

Research on the Dilemma of Consumer Empowerment and Brand Control in Brand Co-creation of Platform Enterprises and Its Resolution Paths

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Abstract. With the development of the digital economy and platform-based business models, platform enterprises increasingly need consumer participation in co-creating brands to access innovative resources, enhance user engagement, and increase brand asset value. However, this process presents a tension between "consumer empowerment" and "brand control": on one hand, granting consumers greater autonomy can stimulate creativity, foster emotional connections, and strengthen brand loyalty, thereby improving the effectiveness of brand co-creation; on the other hand, excessive empowerment may lead to loss of brand control, inconsistent content quality, misalignment with corporate strategic goals, and even erosion of brand equity and reputational risks, placing companies in a dilemma between "decentralized chaos and centralized stagnation." Drawing on theories of brand co-creation, consumer empowerment, and organizational control, this paper analyzes the operational mechanisms and contradictions involved in brand co-creation within platform enterprises, exploring the root causes of this dilemma—such as the conflict between platform ecosystem openness and corporate strategic stability, the tension between consumer agency and brand consistency management, and challenges in governing user-generated content (UGC) under digital technologies. To address these issues, the paper proposes a "dynamic balance" approach: first, establishing a tiered and differentiated empowerment mechanism that grants varying levels of authority based on consumers' participation depth and expertise; second, implementing flexible brand management through soft controls such as value-driven guidance, community self-governance, and algorithm-assisted content moderation; third, leveraging digital tools to build real-time feedback and collaborative co-creation platforms that strengthen trust and shared benefits between firms and consumers, thus achieving a dynamic equilibrium between empowerment and control. The paper argues that platform enterprises should move beyond binary thinking and instead adopt a synergistic governance model that balances openness with orderliness, effectively integrating institutional design, technological capabilities, and cultural development to maximize co-creation efficiency while safeguarding brand assets. This research not only enriches existing scholarship on brand co-creation and consumer empowerment but also offers practical recommendations for enterprises seeking to enhance their brand management and competitiveness in practice.

Keywords: Platform-based enterprise, Co-creation of brand, Consumer empowerment, Brand control, Governance pathways.

1. Introduction

The digital economy is sweeping across the globe, and platform-based enterprises—acting as bridges connecting producers and consumers—have significantly transformed the business ecosystem and the way brands are built. According to statistics from China Internet Network Information Center, by June 2023, the number of online shopping users in China reached 884 million, with an online service platform user penetration rate exceeding 78%. Under these circumstances, traditional brand-building approaches—where companies unilaterally communicate brand values and control all aspects of dissemination—are no longer sufficient to meet the demands of an era marked by heightened consumer self-awareness and growing desire for participation. An increasing number of platform enterprises are actively inviting consumers to co-create brands, granting them rights in design, content creation, and even voting, thereby empowering them to take initiative and foster emotional engagement. Examples such as Xiaomi Community's product crowdfunding, Starbucks' "My Starbucks Idea" platform, and Bilibili's UP (content creator) ecosystem collaboration clearly

demonstrate that consumers are no longer mere information recipients but active co-creators of brand value. This approach enables companies to seize market opportunities more quickly, reduce innovation costs, enhance customer loyalty, cultivate a unique brand community culture, and gain significant competitive advantages [1].

In the wave of brand co-creation, platform companies are facing an increasingly serious challenge: as consumers gain greater rights to participate and express themselves, enterprises' ability to shape their brand identity, communicate core values, and control strategic direction is weakening. Excessive empowerment leads to inconsistent quality in user-generated content (UGC), fragmenting brand image and even spreading messages that contradict corporate values—posing risks of brand asset erosion and reputational damage. The 2022 incident involving a well-known beauty platform, where uncontrolled user reviews damaged its brand, and the 2021 public trust crisis on a social e-commerce platform due to inadequate content moderation, serve as critical warnings about the need for balance between empowerment and control. This dilemma—where "delegating authority leads to loss of control, while strict control stifles engagement"—reveals the inherent tension between platform openness and corporate stability, as well as the conflict between consumer agency and brand consistency. This article aims to analyze the root causes and manifestations of this paradox from the perspectives of service logic and service governance, seeking solutions that satisfy consumer needs without compromising brand control, and offering recommendations for more effective brand management in platform-based businesses.

2. The Dilemma in Brand Co-creation for Platform Enterprises: Identifying Contradictions and Defining the Problem

2.1 The Emergence and Current Practice of Brand Co-creation in Platform-based Enterprises

The rise of brand co-creation in platform-based enterprises stems from the combined impact of digital technology empowerment, shifts in consumer culture, and transformations in business models. Since the Web 2.0 era, social media, mobile internet, and cloud computing have enabled ordinary individuals to easily participate in brand building, significantly lowering participation costs and barriers, thus facilitating large-scale collaborative creation. Meanwhile, younger generations increasingly value self-expression, community belonging, and alignment with personal values. Rather than passively accepting brand narratives, they now seek to express their identities and gain psychological fulfillment through active involvement in co-creation. According to a 2023 survey by iResearch, over 62% of Gen Z consumers are willing to pay for products that [2] reflect their values, and user retention rates among those participating in brand co-creation are more than 40% higher than those of regular users. In practice, platform enterprises employ diverse forms of co-creation, including product design crowdfunding and content co-creation communities, crowdsourced brand storytelling, user review systems, virtual brand ambassador programs, and joint construction of metaverse brand spaces. As co-creation becomes increasingly deep and widespread, it has emerged as one [3] of the most effective strategies for platform companies to build competitive advantages.

2.2 The Connotation, Manifestations, and Driving Forces of Consumer Empowerment

Consumer empowerment refers to platform-based enterprises transferring decision-making authority, content creation rights, and communication rights—traditionally held exclusively by companies—related to their brands to consumers through institutional design, technological tools, and cultural guidance, thereby giving consumers greater voice and influence in the process of brand value creation. Consumer empowerment manifests in diverse forms: informational empowerment enables consumers to access relevant product information, production processes, and reasons behind corporate decisions; participatory empowerment allows consumers to engage in activities such as product design voting, brand naming contests, and crowdsourced advertising creativity; and decisional empowerment enables consumers to influence corporate decisions through community

voting, crowdfunding support, and similar mechanisms. The driving forces behind consumer empowerment stem from three dimensions: technologically, digital platforms' interactivity and recommendation systems provide a foundation for large-scale user participation; culturally, the rise of participatory culture and the spread of sharing economy ideals have heightened consumers' awareness of their [4] agency; and commercially, empowerment boosts consumer engagement, reduces innovation costs, and generates network effects through word-of-mouth marketing, delivering significant economic benefits and social capital to enterprises.

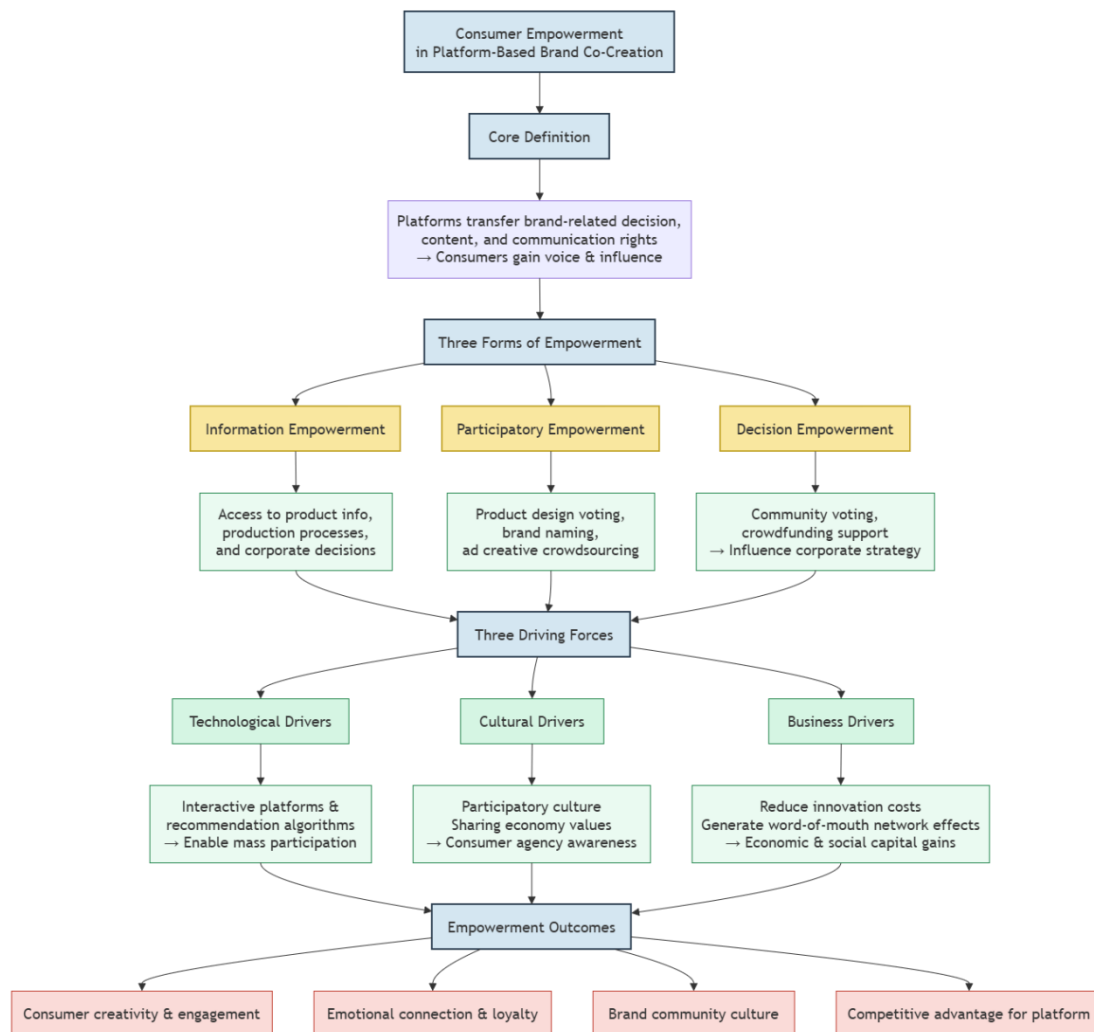


Figure 1. Figure 1 The Connotation, Manifestations, and Driving Forces of Consumer Empowerment

2.3 The Necessity, Scope, and Implementation Challenges of Brand Control

Brand control is a management activity undertaken by enterprises to maintain brand consistency, stability of brand value, and clarity of brand identity. Its necessity stems from the process of accumulating brand assets. As one of the most important intangible assets for a company, a brand must rely on long-term symbolic management, storytelling, and experience design to ensure consistent consumer perception and trust. If a brand becomes fragmented or its values become confused, it will diminish brand recognition, reduce consumer loyalty, and even trigger a reputational crisis. Brand control encompasses managing visual identity systems, reviewing brand communication content, monitoring alignment with core values, and handling crisis public relations. However, in the context of platform-based co-creation, brand control faces unprecedented challenges: user-generated content is vast in volume and rapidly evolving, making traditional manual review methods inadequate. There exists a tension between consumers' desire [5] for personalized expression and companies' need

for standardized management. Excessive control may be perceived by consumers as restrictions on free expression, leading to resentment, reduced engagement in co-creation, and ultimately causing the platform to lose vitality and suffer user attrition.

2.4 The Core Tension and Contradictory Manifestations of the Empowerment-Control Dilemma

The dilemma between empowerment and control manifests in several key contradictions during brand co-creation within platform-based enterprises. First, there is the tension between openness and order: platforms need to maintain a certain level of openness to attract more users, but this openness can lead to diverse content and differing value orientations, complicating unified brand management. Second, there is the conflict between freedom and consistency: consumers desire flexibility in the co-creation process, while companies must ensure that every brand touchpoint conveys consistent messaging and values. Third, there is the contradiction between efficiency and quality: large numbers of users can quickly generate numerous ideas, but this may also result in uneven content quality, undermining the brand image [6]. Fourth, there is the struggle between short-term incentives and long-term investment: empowering users can rapidly boost engagement and create social momentum, but without proper oversight, it may negatively impact the brand's long-term development. In practice, these contradictions often surface as hesitation in establishing co-creation rules, confusion when dealing with user overstepping, and constant tension between community autonomy and brand standards. For example, a well-known sportswear brand attempted in 2022 to involve customers in product design voting, but had to halt the project after some proposed designs deviated significantly from the brand's positioning—an illustration of this very challenge.

3. Theoretical Perspectives on the Dilemma: A Dual View from Service-Dominant Logic and Governance Theory

3.1 Consumer Empowerment Logic from the Perspective of Service Dominant Logic

The service-dominant logic theory, proposed by Vargo and Lusch in 2004, posits that value is not created unilaterally by firms and embedded into products, but rather emerges through consumers' integration of resources and interactions during use. In this framework, consumers are no longer passive recipients of value; instead, they become active co-creators of value and integrators of resources. Brand co-creation in platform-based enterprises embodies precisely the principles advocated by service-dominant logic: a brand is no longer static information unilaterally defined and disseminated by the firm, but rather a dynamic network [7] of meanings co-evolved through ongoing dialogue between the company and its consumers. From this perspective, consumer empowerment is both reasonable and inevitable—only when consumers have a voice, choice, and decision-making power can their knowledge, skills, and creativity be fully leveraged to maximize brand value creation. Service-dominant logic also emphasizes relationality and contextuality; value co-creation within specific socio-cultural contexts requires communication, negotiation, and mutual adaptation to reach consensus. Therefore, platform enterprises should establish equitable platforms for dialogue, viewing consumers as co-builders of the brand rather than mere managers, thereby awakening their agency and fostering emotional connections. This provides strong theoretical support for consumer empowerment, yet it overlooks the importance of brand control.

3.2 Brand Control Mechanisms from the Perspective of Governance Theory

Governance theory originates from research in institutional economics and organizational management, primarily exploring how order can be maintained and goals achieved within complex systems involving multiple participants through institutional arrangements, power distribution, and incentive mechanisms. Applying governance theory to the context of platform-based brand co-creation effectively explains the essence and implementation pathways [8] of brand control. From a

governance perspective, the primary challenge for platform enterprises is preventing opportunism, reducing communication costs, and safeguarding brand assets within an open ecosystem. A brand represents an intangible asset formed through long-term corporate investment and possesses strong characteristics of a public good—everyone benefits from its positive reputation, yet the actions of any single individual can damage it. This necessitates deliberate brand governance, meaning that companies must establish clear property rights, behavioral norms, and penalty mechanisms to prevent brand assets from being wasted or diluted. Governance theory also emphasizes that institutional design operates at multiple levels: formal institutions such as user agreements, content moderation standards, and intellectual property protection rules; and informal institutions including community culture, value orientations, and reputation mechanisms. In practice, brand control can be implemented through various approaches: hierarchical governance relies on corporate authority and direct management; market governance leverages price signals and competitive dynamics to influence user behavior [9]; and network governance focuses more on building trust, mutual benefit, and community self-governance. While governance theory provides a theoretical foundation for effective brand control, it also raises the challenge of striking a balance between control and empowerment.



Figure 2. Framework of Brand Control Mechanisms from the Perspective of Governance Theory

3.3 Analysis of the Advantages and Limitations of Two Theoretical Perspectives

Service-dominant logic and governance theory offer valuable perspectives for understanding the challenges of brand co-creation from the angles of value creation and order maintenance, respectively, yet each has its strengths and limitations. Service-dominant logic emphasizes consumers' agency and creative capacity, advocating empowerment to motivate user participation and achieve co-created value—aligning well with evolving consumer culture in the digital era and guiding platform-based enterprises in developing user-centered branding strategies. However, it places excessive emphasis on openness and fairness, overlooking issues such as brand asset protection and consistency of brand values, and fails to provide effective solutions for problems like low-quality user-generated content or loss of brand image control. Governance theory, by contrast, offers a detailed framework for maintaining order and achieving objectives through institutional design in multi-stakeholder settings, providing brands with a toolkit and methodology for control—particularly relevant [10] in addressing risks of opportunism, coordination costs, and incentive-constraint mechanisms. Nevertheless, governance theory typically assumes a power imbalance between governors and the governed, viewing consumers as objects requiring management and constraint rather than equal partners in collaboration. This managerial mindset may suppress consumer engagement and provoke resistance. Moreover, the two theories differ significantly in ontological assumptions, value orientations, and analytical focus: service-dominant logic prioritizes relationality, reciprocity, and symbiosis, while governance theory emphasizes efficiency, normativity, and controllability. These contrasting theoretical viewpoints precisely reflect the tension between empowerment and control that platform-based enterprises face.

3.4 Exploring the Necessity and Feasibility of Theoretical Integration

To truly resolve the tension between empowerment and control in brand co-creation within platform-based enterprises, we cannot remain confined to a purely service-dominant logic perspective. Instead, we must seek integration points between these two frameworks. This is because real-world challenges abound—platforms need to empower consumers to unleash their creativity for value co-creation, while simultaneously managing brand assets to prevent damage and chaos. Thus, a single theoretical lens fails to provide comprehensive explanations or guidance. However, service-dominant logic and governance theory can be effectively integrated. The resource integration and value co-creation emphasized by service-dominant logic require institutional foundations to function properly, just as governance theory's focus on maintaining order aims at fostering value creation rather than mere control [11]. Therefore, resolving this issue calls for establishing a model of "empowering governance"—one that respects consumers' agency and capacity for co-creating value, and leverages flexible institutions, technological tools, and cultural guidance to achieve a balance between "bounded empowerment" and "humane control," transforming the relationship from opposition into collaboration.

4. Resolving the Dilemma: Constructing a Theoretical Framework Based on a Balancing Mechanism

4.1 Contractual Design Mechanism: Institutional Arrangements for Defining the Boundaries of Rights and Responsibilities

Contract design is a fundamental institutional arrangement for resolving the tension between empowerment and control. At its core, it defines in advance—explicitly or implicitly—the rights, obligations, and benefit-sharing mechanisms of platform companies and consumers during brand co-creation. This is not a traditional legal contract but rather a comprehensive governance structure encompassing formal rules, community norms, and technical protocols. In brand co-creation by platform enterprises, contract design must clearly outline the scope of consumer authority in areas such as content creation, design participation, and promotion, while also establishing baseline

requirements regarding quality standards, ethical guidelines, and intellectual property rights. Take Xiaohongshu and Bilibili as examples: in recent years, both platforms have developed detailed creator agreements, community codes, and content review standards, encouraging user-generated content while reserving the right to remove material that violates brand values. The effectiveness of contract design closely depends on its transparency and flexibility. Platforms need to openly communicate rules, provide case studies, and offer user education to reduce information asymmetry, enabling consumers to understand [12] expectations clearly before participating. Moreover, contracts should be sufficiently flexible to adapt to shifts in brand strategy, market conditions, and user feedback. Such institutionalized allocation of rights and responsibilities can effectively reduce friction costs during co-creation, and through targeted incentives and constraints, guide consumer behavior in alignment with corporate objectives—ensuring brand image and value are protected while preserving creative freedom.

4.2 Boundary Resource Mechanism: Flexible Control Strategies under Platform Architecture

Boundary resources are a concept derived from platform ecology, referring to the use of technical interfaces, data formats, development tools, and other "boundary resources" to influence the actions of external participants in a non-coercive, guiding manner. In the process of brand co-creation, platforms can offer a suite of modular co-creation toolkits, establish parameterized content generation frameworks, and implement intelligent quality inspection systems. These mechanisms grant consumers creative freedom while subtly embedding brand standards into an "invisible track." For example, Nike's NIKEiD customization platform allows customers to select shoe colors, patterns, and other features. However, due to technical constraints, users can only choose from predefined options regarding color, materials, and logo placement. This approach provides room for personalization while ensuring the final product aligns with the brand's aesthetic vision. The advantage here lies in integrating management logic into technology rather than enforcing rules directly—consumers naturally follow these guidelines as they use the tools, avoiding resistance [13] that might arise from overt control. Moreover, boundary resources are scalable and flexible: platforms can assign different levels of tool access based on users' skill levels and trustworthiness. Experienced users enjoy greater creative autonomy, while beginners operate under stricter parameters. With advances in digital technology, this mechanism becomes increasingly effective. Features such as AI-driven content recommendations, real-time scoring, and automated compliance checks form a dynamic regulatory network, enabling platforms to quickly identify and amplify user-generated content that aligns with brand identity, while promptly suppressing material that could harm the brand's reputation.

4.3 Dynamic Coordination Mechanism: Contextualized Balance between Empowerment and Control

The dynamic coordination mechanism breaks away from traditional fixed institutional arrangements by emphasizing flexible combinations of empowerment and control tailored to the different stages, contexts, and characteristics of participants involved in co-creation across brands. Underlying this mechanism are contingency theory and the concept of contextualized governance—[14] recognizing that there is no one-size-fits-all optimal balance. Companies must be able to promptly detect market signals, user sentiments, and brand crises, then adjust accordingly based on these insights. During the idea generation phase of brand co-creation, platforms tend to grant consumers greater freedom, encouraging them to unleash their imagination and pursue bold innovations, where tolerance for failure is high and diversity takes precedence over consistency. In contrast, during the brand promotion phase, control significantly increases, with platforms using content review, expert evaluation, and user voting to vet final outputs. This phased, adaptive management approach has been effectively implemented on the LEGO Ideas platform: user-submitted designs are initially fully open, but when commercial production is considered, they undergo rigorous brand compliance reviews. Moreover, dynamic coordination also involves handling unexpected situations—for instance, if a user-generated content sparks public controversy or

negatively impacts the brand, the platform swiftly shifts from an empowered state to centralized control, quickly restricting the user's privileges, issuing statements, or taking corrective actions to prevent escalation. The success of this mechanism depends on long-term collaboration and trust between companies and consumers. Platforms must ensure transparency in decision-making, maintain regular governance communication, and adopt fair and impartial dispute resolution processes so that users understand and support temporary control measures.

4.4 Construction and Logical Elucidation of an Integrative Theoretical Framework

Based on contract design, boundary resources, and dynamic coordination, this paper proposes a comprehensive approach to resolving the dilemma between "consumer empowerment" and "brand control." The core idea is grounded in service-dominant logic and platform governance theory, viewing brand co-creation as an ongoing process of communication and collaboration among multiple stakeholders within a value co-creation network—rather than a one-way relationship where firms unilaterally provide or consumers passively accept. This framework consists of three interrelated components: institutionally, contract design establishes the foundational rules of engagement, initially delineating the balance between empowerment and control; technically, boundary resources integrate governance principles into the platform architecture, enabling non-intrusive behavioral guidance; and procedurally, dynamic coordination mechanisms respond to environmental changes, ensuring flexibility and adaptability in governance. These elements do not operate independently but mutually reinforce each other: contract design provides legitimacy for setting parameters of boundary resources, technical feedback from these resources supports data-driven dynamic coordination, and insights gained through coordination inform the refinement and evolution of contractual arrangements. A key advantage of this approach lies in moving beyond binary perspectives that emphasize either control or empowerment alone, instead treating them as complementary tools within a governance toolkit. Enterprises can strategically position themselves along the "empowerment-control" continuum according to different stages of brand development, market competition, and consumer maturity. Furthermore, the framework emphasizes pluralistic governance, advocating not only for platform enterprises but also for self-governing core user communities and oversight by third-party professional institutions, thereby distributing governance pressure across multiple actors. In practice, platform companies should establish a cross-functional brand co-creation governance committee, bringing together teams from technology, legal affairs, branding, and user operations to regularly assess governance effectiveness and adjust [16] strategic combinations accordingly. This integrated framework not only effectively mitigates the structural tension between empowerment and control but also enables platform businesses to transition from short-term crisis management toward long-term ecosystem cultivation, achieving sustainable brand co-creation through coordinated governance rooted in institutionalization, technological integration, and procedural adaptability.

5. Conclusions

This paper addresses the dilemma between "consumer empowerment" and "brand control" in brand co-creation within platform-based enterprises, arguing that this issue is not merely a management challenge but rather a profound governance problem arising from the transformation of value creation models in the platform economy era. The root causes of this predicament lie primarily in the tension between platform ecosystem openness and brand strategy consistency, the conflict between consumer agency and corporate control, and the increased governance complexity brought about by the surge of user-generated content enabled by digital technologies. Traditional binary approaches—either tightening control at the expense of innovation or fully relinquishing control leading to chaos—are no longer sufficient for the development needs of platform enterprises. Drawing on service logic and platform governance perspectives, this paper proposes an integrated solution comprising contract

design mechanisms, boundary resource mechanisms, and dynamic coordination mechanisms to address these challenges.

Theoretically, this paper breaks away from previous literature that framed empowerment and control as opposing forces. Instead, it proposes that through institutional arrangements, technological applications, and contextual adjustments, empowerment and control can achieve a mutually beneficial relationship, thereby expanding research [17] on brand co-creation and consumer empowerment. In practical terms, this perspective offers valuable guidance for platform-based enterprises, enabling them to move beyond binary choices and instead pursue win-win collaboration by combining multiple strategies—harnessing user engagement while safeguarding their brand interests. Future work will involve empirical studies on governance models suitable for different industries and platforms, as well as examining the impact of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence on the empowerment-control dynamic, thus continuously advancing both the theory and practice of brand co-creation in platform enterprises.

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