "technology-driven empowerment of consumers, such as the production of brand meaning by (micro) blogging, interaction in social networks or producing and disseminating brand advocacy" (Kemming & Humborg 2010, p. 193). Literature emphasizes that these internet-based processes have the potential to re-define the role of professional brand managers (Quelch & Jocz, 2007, Fournier & Avery, 2011), who cannot any more autonomously craft brand stories and meanings, to be diffused through corporate monologues, but have to engage consumers (and other stakeholder) in the storytelling process.

Some commentators consider "engaging consumers" as a company-controlled, discretionary decision and, thus, as a synonymous of *allowing* them to participate in brand-related activities. Arnhold & Burmann (2010), for example, introducing the concept of user generated branding (UGB), define it in short as "the strategic and operative management of brand related user generated content (UGC) to achieve [an organization's] brand goals".

This perspective, in which the company "manages" the content created by users, implicitly considering them as a resource that firms can instrumentally use to increase the value of their offer, appears to exclude the possibility that some consumers (and other stakeholders) might participate in brand-related activities, without necessarily being invited/exhorted by an *allowing* organization. Hence, the

need to adopt a wider perspective, understanding of collaborative brand management as consisting of complex processes that can potentially (Asmussen et al., 2013): (i) be highly dynamic and fragmented; (ii) be dialogue-oriented as well as multilogue-oriented (Berthon et al., 2007); (iii) include or exclude an organization and its brand managers from a multilogue amongst stakeholders about the organization's brand (iv) not only be co-creative and constructive but also co-destructive (Plé & Chumpitaz, 2010).

The aim of this paper is to discuss how brands and their meaning become constructed and reconstructed in an ongoing, interactive dialogue, highlighting the circumstances under which the inclusion of consumers in the creative and innovation processes around the brand can be successful: How can a company encourage and facilitate consumers' participation in creative processes related to its brand? How can it join the conversation initiated by its users and revolving around its brands, without excessively interfering with the spontaneous social dynamics? Under what conditions the co-creation unfolds its potential positively?

Through a detailed case-study analysis (the Italian company Moleskine<sup>1</sup>), we will highlight some ideas regarding what companies can do to foster consumer participation in brand co-creation and under what circumstances the inclusion of consumers in the creative and innovation processes around the brand can lead to a successful co-creation.

A single exploratory case study was conducted with the aim of getting to a better understanding of the interactions that lead to brand co-creation. This methodology, by providing concrete examples of co-creation in a real context and offering informative insights (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2003) can support theory building. Even though working with a single unit of analysis allows the researcher to be close to the data, permitting them to increase the objectivity of the study and describe the case extensively (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007), the specific brand co-creation examples illustrated in this particular case study - representing a singular manifestation - should not be generalized, but rather be used as insights to guide future research.

Finally we want to point out that in the case-study analysis, the attention was particularly focused on interaction taking place between a brand community and the focal firm, even though the collaboration and the engagement of a broader firm network proved to be critical to the process of brand development and management, as it is widely recognized even in literature (e. g., Gyrd-Jones & Kornum, 2013; Asmussen et al., 2013).

### **3. MOLESKINE: A CO-CREATED BRAND**

#### **3.1. Moleskine: company overview**

Moleskine is a renown notebook's brand but, since 1 January 2007, it is also the name of the company (Moleskine SpA) that owns the worldwide trademark rights for the brand.

The company, headquartered in Milan, has several international subsidiaries and has reached a well-balanced geographical business mix, split between EMEA (49,8% of 2014 revenues), the Americas (35,9%) and APAC (14,2%). Distribution is run through a multi-channel strategy. The Group distributes its products in 105 countries, indirectly, through a network of 76 distributors ("Wholesale"), which serve bookstores, department stores, specialty store, stationery stores and museums and directly, through a retail network of directly operated stores and the e-commerce channel. Through a mixed model, direct and indirect, the company also sells customized products to business customers (companies, institutions, etc., which use them as part of their PR activities).

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<sup>1</sup> The specific company was selected because it offered the opportunity of realizing an over-time study of the phenomenon object of analysis, referred to offline and online environments.

The case study was informed by in-depth interviews with company managers, non-participant observation of the investigated websites and a detailed search of publicly available information from financial statements, internal documents and industry publications. The approach to questioning was open ended and based on individual semi-structured interviews.

**Table 1: Net Sales by Channel**

(Thousands Euro)	FY14	FY13	% Change at Const. FX	% Change at Curr. FX
Wholesale	68.159	63.085	7,7%	8,0%
B2B	18.421	15.818	16,5%	16,5%
Ecommerce	4.142	3.681	12,6%	12,5%
Retail	7.950	4.420	78,4%	79,9%
Net Revenues	98.672	87.004	13,1%	13,4%

Source: Corporate data

### 3.2. From notebook to lovemark: the story of a brand born out of the pages of a book

The Moleskine brand was created in 1997, thanks to the intuition of Maria Sebregondi (currently Brand Equity and Communication Director of the company), inspired by the reading of the book "The songlines", by Bruce Chatwin, in which the author complained about the inability to buy his beloved notebooks (that he nicknamed "Moleskine"), since their manufacturer, a small French company, was no longer in activity.

Intrigued by this story, Sebregondi discovered that a large number of intellectuals and artists associated with the avant-garde movements of the nineteenth and twentieth century, like Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Ernest Hemingway, were devoted user of similar black notebooks, with ivory-coloured pages, rounded corners and elastic closure. Hence, the decision to bring back a legendary history, giving life to a brand that only existed in the literature. Sebregondi proposed her idea to Francesco Franceschi owner of a small publishing house in Milan, Modo&Modo, who trademarked the word Moleskine in 1997.

From the beginning, Moleskine notebooks were positioned not in the "functional" area - as a tool to take notes - but in the identitarian one, as a "book to be written", namely a platform that invited its users to express their creativity and, in general, to connect with their inner dimension. In line with this choice, Moleskine notebooks were initially sold only through "bookstores" (not in the stationery stores). This also justified the premium price positioning.

First year's volume of sales (5.000 notebooks) increased 6 times the following year; in 1999 the company began to market the product throughout Europe and, subsequently, in New York and Japan. In a few years, the brand spread globally, supported also by word-of-mouth, triggered by groups of fans and enthusiasts, spontaneously emerging online.

Today Moleskine is a global brand, but it is, above all, a product - or, rather, a range of products - with a strong identity, deriving from a literary heritage, which evokes culture (the bistros of Montmartre, the avant-garde artists, etc.), travel, memory, imagination. Through its refined, minimalist design, the product reflects this set of values that customers recognize as their own and want to share, using the object as a means of expression of their own identity and creativity. A Moleskine notebook therefore becomes an integral part of one's personality. It is not only a basic, compact accessory, but also a story-telling object that releases emotions collected over time.

The brand development process, achieved with almost no investment in traditional advertising, shows a clear orientation towards a co-creation approach and is based on some pillars:

- the ability to leverage, while supporting and nurturing, the "shared creativity", derived from the strong desire to participate in the creation of the brand, spontaneously manifested by its users and further enhanced by the company, through the different initiatives carried out, offline as well as in the digital environments,
- the capability of stimulating the collaboration and the engagement of a broader firm network (Design Schools, Universities, Cultural Institutions, retailers, other re-known brands, etc.),
- a clear orientation to innovation, considered as a means to enhance the experience consumers live in relation to the brand;

- a strong focus on below-the-line communication tools (like blogs, *ad hoc* events, workshops, social networks).

### 3.3. Off-line communication and co-creative events

Since its foundation, the company has chosen a non-conventional approach to communication, investing in below-the-line activities, managed offline and online, in order to establish an intimate and deep dialogue with an international, multicultural, and intergenerational public. In the physical environment, the key communication activities are realized through:

- the implementation of global events, or through the organization of interactive events at retail, as well as creative workshops with artists and writers at schools of international design, universities or other cultural institutions.

Systematically organized in-store or in prestigious cultural venues, events are conceived to bring the brand, and its core values, to its public, facilitating word-of-mouth.

Inspired by its fan's love of peeking into other people's notebooks and sharing their own intimacy<sup>2</sup>, in 2006 Moleskine started to organize Detour, a traveling exhibit, featuring notebooks belonging to internationally recognized artists, designers, architects, illustrators, musician, writers and world class filmmakers. Hosted by prestigious cultural venues of major world cities (Paris, Tokyo, Istanbul, Venice, London, Berlin, Shanghai, etc.), the exhibit was focused on Moleskine notebooks - re-interpreted and personalized by world-class artists - implicitly inviting visitors to reflect on the ever-active power of imagination and the emotional and cognitive strength of the "physical" page.

Operating in collaboration with international Design and Architecture schools, the company solicited notebooks even from rising talents, and it managed to interact with the broader community: seizing the request for a deeper participation of its public, in 2009 Moleskine launched a context, inviting all those loving painting, illustrating, writing or creating, to submit their personal notebooks, filled with their creativity (in the form of drafts, drawings, notes, keys, photographs or designs), to have the chance to get it publicly displayed as part of an exhibition entitled, myDetour, organized on the sidelines of the Detour Expo. With dozens of editions and a permanent online gallery, these two events, did more than advertise: they helped Moleskine to define its brand in collaboration with the creative community. By involving artists, writers and designers in interactive exhibitions, creative workshops and events, the brand revamped and enhanced its creative and "legendary" aura. It shifted the focus of its story from the great artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to its current community.

With the same goal of bringing the brand to its public, involving them in creative activities related to the brand, other similar events are periodically organized in-store. Some of these events are managed in tandem with qualified partners<sup>3</sup>.

This open, participatory approach adopted by the company, registered a marked shift in 2011, when Moleskine organized, in partnership with Eyebeam Art + Technology Center in New York, a "Notebook hacking" event: during two creative workshops of 3 hours each, participants were taught to use electroluminescent materials to prototype their own Moleskine notebook of the future. Though the event itself was relatively small, it marked an important step in Moleskin's approach to co-creation, showing its will to be identified as a truly open brand: for the first time, fans were encouraged to "hack" notebooks in the DIY spirit, considering the notebook as more than a canvas, as an object that could be altered, transformed and personalized, to fully express their own identity. As we will see below, today Moleskine features its fan's "hacks" on its own website, in a dedicated section;

- visual merchandising and in-store communication. Conceiving the stores as effective platforms for promoting brand and product awareness, the company has significantly invested in Trade

<sup>2</sup> Moleskine's fan communities emerged on Flickr in 2004. Artists and creative minds gathered in dedicated groups, where they shared art created in Moleskine notebooks: travel sketches, water paint landscapes, portraits and cartoon vignettes.

<sup>3</sup> The company has, for example, a long standing relationship with Urban Sketchers, a global artist collective, with whom it organizes "live sketch events", articulated in different Learning Sessions, taking place at a Moleskine Store: during the event, opened to artists and art fans alike, registered visitors receive a free Moleskine Sketch Album and have the chance to sketch the most charming city neighborhoods, guided by 4 accomplished artists, and exhibit their work in-store.

Marketing projects, aimed at increasing its presence and visibility within Top Retailer points of sale, by introducing special displays systems, or atelier, that allow the display of all product categories offered by the brand, within a clearly identified space.

Trade marketing activities are conceived to strengthen the retail experience and increase in-store traffic, brand appeal and key performance indicators at points of sale (profitability by square meter, visit/purchase conversion rate, etc.). To reach these goals, Moleskine works with retailing partners to help them decide which of the products available in the collection they want to carry and how to customize an adequate showcase for them. The company collaborates more interactively with leading retail stores, inviting them to design new platform on which to offer their products to shoppers. These platforms not only include customized designs with and for retailers, but creative displays and promotions that both parties find innovative and of value (Schmidt, 2011<sup>4</sup>).

In order to accrue the visibility and accessibility of the entire range of products offered by the brand (even the new introduced lines), since 2012, the company has started to develop in retail, through the creation of a network of Directly Operated Stores. The direct sales outlets are designed to be a tangible expression of the brand's values: with a simple design - based on combinations of classic black and a touch of bright colors - and the reference to travel, cultural and digital themes, they "physically" represent the spirit of the brand.

- custom and limited editions. Another communication activity is represented by custom editions of the notebook, created especially for companies, organizations and institutions, such as MoMA and events like Tribeca Films and the Montreaux Jazz Festival. These have proven to be successful collaborations, offering high quality visibility for the brand and an additional revenue source for the company. The same goals are reached thanks to the creation of limited, cult editions, devoted to the coolest brand (Star Wars, Lego, the Simpson etc.), that rely on the global popularity of the respective licensors to conquer the fans of these brands.

### 3.4. Online communication and co-creation

The company proved to be able to maintain an ongoing dialogue with customers and fans of the brand, even online, through proprietary and third-party platforms. The official website, content-rich (news, videos, images), is in 11 languages. A specific section of this site, myMoleskine, created in 2009 (in English), houses the community of fans and supporters of the brand, which currently has more than 260.000 members. The official blog, Moleskinerie, was instead created in 2005, as a spontaneous initiative of a fan of the brand. Today it is company managed too. The company has its official pages on the major social networks globally (Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest, Instagram, Youtube etc.) and delivers a monthly newsletter (in 5 languages) to all subscribers.

The Internet has been one of the main drivers of the brand development and co-creation processes, thanks to the recognition and support received by the so-called creative class, particularly active in the digital environment and able to exert a strong influence on a wider audience.

In the virtual environments, Moleskine users and fans<sup>5</sup>, grouping spontaneously in communities, found the opportunity to publicly reveal and share their passion for the brand, actively contributing to define/update its meaning and identity. They started to spontaneously create a large amount of content about Moleskine, sharing it through Flickr groups. They also shared tips on their personal blogs about how to best use their notebooks, how to craft a pen holder onto a Moleskine, etc.

When the company realized that the brand had an organic digital presence, rather than try to disassociate itself with these brand ambassadors, it understood their influence and actively moved its first steps towards a participatory culture. The company first move was to create an official space for sharing Moleskine content, while simultaneously endorsing the community's social activity and

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<sup>4</sup> As cited by Thomas & Wind (2013, p. 13).

<sup>5</sup> Moleskine fans are by nature frequent internet users, learned and curious, with a particular passion for culture and aesthetics. They aren't just fans, they are often professionals in cultural and creative fields, with a high and influential web presence

channeling it. This space took the shape of events and hackathons in the physical world, community and contests in the online environment.

Clearly intercepting the desire to participate expressed by its products' fans and users, the company launched several initiatives to nurture and enhance it, starting from the creation of a gathering place, where different users groups and communities could converge, congregate and interact.

The myMoleskine gallery (whose payoff is "where imaginations meet"), created as a section of the company website, is now a major community management platform, where registered users (established artists or novice, cartoonists, designers, bricoleurs, consumers and fans of the brand) submit their work, sharing their ideas and experiences. The gallery counts more than 40.000 published artworks, mostly scans of sketches, drawings and paintings, made on the cover or on the inner pages of the Moleskine notebooks. In the last years, some of these creations were, with the authors' consent, printed on Moleskine covers to produce special editions (Cover Art Collection). In terms of branding, this fan content also serves Moleskine's brand narrative and positioning as a platform for creativity and self-expression.

The myMoleskine gallery also features videos and photos of users' creations, in addition to those that the company calls "hacks", referring to the unusual, unexpected modes in which customers use Moleskine products, somehow "diverting" from their original destination.

Fans post sketches and other content even on Moleskine's Facebook page, which has attracted almost 240.000 followers, and on Twitter company page, where followers are more than 36.000.

In order to encourage and facilitate participation and engagement from the fans, the company has invested in activities aimed at enlivening the online dialogue, asking questions, running contests and offering freebies and added value.

#### *Asking questions and harnessing the power of visual communication*

Moleskine's questions demand a mix of simple text responses and/or the submission of photographs, related to specific themes, periodically launched by the company (with a prize on offer). This trend toward the visual communication has been influenced by the shifting habits of its brand's users. As more people engage with social media via smartphones, Moleskine realized that taking a picture "on the go", using a high-resolution phone, is more creative and much less tedious than typing out on a two-inch keyboard. The company has therefore created large-scale projects that users can participate in, by posting their own images and videos. Inspiring fans to create and spread images related to the brand helps in establishing them as part of one of the world's most active, prolific, and creative online communities, engaging consumers with the brand on a creative level and obtaining precious insight that can inform new products development process. For example, with the "What's In Your Bag?" campaign, users were asked to take and upload pictures of the contents of their bags to Moleskine's Facebook page, where they were collected into an album. The project not only generated thousands of likes and comments - as readers looked at the contents of other bags (which generally included Moleskine notebooks), and shared photos with their friends - but inspired the company to concentrate its Research and Development efforts on products that could facilitate the transfer of content from analog to digital (and vice versa). By looking at the photographs posted by its users, the company realized that Moleskine clients are not die-hard paper users. They actually live in a continuum, switching from digital to paper, depending on their needs at a specific moment. In Moleskine customers' perception, paper products (essentially analog in their nature) are not competing but closely complementary to digital ones, being necessary, the latter, to meet users' functional needs (and increase their individual productivity) and the firsts, with the tactile experience of the pen-meets-paper workflow, in situations where the consumer feels a greater degree of emotional involvement or when he is far from his desk. This insight, confirmed by the market research, has led the company to launch on the market a new line of products aimed at creating, to the benefit of its users, a "frictionless" experience on the border between these two worlds<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Moleskine has launched several new "Hybrid products", that bridge the analog and the digital worlds. Recently, the company has teamed up with Adobe to launch a special Moleskine Smart Notebook, that let users easily move ideas from paper to screen. Designed to turn hand-drawn sketches into Photoshop or Illustrator files on Adobe's Creative Cloud platform, the Moleskine Smart Notebook is an actual paper notebook, but with a digital twist. It doesn't just imitate the process of sketching on paper, it is sketching on paper that can be captured, using

### *Running contests*

Moleskine regularly features contests, as part of its social media context mix. The company organizes both, one-time contests and re-occurring competitions. The prizes offered (not monetary, but supply of Moleskine products) are appealing to its fans, and showing photos of current submissions encourages people to participate, even if just through voting and commenting. Main examples are:

- An Author per month. Conceived in 2010, in order to give more visibility to the creations uploaded online by users, the initiative is still active. Initially managed through the company blog ([www.moleskinerie.com](http://www.moleskinerie.com)), the project was subsequently extended to the company's Facebook and Pinterest pages and partially modified in its rules, to let registered users contribute, with their vote, to decide the best creations among the top three selected by the company among all uploads made by the users in the previous month. The author of the month (artist, hacker, writer or creative), with the gallery of his works and the link to its official page, is presented to the community through an interview (with the support of video) on the company blog and other official pages; the winning proposal is used to create a bookmark and a cover (branded Moleskine and signed by the author) that, as a free download by users, can be printed and used to decorate their pocket notebooks;

- Creativity Challenge, a challenge of creativity that the company periodically sets to collect illustrations, handmade objects, photos, hacks and sketches made by users in response to a specific question (e.g. What's on your desk?, How has your planner changed? etc.). Users are asked to upload to the online gallery their creative proposals, tag them and vote on them. The authors of the most voted proposals, receive a pack of Moleskine products, special collections or limited editions.

### *Offering freebies and added value*

Intercepting the request for more customization options coming from its customer, around 2010, the company started publishing downloadable template designs in Moleskine format ("MSK templates"). If downloaded and printed, these pages could easily be pasted on or simply inserted in an existing Moleskine analog notebook. The idea was to help Moleskine users customize their notebooks.

Quickly, users were able to give their contribution to the creation and change of these templates, through a simple editor tool that lets them design their own Moleskine template online, and upload it directly to the open source library. Users can also choose to edit templates designed by other creators (who gave their consent to the public sharing of it), just like developers would improve open source software<sup>7</sup>.

Hundreds of fans have contributed their own designs to the MSK platform (that counts more than 8.000 templates), which is another example of a clear form of co-creation, in which the company provides a range of basic content and editing tools (that facilitate customers participation), making them available to users, who may choose to continue the poetic process undertaken by others or start it from scratch.

From a product development standpoint, even this project, as the creativity challenges previously analyzed, creates a stream of ideas that can inform and inspire the design of new products.

In the same direction of offering added value and more customization options to its users, the company created in 2011, the Artist Marketplace (Artmart), an e-commerce platform enabling direct exchange between Moleskine artists (or do-it-yourselfers) and consumers: the firsts upload photographs of their creations (Moleskine products, whose cover has been reinterpreted and customized through different techniques, from embroidery and origami, to oil paint, photography, and even taxidermy) trying to find potential customers for it, the latter can buy one-of-a-kind, customized notebooks, journals and planners, directly from Moleskine artists.

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a free Moleskine iOS companion app, and turned into workable vector files. Artists, designers and creative people can jot down an idea or draw a full-scale model even when they are far from their desks, with no connection, and they can continue working on it as soon as they get into their studio.

<sup>7</sup> In the same section of the site (MSK), the company also makes available free of so-called paper toys, models of three-dimensional objects, which user can download, print, cut and paste to carry out, following the instructions, original works of origami. The appreciation from the users of the site has been evident, with some proposals for creations that recorded more than 100.000 downloads.



Moleskine does not specifically filter the creations, except for inappropriate content. The company takes a 7.5% fee on sold items, which, according to the website, is used to finance the marketplace itself. The creators (who set the price for their creations, retaining 92.5% of it) get a virtual "window" where they can exhibit their work and become known to a wider public: the proposals that receive the highest number of "likes" by users are made more visible, appearing in a dynamic mosaic on the homepage [artmart.moleskine.com](http://artmart.moleskine.com), where it is possible to conduct targeted searches, using different keywords (artist, customization technique, price, etc.).

For Moleskine enthusiasts the Artmart is not only a place where to purchase notebooks from their favorite artists but it is also a centralized hub for sharing and discovering new work, trading tips for customizing covers. With this project, Moleskine actually enabled its creative customers to use its products as a "platform to monetize their unique talents"; the company endorsed and fostered their creations, at the same time helping fans and users to find exclusive products, in a process in which the creation of value is mutually and jointly realized.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

Moleskine seems to have succeeded where other companies failed: not only the company managed to discreetly join the conversation, revolving around the brand, spontaneously initiated by its users, but it enticed online users to move to its official community websites or fanpages. This is a result that could not be taken for granted, as research shows that company-managed community tend to be perceived as different from customer-managed ones (Dholakia & Vianello, 2011), exhibiting in particular a narrower focus (purpose) and a minor degree of perceived expressive freedom (De Almeida et al., 2013), that, resulting in minor degrees of credibility, can significantly compromise the users' willingness to continue to participate, thus hampering the community's vibrancy.

Moleskine, instead, managed to stimulate the active participation of its users' groups, even within proprietary digital platforms, interesting a growing audience of potential end-users with whom to share the values of the brand. The company could reach this goal by:

- guaranteeing a complete expressive freedom<sup>8</sup> to its users; even being aware that the firm could end up being the subject of criticism, the management assumed a leadership style open and participatory. The online spaces managed by the company are conceived to be platforms for free expression and inspiration, where consumers are encouraged to collaboratively express their vision of the brand, even through creative hacks,
- focusing on ways to enhance the appeal and value delivered to community members (for example through the offering of a wider range of customization options, or giving an opportunity of endorsement and visibility to artists and a monetization model for fan art),
- adopting a soft tone of voice and a wide focus. Of course, the company uses its website and social media even as an avenue to promote its newest products, but the focus of the conversation is widely defined and related to its users' main interests. Even when posts are devoted to present new business offerings, the products - thanks to the involvement of artists for the realization of creative videos, illustrations, etc. - are always photographed or filmed in imaginative ways, which appeals to the creative mindset of its fans, rapidly going viral;
- defining in a transparent manner the reciprocal roles and expectancies;
- providing parameters (a "soft" governing architecture) and tools that encourage, facilitate and channel users' participation, without controlling and stifling it.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

The analysis so far conducted allows to highlight that the co-creation is not an isolated project but a cumulative process, that occurs when actors integrate their resources over time, through multiple meetings, creating a shared experience that provides benefits for all the participants. To be successful, this process has to be organized, managed, facilitated. A wide array of company's choice can strongly influence the motivation to participate expressed by users and, therefore, the success

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<sup>8</sup> The company declares on its website that it never censors comments based on political or ideological point of view or of a critical nature, only reserving the right to delete those comments that are off-topic, spam, abusive, use excessive foul language, or include ad hominem attacks.

and sustainability of co-creation, that appears to be based on the seemingly paradoxical coexistence of stability and change, control and freedom. The first couple of factors allows the firm to remain consistent in relation to its core values, whilst staying flexible enough to respond to market dynamics; the second one, necessary to maintain a consonance between different kind of communication flows, is based on a clear definition of the rules of participation that leaves enough freedom to each participant.

To adopt a co-creation approach, companies have to acknowledge consumers as creative agents participating in the co-production of brand value (Kozinets et al., 2008), and have, consequently, to develop a really new, open and participatory, leadership style. They have therefore to renounce to “impose” and “control”, while trying to encourage and moderate multiple conversations around the brand, in order to explore and bring out new territories and new, socially constructed, brand meanings. This exploration draws on stability (the brand ideology, the brand’s core values), that shapes co-creation - providing a direction for creativity and a means to evaluate outputs (Ind et al., 2012) – and change, that is the evolutionary process determined by the actions of customers (and other stakeholders) that, together with those of the company, contribute to update and enrich the brand meaning and ideology.

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