

## Consumer Participation in Co-Creation: Exploring Its Role in Shaping Brand Image

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### Abstract

**Purpose:** This study examines how consumer participation in co-creation influences the brand image of Teh Botol Sosro within a participatory marketing context. Recent research has increasingly shifted from firm-centered branding toward consumer involvement in co-creating brand value and meaning through digital and social media interactions. However, prior studies have often focused on consumers with established brand relationships, leaving limited understanding of how non-loyal consumers experience open co-creation initiatives. This study addresses this gap by examining how both loyal and non-loyal consumers construct brand meaning through participation in the 2025 Teh Botol Sosro Packaging Design Competition.

**Methods:** A descriptive qualitative approach with a phenomenological method was employed. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with six purposively selected participants, comprising loyal and non-loyal consumers as well as winners and non-winners. Data were analyzed through data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing.

**Findings:** Consumer participation functioned as an experiential mechanism that strengthened brand image through cognitive, emotional, and creative engagement. Access and risk-benefit considerations were more prominent than dialogue and transparency. Participation generated stronger, more favorable, and distinctive brand associations, while non-loyal consumers also contributed to brand meaning through creative participation.

**Originality:** This study extends co-creation research by positioning loyal and non-loyal consumers as active meaning-makers in participatory brand image formation, offering empirical insight into how open creative participation can reshape brand perceptions beyond pre-existing brand loyalty.

**Keywords:** Co-creation, Brand Image, Consumer Participation, Participatory Culture, Non-Loyal Consumers.

### Introduction

Teh Botol Sosro is one of Indonesia's long-established beverage brands and is strongly associated with local cultural identity. Its longevity has been supported by its historical roots, consistent brand identity, and sustained efforts to maintain product quality and brand image. However, long-established brands increasingly face challenges arising from changing consumer preferences, emerging competitors, and evolving expectations regarding brand communication. These conditions require legacy brands to continuously adapt their branding and marketing strategies while maintaining the authenticity and heritage that distinguish them from newer competitors (He et al., 2020).

Previous research suggests that brand longevity can strengthen consumer trust, increase purchase intention, and facilitate faster purchase decisions because consumers

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tend to perceive long-established brands as more familiar and reliable (Liu, 2025). However, longevity does not automatically guarantee market leadership. Teh Botol Sosro continues to face strong competition in Indonesia's ready-to-drink packaged tea market. According to the Top Brand Index, Teh Botol Sosro recorded a score of 21.70% in 2025, placing it second behind Teh Pucuk Harum, which recorded 31.30%.

As shown in Table 1, the Top Brand Index from 2021 to 2025 demonstrates different performance patterns among major ready-to-drink packaged tea brands. Teh Pucuk Harum consistently maintained the leading position, although its index fluctuated from 36.80% in 2021 to 31.30% in 2025. In comparison, Teh Botol Sosro increased from 18.60% in 2021 to 21.70% in 2025 but remained below the market leader throughout the five-year period. This competitive position indicates that a strong historical identity alone may not be sufficient to maintain market leadership. Established brands must also develop strategies that keep consumers actively engaged with the brand and its meaning.

Table 1. Comparison of the Top Five Brand Entries in the 'Ready-to-Drink Packaged Tea' Category, 2021–2025

| No | Brand Name      | 2021    | 2022    | 2023    | 2024    | 2025    |
|----|-----------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| 1  | Teh Pucuk Harum | 36.80 % | 32.60 % | 30.60 % | 29.60 % | 31.30 % |
| 2  | Teh Botol Sosro | 18.60 % | 20.10 % | 18.80 % | 20.00 % | 21.70 % |
| 3  | Teh Gelas       | 12.50 % | 10.50 % | 9.30 %  | 6.20%   | 6.30 %  |
| 4  | Fretea          | 11.80 % | 10.40 % | 11.00 % | 12.00 % | 10.80 % |
| 5  | Fruit Tea       | -       | -       | -       | 8.30 %  | 9.20 %  |

Note: Data obtained from the comparison feature of the top 5 packaged tea brands for the 2021–2025 period on <https://topbrand-award.com/>

These challenges are further intensified by increasing consumer demand for packaged tea products, encouraging many companies to introduce new product variants and adopt more competitive branding strategies. Tamtomo & Goebel (2023) highlight that both global and local brands, including Teh Botol Sosro, compete for consumer attention through branding strategies that combine local and global identity constructs to appeal to aspirational consumer segments. In the Indonesian context, Ilyas et al. (2020) found that brand awareness, including brand recall, brand recognition, and brand image, significantly influences consumer decision-making and repurchase intention. The greater the familiarity with a brand, the more likely consumers are to consider it in their purchasing decisions. Therefore, established brands need to continuously innovate and adopt engagement-driven strategies to remain relevant, particularly among digitally native consumers who increasingly expect opportunities to interact with brands.

In response to these challenges, Teh Botol Sosro has implemented participatory digital activation strategies, including its annual packaging design competition. This initiative represents a form of co-creation in which consumers are invited to contribute directly to the visual representation and communication of the brand. The 2025 packaging design competition was selected as the empirical context of this study because it provides an open participatory platform that is accessible not only to loyal consumers but also to members of the general public who may have limited prior attachment to the brand. As the most recent implementation of this initiative, the 2025 competition also provides a timely context for examining current consumer-brand interaction dynamics.

From a theoretical perspective, product and branding strategies play a crucial role in shaping consumer choices. Previous studies suggest that the attractiveness of product

assortment, including its size and composition, significantly influences consumer decision-making (Maesen & Lamey, 2023). When competing brands offer assortments that are perceived as more aligned with consumer preferences and easier to evaluate, consumers are more likely to switch brands (Donnelly et al., 2020). However, contemporary marketing is no longer determined solely by product-related factors. Marketing communication has increasingly shifted toward participatory approaches in which consumers are no longer positioned merely as passive recipients of brand messages but as active contributors to the construction of brand meaning. Recent research on customer brand co-creation similarly emphasizes consumers' active role in creating brand value through digital and social media interactions (Le et al., 2022; Siano et al., 2022). Traditionally, brand image was conceived as a unidirectional construct, created by firms and communicated to consumers (Buhalis & Park, 2021). The evolution of consumer expectations, alongside the rapid growth of e-commerce and social media, has encouraged a more participatory approach to brand building, in which multiple stakeholders can actively contribute to the creation of brand meaning and value (Orazi et al., 2017).

This shift reflects a broader transformation in marketing communication, where the boundaries between brands and consumers are increasingly blurred. Participatory communication enables consumers to engage in value co-creation through activities such as user-generated content, allowing them to contribute their ideas, interpretations, and creative expressions to brand-related communication. Lorenzo-Romero et al. (2021) found that active consumer participation in digital brand strategies can strengthen emotional connections between consumers and brands. However, previous studies on participatory engagement often involve consumers with a certain level of loyalty, attachment, or prior relationship with the brand.

In contrast, Teh Botol Sosro's packaging design competition is open to a broader audience, including non-loyal consumers who may have limited prior experience with the brand. This creates a different participatory dynamic because brand meaning may be shaped not only by existing consumers but also by individuals whose perceptions are formed or altered through direct creative engagement. In this context, participants do not merely receive firm-generated communication; they also contribute ideas and creative outputs that may become part of their experience and interpretation of the brand. User-generated content not only affects relationships with loyal consumers but also influences the perceptions of potential consumers. Both firm-created content and user-generated content significantly impact brand equity and purchase intention (Laestadius & Wahl, 2017). While firm-created content enhances brand awareness and perceived quality, user-generated content is more effective in building emotional connection and trust, particularly when supported by social proof. Despite the growing importance of participatory marketing, previous studies have frequently examined brand image from a firm-centered or managerial perspective, focusing on branding strategies and managerial decisions (Sarkar & Banerjee, 2019). For example, *the Brandmorphosis Analysis of Teh Botol Sosro* highlights how the brand has maintained its position through consistency, adaptation, and strategic transformation. While such studies provide valuable insights into how brands construct their identity, they offer limited understanding of how brand image is subjectively experienced and interpreted by consumers, especially those who actively participate in brand-related activities. Furthermore, limited research has explored how participatory experiences in open digital co-creation initiatives shape brand image among consumers with different levels of prior brand attachment, particularly non-loyal consumers.

This gap is particularly relevant in the context of local brands, where cultural identity and public participation play a significant role in shaping brand meaning (Nguyen et al., 2025). Previous research has also given limited attention to how individuals with different levels of prior brand attachment participate in the construction of brand meaning through open co-creation initiatives (Carah & Brodmerkel, 2020). The novelty of this study lies in examining brand image formation through the lived participatory experiences of both loyal and non-loyal consumers in an open digital co-creation initiative. While previous research has primarily emphasized consumers with existing brand relationships or examined brand meaning from a firm-centered perspective, this study focuses on how individuals with different levels of prior brand attachment cognitively, emotionally, and creatively contribute to the construction of brand meaning through direct participation. In doing so, the study extends existing discussions of participatory brand building by highlighting non-loyal consumers as active contributors to brand image formation, an aspect that remains underexplored in existing research (Carah & Brodmerkel, 2020). By examining the 2025 Teh Botol Sosro packaging design competition, this research also provides an empirical perspective on participatory brand image formation within the context of a long-established Indonesian local brand, where cultural identity and public participation are particularly relevant to the construction of brand meaning (Nguyen et al., 2025).

To address this gap, this study adopts a descriptive qualitative approach with a phenomenological orientation, as this approach is appropriate for capturing the lived experiences and subjective interpretations of participants involved in the co-creation process. Specifically, this study aims to explore how participatory experiences in the 2025 Teh Botol Sosro packaging design competition shapes perceptions of brand image among consumers with different levels of prior brand loyalty. By focusing on participants' subjective experiences, this study positions consumers not merely as recipients of brand messages but as active agents who contribute to the construction of brand meaning. Practically, this research provides insights for brands into the strategic value of participatory engagement and user-generated content in building a relevant and meaningful brand image in the era of two-way communication.

The role of consumers in marketing communication has evolved significantly, shifting from passive audiences to active participants who engage cognitively, emotionally, and creatively with brands (Dastane et al., 2025). Traditionally, consumers were primarily understood as recipients of firm-generated content (FGC), with limited opportunities to respond to, contest, or co-create brand narratives (Li et al., 2023). However, this perspective has been challenged by the emergence of participatory culture, in which consumers are no longer merely consumers of content but also contributors to its creation and circulation. Jenkins' concept of affective economics highlights this transformation by positioning consumers-as socially connected, emotionally engaged, and actively involved in shaping brand-related meanings (Nørreklit & Trenca, 2021). As a result, consumers increasingly act as influential agents who can shape, strengthen, or even challenge brand image through their interactions and contributions (Tajvidi et al., 2020).

Empirical studies further support this shift toward participatory engagement. López-Mas et al. (2022) demonstrate that involving consumers in packaging design can produce outcomes that are equally or even more appealing than those developed solely by firms, highlighting the potential effectiveness of co-creation strategies. Similarly, Dretsch et al. (2024) find that co-creation activities emphasizing brand meaning lead to higher levels of digital consumer engagement, particularly among consumers with strong

prior attachment to the brand. In addition, packaging design has been recognized as a critical branding tool, as its visual and functional elements contribute to shaping consumer perceptions through repeated interaction (Srivastava et al., 2022).

Beyond product-related aspects, participatory approaches can enhance the relevance and meaningfulness of brand experiences by involving consumers directly in creative and brand-related design processes. These findings collectively suggest that consumers play an active role in shaping brand-related meanings through their experiences, interpretations, and creative contributions. To further conceptualize this participatory role, the DART framework provides a relevant theoretical foundation for understanding how firms and consumers jointly create value through interactive engagement. This framework reflects a shift from a firm-centered approach toward a more collaborative perspective, where the market is viewed as a space for co-creating experiences rather than merely targeting consumers (Lavikka et al., 2017).

The DART framework consists of four dimensions. The *first* element, dialogue (D), refers to two-way interactions that allow consumers to express ideas and creativity rather than passively receiving messages. The *second* element, access (A), highlights the ability of consumers to obtain information, resources, and brand-related content through digital platforms, enabling a deeper understanding of brand values. The *third* element, risk-benefit (R), reflects the balance between the potential risks, such as public evaluation of consumer-generated work, and the benefits gained, including recognition and relationship-building opportunities. The *final* element, transparency (T), emphasizes openness in processes, evaluation mechanisms, and communication, which fosters trust and perceived credibility (Klafke et al., 2021). Through this framework, consumers are positioned as strategic contributors to brand experience rather than mere targets of marketing communication, highlighting how participatory involvement can influence the formation of brand-related perceptions.

Brand image in contemporary marketing is increasingly shaped through participatory processes that involve consumers as active contributors in co-creation activities. Brand image has been widely conceptualized as a set of perceptions held in consumers' memory and formed through associations linked to a brand (Kotler & Keller, 2016). These perceptions are inherently dynamic and subjective, because they are rooted in individual cognition and shaped by personal experiences and interpretations (Van Quang & Anh, 2025). Extending this perspective, Nuralam et al. (2025) conceptualize brand image as a set of extrinsic attributes that can be perceived and evaluated by consumers even prior to actual product use, highlighting the importance of pre-consumption experiences in shaping brand evaluation.

Brand image is not a singular construct but rather a structured set of associations that are cognitively stored in consumers' minds. These associations can emerge from direct consumption experiences, marketing communication, or participatory interactions between consumers and brands. In this context, digital activation strategies involving consumer participation can play an important role in shaping brand image through personal experiences and the symbolic meanings attached to the brand. This aligns with the co-creation perspective, where consumers are no longer passive recipients of messages but active contributors in generating value, meaning, and brand identity (Klafke et al., 2021). Through digital interaction and creative content production, consumers may therefore develop emotional and cognitive associations that contribute to brand image formation.

From a conceptual standpoint, brand image can be understood through different

types of brand associations, which encompass both functional and symbolic dimensions. These include product-related attributes, such as packaging and physical characteristics, as well as non-product-related attributes, such as price and usage situations (Keller & Swaminathan, 2019). Brand associations also reflect the benefits perceived by consumers, which may be functional, experiential, or symbolic in nature. Functional benefits relate to the practical utility of a product, experiential benefits refer to the feelings and sensory experiences associated with its use, while symbolic benefits reflect the social meaning, identity, or self-expression derived from the brand.

Beyond identifying the types of associations, it is also important to understand their quality in shaping brand image. Keller & Swaminathan (2019, pp. 76-77) propose three dimensions of brand associations: strength, favorability, and uniqueness. The strength of an association depends on how information is encoded and retained in consumers' memory, which is influenced by the depth of cognitive processing and prior brand knowledge. Favorability refers to the extent to which these associations are perceived positively and aligned with consumer needs, ultimately influencing attitudes toward the brand. Meanwhile, uniqueness reflects the degree to which a brand is perceived as distinctive compared to its competitors, enabling it to occupy a specific position in consumers' minds.

In the context of this study, these conceptualizations are particularly relevant because brand image is explored through the lived experiences of participants involved in a packaging design competition. Participatory engagement allows consumers to actively construct brand associations based on their personal interpretations and creative involvement. As a result, brand image is shaped not only by firm-driven communication but also co-created through consumer experiences. Understanding both the types and dimensions of brand associations enables a more comprehensive analysis of how brand image is formed and why it may differ across individuals, including both loyal and non-loyal consumers. This perspective is essential for examining how participatory experiences contribute to the development of a meaningful and differentiated brand image.

## Methods

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach with a phenomenological method, as it is well-suited for capturing the formation of meaning and the dynamics of experience through in-depth interviews. This approach allows researchers to explore participants' narratives regarding their design choices, the values they sought to communicate, and their feelings after participating in the 2025 Teh Botol Sosro Packaging Design Competition. Phenomenological inquiry aligns with studies highlighting narrative and storytelling as central to brand identity and image formation, where brand meaning emerges dynamically through interactions and sensemaking among stakeholders (Aimé, 2023; Bansal & Sisodia, 2026; Mills & John, 2025). Data were collected through online in-depth interviews with six informants selected via the official competition hashtag, #TrueFaceOfKindnessIndonesia. The participants were purposively selected to represent diverse perspectives, including winners, non-winners, loyal, and non-loyal participants, ensuring rich variation in experiences and insights into brand image interpretation.

Qualitative data were analyzed using a modified Miles and Huberman framework, emphasizing data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. This method enabled systematic identification of cognitive, emotional, and sensory dimensions of brand image while maintaining methodological rigor. The selection of six informants was

guided by contemporary qualitative research principles, emphasizing depth and informational richness over quantity. Small, purposively selected informants are sufficient for phenomenological studies when participant characteristics are specific and dialogue quality is high, increasing each participant's information power (Malterud et al., 2016). This approach allowed the researchers to conduct intensive narrative analysis and explore the co-creation of brand meaning through participants' lived experiences, reflecting both methodological consistency with prior research and minor adaptations tailored to this study's context.

## Results

This section presents the research results obtained through semi-structured in-depth interviews and documentary observation. The analysis focuses on the main themes that emerged from the participants' experiences in the 2025 Teh Botol Sosro Packaging Design Competition. Data were analyzed using qualitative techniques of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, resulting in key thematic categories supported by interview excerpts. Six participants were selected to represent diverse experiences based on competition outcomes (winners and non-winners), brand loyalty (loyal and non-loyal customers), and participation intensity. The informants consist of HPH (non-winning and loyal); AP (winning and loyal); FAZ (non-winning and non-loyal); SBD (non-winning and loyal); MFG (winning and loyal); and VR (winning and non-loyal). All participants were between 20 to 23 years old and were students and freelance illustrators.

The 2025 Teh Botol Sosro Packaging Design Competition was selected as the research subject based on several scientific considerations. *First*, Teh Botol Sosro represents one of the most established and widely recognized beverage brands in Indonesia, with a long-standing market presence and strong cultural embeddedness that makes it a highly relevant case for examining consumer-brand relationships. As a brand that has maintained its market dominance for decades, Teh Botol Sosro offers a unique context in which brand loyalty, identity, and meaning construction can be studied within a real-world setting. *Second*, the packaging design competition constitutes a structured, recurring, and publicly accessible co-creation initiative, providing a traceable and observable platform through which brand-consumer interaction can be systematically examined. Unlike informal or spontaneous forms of consumer engagement, this competition operates within a defined framework that includes clear participation rules, evaluation criteria, and thematic guidelines, making it particularly suitable for structured qualitative inquiry. The competition's annual format over five consecutive years further reinforces its continuity, allowing for the examination of institutionalized co-creation practices within an established brand context.

*Third*, the 2025 edition is especially significant as it incorporated culturally embedded themes rooted in Indonesian local wisdom and diversity. The adoption of the grand theme The True Face of Kindness in Indonesia, along with its three culturally specific sub-themes, reflects a deliberate effort by the brand to engage participants in a process of cultural meaning-making. This thematic depth makes the competition a particularly suitable case for exploring the intersection of co-creation, cultural identity, and brand meaning construction, which are areas of growing scholarly interest in marketing and communication studies. *Fourth*, from a methodological standpoint, the competition provided access to a clearly defined and reachable participant population, namely young creative individuals aged 20 to 23, whose active engagement with the brand through a structured creative process offers a rich and contextually grounded basis

for qualitative inquiry. The diversity of participants in terms of competition outcomes and brand loyalty further strengthens the analytical value of this case, as it enables a comparative exploration of how different levels of involvement and prior brand relationships shape co-creation experiences and brand perception.

The Teh Botol Sosro packaging design competition has been held annually for five consecutive years as a platform for young Indonesian creatives in design, illustration, and visual arts to express their ideas through product packaging (2026). In this study, the competition is understood not only as a marketing communication strategy but also as a form of co-creation practice, where brand meaning and value are jointly constructed between the brand and participants. The 2025 competition adopted the main theme *The True Face of Kindness in Indonesia*, which highlights Indonesian cultural diversity and local wisdom, represented through three sub-themes: *Kindness of Indonesia's Nature*, *Kindness of Indonesia's Original Stories*, and *Kindness of Indonesia's Youth*. As shown in Figure 1, these themes served as the main creative framework for participants in developing packaging designs that interpreted Indonesian identity, cultural values, and local narratives through their own visual expressions. Figure 1 presents the grand theme of the 2025 competition, which is adapted and translated into English from the original image.



Figure 1. The Grand Theme of the 2025 Teh Botol Sosro Packaging Design Competition (source: [sebotolkaryaanakbangsa.com](http://sebotolkaryaanakbangsa.com))

This section describes participants' experiences in the competition, including their motivation, creative processes, and the meanings they constructed throughout their involvement. Overall, participation was shaped by a combination of personal, professional, and experiential considerations rather than a single motivating factor. It was found that participants were driven by both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. The competition was perceived not only as a space for self-development and creative exploration but also as a strategic opportunity to gain wider exposure and professional recognition. External factors, such as incentives and audience reach, were identified as important considerations in deciding whether to participate. In particular, emerging designers tended to prioritize competitions that could enhance their visibility and support their personal branding. In this regard, it was reported by one informant that the decision to participate was influenced by the incentives offered and the perceived potential of the competition to reach a wider audience, which was understood as an opportunity to introduce one's creative work more broadly to the public (Informant 1-HPH, September 2025).

Furthermore, a high level of creative engagement was observed throughout the participants' involvement. The creative process was not limited to technical execution but

involved comprehensive visual research, exploration of cultural themes, and consideration of market preferences and packaging design aesthetics. These findings indicate that participants assumed an active role as co-creators, interpreting and translating brand values into their own creative outputs. It was also identified that participation contributed to the development of participants' professional identity and confidence as designers. In this regard, the competition experience was described as a meaningful process of personal and professional growth, through which participants felt that their creative work gained broader visibility and recognition, particularly in light of the brand's extensive national distribution network (Informant 1-HPH, September 2025).

In addition, it was found that some participants engaged in in-depth research to enhance the quality and authenticity of their work. This included consulting academic sources and learning about specific cultural contexts that were not previously familiar to them. Such efforts demonstrate a strong level of cognitive involvement and commitment within the co-creation process. In one case, it was reported that more extensive research has been undertaken compared to previous years of participation, involving the reading of academic journals and a thorough study of the Talang Mamak tribe, including their traditional practices and cultural heritage, to ensure the accuracy and depth of the visual representation produced (Informant 5-MFG, October 2025).

Overall, the findings suggest that the competition functioned not only as a platform for producing visual outputs but also as a space for learning, cultural exploration, and creative experimentation. The co-creation process was characterized by dynamic and intensive engagement, which contributed to strengthening both emotional attachment and cognitive understanding of the brand. These results highlight the role of participatory activities in fostering deeper connections between consumers and brands through meaningful creative involvement.

It is further worth noting that the level of engagement demonstrated by participants extended beyond mere task completion. The competition appeared to function as a catalyst for self-directed learning, wherein participants voluntarily sought out knowledge that was not explicitly required by the competition guidelines. This pattern of behavior reflects a form of deep cognitive engagement that is consistent with scholarly understandings of intrinsic motivation and meaningful participation in co-creation contexts. The willingness of participants to invest considerable time and intellectual effort into their submissions suggests that the competition successfully cultivated a sense of ownership and personal investment in the creative process, which in turn may have contributed to the strengthening of their emotional connection to the brand.

Participants' interactions with the organizers were generally characterized by one-way communication, primarily facilitated through digital platforms such as Instagram and official websites. It was found that access to information was widely available, including competition templates, terms and conditions, frequently asked questions (FAQ), and educational content provided by judges. These resources were perceived as helpful in guiding participants to better understand the expectations and criteria of the competition. The availability of such structured information indicates that the organizers emphasized clarity and accessibility, enabling participants to align their creative outputs with the brand's expectations. In this context, it was noted by one informant that the open provision of resources, including insights shared by the judges regarding evaluation criteria, was regarded as particularly helpful in directing the design process in a manner that was consistent with the brand's expectations and aesthetic standards (Informant 1-HPH, September 2025).

However, it was also identified that not all aspects of the competition system were perceived positively. Some participants expressed concerns regarding the judging process, particularly the voting mechanism and the involvement of external communities in the initial selection stage. This approach was viewed by several informants as lacking transparency and fairness, as the evaluation process was not conducted solely by the main judges. Such perceptions suggest that while information access was considered adequate, the clarity of procedural mechanisms, especially in evaluation, remained questionable for some participants. Specifically, it was conveyed by one informant that the delegation of the initial selection process to external communities, rather than its direct management by the main judges, was perceived as undermining the fairness of the competition, particularly during the early elimination stages (Informant 4-SBD, October 2025).

In contrast, a more interactive and positive form of engagement was experienced by participants who were selected as winners. It was found that winners received more personalized forms of communication and appreciation from the brand, including invitations to award ceremonies, factory visits, and opportunities to participate in collaborative exhibitions such as JICAF. These experiences felt recognized and valued beyond the competition itself. This indicates that while interaction during the competition process tended to be limited, post-competition engagement provided a more relational and meaningful experience for selected participants.

This disparity in the quality of interaction experienced between winners and non-winners raises important questions about the inclusivity of the co-creation model employed by the brand. While post-competition engagement was found to be enriching and relational for those who succeeded, participants who did not advance beyond the initial stages appeared to receive comparatively limited acknowledgment or feedback. This asymmetry suggests that the co-creation experience, as currently structured, may be more fully realized for a select group of participants, while the broader participant community remains at the periphery of meaningful brand engagement. Addressing this gap could represent a significant opportunity for the brand to deepen its relational value proposition across a wider audience.

Overall, the findings suggest that the competition system placed a stronger emphasis on access to information and procedural clarity rather than on fostering continuous two-way interaction. While the elements of access and transparency were generally perceived as well-implemented, the element of dialogue appeared to be less developed during the competition process. Despite criticisms regarding the evaluation mechanism, positive post-competition experiences among winners contributed to reinforcing favorable perceptions of the brand. These results indicate that although the competition reflects key principles of the DART framework, there remains an opportunity to strengthen dialogic engagement to create a more inclusive and balanced co-creation experience for all participants.

It was found that participants' perceptions of the brand evolved throughout their involvement in the competition. Prior to participation, the brand was generally perceived as a well-known local bottled tea product with a strong and iconic identity. However, this perception tended to be limited to functional consumption and surface-level brand recognition, without a deeper understanding of the brand's cultural values or communication strategies. Following participation, a shift in perception was observed, as participants began to view the brand in a more meaningful and appreciative way. The competition experience allowed participants to perceive the brand differently through

participatory initiatives. The brand was increasingly perceived as an entity that facilitates collaboration and shared growth with its audience.

This perceptual transformation is particularly noteworthy among participants who had previously demonstrated low levels of brand loyalty. For these individuals, engagement with the competition appeared to serve as a turning point in their relationship with the brand, shifting their orientation from one of indifference or purely transactional consumption toward a more emotionally invested and value-aligned connection. This finding underscores the potential of well-designed co-creation initiatives to function not only as tools for brand communication but also as mechanisms for cultivating brand loyalty among previously disengaged consumer segments. The depth of this transformation further suggests that the act of creative participation itself, rather than competition outcomes alone, plays a central role in reshaping how consumers perceive and relate to a brand over time.

Overall, these findings suggest that participatory experiences play a significant role in reshaping brand perceptions, particularly among participants who were previously non-loyal or less engaged consumers. The shift from a purely functional perspective toward a more relational and value-driven understanding highlights the importance of co-creation in strengthening brand meaning. This transformation reinforces the idea that brand image is not solely constructed by the company but is also co-created through consumers' direct experiences and involvement.

## Discussion

This section interprets the findings linking the empirical results with relevant conceptual perspectives to provide a deeper understanding of the co-creation process. The analysis focuses on how participants experience and interpret their involvement, particularly in relation to interaction patterns, access to resources, and perceived value. By situating these findings within established theoretical frameworks, the discussion highlights the extent to which the co-creation process facilitates meaningful engagement between the brand and its participants, and whether the results obtained are consistent with the original research questions concerning co-creation experiences, brand image formation, and advocacy behavior.

From the perspective of the DART framework, the findings reveal an uneven distribution across its four core dimensions, with access and risk-benefit functioning more prominently than dialogue and transparency. The imbalance suggests that while the competition successfully lowered barriers to participation through the provision of structured resources and digital accessibility, it fell short of enabling the kind of reciprocal, dialogic engagement that characterizes deeper forms of co-creation. Rather than functioning as a fully collaborative space, the competition operated primarily as a contributory platform, wherein participants submitted creative outputs within a predefined framework without substantive opportunities for iterative exchange or mutual meaning negotiation with the brand.

This finding is theoretically significant because it challenges idealized conceptions of co-creation as an inherently symmetrical process. The evidence suggests that co-creation, as practiced in branded competition contexts, tends to be asymmetrical, with the brand retaining control over thematic direction, evaluation criteria, and outcome selection. While participants exercise creative agency within these boundaries, the structural conditions of the competition constrain the extent to which genuine collaborative meaning-making can occur. This interpretation directly addresses the

original research question regarding the nature of interaction within the co-creation process, confirming that participation in this context is more accurately characterized as guided contribution than as open collaboration.

The role of resource access in shaping participation quality further reinforces this interpretation. The availability of templates, guidelines, and judge-provided educational content enabled participants to align their creative outputs with brand expectations, thereby facilitating a form of directed creativity. While this accessibility is strategically effective from a brand management perspective, it simultaneously limits the exploratory and experimental dimensions of co-creation. The predominantly informational nature of access, without accompanying mechanisms for feedback or dialogue, indicates that the competition prioritizes output quality and brand consistency over participant development and relational engagement.

The evolution of brand perception observed among participants can be interpreted as a direct outcome of the experiential and cognitive dimensions of co-creation involvement. The shift from functional recognition to culturally and emotionally enriched brand understanding reflects the capacity of participatory experiences to activate deeper cognitive processing and affective engagement. This transformation is consistent with experiential marketing theory, which posits that active involvement in brand-related activities generates more durable and multidimensional associations than passive exposure alone (Zhao et al., 2025). Importantly, this perceptual shift was observed across participants regardless of their competition outcomes, suggesting that the process of participation itself, rather than the result, is the primary driver of brand image development.

The formation of participants' brand image can be further understood through the dimensions of brand associations, particularly in terms of how these associations are strengthened through participatory experiences. Repeated brand communication plays an important role in reinforcing consumers' memory of a brand; however, direct involvement in co-creation activities provides a deeper and more meaningful form of engagement. In line with Keller & Swaminathan (2019), the strength of brand associations is reflected in how well information is encoded and retained in consumers' memory, where active participation enables more stable and enduring associations compared to passive exposure.

This process is further enriched through experiential engagement, as participants are involved in sensory, affective, and cognitive activities during the creative process. Experiential marketing theory suggests that such engagement activates multiple dimensions of experience, including emotional responses, imagination, and intellectual involvement, which together enhance the depth of consumer-brand interaction (Zhao et al., 2025). Through creative participation, individuals are not merely exposed to brand attributes but actively interpret and express them, engaging multiple experiential dimensions that enhance emotional and cognitive attachment. Such experiences have been examined across various contexts across various contexts, including digital media and cultural engagement, demonstrating their effectiveness in strengthening consumer-brand relationships (Erdoğan, 2025; Manojlović et al., 2025). In this context, the design competition provides a rich experiential environment that allows participants to internalize brand values through aesthetic, emotional, and intellectual involvement.

Furthermore, participatory experiences that involve thinking, imagining, and self-expression contribute to stronger memory formation by activating cognitive processes that reinforce memory schemas (Alonso et al., 2020). These schemas function as

structured mental frameworks that influence how brand-related information is encoded, stored, and retrieved, making the associations more durable and easier to recall in future contexts. Contemporary research highlights that such experiential engagement enhances not only memory retention but also the ability to apply learned meanings and creative strategies beyond the initial interaction (Gillooly et al., 2017; Harmeling et al., 2017), as active involvement in meaningful tasks has been shown to deepen cognitive encoding and facilitate the transfer of knowledge across contexts (Mercier & Kalampalikis, 2020). As a result, the associations formed through participation become more deeply embedded, reflecting an internalization of brand values rather than surface-level recognition.

Overall, the strengthening of brand associations observed in this study demonstrates that experiential and participatory engagement generates more durable and multidimensional cognitive structures than passive brand exposure alone. This finding directly addresses the research question concerning the outcomes of co-creation involvement, indicating that active participation enables participants to internalize brand values in ways that are both cognitively stable and emotionally resonant. Rather than merely recognizing the brand at a surface level, participants developed associations that are more resistant to decay and more likely to influence future brand-related perceptions and behaviors.

The favorability and uniqueness of these associations can be interpreted as complementary outcomes of the same participatory process. On one hand, the positive attitudes formed across participants regardless of winning status suggest that affective engagement during the creative process functions independently of competitive outcomes, reinforcing the brand's image as supportive and culturally aligned. On the other hand, the translation of selected participant designs into mass-produced packaging created a form of experiential differentiation that is structurally difficult for competing brands to replicate. Together, these dimensions reflect what Keller & Swaminathan (2019) describe as the dual function of brand associations: to generate favorable affect and to establish distinctive positioning in consumers' cognitive frameworks. The co-creation competition, in this regard, functions as a mechanism that simultaneously cultivates both dimensions through a single participatory structure.

The emergence of advocacy behavior represents the most consequential outcome of this process, as it signals a transition from brand engagement to brand identification. When participants perceive that their creative contributions are recognized and valued, the brand becomes integrated into their self-concepts, motivating voluntary promotional behavior that is intrinsically rather than extrinsically driven (Bagozzi et al., 2017; Raimondo et al., 2022). This self-brand connection is theoretically significant because it suggests that co-creation, when designed to provide genuine recognition and relational engagement, can produce advocacy outcomes that are more authentic and enduring than those generated through conventional incentive-based marketing strategies. The long-term implication for Teh Botol Sosro is that participants who develop this form of identity-based attachment are likely to function as credible brand ambassadors within their social and professional networks, generating earned media value that extends well beyond the competition itself.

Viewed through the DART framework, the post-competition phase emerges as the most dialogically rich stage of the entire co-creation experience. The shift from structured, one-way communication during the competition to more personalized relational engagement afterward through award ceremonies, factory visits, and collaborative exhibitions indicates that the most impactful forms of brand-participant

dialogue are temporally concentrated at the conclusion of the formal process rather than distributed throughout it. This temporal asymmetry has strategic implications: brands seeking to maximize the relational value of co-creation initiatives should consider embedding dialogic mechanisms earlier in the participation timeline, rather than reserving meaningful interaction exclusively for post-competition recognition of winners.

Furthermore, the balance between perceived risks and benefits, as experienced by participants, shaped their overall evaluation of the co-creation process in ways that are consistent with value co-creation theory. When the benefits of participation, including recognition, professional exposure, and creative development, were perceived to outweigh the risks associated with public submission and competitive evaluation, participants developed more positive and sustained attachments to the brand. Transparency in process communication further reinforced this dynamic by contributing to perceptions of fairness and institutional integrity, which are foundational to the development of trust-based consumer-brand relationships.

The involvement of non-loyal participants illuminates an important boundary condition of co-creation as a brand-building strategy. While participatory engagement generated positive attitudinal shifts even among individuals without prior brand loyalty, these changes did not consistently translate into behavioral outcomes such as increased consumption. This finding suggests that co-creation functions more effectively as a mechanism for attitudinal and perceptual transformation than as a direct driver of behavioral loyalty, particularly in the short term. Consistent with the mere exposure effect (Bi et al., 2024; Styliadis et al., 2022), repeated brand interaction through participatory activities cultivated familiarity and positive affect even in the absence of consumption experience, indicating that attitudinal change can precede behavioral change. Through continuous engagement, participants began to develop a favorable evaluation of the brand, while co-creation activities such as content sharing and creative participation simultaneously expanded the brand's visibility and communicative reach, aligning with the notion of participatory culture in which individuals actively contribute to the circulation and amplification of brand meaning.

Furthermore, the motivations of non-loyal participants, oriented toward social professional exposure, creative expression, or social media visibility, nonetheless generated meaningful value for the brand by enriching its cultural meaning through user-generated content, even in the absence of direct product consumption. User-generated content produced through such participatory activities has been recognized as a significant driver of brand perception and future behavioral intentions (Kim & Johnson, 2016; Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016). In this context, loyalty may initially be directed toward the experience or the competition itself rather than the product, but it nonetheless serves as a foundational step toward building broader consumer-brand relationships. The translation of these attitudinal changes into sustained behavioral loyalty, however, likely requires additional longitudinal engagement strategies that extend beyond a single competition cycle, suggesting that the brand's current co-creation model may benefit from the development of continued relational touchpoints that maintain participant engagement beyond the competition's formal conclusion.

This study has several limitations and methodological weaknesses that should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings. First, the study involved six purposively selected informants. Although this number is appropriate for an in-depth qualitative phenomenological inquiry, it limits the transferability of the findings to the broader population of participants in Teh Botol Sosro's packaging design competition. The

findings therefore represent the lived experiences of a specific group of participants rather than the full diversity of individuals involved in the competition. Second, the study focused exclusively on the 2025 competition, which limits the ability to determine whether similar patterns of co-creation and brand image formation occur across different competition periods or themes. Third, the study relied primarily on self-reported interview data, creating a potential risk of recall bias and social desirability bias, as informants may have selectively remembered or positively framed their experiences. The absence of direct behavioral observation and longitudinal follow-up also represents a methodological weakness, particularly because reported changes in brand perception and loyalty could not be compared with subsequent observable behaviors, such as product consumption, repeat participation, or continued advocacy. Finally, the study examined the co-creation process primarily from the participants' perspective and did not incorporate the organizational perspective of Teh Botol Sosro. Consequently, the findings provide a more comprehensive understanding of consumer experiences than of the complete co-creation process involving both consumers and the brand.

Despite these limitations, the findings provide a meaningful foundation for future research. Future studies could adopt longitudinal designs to examine whether changes in brand image and attitudes are sustained over time and translated into behavioral loyalty. Comparative studies could also examine co-creation initiatives across different competition periods, brands, or industries to assess the transferability of the findings. In addition, future research could integrate both participant and organizational perspectives to provide a more comprehensive understanding of co-creation dynamics. Examining non-participating audiences who engage with competition-related content through social media without submitting entries may also broaden understanding of how participatory brand initiatives shape brand meaning beyond direct participants.

## Conclusion

This study concludes that participation in the Teh Botol Sosro 2025 Packaging Design Competition constituted a meaningful co-creation experience driven by both intrinsic motivations, including creative self-expression and cultural exploration, and extrinsic motivations such as professional exposure and incentive-based recognition. This participatory experience effectively strengthened brand image across three dimensions: the strength of associations was enhanced through experiential internalization of cultural brand values, the favorability of associations was elevated through affective engagement that generated pride and relational closeness regardless of competition outcomes, and the uniqueness of associations was reinforced through the distinctive practice of translating participant designs into mass-produced packaging. Analysis through the DART framework further revealed that while access and risk-benefit dimensions were well-realized, limited dialogue during the competition phase did not prevent the emergence of voluntary advocacy behavior, as participants who felt recognized developed self-brand connections that motivated organic brand promotion within their networks. Theoretically, this study advances the intersection of co-creation theory, experiential branding, and brand association frameworks by offering a replicable analytical model for similar initiatives across diverse industry contexts; practically, brands can leverage structured creative competitions as relational strategies for cultivating loyalty among disengaged consumer segments, particularly among young creative communities in Indonesia and similar emerging markets. Future research is encouraged to adopt longitudinal and mixed-methods designs, employ comparative frameworks across different brand contexts,

integrate dual-perspective analyses incorporating both participant and organizational viewpoints, and extend inquiry toward non-participating observers whose passive social media engagement with competition content represents an underexplored dimension of participatory brand communication.

### **Authors' Contributions and Responsibilities**

All authors contributed substantially to the conception and design of the study. The authors contributed to data collection, data analysis, interpretation of the findings, and discussion of the results. All authors participated in drafting and revising the manuscript, took responsibility for the integrity and accuracy of the research, and approved the final version of the manuscript for publication.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest related to the material discussed in this manuscript.

### **Generative AI Statement**

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI) to assist with language refinement, readability, and sentence restructuring. Elicit AI and Consensus AI were used to support literature searching and the identification of relevant academic sources. All AI-assisted outputs were critically reviewed, verified, and edited by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, interpretations, and final content of the manuscript.

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