Crowded identity: Managing crowdsourcing initiatives to maximize value for participants through identity creation

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Abstract   In this article, we consider crowdsourcing from the consumer perspective. Specifically, we examine the identity value (i.e., sense of self) that consumers accrue by participating in creative crowds. How can managers structure crowdsourcing initiatives to maximize value for participants through identity creation and expression? We strive to answer this question first by examining the different types of crowdsourcing initiatives from a value co-creation perspective. Then we evaluate how consumers construct identities through consumption and review the literature on identity theory. Finally, we link the identity type—personal, extended, or social—to the management of crowdsourcing ventures and offer suggestions for practitioners.
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1. Can the customer truly work for you?

Successful crowdsourcing ventures require more than an online platform and some kind of brand connection. Without an understanding of participant motivations and behaviors, casual attempts to leverage the wisdom of the crowd may backfire and lead to unintended results. Prominent examples of crowdsourcing failures are myriad. Consider

General Motors, which provided users with web tools to make their own ads for the Chevrolet Tahoe, resulting in a number of viral videos that lampooned the company's products and the American automotive industry's gas guzzlers more generally. In the fast-moving consumer goods industry, Mountain Dew successfully crowdsourced part of its product development through the Dewmocracy contest series, but a similar project asking fans to name the brand's new apple-flavored drink brought on a slew of ironic suggestions, including 'Diabeetus.'

GetSatisfaction (2015), an online platform that extracts insights from consumer conversations about products and services, identified two mutually

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dependent markers of crowdsourcing success: engaged people and high-quality content. In crowdsourcing, consumer skills, knowledge, and other resources are leveraged as a community (i.e., crowd) to create value not only for the focal firm but also for the customer. Indeed, we argue that it is a customer-determined value that drives engagement and contribution, and ultimately influences the success of a crowdsourcing venture.

Research has identified a variety of reasons customers may contribute to a brand, such as a desire to learn new things or to gain a reputation (Füller, 2010). We argue that participation in a creative crowd creates value for the consumer through identity construction and expression. As in the physical world, customers construct online identities by associating themselves with virtual signs, places, communities, and possessions (Belk, 2013).

In this article, we link crowdsourcing to identity theory and address a pragmatic question: How can managers design crowdsourcing initiatives so as to maximize value for participants in terms of identity construction? First, we summarize previous research on crowdsourcing. Second, we look at crowdsourcing activities from a service-dominant logic perspective and, specifically, value co-creation. Then, we build on identity theory and the associated marketing literature to identify motivational foundations and outcomes of crowdsourced value co-creation. Finally, we address the issue of how to leverage the various facets of customer identity—personal, extended, or social—to build lasting relationships and maximize customer-determined value.

2. Crowdsourcing: Problem solving vs. value capture

Crowdsourcing is traditionally defined as an online call for a group of people to complete a task voluntarily, using their own resources (Estellés-Arolas & González-Ladrón-de-Guevara, 2012). There are two major streams in the crowdsourcing literature. The first arises from the innovation management field and focuses on the creativity and problem-solving capacities of the crowd (Afuah & Tucci, 2012; Malhotra & Majchrzak, 2014). The second is organizationally focused and explores value creation and capture in crowdsourced-based businesses (Kohler, 2015).

In the innovation management literature, crowdsourcing is treated as a phenomenon in its own right. The focal challenge centers on how best to orchestrate crowdsourcing in terms of quantity of participants and quality of contributions (Kosonen, Gan, Vanhala, & Blomqvist, 2014). The empirical research

largely deals with the idea of crowdsourcing and problem-solving contests (Poetz & Schreier, 2012). In contrast, the organizational stream explores the limits of crowdsourcing, its taxonomies, and strategic trade-offs (Pisano & Verganti, 2008). Researchers tend to argue that solving problems with crowdsourcing and open innovation is unlikely to create a sustainable competitive advantage because solutions may quickly be copied by competitors (Bloodgood, 2013). Thus, this research stream usually focuses on issues such as labor market outreach, employment of external labor (Ford, Richard, & Ciuchta, 2015), and crowd-based venture financing (Agrawal, Catalini, & Goldfarb, 2014).

Following the service-dominant logic of marketing (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), we categorize customer participation in crowdsourcing activities as a form of value co-creation; here, customers serve as co-producers by applying their skills and competencies to create value. Crowdsourcing represents the powerful instance of individuals' transformation from passive consumers into "collaborators, co-developers, and competitors" (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2000, p. 84).

To explore the types of skills, knowledge, and other resources participants contribute to crowdsourcing ventures, we identified—using a simple snowball sampling technique—crowdsourcing ventures listed by boardofinnovation.com and similar websites. We then analyzed over 30 service descriptions offered by websites such as crowdsourcing.com, crowdworks.com, Innocentive, and Top-Coders. Using the descriptions on these sites, we found that organizations employ crowdsourcing for six different types of activities:

1. *Idea generation* (generation of new ideas for products and services);

2. *Problem solving* (solutions to a particular problem—contest and challenges);

3. *Evaluation and selection* (ideas/solutions—discussion boards, forums, and voting);

4. *Forecasting* (prediction markets for product success or market conditions);

5. *Production* (coordination of labor contributions in the form of time and effort); and

6. *Funding* (collection of funds and material resources).

Organizations that engage in such activities deliberately redraw or blend their boundaries using

Table 1. Well-known firms and the types of crowdsourcing resource/activity they use

Activity/Resources	KickStarter	PredictIt	Userfarm	CrowdTap	Lithium	SAP SCN
Idea generation			Video concept contests	Customer insights and ratings	Customer feedback and conversations	New features and functionality suggestions
Problem solving				Ideas for new products, naming, and advertisement	Social media strategy development	Solutions for unconventional business needs
Solutions evaluation				Discussion of solutions suggested		Conversations on practice and implementation
Forecasting		Political prediction market				
Production			Video production		Customer support crowdsourced to expert communities	Customer support, educational content production
Funding	Crowdfunding startups					

online web platforms or social media tools to reach various types of online participants and leverage their cultural resources. These resources include participants' specialized knowledge and skills, life expectancies and histories, and imaginations (Arnould, Price, & Malshe, 2006). Table 1 provides examples of well-known firms and the types of resources/activities they use in crowdsourcing. It should be pointed out that projects focusing on leveraging a solo type of resource, such as funding-only (e.g., Kickstarter) or prediction-only (e.g., PredictIt), represent the simplest and increasingly rare type of crowdsourcing model. Most crowdsourcing businesses leverage two or more activities/resources. Userfarm, one of the leading platforms for crowdsourcing video content, invites the creative crowd first to write up an idea based on a client's brief (idea generation) and then to produce a video based on the chosen idea (production). The open innovation platform CrowdTap collects customer insights on existing products and services, as well as suggestions for new product development, naming, and advertising. Lithium, another platform specialized in managing customer-brand relationships, crowdsources a brand's customer support, hosts customer feedback, and applies social analytics to develop a brand's social media strategy. SAP uses crowdsourcing for customer support, problem solving, and the production of educational materials and podcasts. A business model that crowdsources the entire suite of activities, from idea generation to funding, has yet to be developed.

3. The customer side of crowdsourcing: Motivation and contribution

Crowdsourcing has attracted relatively little attention from marketing scholars. Some early studies focused on crowd segmentation to ensure the appropriate targeting of participants. Kozinets, Hemetsberger, and Schau (2008) segmented online consumer communities by the degree of member engagement and contribution. Malhotra and Majchrzak (2014) identified sub-crowds through their role in innovation communities and knowledge-sharing habits, and called for differentiated incentive structures for each sub-crowd. Füller (2010) drew on social exchange and self-determination theories to analyze participant expectations regarding virtual co-creation projects and linked these expectations to four distinct motivations: reward-oriented, need-driven, curiosity-driven, and intrinsically interested. Finally, Berthon, Pitt, McCarthy, and Kates (2007) and Berthon, Pitt, Kietzmann, and McCarthy (2015) developed a related perspective on consumers creating—not merely consuming—value for firms. They identified the types of knowledge creative consumers must possess to adopt and transform proprietary offerings: knowledge about their own needs and knowledge relevant to the particular firm's problems.

To date, crowdsourcing strategies and the crowds participating in them have been analyzed separately. The firm's desire to reach valuable

resources and gain competitive advantage, and the customer's intrinsic motivation for innovation and problem solving have been studied in isolation, each within its own perspective. Beyond the inherent motivations for participation, two important questions arise that need further investigation: (1) Why do these motivations exist? and (2) What do customers get out of contributing to crowdsourcing ventures?

As the essence of crowdsourcing is customer-company resource integration, we believe the value customers derive from participation in such ventures may be studied on equal terms with the value they derive from consumption practices (see Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009). In the next section, we explore how consumers realize value through identity creation and expression. This perspective lays the groundwork for our subsequent suggestions on how to design crowdsourcing ventures that maximize participant value.

4. The self, identity, and value co-creation

Psychologists have argued that an individual's motivation for action is mediated by their *self-concept*: the view they have of themselves (Markus & Wurf, 1987). This self-concept consists of all statements that can be made by a person using words like I, me, mine, and myself. Attitudes, beliefs, roles, and values (e.g., "I think equality is important") are all aspects of the self (Triandis, 1989).

Self-concept emerges through self-categorization when people compare themselves to others, assessing their relative similarity or dissimilarity (Forehand & Deshpande, 2001). These categorizations may be derived from social roles (e.g., entrepreneur, father), from beliefs (e.g., conservative, liberal), or from body type (e.g., lanky, plump). The category labels with which a consumer self-associates are termed *identities* (Reed, 2002). A strategy designed to reach consumers by appealing to their sense of who they are or who they want to be is called *identity marketing* (Bhattacharjee, Berger, & Menon, 2014).

Identities provide an important source of motivation since people consistently select goals that represent self-definitions (Markus & Wurf, 1987) and "people who [define] themselves as doers of a particular behavior [are] more likely to do that behavior" (Triandis, 1989, p. 506). Firms often launch identity-focused campaigns (e.g., Real Americans Drive Chevy!) with the hope that such advertising will, even if momentarily, activate a specific consumer identity and influence their preference for identity-relevant products (Mercurio

& Forehand, 2011). However, a customer's self-concept contains a number of hierarchically ordered identities. People strive to coordinate their identities such that their global self maintains some degree of internal consistency; thus, particular identities are sometimes curtailed (Kleine, Kleine, & Kernan, 1993).

The key to leveraging participant identities in crowdsourcing may lie in thoroughly structuring such ventures around a set of identities that are relevant for a particular project, phenomenologically important for the particular customer, and salient in a particular context in order to bring to mind consistent behaviors (Reed, 2002). The next section explores the three facets of the self.

5. Three facets of the self

Identities represent inner reflections on the self and social context. They are produced by the interplay of body, individual consciousness, and social structure (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The *private self* includes cognitions that involve traits, states, or behaviors of the individual (e.g., "I am honest"). The *public self*, or collective self, involves cognitions concerning other people and a view of the self that is found in some collective or reference group (Triandis, 1989). Finally, in marketing, a prominent extension of identity theory is the notion of the *extended self*; this emphasizes the meaning customers attach to their possessions, for people regard their belongings as parts of themselves (e.g., "We are what we have"; Belk, 1988, 2013).

Table 2 summarizes the three selves. Next, we discuss each self in turn, along with the strategies managers can use to leverage these identities to add value to consumers who engage in crowdsourcing activities.

5.1. Personal identity: *I*

Personal identity forms the core of an individual's self-concept. It typically consists of a small number of propositions related to intellectual honesty, spirituality, and connectedness. Where and when these core representations overlap with a firm's brand image is important, as this will create strong customer-firm identification.

Customer-brand identification is more than just brand loyalty and re-purchase. It is the extent to which individuals incorporate brands into their self-concept. There is evidence that customers process information about the brands they associate with the same way they process information about themselves. They apply the same self-serving bias

Table 2. Facets of consumer's self

I - Personal Identity	*Me/Mine* - Extended Self	*We* - Social Identity
Representations of: Physical attributes, traits, abilities	Representations of: Material and symbolic possessions	Representations of: Group membership
Provides customer with: Continuity of time and space, connectedness of past and future selves	Provides customer with: Self-verification and self-expression	Provides customer with: Self-verification and self-enhancement
Key features: • Continuity • Agency • Reflexivity • Bodily awareness	Key features: • Personalization • Control • Learning • Contamination • Life narrative	Key features: • Group membership • Desire for distinctiveness • Social comparison • Local culture and language
Strategic benefits: Creating customer-brand identification	Strategic benefits: Establishing long-term relationship	Strategic benefits: Maximizing resources committed by customers
Type of appeal: Transformational Do it to become (or avoid becoming) a different person	Type of appeal: Contingent Do it because it's a part of the person you are	Type of appeal: Conformational Do it to comply with a group norm and get the positive feedback from a community

(i.e., attribution of success to internal agency and failure to external causes) to protect the internalized brand from negative information and other threats (Escalas & Bettman, 2012).

Time is central to identity. From a Lockean perspective, a person is ''a thinking, intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself. . .in different times and places'' (Locke, 1689, p. 268). Thus, continuity over time is central to a person's identity. It may operate as a relationship between two different persons: me in the current moment and me in the future, with all connections of memory, intention, and desire between the two. For example, consumer behavior like saving and investment can be viewed as a decision to sacrifice current spending on behalf of the future self (Bartels & Urminsky, 2015).

Another important aspect of personal identity is a sense of agency and intentional control over actions. Agency reduces uncertainty about the future and plays a crucial role in identity because it ensures the person's continuity in the future. Indeed, agency is reported as one of the most influential factors driving customer satisfaction with tech products, as technology grants consumers more sense of control (Fournier & Mick, 1999).

The personal self is inevitably physical. An individual cannot experience things without corporeal involvement (Berger & Luckmann, 1966); thus, the self extends to the body. It entails 'bodily awareness': the conscious monitoring of sensory input from the physical environment and of body regimes (e.g., sleep schedules, exercises, diet; Giddens, 1991). Tapping into a person's bodily experience and appearance can be a powerful tool for designing marketing campaigns. For example, Snickers builds its messaging around mood, hunger, and appearance. ''The Blond Bombshell is back. And she is hungry!'' announces Snickers' newest commercial, cleverly contrasting Marilyn Monroe with a hungry, cranky version of herself played by the actor Willem Dafoe. Alternatively, Virgin America's Arrive Beautifully campaign plays on people's concern with long-distance air travel and their appearance on arrival.

Finally, to be a particular person is to have an idea of who you are and to keep a particular biographical self-narrative going. A person's name, for example, is a primary element in their biography (Giddens, 1991). Coca-Cola tapped into consumers' reflexive identities in its Share a Coke campaign, which offered customers the ability to personalize bottles with the names of friends.

There are four aspects of personal identity that have relevance to crowdsourcing behavior and value co-creation: (1) a sense of continuity throughout time, (2) a sense of agency, (3) biographical reflexivity, and (4) bodily awareness. With these, managers can add value through identity construction for participants in crowdsourcing ventures.

5.1.1. Link to relevant past experiences and/ or desirable future self

Consider My Starbucks Idea, the Starbucks crowdsourcing platform launched in 2008. By 2015, My Starbucks Idea had received about 190,000 ideas submitted by customers, of which more than 300 were implemented by the company. The submission categories reflect the temporal self. Product and store experiences focus on past customer encounters and memories, while social responsibility and local community building enacted by the corporation mirrors customer reflections on who they are, who they want to be, and how they see themselves in the future.

5.1.2. Stress the agency and control enjoyed by the customer

Citizen engagement platforms such as The Sunlight Foundation and the Portland-based BusProject emphasize the empowerment and control they create for participants by securing more open and accountable governance. In these instances, participants build self-identity via ability to influence aspects of their lives that were previously beyond their control.

5.1.3. Build reflexive biographical narratives by linking to critical events or important life stages

Consider MindSumo, which positions itself as a student-centered open innovation hub—a kind of online mini-internship. Companies submit problems they are faced with and students generate solutions. Implemented solutions result in cash rewards. Beyond the monetary incentive, MindSumo leverages temporal events that are important to students. For example, it links problems/challenges to related courses the students are studying and to their future careers. MindSumo then shows the students how to leverage their experiences in CVs and interviews. Thus, it actively enables participants to construct reflective biographical narratives to enhance their self-identity.

5.1.4. In relevant cases, engage bodily senses and appearance

Threadless, the crowdsourced T-shirt design and selection company, utilizes the aspect of bodily awareness on many levels. Designers post pictures of themselves wearing their designs, and community members can post pictures of themselves wearing the shirts they voted into production. This strategy is ripe for exploitation by fashion, food, fitness, and wearables brands that might be interested in exploring crowdsourcing opportunities.

5.1.5. In a nutshell: Personal identity

In summary, personal identity represents the core of the individual's self-concept. It includes perceptions of one's own set of internal processes and properties: intellectual abilities, psychological traits, and the physical body. Leveraging these aspects of identity is crucial in establishing and maintaining the customer-company connection.

5.2. Extended self: *Me/Mine*

One key to understanding customer behavior lies in perceiving the meaning people attach to the possession and consumption of goods and services, for in that meaning resides value. Empirical research has shown that consumption meaning is derived from personal memories and social status and not from an offering's functional characteristics (Wallendorf & Arnould, 1988). People use favored objects as markers to denote their character to others and to remind themselves of who they are. They derive their self-concepts from these possessions and regard their possessions as parts of themselves, thus extending the self to these objects (Belk, 1988). The major categories of the extended self are those persons, places, and things to which one feels attached. People make things—be they physical or virtual—a part of their self in several ways:

- By creating or altering them;

- By exercising power or control over them, just as they might control an arm;

- By overcoming, learning, or mastering them; and

- By contamination through physical or virtual contact, or proximity (see Belk, 1988).

An important part of many Americans' extended selves is the automobile. Indeed, cars are mentioned most frequently among Americans' most valued possessions.[1] Automotive brands use these insights in their marketing campaigns, and more recently, in crowdsourcing projects (e.g., BMW Customer Innovation Lab).

Other highly valued possessions include assets (e.g., house), practical objects (e.g., tools, appliances), recreational objects (e.g., sporting equipment, musical instruments), personal appearance-related objects (e.g., clothing, jewelry), aesthetic objects (e.g., paintings, antiques),

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[1] This is increasingly giving way to smartphones.

and sentimental objects representing interpersonal ties (e.g., gifts, photo albums; Ritchins, 1994). As such, the real estate, DIY, sporting, jewelry, and apparel industries—among others—carry the potential for crowdsourcing to create value for the extended self.

Valued possessions help narrate a person's life story. When asked why a particular object is a personal favorite, consumers refer to the shared history between them and the object. This history is not purchased with the object but arises after years of use (Wallendorf & Arnould, 1988). An individual's personal history in relation to the possession plays a crucial role. That's why Micro Kickboards, a prominent manufacturer of children's sporting equipment, asks its customers to "Share your Micro experience." Another excellent example is Tiffany & Co.'s microsite, What Makes Love True. It is designed for customers to share how, when, and where they experienced true love via photographs, stories, and locations of these moments—specifically, moments related to Tiffany jewelry.

Similarly, if an individual perceives their experience with a crowdsourcing platform as a part of themselves, it becomes part of their personal narrative. Moreover, the value of this can increase with the length of the relationship. Long-term involvement with a particular crowdsourcing platform not only enhances the participants' competence and ability to solve company-specific problems, but also becomes an integral and value-laden part of their identities. Thus, adding identity value to participants in crowdsourcing ventures with the extended self is perhaps most relevant for those projects seeking long-term customers.

Managers can add value to crowdsourcing participants through the extended self. Indeed, participants will value participation to the extent to which co-creation is used by an individual to maintain his or her self-concept. Designing a co-creation project to add value by engaging the extended self may include the following activities: (1) allowing personalization, (2) introducing opportunities for learning and growth, (3) celebrating contributions and spurring contamination, and (4) asking participants to share their stories.

5.2.1. Allow personalization
Surprisingly few crowdsourcing platforms allow users to change or control the environment or the co-creation process. One exception is CrowdTrap, which enables participants to customize personal dashboards and brand connections. In general, however, this is an area of untapped potential.

5.2.2. Introduce opportunities for learning and growth
Organizations can implement learning opportunities to help members grow professionally. It is already quite common for creative design crowdsources, like 99designs and Zooppa, to host an abundance of creative resources—from how-to books, articles, and podcasts to fonts and music stocks. They also organize online training and webinars (e.g., 99webinars), which not only improves contributions but also strengthens participant attachment. Among ideation and open innovation hubs, BoardofInnovation features inspiration and tools resources for participants.

5.2.3. Celebrate contribution and spur contamination
It may be beneficial to introduce areas in which participants are recognized for their crowdsourcing efforts. Celebrating such contributions will not only acknowledge individuals, but also spur contamination in a physical or virtual proximity. Creative design crowdsources are at the forefront here by hosting video interviews (99designs) and biographies (Zooppa, Talenthouse) featuring the 'most active contributors.' Others host and exhibit contributions in hall-of-fame (Mofilm) or showroom (CreateMyTatoo) formats.

5.2.4. Ask participants to share their stories
Asking participants to share their personal histories and experiences via the platform can add value. We have already mentioned some examples of this practice with companies like Micro Kickboards and Tiffany. Moreover, a comprehensive implementation may combine some or even all of these steps. For example, customers visiting Motorola's Moto Maker website can customize their smartphones by choosing panels, colors, and materials, and engraving their names, significant words, or key phrases onto their phones (contamination) before being invited to share their personal experiences with the phone (story giving).

5.2.5. In a nutshell: Extended self
Thus far, we have discussed a one-to-one relationship between the crowdsourcing platform and the participant/contributor. That is an appropriate perspective, especially for ideation and/or problem-solving contests, where healthy competition among members of the crowd is useful. However, this perspective misses the wisdom of the crowd itself. A crowd without conversation and collaboration is essentially a mindless mob. In the next section, we look at the social side of crowds, and specifically the formation of social identity.

5.3. Social identity: *We*

The term 'social' refers to the groups (e.g., family) and roles (e.g., father) one finds in communities. *Social identity* is that part of the individual's self that is derived from the knowledge of group membership combined with the value and significance of that membership. Social identity influences an individual's perception and behavior such that members of a particular group start to see and act in similar ways, and tend to protect and promote the group. Classical psychological experiments studying social identity explored resource allocation and found that participants repeatedly allocated more resources to members of their own group than to members of other groups (Tajfel, 1982). Managers can leverage social identity to provide value to crowd participants. Infusing crowdsourcing with social identity entails designing types of membership that reinforce participant identification with a group. It turns the crowd into a community.

Group memberships are usually based on some type of similarity between members. Depending on the project's purpose and context, that may be—among others—demographic status (e.g., young single mothers), possessiveness of certain devices (e.g., wearable heart-rate monitor users), or geographical closeness (e.g., East-Boston residents). For example, the gaming hardware and software supplier Razer leverages customers' social identities through creating the Gamers social category: "By gamers. For gamers."

Naturally, no community can exist without conversation and interaction between its members. Exchanging feedback and insights and providing leadership and encouragement are all crucial elements of successful crowdsourcing. These features are essential for any platform or software (e.g., SalesForce Community Cloud), especially when it comes to crowdsourcing customer support.

The community may provide positive self-image and self-enhancement for its members by comparing and distinguishing itself from other groups along dimensions with a clear value differential (Tajfel, 1982). To inspire and motivate group members, inform them not only how they are different from others, but also how they are better. Such positive distinctiveness may be achieved by developing local cultural forms. Answers to questions like "What do we do differently?" and "How do our beliefs differ?" should be articulated for a community to provide a positive identity.

Attempts to achieve positive group distinctiveness may then be translated into developing and accentuating linguistic differences from out-groups (Tajfel, 1982). Managers should consider

ways of developing and encouraging the emergence of a community's own language. Even a slight nudge or single example may be enough to trigger the community's linguistic creativity. Thus, steps to add value for participants through the creation of social identity—whilst at the same time creating a productive, loyal community—include the following: (1) highlight the community, (2) claim members' distinctiveness and superiority, (3) encourage interaction, (4) design social structure, and (5) think of the local culture.

5.3.1. Highlight the community
Leading experts in crowdsourcing customer support repeatedly emphasize that it is not enough to announce the presence of a community simply by sending a press release and writing a company blog. Rather, managers should explicitly highlight the group identity of customers partnered with the company/brand/web platform ("We are the team"). Since this community provides a customer service, this service should be marketed and backed with research and targeted, multi-channel outreach (GetSatisfaction, 2015).

5.3.2. Claim members' distinctiveness and superiority
It is important to claim the distinctiveness of community members ("We are different") and their meaningful advantage over out-groups ("We are better"). Most platforms concentrate on explaining the value created for their corporate clients rather than the value created for participants. Still, some market themselves with plausible reflections and self-definitions, like "community of amazingly talented designers" (99designs.com).

5.3.3. Encourage interaction
Managers should provide opportunities and incentives for peer-to-peer interaction and collective reasoning. Only a few platforms, such as CrowdTap and CrowdSpring, offer visible user profiles and messaging/conversation capabilities. The single crowdsourcing venture identified in our study (see Section 2) as enabling some sort of collaboration within contests and challenges is the U.S. federal government's innovation platform, Challenge.gov. This vehicle features integrated discussion boards for participants to talk about issues and team up.[2]

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[2] It should be noted, however, that Challenge.gov does not feature groups or event creation, or any other Facebook-like social functionality.

5.3.4. Design social structure

Many of the leading platforms use gamification to create status. SAP, Mofilm, CrowdTap, Eyeka, and others reward customers for their contributions with 'reputation scores' to signal status. Some platforms make exclusive content available to top contributors only; others (e.g., SAP) go so far as hiring the most prominent community members to serve as community managers. However, only a few platforms have formal mechanisms for status and social roles. One example is the student-centered innovation hub MindSumo, which provides support and direction for junior community members.

5.3.5. Think of the local culture

Culture often comes connected with norms, beliefs, and insider language to the social structure of the community. Some platforms describe desired and undesired behaviors within their user agreements, although peers typically learn these norms from each other. Linguistic innovations can follow, such as Jovoto's 'karma' points for reputation or the 'Dusters' self-identification used by participants of the renowned Star Dust citizen science project.

5.3.6. In a nutshell: Social identity

In general, leveraging social identities in online communities helps to foster interaction with the brand and spread the best innovation practices between participants. It enables a faster innovation cycle and more efficient collaboration, creating value both for the crowdsourcing firm and for the participants. Tools that strengthen engagement in crowdsourcing communities (e.g., emphasizing distinctiveness, fostering local culture) do not differ dramatically from the tools of other types of online communities (e.g., brand communities). There is a significant difference, however: crowdsourcing communities are launched with a clear purpose of integrating customer knowledge and creativity with the focal task of the platform (e.g., open innovation, problem solving, concept testing, customer support, crowdfunding).

6. Final thoughts and future research recommendations

The contribution of this study is the linking of crowdsourcing with identity theory. In this article, we reviewed the three aspects of self-identity (personal, extended, and social) and addressed the pragmatic question: How can managers design crowdsourcing initiatives so as to maximize value for participants in terms of identity construction? We suggested that identity creation provides powerful tools for adding value to participants in crowdsourcing ventures, developing long-term relationships and generating enhanced value co-creation. Figure 1 links crowdsourcing activities and the three types of identity we have explored with the strategic goals, and indicates the primary domains where these tools may be exploited most effectively.

Figure 1.   Identity and crowdsourcing: Activities, features, examples, and benefits
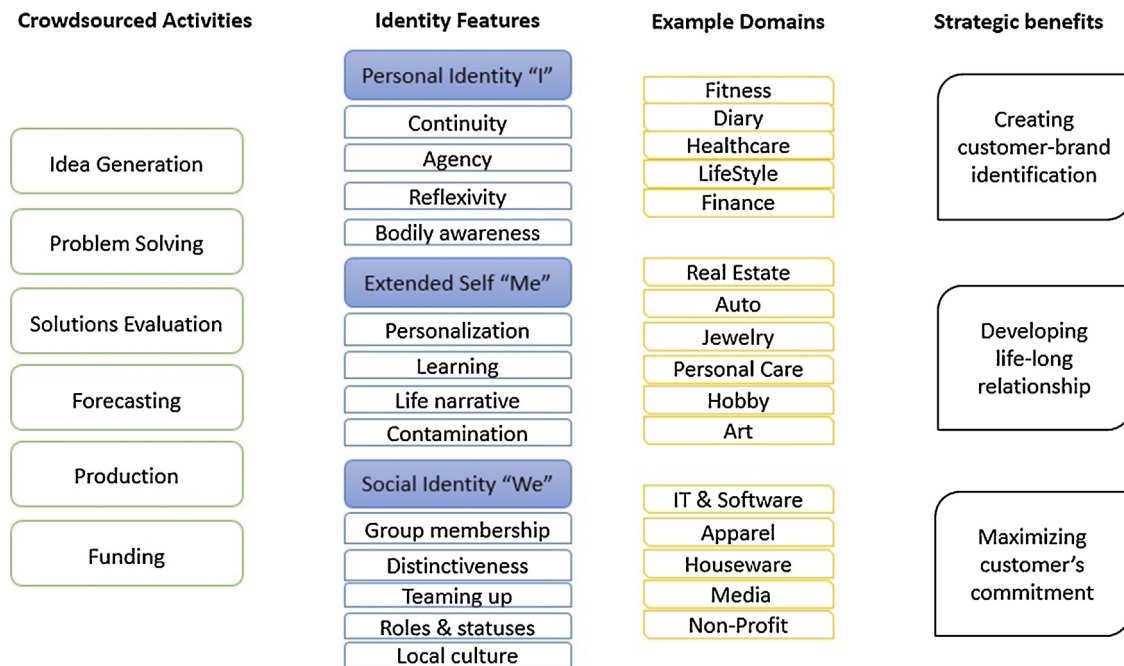
The aim of our article is to inform managers about the potential of identity creation and highlight appropriate strategies to achieve this goal in crowdsourcing. Our review of crowdsourcing platforms has shown that some of these tools are already quite common (e.g., gamification with the roles and statuses, customization of the working environment, surfacing the life narrative with story giving), while others are underdeveloped (e.g., social functionality, teaming up, leveraging bodily awareness). Obviously, the examples discussed are not exclusive to a particular mode of identity since almost every crowdsourcing effort involves more than one form of identity creation.

The pairing of identity construction and the crowdsourcing field has the potential for interesting qualitative and quantitative research. For example, the subjective meanings assigned to crowdsourcing activities could be explored through conversation analysis and the ethnomethodological study of word-of-mouth practices in crowdsourcing communities. Quantifying and testing some of the hypothesized relationships—such as participants' perceived control over their environment and its effects on adding value and strengthening engagement—would be beneficial not only to crowdsourcing theory and practice but also for the advancement of identity theory itself. Finally, there are other identity concepts—such as identity salience and identity signaling—that can be leveraged in future research.

The virtual world has changed value co-creation. Digital possessions may lack some of the characteristics that invite attachment to material possessions (e.g., softness, scent). However, there is evidence that customers can become as attached to immaterial possessions as they can to material possessions, and gain an enhanced sense of self from virtual co-creation (see Belk, 2013). The re-embodiment of the self with avatars and the online sharing of narratives, experiences, and possessions allows individuals even more freedom to select and modify the public representations of themselves. These self-representations may consequently appear closer to 'ideal' selves, but still reflect a person's pursuit of uniqueness and self-enhancement. Thus, we argue that using self-identity to create value for both the consumer and the firm in crowdsourcing ventures has promising potential.

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