Redefining Customers Role: A Case Analysis of Heytea DIY Design Strategy for Brand Value Co-creation

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***Abstract*—In recent years, the beverage industry has increasingly pivoted towards the emotional function of products, implementing strategies such as IP collaborations and cross-industry partnerships to reach potential consumers. Heytea is an innovative cheese tea beverage brand originating from Guangdong Province, China. Driven by its brand concept of creating inspiring new-style tea, Heytea continues to drive innovation in the tea beverage industry while maintaining close relationships with customers and delivering high-quality consumer experiences. To operationalize the active engagement with customers, Heytea introduced a series of DIY design strategies, particularly between 2025 to 2026. Under the Participatory Culture theory and Co-created Brand Value (CCBV) framework, this study analyzes Heytea's creative DIY strategy to extract key insights into successful value co-creation between the brand and consumers. Based on official reports and news releases, it integrates and analyzes relevant facts and data regarding the design strategy. It aims to reveal the underlying business logic and consumer psychology behind Heytea's success in engaging consumers in its DIY activities. This study finds that Heytea expands its sales focus from product alone to conveying emotional value and engaging customers in co-creating brand value, with its DIY services serving as one of the approaches. The study further explores that Heytea's experience highlights the need for competing brands to move beyond the conventional view of consumers as passive recipients of information and to explore ways of involving them in the value-creation process to achieve long-term benefits.**

***Keywords*—beverage industry, customer engagement, DIY design, brand co-creation, brand equity**

I. Introduction

In the saturated beverage market of 2026, innovation cycles in ingredient selection and flavor profiles can hardly establish brand barriers and highlight differentiation. A hit product can be adopted by various beverage brands and replicated by competitors within a short time term. Consequently, competition in the beverage industry has gradually shifted from the functional value of the product itself to emotional value, particularly among products with similar flavors and categories. With the development of social media and e-commerce, digital channels have become vital for conveying brand value and equity. According to recent research by Sarkis *et al.* (2025), electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) among customers is approximately twice as influential as social media advertising in stimulating digital engagement. Additionally, as a tangible touchpoint between brands and consumers, packaging design can trigger creative content and encourage brand sharing. Interactive packaging that invites consumer participation can play a key role in generating viral eWOM. Shukla *et al.* (2022) demonstrate that creative packaging design significantly enhances customer purchase intentions by evoking curiosity and increasing their motivation to process brand information and engage in brand. Ultimately, it is a collaboration between brand and consumer responsiveness that shapes critical intangible assets such as brand equity and loyalty. By analyzing Heytea's DIY design strategy, this study examines how Heytea recognizes and emphasizes customers' roles in brand value co-creation, ultimately summarizing its useful and transferable experiences and insights for the border beverage industry.

II. Theoretical Framework

A. Participatory Culture

The concept of Participatory Culture demonstrates a fundamental and innovative change where the public has transformed from passive consumers into active cultural producers and disseminators. While initially explored by Jenkins in 1992, the concept was later systematically conceptualized by Jenkins *et al.* (2006) as a culture defined by five core attributes: relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing, informal mentorship in which experienced individuals guide novices, a belief among members that their contributions matter, and some social connection among members. Expanded the scope of this concept, the reason content is widely shared via media is that it resonates with the emotions and identities of its members, further enabling the public to participate in the brand's social practice and identity construction during the dissemination process.

B. Co-created Brand Value (CCBV)

A brand's objective of integrating consumers into the brand community goes beyond improving its tangible performance, with the ultimate goal of achieving value co-creation through consumer contributions. Drawing upon the theoretical model of Co-created Brand Value (CCBV) proposed by Hollebeek *et al.* (2021), this study conceptualizes the communicative behaviors of consumers within participatory culture as the driving force behind value co-creation. Under the CCBV model, the customer-oriented strategy acts as an antecedent, supporting the co-creation steps of resource integration and engagement (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2021). When a brand influences consumer behavior, consumer responses including positive feedback, repeated participation and experience sharing via social media can strengthen the bond between consumers and the brand throughout the entire consumption journey, which ultimately contributes to the accumulation of brand equity.

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III. Heytea's DIY Design Strategy

Brand co-creation refers to the interaction and collaboration between a firm or a brand and its customers in the joint effort to create unique value and personalized consumption experiences (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Moreover, Carcelén-García and Díaz-Soloaga (2022) argue that co-creation establishes an ongoing dialogue and places customers at the center of business activities. Under this theoretical framework, the DIY works and media content created by customers represent the embodiment of high engagement and integrated resource along the path of value co-creation, which can contribute to increasing customers' purchase intentions, building loyal customer relationships and driving their innovations (Carcelén-García & Díaz-Soloaga, 2022). Heytea strategically engages customers in the creation of its brand culture and value. In practice, Heytea implements its DIY strategy through two main initiatives, including the personalized cup stickers and DIY ingredient customization. First of all, Heytea upgraded its existing sticker design into a consumer DIY initiative in November 2025. The original sticker designs prior to the campaign were primarily limited to holiday-themed releases, such as fixed sets of visual and text templates for Qixi and other gratitude-themed festivals. Now, the updated Heytea stickers launched in 2025 allow customers to create fully custom designs via the official website and WeChat Mini Program. Subsequently, Heytea launched a nationwide beverage customization campaign in July 2026. Covering five major product categories and all of Heytea's core product lines, this campaign provides customers with 13,840 possible ingredient combinations for creative customization, and also allows them to name their self-created drinks. Moreover, Heytea recasts customers as inspiration contributors in the campaign's slogan, fostering a cognitive shift related to consumer's positioning from passive purchasers to active participants in the creation process. Overall, both DIY strategies provide customers with a sense of immersion and ownership, turning the brand's product and service experience into an emotional interaction that fundamentally forms a model of co-creation.

IV. Achievements of DIY Strategy

A. Marketing and communication performance

One prominent outcome of this creative strategy is the massive volume of User-Generated Content (UGC), which turns consumer resources into organic promotion for the brand and its DIY events. This content features customers' DIY artworks and their ingredient combinations, shared on social media platforms such as Douyin and Xiaohongshu. According to data collected by Social Research (Lu, 2025), the DIY stickers campaign generated 10,202 mentions and 935,757 interactions across all platforms within just two weeks of its launch. And UGC accounted for 9731 mentions, making up 99.3% of the total. When sharing DIY artworks, consumers actively mentioned brand name and included relevant hashtags such as "#HeyteaStickers" and "#HeyteaDIY" in their text. This indicates that UGC was the primary driver of the campaign, and the popularity was almost entirely fueled by customers' voluntary creation and sharing. Ultimately, it achieves a win-win value co-creation that consumers gain a sense of self-expression and emotional value, while the brand secures authentic market visibility.

B. Commercial and consumer-behavior benefits

In terms of financial returns, an analysis of sample interaction data from the DIY sticker campaign indicates that approximately 6.56% of customers expressed a high willingness to repurchase (Lu, 2025). Furthermore, Heytea's DIY has reduced consumers' price sensitivity for relevant activities. During the DIY ingredient campaign, customer comments revealed statements such as "not caring about delivery discounts", "willing to pay over 20 RMB for a customized drink with extra toppings", and "drinking three cups a day" (Jiangchengzi & Liulian, 2026).

The DIY strategy has even stimulated a secondary economy on resale platforms. For instance, a journalist from 21st Century Jingji Herald (2026) found that some consumers were willing to pay additional fees for proxy drawing and uploading services in order to produce higher-quality DIY works, demonstrating consumers' willingness to pay a premium for the co-creation experience. Drawing fees range from 5 to 20 RMB, with some sellers fulfilling more than 2000 orders. Meanwhile, proxy uploading services cost 5 RMB, and one seller has sold more than 1700 orders. This high level of engagement not only highlights Heytea's strong commercial value, but also confirms its success in brand value co-creation with consumers.

C. Hetea's preventive measures

Furthermore, although earlier brands that adopted similar DIY mechanisms encountered potential risks and shortcomings, Heytea's proactive planning can provide valuable references for industry competitors. First, offering DIY options places considerable operational pressure on brands. A notable brand crisis in June 2026 provides a relevant example: Molly Tea suffered server crashes and staff shortages following the collapse of its operating system. Consequently, the brand faced three large-scale refund waves from both consumers and franchisees within a single month. Second, allowing consumers creative freedom can pose a significant challenge to brand reputation by unpleasant taste experiences. It is highly likely that consumers associate dissatisfied experiences or negative messaging with the brand and share them on social media. Additionally, based on the theoretical logic of attribution related to consumers' negative emotions (Weiner, 1985), the disappointment consumers feel when tasting their self-made drinks can turn into doubt and dissatisfaction with the brand, which undermines the positive connection between consumers and the brand. Addressing these potential issues, Heytea achieves significant success with its full pre-planning. The brand utilizes artificial intelligence to verify the compliance of DIY designs and conducts research in advance to assess the compatibility of diverse ingredient combinations. By confining consumers' secondary sharing behaviors and circulated content within manageable scope, particularly all DIY production can represent original brand image and strength.

V. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is evident that Heytea has successfully broken away from the traditional identity positioning that frames consumers merely as message receivers and brand as a sender in marketing communication. After acknowledging consumers' role in value co-creation, Heytea has achieved remarkable results in the co-creation process. These results sufficiently demonstrate that after the DIY campaign release, Heytea's consumer participation has shown strong positive performance, which is directly reflected in its sales and can be easily observed from the large volume of UGC. Accordingly, to sum up Heytea's successful experiences, this strategy is not equivalent to giving consumers completely unrestricted freedom. Heytea's proactive preparation for the legitimacy and rationality of DIY campaign preserves its brand image and reputation, thereby paving the way for deeper value co-creation. Besides, the creative DIY strategy precisely targets consumers among young generation. In response to the widespread fashion trend for creative emotional value and pursuing personalisation, Heytea extends consumers' identities from being information receivers in brand strategies to bilateral partners within the dual relationship to construct brand narratives. For competing brands trapped in homogeneous product development and sluggish innovation, the DIY serves as a medium for creative collaboration. The most pressing task for these brands is to recognize the value of consumer co-creation and translate this concept into practice. However, this study is unable to monitor and collect valid data concerning the long-term performance of Heytea's DIY strategies. It remains unconfirmed whether creative collaboration with consumers can bring long-term benefits to Heytea's future development, such as optimizing products by leveraging popular user-generated ingredient combinations or integrating consumer insights into brand narrative construction to keep the brand consistently aligned with customer demands and prevailing trends.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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