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# Co-Creation in Food Innovation Systems: Integrating Consumer Participation, Digital Collaboration, and Sustainable Ingredient Development in Contemporary Product Design

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**Abstract:** The increasing complexity of global food systems, coupled with shifting consumer expectations, has accelerated the adoption of co-creation as a strategic approach to innovation. This study develops a comprehensive theoretical and empirical synthesis of co-creation practices within food product development, integrating insights from participatory design, digital collaboration, and ingredient innovation—specifically focusing on emerging sustainable inputs such as water chestnut derivatives. Drawing exclusively on existing scholarly literature, the research explores how co-creation frameworks facilitate value generation, influence consumer acceptance, and reshape traditional supply chain dynamics. The paper critically examines both the enabling and constraining factors of co-creation, including trust, communication strategies, technological mediation, and organizational barriers. Additionally, it contextualizes co-creation within hybrid food product development, where consumer perceptions play a pivotal role in market success. The methodological approach is qualitative and integrative, synthesizing conceptual models and empirical findings from diverse studies to construct a unified analytical framework. The results indicate that co-creation enhances product relevance, supports sustainable innovation, and strengthens

stakeholder engagement, but also introduces risks related to value co-destruction, misalignment of expectations, and governance challenges. The discussion elaborates on theoretical implications for innovation management and practical considerations for food industry stakeholders. Limitations include reliance on secondary data and lack of empirical testing, while future research directions emphasize hybrid methodologies and cross-cultural comparisons. The study contributes to the academic discourse by bridging fragmented literature streams and proposing a holistic understanding of co-creation as a transformative paradigm in food innovation ecosystems.

**Keywords:** Co-creation, food innovation, consumer participation, sustainable ingredients, digital collaboration, product development, value co-creation.

## Introduction

The evolution of modern food systems has been marked by a transition from producer-centric models to increasingly participatory and consumer-driven paradigms. This shift reflects broader socio-economic transformations characterized by heightened consumer awareness, technological advancements, and the growing importance of sustainability in consumption practices. Within this context, co-creation has emerged as a critical framework for fostering innovation, enabling organizations to actively involve consumers and other stakeholders in the design and development of products and services (Ind et al., 2013). Rather than treating consumers as passive recipients, co-creation positions them as active contributors whose knowledge, preferences, and experiences shape innovation outcomes.

The concept of co-creation is deeply rooted in participatory design traditions, particularly those originating in Scandinavian contexts, where collaborative processes between designers and users were institutionalized to enhance usability and democratic engagement (Gregory, 2003). Over time, these principles have been adapted and expanded within marketing and innovation research, emphasizing the co-production of value through interactive processes (Ind et al., 2013). In the food industry, co-creation has gained prominence as

companies seek to address complex challenges such as changing dietary patterns, sustainability concerns, and the demand for personalized products.

A critical dimension of co-creation in food systems lies in its application to new product development (NPD). Traditional NPD processes often rely on internal expertise and market research, but these approaches may fail to capture the nuanced and evolving preferences of consumers. Co-creation addresses this limitation by integrating consumers directly into the development process, thereby enhancing the relevance and acceptance of new products (Filiari, 2013). Studies have demonstrated that consumer involvement can lead to more innovative and market-aligned products, particularly in categories such as hybrid foods, where sensory expectations and cultural norms play a significant role (Grasso et al., 2022).

Despite its potential benefits, co-creation is not without challenges. Organizational barriers, including resistance to change, lack of coordination, and difficulties in managing diverse stakeholder inputs, can hinder effective implementation (Benson et al., 2021). Furthermore, the process of co-creation can lead to value co-destruction if mismanaged, resulting in negative outcomes such as consumer dissatisfaction or reputational damage (Buhalis et al., 2020). These risks underscore the need for a nuanced understanding of co-creation dynamics and the development of robust frameworks to guide practice.

An emerging area of interest within food innovation is the integration of sustainable and functional ingredients, such as water chestnut (*Trapa natans*), into product development. Research has highlighted the nutritional and functional properties of water chestnut, including its potential antidiabetic effects and versatile starch characteristics (Das et al., 2011; Gani et al., 2010). The incorporation of such ingredients aligns with broader sustainability goals and offers opportunities for differentiation in competitive markets. However, consumer acceptance of novel ingredients often depends on effective communication and participatory engagement, further emphasizing the role of co-creation.

The literature also highlights the importance of trust

and communication in co-creation processes. Trust in consumers as co-creators is influenced by factors such as the credibility of communicators and the transparency of interactions (Jacobsen et al., 2020). Effective communication strategies are essential for aligning expectations and facilitating meaningful participation, particularly in digital environments where face-to-face interactions are limited (Benson et al., 2021).

While existing research provides valuable insights into various aspects of co-creation, there remains a gap in the integration of these perspectives into a cohesive framework. Specifically, there is a need to synthesize findings from studies on consumer behavior, organizational dynamics, digital collaboration, and ingredient innovation to develop a comprehensive understanding of co-creation in food systems. This study addresses this gap by systematically analyzing the literature and constructing an integrated model that captures the complexity and multifaceted nature of co-creation.

The primary objectives of this research are to examine the theoretical foundations of co-creation, analyze its application in food product development, and explore the interplay between consumer participation, technological mediation, and sustainable innovation. By doing so, the study aims to contribute to both academic knowledge and practical applications, providing insights for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers.

## **Methodology**

The methodological approach adopted in this study is qualitative and integrative, relying on an extensive review and synthesis of existing scholarly literature. The objective is not to generate new empirical data but to construct a comprehensive analytical framework that integrates diverse perspectives on co-creation within food innovation systems. This approach is particularly suitable for exploring complex and multifaceted phenomena, where insights from multiple disciplines must be combined to achieve a holistic understanding.

The selection of references was guided by their relevance to key themes, including co-creation theory,

participatory design, consumer behavior, food product development, and sustainable ingredients. The literature spans various domains, including marketing, food science, innovation management, and sustainability studies. This interdisciplinary scope reflects the inherently cross-cutting nature of co-creation, which intersects with multiple fields and requires a broad analytical lens.

The analytical process involved several stages. First, the literature was systematically reviewed to identify core concepts, theoretical frameworks, and empirical findings related to co-creation. Particular attention was paid to definitions and interpretations of co-creation, as these vary across studies and influence the understanding of its applications (Ind et al., 2013). Second, the literature was categorized into thematic clusters, including digital co-creation, consumer participation in NPD, organizational challenges, and sustainable ingredient development. This categorization facilitated the identification of patterns, similarities, and differences across studies.

Third, a comparative analysis was conducted to examine how different studies conceptualize and operationalize co-creation. For example, research on virtual co-creation workshops highlights the role of digital tools and methodologies in facilitating collaboration (Benson et al., 2021), while studies on participatory design emphasize the importance of user involvement in shaping outcomes (Gregory, 2003). By comparing these perspectives, the study identifies common principles and contextual variations.

Fourth, the findings were synthesized into an integrated framework that captures the key dimensions of co-creation in food innovation. This framework considers factors such as stakeholder roles, communication strategies, technological mediation, and organizational structures. It also incorporates insights from studies on value co-creation and co-destruction, recognizing that co-creation processes can produce both positive and negative outcomes (Buhalis et al., 2020).

In addition to theoretical analysis, the study incorporates insights from empirical research on food product development, particularly in relation to

consumer preferences and acceptance. For instance, studies on hybrid meat products provide valuable data on how consumers perceive and evaluate innovative food concepts (Grasso et al., 2022; Blok, 2023). Similarly, research on children as co-creators offers insights into the potential of involving diverse demographic groups in innovation processes (Galler et al., 2020; Galler et al., 2022).

The inclusion of studies on water chestnut and related food science research serves to contextualize co-creation within the domain of ingredient innovation. These studies provide information on the physicochemical properties, nutritional benefits, and potential applications of water chestnut, which can inform product development processes (Gani et al., 2010; Gul et al., 2014). By integrating these findings with co-creation frameworks, the study explores how consumer participation can enhance the development and acceptance of products incorporating novel ingredients.

The methodological limitations of this approach include its reliance on secondary data and the absence of primary empirical validation. However, the integrative nature of the analysis allows for a comprehensive synthesis of existing knowledge, which can serve as a foundation for future empirical research.

## Results

The synthesis of the literature reveals several key findings regarding the role and impact of co-creation in food innovation systems. These findings are organized around four primary dimensions: conceptualization of co-creation, mechanisms of consumer participation, organizational and technological enablers, and implications for product development and sustainability.

First, the conceptualization of co-creation varies across studies but generally converges on the idea of collaborative value generation involving multiple stakeholders. Co-creation is not merely a process of gathering feedback but an interactive and iterative engagement that shapes both the product and the experience associated with it (Ind et al., 2013). This perspective emphasizes the dynamic nature of value creation, where outcomes emerge through continuous

interaction rather than predefined processes.

Second, consumer participation emerges as a central mechanism in co-creation. Studies indicate that involving consumers in early stages of product development can significantly enhance innovation outcomes by providing insights into preferences, expectations, and contextual factors (Filiari, 2013). In the context of food innovation, this is particularly important due to the sensory and cultural dimensions of consumption. Research on hybrid meat products demonstrates that consumer perceptions are influenced by factors such as taste, health considerations, and ethical concerns (Grasso et al., 2022; Blok, 2023).

Third, the role of digital technologies in facilitating co-creation is increasingly prominent. Virtual workshops and online platforms enable organizations to engage with geographically dispersed participants and gather diverse inputs (Benson et al., 2021). These technologies also support asynchronous collaboration, allowing participants to contribute at their convenience. However, the effectiveness of digital co-creation depends on factors such as user interface design, communication strategies, and participant motivation.

Fourth, organizational and structural factors play a critical role in enabling or constraining co-creation. Challenges include managing diverse stakeholder inputs, aligning objectives, and maintaining control over the innovation process (Falahat et al., 2024). Organizational culture and leadership are also গুরুত্বপূর্ণ in fostering an environment conducive to collaboration. Studies highlight the importance of clear communication, trust-building, and the establishment of shared goals (Jacobsen et al., 2020).

Fifth, co-creation has significant implications for sustainability and supply chain dynamics. Research on coffee supply chains illustrates how co-creation can transform traditional relationships by involving farmers as active partners in value creation (Candelo et al., 2018). This approach enhances transparency, equity, and sustainability, aligning with broader trends in ethical consumption.

Sixth, the integration of novel ingredients such as water chestnut into food products presents both opportunities and challenges. Scientific studies demonstrate the functional and nutritional benefits of water chestnut, including its starch properties and potential health effects (Das et al., 2011; Gani et al., 2010). However, consumer acceptance of such ingredients depends on effective communication and engagement, which can be facilitated through co-creation processes.

Finally, the literature highlights the dual nature of co-creation, where positive outcomes such as innovation and engagement coexist with risks of value co-destruction. Misalignment of expectations, lack of trust, and inadequate management can lead to negative experiences for participants and organizations (Buhalis et al., 2020). This underscores the need for careful design and governance of co-creation processes.

## **Discussion**

The findings of this study underscore the transformative potential of co-creation as a paradigm for innovation in food systems, while also highlighting its inherent complexities and limitations. At a theoretical level, co-creation challenges traditional models of value creation by emphasizing the distributed and interactive nature of innovation. This shift aligns with broader trends in knowledge economies, where value is increasingly generated through networks and collaborations rather than hierarchical structures.

One of the most significant implications of co-creation is its ability to enhance the relevance and acceptance of new products. By involving consumers in the development process, organizations can gain deeper insights into preferences and expectations, reducing the risk of market failure. This is particularly important in the context of food innovation, where sensory attributes and cultural factors play a critical role in shaping consumer behavior (Grasso et al., 2022).

However, the effectiveness of co-creation depends on the quality of interactions between stakeholders. Trust emerges as a key factor in this regard, influencing both the willingness of participants to engage and the

credibility of the outcomes (Jacobsen et al., 2020). Building trust requires transparency, consistency, and effective communication, which can be challenging in complex and dynamic environments.

The role of digital technologies in enabling co-creation is both enabling and constraining. While virtual platforms expand the reach and accessibility of co-creation, they also introduce challenges related to engagement, communication, and coordination (Benson et al., 2021). Designing effective digital co-creation processes requires careful consideration of user experience, facilitation techniques, and incentive structures.

From an organizational perspective, co-creation necessitates a shift in mindset and practices. Traditional models of innovation often prioritize control and efficiency, whereas co-creation emphasizes openness and collaboration. This transition can be challenging, particularly for organizations with established structures and cultures. Addressing these challenges requires leadership commitment, capacity building, and the development of new competencies.

The integration of sustainable ingredients such as water chestnut highlights the intersection of co-creation and sustainability. By involving consumers and other stakeholders in the development of products incorporating novel ingredients, organizations can enhance acceptance and promote sustainable consumption patterns. This approach also aligns with the broader goal of creating more resilient and equitable food systems.

Despite its potential benefits, co-creation is not a panacea. The risk of value co-destruction must be carefully managed, particularly in situations where expectations are misaligned or communication is ineffective (Buhalis et al., 2020). Developing robust governance frameworks and evaluation mechanisms is essential for mitigating these risks.

Future research should focus on empirical validation of the proposed framework, as well as the exploration of co-creation in diverse cultural and institutional contexts. Comparative studies could provide valuable insights into how co-creation practices vary across

regions and industries. Additionally, the integration of quantitative methods could enhance the rigor and generalizability of findings.

## Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of co-creation in food innovation systems, integrating insights from diverse strands of literature to develop a holistic understanding of the phenomenon. The findings highlight the central role of consumer participation, digital technologies, and organizational dynamics in shaping co-creation processes and outcomes. Co-creation emerges as a powerful tool for enhancing innovation, promoting sustainability, and strengthening stakeholder engagement.

At the same time, the study emphasizes the importance of addressing the challenges associated with co-creation, including organizational barriers, communication complexities, and the risk of value co-destruction. By adopting a nuanced and strategic approach, organizations can harness the potential of co-creation while mitigating its risks.

The integration of sustainable ingredients such as water chestnut into co-creation frameworks illustrates the potential for aligning innovation with sustainability goals. This approach not only enhances product development but also contributes to broader societal objectives.

In conclusion, co-creation represents a paradigm shift in food innovation, offering new opportunities for collaboration and value generation. By advancing theoretical understanding and practical applications, this study contributes to the ongoing evolution of co-creation as a central concept in contemporary research and practice.

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