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# BRAND CO-CREATION AS GOVERNANCE OF A SHARED MEANING RESOURCE: A COMMONS PERSPECTIVE

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**Abstract**

Brand co-creation research typically treats brand meaning as a firm-owned project to which others contribute, and its problems are accordingly divided among participation management, consumer labor, deviant behavior, and technology adoption. These four streams rarely engage one another. This article synthesizes them by questioning the ownership assumption they share. Drawing on Ostrom's theory of governing the commons as method theory, we argue that co-created brand meaning behaves like a common-pool resource: exclusion is difficult, while its integrity (coherence, distinctiveness, credibility) is subtractable. The exploitation of volunteer labor, brand hijacking, and the harvesting of community meaning by artificial intelligence (AI) systems then appear as related governance failures rather than three separate problems. We develop six propositions on the resource, proportionality, collective choice, graduated sanctions, machine appropriation, and polycentric governance, together with their boundary conditions. The contribution is a conceptualization of co-created brand meaning as a shared resource, which moves the central question from how to invite consumers to contribute to which rules sustain the integrity of the meaning to which they contribute.

**Keywords:** brand co-creation; brand meaning; commons; governance; consumer labor; generative AI

## 1. Introduction

Brand meaning is increasingly built by many parties outside the firm, and machine systems now read it as well. Generative AI is expected to change how marketers interact with customers and create content (Grewal et al., 2025), and its role in innovation and marketing processes has been set out as a research agenda (Cillo & Rubera, 2025). Systems of this kind are trained on the traces that people leave in public venues, and research on model collapse shows that models trained on model-generated content lose the tails of the original content distribution (Shumailov et al., 2024). That finding implies that content produced by people remains valuable as a training input. Meaning that many parties built over a long period can therefore be reused by others who took no part in building it, and no rules agreed by those who did govern that reuse.

The brand co-creation literature, however, is already broad. A critical review of 148 articles defines co-creation in branding as a deliberate process of interaction among two or more parties that affects the brand (Sarasvuo et al., 2022). A review of research on small and medium-sized enterprise brands maps two eras and three main streams (Juntunen, 2024), and a conceptual analysis identifies at least ten rarely defined terms (Tähtinen & Suomi, 2021). The field does not lack definitions, classifications, or reviews. What it lacks is an explanation of why the same co-creation can endure in one brand and collapse in another, or why it shifts from voluntary participation to exploitation, hijacking, or harvesting. The shortfall follows from the disconnection among four research streams. Research on brand meaning and identity treats co-creation as the work of many actors who need to be managed (Baker et al., 2022; He & Zhang, 2022; Brand et al., 2025). Critical research on platformization and consumer labor reads co-creation as a way for

platforms and firms to extract value from consumer work (Denegri-Knott et al., 2024; Caliandro et al., 2024). Research on non-collaborative co-creation examines brand hijacking, brand hate, and deviant behavior as threats to the brand (Siano, Confetto, et al., 2022; Behl et al., 2024; Aziz & Rahman, 2022). Recent research on generative AI treats machines as tools or additional actors in the brand–consumer dyad (Grewal et al., 2025; Feng & Sun, 2026). The four streams share one rarely stated assumption: brand meaning is a stock owned by the firm and contributed to by others. On this assumption, the governance question narrows to how to motivate, treat fairly, control, or supplement contributors.

This article questions the ownership assumption. Much of the literature assumes that co-creation is a firm-organized invitation to participate, and that brand ownership (trademark law, identity guidelines, platform terms) confers control over meaning. Yet co-created meaning behaves like a shared resource: anyone who interacts with the brand can reinterpret and circulate it, and each use changes the coherence and credibility that others rely on. Empirical work is consistent with this reading, since brand meaning emerges at several levels of service ecosystems and limits the direction that any single actor can give it (Baker et al., 2022), and it is staged through the performances of many actors (Brand et al., 2025). On this view, exploitation, hijacking, and machine harvesting are manifestations of a single failure, the absence of commonly recognized rules, and the literature on governing shared resources (Ostrom, 1990) offers a framework for explaining when such rules succeed.

Two practical developments make the issue pressing. Generative AI is increasingly used in interactions between brands and consumers (Feng & Sun, 2026), and brand meaning is distributed across platforms whose rules the brand does not set (Caliandro et al., 2024). Theoretically, the ownership assumption leads the field to treat one problem as several, each under a different label and with a different remedy. We use the Theory Synthesis template from Jaakkola (2020), with commons governance theory as the method theory and brand co-creation research as the domain theory. Our contribution is of the new development type: a conceptualization of co-created brand meaning as a shared resource, six propositions with their rationale and scope conditions, and a differentiation from the closest works. For managers, we propose shifting the focus from designing participation incentives to designing rules.

## 2. Theoretical Background

### 2.1 Four streams and one shared assumption

The material analyzed is the theoretical domain of brand co-creation. Table 1 maps the four streams by core claim, assumption, and blind spot rather than by year of publication.

| Stream | Core claim | Anchor works | Rarely questioned assumption | Blind spot |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| A. Meaning and identity | Brands are built with stakeholders through dialogue, access, transparency, and risk | Siano, Vollero, et al. (2022); Sarasvuo et al. (2022); Baker et al. (2022); He & Zhang (2022); Veloutsou (2023); Simmons & Durkin (2023); Anderski et al. (2023); Brand et al. (2025) | Root metaphor: the firm as a steward who invites; equity flows to the brand owner | Who decides the rules for using meaning; what happens when others capture the benefits |
| B. Consumer labor | Co-creation puts consumers to work without pay; double exploitation | Kozinets et al. (2021); Denegri-Knott et al. (2024); Caliandro et al. (2024) | Ideology: the core relation is firm extraction from consumers | The effect of extraction on the quality of meaning itself, not only on fairness |
| C. Non-collaborative | Hijacking, brand attacks, and deviant behavior erode equity; | Siano, Confetto, et al. (2022); Aziz & Rahman (2022); Pöyry & Laaksonen (2022); Behl et al. (2024); Sameeni et al. | In-house: deviance is a threat from outside or | Deviance as a symptom of absent or illegitimate |


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| Stream | Core claim | Anchor works | Rarely questioned assumption | Blind spot |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | artists can mitigate | (2024); Sibai et al. (2024); Echeverri & Skålén (2021) | from bad actors | rules |
| D. AI and machines | AI strengthens co-creation and empowers consumers; AI becomes a new audience for the brand | Huang & Rust (2021); Puntoni et al. (2021); Longoni & Cian (2022); Brüns & Meißner (2024); Pantano et al. (2024); Grewal et al. (2025); Cillo & Rubera (2025); Feng & Sun (2026) | Field: AI is a tool, an additional actor, or a channel | AI as a harvester of meaning built by others |

*Table 1. Map of brand co-creation streams. Compiled by the authors from the cited sources.*

Stream A is the most established. An integrative review of branding research marks a shift from brand control to brand co-creation, with varying boundaries and degrees of openness (Siano, Vollero, et al., 2022), and a critical review of 148 articles understands co-creation in branding as a process of interaction and mutual influence among parties (Sarasvuo et al., 2022). Brand meaning is accordingly no longer seen as resting entirely with the firm. It emerges at several levels of nested service ecosystems, with limits on how far individual actors can direct it (Baker et al., 2022), and it forms through firm–customer interaction around core and peripheral brand meanings (He & Zhang, 2022). It is tied to audience responses through the co-creation of brand identity (Veloutsou, 2023) and is staged through the performances of many actors (Brand et al., 2025), including on digital engagement platforms (Anderski et al., 2023). Market actors also use brands to form and renew a sense of collective identity (we-ness), as shown for New Zealand national identity (Beverland et al., 2021). Theoretical lenses extend this view. Structuration theory has been used to understand brand value co-creation on social media (Simmons & Durkin, 2023), and a service-dominant (S-D) logic lens holds that marketing phenomena emerge and become institutionalized in service ecosystems (Vargo et al., 2023), with S-D logic itself being formalized as a general theory of markets (Akaka et al., 2021). These frameworks nevertheless keep the firm as the central actor that invites participation and sets its terms. The works reviewed here do not examine who sets the rules for using meaning once it circulates beyond the firm's venues, or what happens to the meaning itself when those rules are absent or contested.

Stream B challenges the assumption of harmony in stream A. The platformization of consumer culture is marked by tensions between datafication and liquefaction and between standardization and impermanence (Caliandro et al., 2024). Consumers' relational work on platforms is read as labor in that it generates engagement that benefits the platform (Denegri-Knott et al., 2024), and platforms can empower consumers while constraining them through the affordances they provide (Kozinets et al., 2021). Established brands in turn build their own platforms to regain control and consumer loyalty (Wichmann et al., 2022). Streams A and B both treat the relationship as a firm–consumer or platform–consumer dyad. Engagement research has begun to extend the analysis beyond the dyad: stakeholder engagement is conceptualized as the foundation of value co-creation in multi-stakeholder service ecosystems (Viglia et al., 2023), and engagement marketing has been extended to all stakeholders (Kumar et al., 2025). Neither extension addresses who governs the use of meaning, and neither examines how extraction affects the quality of the meaning itself rather than the fairness of the exchange.

Stream C addresses the adverse side of co-creation. Hijacking is classified by its constructive–destructive nature and the perpetrators' intent (Siano, Confetto, et al., 2022). A scoping review of the dark side of online brand communities identifies six themes, including unethical practices and brand violations, provocation, and brand activism and hate (Behl et al., 2024), and a literature review of brand hate maps its triggers and consequences (Aziz & Rahman, 2022). A survey shows that brand hate drives brand boycott and sabotage, with negative electronic word of mouth (eWOM) as a mediator (Sameeni et al., 2024), and anti-brand actions against brand activism rely on practices characteristic of social media (Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022). Within consumption communities, verbal violence can become endemic and turn a community into a toxic space through direct, structural, and cultural violence (Sibai et al., 2024). The concept of value co-destruction shows that interaction does not always create value (Echeverri & Skålén, 2021), although the concept has been problematized for the logic that underlies it (Alexander & Vallström, 2023). In these works, deviance is analyzed mainly as a threat that originates with hostile or deviant actors. The alternative


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reading, that deviance can signal rules which participants regard as absent or illegitimate, is the reading this article pursues. Stream D has only recently formed. A framework for AI in marketing maps mechanical, thinking, and feeling AI to marketing strategy (Huang & Rust, 2021), and behavioral research identifies four kinds of consumer experience with AI: data capture, classification, delegation, and social (Puntoni et al., 2021). Preference for AI recommendations depends on whether the context is utilitarian or hedonic (Longoni & Cian, 2022). In three experiments, using generative AI for social media content lowered perceived brand authenticity, and the decline was smaller when AI assisted humans than when it replaced them (Brüns & Meißner, 2024). A review anticipates that generative AI will affect how marketers interact with customers and create content (Grewal et al., 2025), a research map covers innovation and marketing processes (Cillo & Rubera, 2025), and generative AI has been examined in the creative process of luxury brands (Pantano et al., 2024). A mixed-methods study based on interviews and a survey finds that collaboration and communication with generative AI increase consumer empowerment, whereas creation shows an inverted-U relationship (Feng & Sun, 2026). Stream D treats machines as a capability, a channel, or an audience, not as appropriators of meaning built by others. The four streams agree that brand meaning is no longer fully controlled by the firm. They disagree on whether co-creation empowers consumers or exploits them (streams A and B) and on whether deviance damages or enriches the brand (stream C). They are also disconnected: streams B and C are not integrated even though both concern parties who feel that their meaning or labor has been taken, and stream D is not linked to the other three. What the streams leave unexamined is the assumption beneath all of them, that meaning is a stock owned by the brand owner.

### 2.2 Method theory: governing shared resources

We chose Ostrom's theory for three reasons that align with the IMPACT guidance for theory selection (Hollebeek et al., 2025): matching, interestingness, and applicability. First, on matching, the theory was built to explain when parties who share a resource without single ownership succeed in governing it themselves, which is the problem that the ownership assumption leaves unaddressed (Ostrom, 1990). Second, on interestingness, its core assumption, that users can develop their own rules when certain conditions are met, contradicts the classic expectation that shared resources inevitably collapse (Hardin, 1968). Third, on applicability, the theory has already been applied to related phenomena. A firm built open institutional infrastructure by adapting Ostrom's polycentric governance principles (Gatignon & Capron, 2023), public service co-creation has been read through Ostrom's design principles (Williams et al., 2023), and the governance of intellectual property rights over large language model training data has been analyzed with Ostrom's framework (Makridis & Ammons, 2025). Blockchain has been studied as a tool for governing shared resources (Rozas et al., 2021), the ethics of commons organizing has been critically examined (Murillo et al., 2025), and the commons perspective has been extended to knowledge (Hess & Ostrom, 2007). These studies show that Ostrom's theory is already applied to organizations, co-creation, and AI, but in our review of the literature none applies it to brand meaning. The theory arose from the study of limited natural resources and small, close-knit communities; the analogy therefore requires explicit justification. We use the theory differently from earlier studies: not for a firm building infrastructure, for public services, or for training data, but for the relationship among the firm, consumers, and machines over brand meaning.

## 3. Conceptual Approach

This article uses Theory Synthesis (Jaakkola, 2020) to address fragmentation: four streams address problems that appear different without a shared explanation. A synthesis differs from a review in one respect: it must produce a view absent from the source streams. The article also contains an adaptation element, since Ostrom's theory is borrowed as a lens and adapted from natural resources to meaning resources. Problematization proceeds by challenging one root assumption, the ownership of meaning, and offering an alternative in the form of propositions. Brand co-creation serves as the domain theory and the governance of shared resources as the method theory. Each proposition is stated together with its mechanism and boundary, in line with guidance for proposition-based conceptual contributions that stresses conceptual distinctiveness, completeness, and coherence (Hollebeek et al., 2024). Table 2 sets out the design elements of the article and the decision taken for each.


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| Design element | Decision in this article |
|---|---|
| Theory selection | Domain: brand co-creation. Method: governance of shared resources (Ostrom, 1990) |
| Theories and concepts analyzed | The four streams; consumer labor literature as a complement |
| Perspective and level of analysis | Meaning system at the brand level, with three classes of actors: the firm, human contributors, and machine appropriators |
| Key concepts | Shared meaning resource; rules-in-use; meaning integrity; appropriation |
| Translation of the phenomenon | The phenomena of the four streams are read as dilemmas of appropriation and rules |
| How concepts are integrated and argument quality | Toulmin structure: claims (propositions), grounds (cited studies), warrants (the analogical bridge, made explicit) |

*Table 2. Justification of research design elements (Jaakkola, 2020 framework).*

The material analyzed in this article consists of published literature from peer-reviewed journals in marketing, management, and institutional economics, mainly from 2021 to 2026, complemented by foundational works on commons governance.

## 4. Conceptual Framework

### 4.1 The shared meaning resource and its analogy

A shared meaning resource (SMR) is the stock of interpretations, practices, symbols, and stories that makes a brand's meaning recognizable across parties, accumulated through acts of interpreting and producing by the firm, human contributors, and machine systems. These three classes of actors appropriate a single resource in different roles. The firm encloses, that is, claims ownership of the resource and sets rules for its use. Contributors contribute, that is, reinterpret and circulate meaning. Machines harvest, that is, extract statistical patterns from the traces that remain. The roles differ in that each class holds a different bundle of rights over the same meaning.

The analogy to shared resources needs an explicit warrant. Meaning is not depleted by use and therefore differs from a grazing pasture. A resource that is nonrival in use can nevertheless suffer quality degradation from exploitation, and this logic has already been used to organize rights over language model training data (Makridis & Ammons, 2025); such resources therefore still require governance. What can diminish in an SMR is its integrity: the coherence, distinctiveness, and credibility of meaning for others. The other defining property of a common-pool resource, difficulty of exclusion (Ostrom, 1990), holds here given freedom of interpretation and digital traces that persist and are searchable. Trademark law protects signs, not the interpretations that others form of them. Rights over a resource can be separated into bundles that run from access and use to management, exclusion, and alienation (Schlager & Ostrom, 1992), and ownership is only one of these bundles. Owning a brand therefore does not automatically mean holding all rights over its meaning. The warrant is that, when a resource is hard to exclude and its integrity is reduced by use, appropriation dilemmas and questions of rules arise regardless of the resource's material form.

The analogy holds when three conditions are met: (a) many parties interpret and circulate meaning outside venues controlled by the firm; (b) the traces of that interpretation are persistent and searchable, making exclusion difficult; and (c) the quality of meaning for others depends on the accumulation of those interpretations. For brands with minimal public interaction, low-involvement commodity products, or closed B2B brands, these three conditions are weak and meaning is better read as an asset managed by the firm; there, enclosure is not a failure. The same three conditions set the scope of the propositions: each proposition holds to the extent that they are met. The second distinguishing concept separates rules-in-use from written rules. Brand identity guidelines and platform terms are written rules. Rules-in-use are the rules that actors actually regard as legitimate and enforce (Ostrom, 1990). A gap between the two explains why a firm can hold formal control and still lose practical control: contributors follow the norms that their community enforces, and those norms may differ from the guidelines that the firm publishes. The

distinction anchors the analysis of regimes: the regime that applies to a given brand is determined by its rules-in-use and not by its written rules alone.

### 4.2 Appropriation dilemmas as violations of design principles

Table 3 maps the phenomena of the four streams onto Ostrom's eight design principles, which were derived from the governance of natural resources (Ostrom, 1990). The mapping is the article's analytical argument: each phenomenon is read as the violation of a specific principle. Reading a phenomenon as a violation does not imply that every instance of exploitation, hijacking, or harvesting results from rule failure alone. It states that the observed pattern is what the corresponding principle predicts when the matching rule is absent.

| Design principle | Typical violation in brand co-creation | Stream |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Clear boundaries | It is unclear who the legitimate contributors are and what counts as "the brand"; machines operate without boundaries | C, D |
| 2. Proportional benefits and costs and local fit | Contributors give labor and meaning, and the benefits flow to the owner | B |
| 3. Collective choice | "On-brand" rules are set unilaterally | A, B |
| 4. Monitoring | The firm's monitoring of meaning is not accountable to the community, or does not exist | A, C |
| 5. Graduated sanctions | Binary responses to appropriation: ignore it or take legal action | C |
| 6. Conflict resolution | There is no low-cost channel for resolving disputes over meaning | B, C |
| 7. Recognition of rights to organize | The firm or platform regulates third-party use without involving the community | D |
| 8. Nested enterprises | Uniform rules across venues, or no rules between levels | A, D |

*Table 3. Violations of commons design principles and their symptoms. Compiled by the authors from Ostrom (1990).*

Three regimes follow from this mapping. Under enclosure, the firm sets and enforces rules unilaterally through law or platform control, and co-created meaning is treated as private property. Under open drift, no commonly recognized rules exist, and appropriation proceeds without constraint. Under a governed commons, rules are made and monitored jointly with contributors, and sanctions are graduated. Ownership is the starting point of the co-creation literature, which has therefore mostly worked with the first two regimes without naming them: stream A assumes enclosure combined with invitation, whereas streams B and C describe the consequences of enclosure or of drift. The governed commons is the regime that the existing streams leave unexamined, and the propositions state when it preserves integrity.


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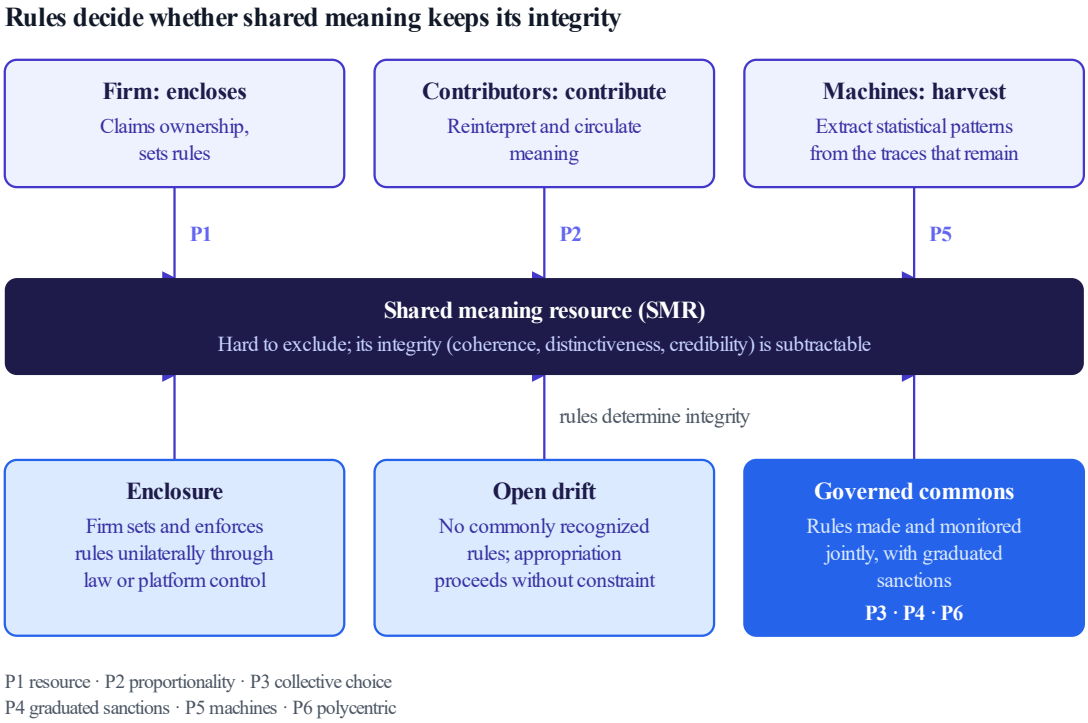


Figure 1. Conceptual framework: three appropriators, one shared meaning resource, three regimes of rules, and six propositions

Figure 1 summarizes the framework: three classes of appropriators act on one shared meaning resource, and the regime of rules determines whether its integrity is preserved. The six propositions state when rules preserve or fail to preserve that integrity.

### 4.3 Six propositions on governing meaning

P1 (resource). The more acts of brand interpretation occur outside firm-controlled venues, and the more persistent and searchable their traces, the less legal ownership of the brand translates into control over meaning, and the more the integrity of meaning depends on rules that contributors recognize. The mechanism is that freedom of interpretation combined with digital persistence moves meaning from symbols that the firm controls to practices that many parties perform and record (for the ecosystem level, see Baker et al., 2022; for the performances of actors beyond the brand owner's control, see Brand et al., 2025). Meaning that rests in practices can be revised by anyone who takes part, and the records of those practices remain available to later participants and to machines. Platform conditions strengthen the effect, since platforms shape what consumers can do with brand meaning through their affordances (Kozinets et al., 2021). The relationship weakens for brands with minimal public interaction and in closed settings.

P2 (proportionality). The more contributors judge that the benefits they receive (money, recognition, influence) are not proportional to their contributions, the more the quality of contributions declines, not only their quantity. The mechanism is that voluntary work shifts from reciprocity to perceived extraction. The basis is conditional cooperation grounded in reciprocity and reputation (Ostrom, 1990). One-off contributors with no identity tie to the brand fall outside this effect, being insensitive to proportionality. Nonmonetary benefits, such as connection with others, can also make unpaid work seem worthwhile and are often not experienced as work (Denegri-Knott et al., 2024); P2 therefore concerns the contributors' own judgment of proportionality, not the presence or absence of payment.

P3 (collective choice). Rules about what counts as "on-brand" that are made with contributor involvement increase enforcement by fellow contributors and reduce dependence on firm sanctions. The mechanism is legitimacy: rules that contributors helped to make give them a stake in those rules, whereas rules imposed on them treat contributors merely as subjects (Ostrom, 1990). Contributors who hold such a stake have reason to monitor one another and to correct departures from the agreed meaning, which lowers the firm's monitoring cost. The mechanism


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presupposes a recognizable community; in large, heterogeneous publics, representation becomes a problem in its own right.

P4 (graduated sanctions). Graduated responses to non-collaborative appropriation (dialogue, incorporation, restriction, formal action) preserve the integrity of meaning and cooperation better than binary responses. The principle of graduated sanctions holds that mild early responses signal that rules are enforced without alienating those who have departed from them (Ostrom, 1990). Proportional responses keep the boundary between brand play and brand attack negotiable, which allows ambiguous actors to be converted into contributors, in line with findings that artists can mitigate dilution (Siano, Confetto, et al., 2022). Seriously harmful content still requires immediate formal action.

P5 (machines). Harvesting of meaning by third-party AI systems, without arrangements negotiated with the contributor community, lowers the quality of future contributions through withdrawal or strategic degradation, and the meaning that machines subsequently read therefore has lower integrity. The effect is delayed: contributors respond to harvesting only after they become aware of it. What is harvested is not brand text but the patterns of interpretation accumulated in contributors' traces. Two parties are harmed: contributors, whose work becomes material for third parties without compensation and without a voice in its use, and firms, which lose control over how machines re-read their brand meaning. Existing rules do not reach this harvesting: trademark law protects signs, not interpretation, and platform terms govern access to data, not the treatment of the meaning it contains. Research on model collapse points in the same direction. Indiscriminate training on model-generated content eliminates the tails of the original content distribution, which raises the value of authentic human interaction content (Shumailov et al., 2024). Content that people produce can itself decline when its contributors withdraw, and the meaning that machines read then reflects the reduced quality at its source. P5 describes a violation of principles 2 and 7 (Ostrom, 1990), since harvesting breaks proportionality and bypasses the community's right to organize. The effect weakens when contributors have no exit option or see shared benefits from machine use.

P6 (polycentric). For brands that operate across many venues, nested rules (brand principles at the top level, local rules at each venue) produce higher meaning coherence than uniform rules or no rules. The rationale is the fit of rules to local conditions combined with coordination across levels (principles 2 and 8; Ostrom, 1990). Polycentric systems allow rules to match the conditions of each venue while keeping the venues connected (Ostrom, 2010), and the account of brand meaning as emerging at the level of nested ecosystems points in the same direction (Baker et al., 2022). The advantage shrinks when venues are highly heterogeneous, which raises coordination costs.

The framework is strongest for cultural and community brands, platform brands, place and collective brands, and brands whose followers interact across many venues; in these cases the three conditions for the analogy hold most fully. It is weakest for low-involvement commodity products and closed B2B brands. Brands that build open infrastructure for others, as the firm studied by Gatignon and Capron (2023) did, are closer to the governed commons regime and are therefore informative cases for P3 and P6. The time dimension also matters: the logic strengthens when traces of meaning are persistent and when machine actors act as readers or trainers based on those traces, conditions that have become common only in recent years.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Theoretical contributions

This article synthesizes the four streams through commons theory and develops a new concept: co-created brand meaning as a resource whose integrity depends on commonly recognized rules. The shift in assumption is from "meaning is a stock owned by the firm and contributed to by others" to "meaning is a shared resource whose sustainability is determined by rules." Exploitation, hijacking, and machine harvesting consequently become instances of one problem, and the research question moves from motivation to participate to the quality of rules. The contribution has three parts. First, the article specifies a resource (the SMR), its subtractable property (integrity), and the three classes of actors that appropriate it, which gives the streams a common object of analysis. Second, it replaces the ownership assumption with a testable alternative: six propositions that state when rules preserve or fail to preserve integrity, each with its mechanism and boundary. Third, it brings machines into the analysis as a class of appropriators whose use of meaning affects what others later contribute, which stream D has not done. In the conceptual contribution framework (Hollebeek et al., 2024), we position this contribution in the revelatory cell, which combines scientific and practical utility.

The framework also implies a paradox. The more strongly a firm asserts ownership of meaning (enclosure), the less control it retains over the integrity of that meaning, as contributors withdraw or become opponents and machines continue to extract from the traces that remain. Conversely, a willingness to share the right to make rules can increase control over integrity. The paradox follows from P1 and P3 together: ownership controls symbols, whereas integrity depends on rules that others recognize.

This article differs from the closest works in five respects. The reviews by Sarasvuo et al. (2022) and Juntunen (2024) provide definitions, classifications, and maps of streams. This article does not redefine co-creation but explains when it endures or collapses through rules, and it synthesizes the streams by mechanism rather than chronology. Baker et al. (2022) show that brand meaning emerges in nested service ecosystems with limits on individual actors' direction; this article specifies governance as shared rules organized by Ostrom's eight design principles and covers exploitation, hijacking, and machines within one framework. Denegri-Knott et al. (2024) read consumers' relational work on platforms as work that benefits the platform; this article treats voluntariness as dependent on proportionality and collective choice (P2, P3), implying that even cultivated commitment can collapse. Behl et al. (2024) and Siano, Confetto, et al. (2022) examine the effects and typology of non-collaborative co-creation; this article reads deviance as a symptom of absent or illegitimate rules and derives graduated responses from it (P4). Finally, Williams et al. (2023) and Makridis and Ammons (2025) apply Ostrom's design principles to public service co-creation and to large language model training data. We extend them to brand meaning and to three classes of appropriators at once: firms, consumers, and machines.

### 5.2 Practical implications

For brand managers, the key shift is from designing participation incentives to designing rules. Three steps follow. First, brands should create rules for the use of meaning that the community can read and that are tested with contributor representatives, not only internal guidelines (P3). Second, brands should prepare a graduated set of responses to non-collaborative appropriation, from dialogue to legal action, and convert ambiguous actors into contributors who operate under agreed rules where possible (P4). The classification of hijacking by intent (Siano, Confetto, et al., 2022) can inform which response applies. Third, when community content is licensed for machine training or made "machine-readable," brands should negotiate the arrangement with the community, since P5 predicts a delayed cost in the form of lower meaning integrity. For platforms and regulators, the framework treats the community's collective right over the use of its meaning traces as a governance issue, not only an issue of individual copyright; rights over training data have already been analyzed in this way for language models (Makridis & Ammons, 2025).

### 5.3 One logic for four streams

The four streams do not face four separate problems. The absence of commonly recognized rules offers a single logic for the decline in contributions, hijacking, and machine harvesting. Table 3 shows the pattern: several principles, such as collective choice and monitoring, are violated in more than one stream, and each stream describes a different consequence of the violation. The debate between empowerment and exploitation (streams A and B) is reframed when both are read as two ends of rule quality, namely proportionality and collective choice. Where contributors receive proportional benefits and take part in making the rules, co-creation reads as empowerment; where they do not, it reads as exploitation. In stream C, the question about deviance shifts from whether it damages or enriches the brand to whether it can be channeled through graduated sanctions, since the response to deviance decides whether ambiguous actors are lost or converted. Stream D enters the same logic through P5: machines are appropriators whose use affects the quality of what contributors later produce. Measuring co-creation success by the health of the rules (their legitimacy, monitoring, and graduated sanctions) rather than by the number of contributors or the level of engagement would lead brands to be judged by how well they sustain the integrity of meaning, including when machines read that meaning.

## 6. Limitations and Research Agenda

This article is conceptual; its propositions therefore remain to be tested. Three limitations bear on how they should be read. First, the analogy to shared resources rests on an explicit warrant: meaning is not depleted by use, and brand communities are usually more fluid than communities of pasture users. The analogy holds only when many


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parties interpret and circulate meaning outside the firm's venues, when the traces of that interpretation persist and are searchable, and when the quality of meaning depends on their accumulation; the framework should not be extended to brands that fail these conditions. Second, the mapping in Table 3 is an analytical argument that future work can refine, for instance by coding actual cases against the eight design principles. Third, the propositions describe tendencies under stated boundary conditions and do not specify effect sizes or thresholds. The novelty of this article lies in the explicit application of Ostrom's theory to co-created brand meaning; the theory has been applied to knowledge as a commons (Hess & Ostrom, 2007), but not to brand meaning.

Five lines of research follow from the propositions.

P2 and P3 can be tested with scenario experiments that vary the proportionality of benefits and involvement in rule making, with contribution quality (not quantity) as the outcome and active members of brand communities, not general consumers, as respondents. The experiments can also include a condition with nonmonetary benefits, to test the boundary that P2 draws around contributors who do not experience their work as work.

P4 can be tested with comparative case studies of brand responses to brand play and brand attack, coded as a sanction ladder, with the response case as the unit of analysis. The coding can follow the classification of hijacking by intent (Siano, Confetto, et al., 2022) to separate constructive from destructive appropriation before responses are compared.

P5 can be tested with longitudinal data from communities subject to changes in data licensing, measuring changes in the quality and volume of contributions afterward, with the community as the unit of analysis. A parallel design can compare communities whose content is open to machine use with communities that have negotiated arrangements, which tests the proposed moderating role of shared benefits.

Measurement of the SMR. Indicators of meaning integrity (coherence, distinctiveness, credibility) should be developed across venues, including interpretations generated by language models compared with community interpretations. Such indicators would allow P1 and P5 to be tested on observed meaning and not on perceptions alone.

Boundary conditions. Cultural and community brands can be compared with commodity brands to test whether P1 weakens as predicted. The same comparison can address P6 by contrasting brands with many heterogeneous venues against brands with few.

## 7. Conclusion

This article synthesizes four streams of brand co-creation research with the theory of governing shared resources and proposes that co-created brand meaning behaves as a shared resource whose integrity depends on commonly recognized rules. The decline in contributions, hijacking, and machine harvesting can accordingly be read as manifestations of a single failure, and six propositions state when rules preserve or fail to preserve the integrity of meaning. Five lines of research can test these propositions, and the boundary conditions state where they should not be expected to hold. For managers, the implication is to design rules for the use of meaning together with contributors, and not only participation incentives. For research, the implication is that co-creation outcomes should be explained by the rules under which meaning is shared, in addition to the motivation of those who contribute.

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