

Empowering Consumers, Building Brands: How Crowdsourcing Contests Strengthen Brand Passion

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Executive Summary

Crowdsourcing contests are widely used in marketing and innovation practice to involve consumers in the development of new ideas, designs, and solutions. Firms rely on these formats to access external creativity and open up innovation processes. This article shows, however, that crowdsourcing contests can create value beyond innovation outcomes. They can also strengthen emotional consumer–brand relationships.

The central question of the study is whether perceived empowerment during participation in a crowdsourcing contest leads to an increase in brand passion. Empowerment is conceptualized as a psychological state consisting of four dimensions: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact. Participants feel empowered when they perceive the task as personally meaningful, feel capable of contributing, can act autonomously, and believe that their ideas can influence the brand or its offerings.

The study argues that empowerment experiences do not only affect participation behavior or economic outcomes. They can also shape affective brand relationships. When consumers invest time, creativity, and personal effort in a brand-related activity and experience this participation as meaningful and consequential, their emotional attachment to the brand may increase. The article therefore focuses on within-person change in brand passion rather than treating brand passion as a static attitude.

Empirically, the study is based on a real-world crowdsourcing contest organized by SWAROVSKI GEMS™. Participants were invited to develop lifestyle electronics designs that incorporated Swarovski genuine gemstones and created stones. The study combines survey data collected at two points in time, at contest registration and after contest completion, with behavioral platform data. This design allows the authors to analyze changes in brand passion over the course of participation.

The findings show a stable positive relationship between perceived empowerment and change in brand passion. Participants who experienced the contest as more meaningful, competence-enhancing, autonomous, and impactful showed stronger increases in passion toward the brand. This extends prior research on consumer empowerment, which has mainly focused on trust, intention to participate again, willingness to pay, or consumer demand. The study

positions empowerment as a psychological mechanism through which participatory brand initiatives can create emotional brand value.

Importantly, the effect of empowerment is not uniform across participants. Relationship motivation strengthens the empowerment–brand passion relationship. Participants who join contests partly to connect with others, experience belonging, and interact with like-minded individuals are especially likely to translate empowerment into stronger emotional attachment to the brand. Perceived fairness also strengthens the effect. When participants view the contest’s procedures and outcomes as fair, empowerment experiences become more credible and authentic, making them more likely to influence brand passion. In contrast, reward motivation does not significantly weaken the relationship. This means that even participants who are motivated by monetary rewards can develop stronger emotional attachment when the contest experience is empowering.

The managerial implications are clear. Firms should not design crowdsourcing contests merely as idea-generation mechanisms or prize-based competitions. To capture relational brand value, they need to design participation experiences that provide autonomy, competence support, meaningful contribution, and visible impact. They should also foster social interaction through feedback opportunities or community-building features. In addition, fairness is crucial: transparent evaluation criteria, credible judging processes, and clear communication can increase the legitimacy of the contest and strengthen its branding effects.

Overall, the study shows that crowdsourcing contests can serve a dual strategic role. They help firms generate ideas and solutions, but they also cultivate emotional consumer–brand relationships. In an environment where generative AI may increasingly support or replace parts of idea generation and screening, the relational and symbolic value of human participation may become even more important.