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CO-INNOVATION IN CREATIVE INDUSTRIES: A CASE STUDY ANALYSIS

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Abstract: Internationally, the proactive engagement of customers, clients, and/or fans in the development of new products, services, and/or technologies has become a business priority for those companies that have understood the importance of focusing on a management approach based on open innovation in order to increase their performance. In this context, leveraging the online environment and social media for open dialogue and co-creation with customers and external stakeholders can significantly contribute to a company's success, fostering innovation, enhancing relationships, and ultimately driving value creation. The paper aims to bring to the fore the open innovation business model of the two most renowned and dynamic creative companies in involving customers in proposing innovative ideas and solutions for developing new competitive products through online platforms. Hence, the research carried out and presented in this paper, provides insights into co-creation innovation addressed by Mulino Bianco and LEGO companies, highlighting the importance and how customers and other external stakeholders are involved in the co-creation of value. A comparative analysis between the two companies will also be done to better understand how innovation through co-creation can be approached according to the creative companies' resources and interests.

Key words: co-creation, creative companies, creative industries, innovation through co-creation, online platforms, open innovation, value creation

1. INTRODUCTION

Creative industries are made up of vast fields and deal with the interaction of different sectors. Sectors belonging to the creative industries range from activities rooted in traditional knowledge and cultural heritage, from cultural and craft festivities to more technological and service-oriented subgroups such as audiovisual and new media.

The term creative industries refer to the socio-economic potential of activities that are the subject of trade in creativity, knowledge, and information [1].

Among the types of innovation approached by different companies within creative industries to increase their performance, open innovation is an advantageous alternative, especially when it comes to proposing new products, offering services (experiences), orienting towards a certain type of business model, the creation of collaborative communities through crowdsourcing platforms

[2], the pro-active involvement of various actors through co-creation, etc. [3].

In this context, identifying and bringing to the fore companies that successfully embraced open innovation to increase their performance is of great importance to encourage other companies to follow their example by giving their customers a voice through proactive involvement in co-creating new innovative and competitive products.

2. CREATIVE INDUSTRIES AND CO-INNOVATION PROCESS

Defining the creative industries is of great importance in understanding the size, shape, and skills required of the workforce. To do that, the historiography of the term creative industry has been traced by many specialists over the years [4-10]. A large number of them believe that there must be a solid theoretical basis for any definition used as public policy, especially if that definition has important consequences for how

any type of industry, including those that are the subject of this paper, is to be measured, as well as the type of intervention that will be adopted [6, 11-14].

Creative industries research studies over the years (whether global or European, national or regional) have shown that have a considerable size when it comes to the number of businesses, value-added, and employment [15].

The European Union aims to make creative industries more visible, emphasizing the shift of the European economy from traditional manufacturing to services and innovation [16].

Co-innovation in creative industries involves collaborative efforts between individuals, organizations, or entities to develop innovative products, services, or solutions in the creative and cultural sectors. Co-innovation processes in creative industries often share common elements with co-innovation in other sectors but are tailored to the unique characteristics and needs of creative endeavors.

Engaging in an interactive and open dialogue with various stakeholders, including customers and external partners prove to lead to several benefits for creative companies, namely: co-creation of value, creativity and innovation, enhanced customer engagement, market insights, brand building, agile decision-making, community building, global reach.

By involving external stakeholders in discussions and brainstorming sessions through online platforms can lead to the generation of fresh and innovative concepts that might not have emerged within the company's internal teams. Social media platforms provide an avenue for companies to directly interact with their customers, respond to queries, address concerns, and gather feedback in real time. This strengthens the company-customer relationship and fosters a sense of trust and loyalty.

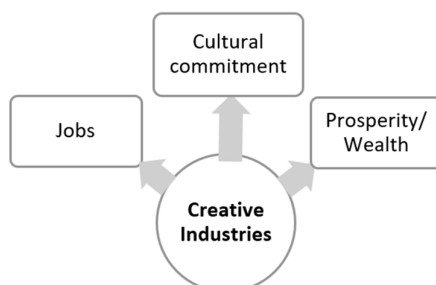


Fig. 1. Factors generated by the creative industries.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 The research methodology

The use of the case study was preferred in this situation as the main research tool, this being considered a rather intensive investigation method, an all-encompassing strategy, which requires several steps in the approach: definition and design of the research, preparation, collection, and analysis of data, and presentation of conclusions [17]. Also, two case studies were chosen to be presented in this paper to gain a clearer picture of how open innovation is implemented at the creative firm level.

To identify which companies within creative industries (shortly, creative companies/firms) have already seen the opportunity and implemented open innovation as a tool to become more competitive, the authors have conducted online research by investigating various internationally recognized databases.

The search activity in the online environment for co-creation platforms developed up to that moment, was based on some sorting criteria, namely: to be part of the creative industries, to have successfully implemented open innovation by involving actors in co-creation processes, through the development of online platforms in this sense. From the list of identified platforms, Mulino Bianco and LEGO were among those that corresponded to the established criteria and thus chosen to be presented in this paper as examples of good practices, for some years now.

To ensure data collection, a guide was created that was used uniformly for the two case studies [18], being structured into two main parts:

- In the first part, the intention was to better know the studied company, the focus being on identifying the role of innovation in the researched company;
- The second part aimed at a detailed investigation of how co-creation in the virtual environment was approached and put into practice by the creative company.

Each of the two studies was carried out separately, and the data collection was carried out on secondary sources regarding the co-creation strategy applied by each company.

3.2 Main findings/results

3.2.1. *Innovation through Co-creation: The Use of Online Environments by Mulino Bianco and Lego*

Both Mulino Bianco, a brand of Barilla Group, and LEGO Group have been widely recognized for their successful implementation of open innovation principles. Creative companies leverage open innovation to engage with fans, customers, and partners to create new ideas, products, and experiences.

Among the existing projects under the Mulino Bianco brand dedicated to the proactive involvement of customers, respectively

stakeholders in innovation processes, is Nel Mulino Che Vorrei [19].

Currently, the LEGO Group prides itself on a vast experience in the dialogue and involvement of stakeholders in the co-creation of new products. The first such co-creation project dates back to 2005, and the one proposed for presentation in this paper was launched in 2008 and is entitled, suggestively, LEGO Ideas [20].

The main findings on how the two companies incorporated innovation through co-creation by using online platforms are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Innovation through co-creation: the use of online environments by Mulino Bianco [21- 26] and Lego [27-34]

Creative Company	Innovation through co-creation: the use of online environments		
	<i>Innovative process and its quantifiable results</i>	<i>Pro-active customer involvement/ stakeholder dialogue and digitization of innovation</i>	<i>Innovation of the business model/ Implementing open innovation</i>
LEGO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Starting with the first toys (simple yo-yos, trucks, and ducks on wheels), the company managed to become one of the most respected brands in the world and a leader in the toy industry. Portfolio of high-quality and safe products (the strictest safety and quality standards). Extensive and continuous development since the launch of the traditional LEGO brick in 1958: Toy of the Century, Products of the Century. Product innovation: educational toys, always in trend, representing the combination of a structured system, logic, and unlimited creativity. Product diversity, either offline or online, through constant innovation, with children as a model, but also innovating for adults. Always in trend with the dynamics of digital technologies. Innovations through co-creation with stakeholders result in a product portfolio that goes beyond traditional brick-and-mortar toys. Today, the LEGO Group also sells computer games, television series, books, clothing, and 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continuous innovation embedded in most of the LEGO's activities and products, starting from the traditional R&D facilities in Billund, attracting startups and other complementary activities around their campus, incorporating research into public programs such as schools and libraries, and new product ideas. In 2004, the first steps towards open innovation were taken, when the dialogue with users through the online environment was also initiated, by creating platforms that allow the sharing of ideas, opinions on LEGO products/creations and innovations/inventions of users to improve the existing ones and/or create new ones. Digitization of innovation, the main direction used in the development of the LEGO Group for over ten years. The digitization of innovation achieved through the online environment provides numerous tools for mediating the dialogue and interaction between the brand and users, thus facilitating their involvement in the open innovation process, through co-creation or crowdsourcing. LEGO Ideas is a crowdsourcing and co-creation platform for adults, aimed at those over 13 years old, which allows those wishing to submit ideas, through a contest, related to the construction of LEGO sets, but also to gather a minimum of 10,000 supporters so that the respective project to be considered for evaluation by the LEGO team, which also decides which ideas will be turned into reality, becoming LEGO sets. The process around LEGO Ideas is to turn innovation upside down (products pulled from markets, from users). Outsourced tool of new product competitions using existing components, well-structured to organize them: information about them, useful resources for creators/fans, blog, community, visible links to various social media pages. Rewarding co-creation: giving a small part of the revenue obtained from any product developed by 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Innovative business model in four key dimensions, creating more value for customers with the use of fewer resources. Managers with a broad view of innovation: which includes not only new products but also pricing plans, community building, business processes, and marketing channels, all of which represent powerful business drivers. Structure for strategic coordination of innovation activities: Executive Innovation Governance Group. Using open innovation to increase global footprint, broaden target audience, and define long-term product strategy. The interest and orientation towards creativity and innovation are also proven by the existence of departments such as Value Creation, Innovation and Consumer Marketing, and Buyer Marketing and Direct Development. The LEGO Foundation - LEGO® Idea Conference: brings together educational and play innovators from around the world in a recognized global platform. The co-creation efforts of the brand were also directed towards the involvement of external stakeholders such as non-

	<p>stationery, with LEGO themes often associated with other media products such as the Star Wars franchise and Lord of The Rings. The innovative product development strategy aims to launch new products every year.</p>	<p>the LEGO Group, giving away 10 sets, as well as recognition as an author (the only case in which he also receives the copyright of his innovation).</p>	<p>governmental organizations, which resulted in the FIRST LEGO League, the annual international robotics competition, as well as educational institutions that led to the establishment of the LEGO Learning Institute.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The co-creation between the company and its consumers was initiated by the latter and resulted from the online dialogue between dedicated LEGO users. • Implementing the open innovation process through LEGO Ideas eliminated the need for steps in the normal product innovation cycle (idea generation, design, testing, consumer engagement). Staged co-creation process based on co-ideation, co-evaluation, and co-design.
<p>MULINO BIANCO</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mulino Bianco's innovation strategy is always about generating new products and packaging. • A portfolio of appreciated products, because of the brand's concern for people's well-being, by cultivating not only the quality of each ingredient but also taking care of nutritional aspects. • Products made with respect for the environment and nature, by practicing a sustainable production process throughout its entire course, from the farmer to the consumer. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • R&D is a fundamental step in the process of developing an idea into a product, which often takes longer than the production phase. It can take a long time and requires sustained effort to work with an idea and find contributors. Therefore, the R&D process is fundamental to what happens later in the manufacturing phase. • The open innovation process: co-creation with stakeholders, based on the interaction between different professionals, both inside (internal stakeholders) and outside the company (external stakeholders). • The digitization of innovation is achieved through the <i>Nel Mulino Che Vorrei platform</i>, a tool dedicated to interaction with stakeholders, current and potential consumers, adults, and residents of the Italian territory. • On the platform, one can: discover projects, propose ideas, vote for others' ideas, view completed projects, enter the platform's blog, answer various questions sent by Mulino Bianco, participating in surveys. • Projects aimed to involve both the participants, who contribute with innovative ideas, and the Mulino Bianco experts, who evaluate the innovative ideas proposed by the participants, as well as various actors, who can be of all categories: current or potential consumers, who contribute by voting to classify the ideas. • Nel Mulino che Vorrei = role of listener, to satisfy the needs, demands, and wishes of customers/consumers. • Stakeholders' participation in co-creation: by sending ideas, assigning copyright, voting on other people's ideas, or commenting on already posted ideas. • Outsourced idea competition tool, a very well-structured platform for organizing competitions: information, useful resources for creators, blog, survey questionnaires, visible links to various social media pages. Rewarding co-creation: turning an idea into a real product. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The business model is the one established by Barilla Group: "Good for You, Good for the Planet: One way of doing business!" • Together with other brands within the Group, Mulino Bianco aims to become the home of competence and a hub for innovation to educate the food industry as a lasting concept. • In its more than forty years of existence, Mulino Bianco has revolutionized the bakery products market and guaranteed a superior level of quality through strict control of the production line; by launching a breakfast idea in Italy, Mulino Bianco proposes a balanced nutritional model, following the tradition of its native country, Italy. • The phased co-creation process, which starts and ends with the consumer (outside-in process), is based on co-ideation and co-evaluation.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Il Mulino Che Vorrei community, an example of co-generation and crowdsourcing project, model of communication, opened to everyone. 	
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Table 2

The 5 Cos approach: Mulino Bianco vs. LEGO

5 Cos	Nel Mulino che Vorrei	LEGO Ideas
Co-ideation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is opened to a vast community of enthusiasts, selected by the brand and research community, through which new product concepts are sought to be identified. • In this stage, those ideas that aim at information to diversify the range of existing products are processed. • All ideas and/or proposals must comply with the minimum requirements imposed by the brand (examples, new filling, different dough, etc.). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The dedicated tool offers the possibility to aggregate a vast number of ideas from fans of LEGO games. • However, to enter the next stage a minimum number of supporters (who vote for the idea) is required to ensure the characteristic of genius and uniqueness of the ideas selected to be further developed.
Co-valuation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A staged process, carried out in the first phase through creative voting (likes, stars, ...); any idea that is unique and original can be evaluated from the perspective of attractiveness by the active community. • Subsequently, the selected ideas are internally evaluated by the brand's experts. • Among the important evaluation criteria are also the uniqueness of the idea, the feasibility of the developed project, compliance with the imposed evaluation criteria, the extent to which it is by the proposed objectives. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unlike the co-ideation stage, in which case the 10,000 supporters allow the idea to enter the competition, in the co-valuation stage there is the possibility to vote for a physical product (prototype). • For the completed prototype, the evaluation term is much more extensive, which means that that prototype goes through a much more thorough analysis and control process, both from the supporters and the experts of the group.
Co-design	-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants who enter the next stage after (co)ideation must go through all the stages of prototyping a product from its design, the presentation of technical characteristics, the motivation of the genius of the concept and the future product, and the creation of the prototype. • The participants must sketch images and pictures, which will be sent for evaluation by the brand experts.

3.2.2 *The 5 Cos in the creative firm (co-ideation, co-valuation, co-design, co-test, co-launch)*

The “5 Co’s” is a model involving five collaborative activities or phases, which are used in various contexts, including product development, innovation, and entrepreneurship. Each phase involves different levels of collaboration and engagement with stakeholders, customers, and partners [34].

The model emphasizes the iterative nature of innovation and the need for ongoing collaboration to create successful products and services. A breakdown of each of the “5 Co’s” entails co-ideation, co-valuation, co-design, co-test, and co-launch [34].

It is important to note that the “5 Co’s” model might be used with slight variations in different contexts/industries, as in the case of the two creative firms, presented in Table 2.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

The innovation approached in the early periods of activity by the two companies was a closed one, but the transition to open innovation proved to be easy to achieve and auspicious as a strategy to increase the performance of creative companies. If in the case of Mulino Bianco, open innovation was practiced, already to a certain extent, sometime before it became so popular, starting from simple communication with consumers and reaching collaboration in joint projects, LEGO has been moving towards open innovation since 2004, when it began to pay special attention to dialogue with users through the online environment.

Starting from the established mission of delivering quality products to ensure well-being for both people and communities (Mulino Bianco) and inspiring and developing future

creators (LEGO), open innovation has already been an important part of their culture for many years. After all, it's not just about products, it's about cultivating the dream of building a better world (Mulino) and awareness of human possibilities/capabilities (LEGO).

The innovative product development strategy practiced by Mulino Bianco and LEGO places particular emphasis on environmental protection and the proactive involvement of different actors. To communicate with them, both creative companies have developed online platforms that allow the sharing of ideas, and opinions about products or user innovations to improve existing ones or create new ones.

The purpose of the co-creation competitions launched on these platforms is to give a voice to all those who want to be part of the respective community, thus bringing their input, and using their knowledge, creativity, and skills in the co-creation of innovative products.

The comparative analysis carried out between the two creative firms that have been implementing open innovation for years highlighted the following key elements:

- The interest in innovation of both companies is continuous and obvious, the desire being to be the main choice of customers, a fact that leads to the development and practice of an innovative business model.
- The implementation of co-creation was achieved through call-to-action type competitions whose objective is either gathering new ideas (Mulino) or product proposals/prototypes (LEGO).
- The tools used to digitize innovation: outsourced online platforms that play a crucial role in digitizing innovation and facilitating open innovation processes, such as crowdsourcing and co-creation. These platforms serve as intermediaries that connect different stakeholders in a digital environment. They provide a structured and efficient way to gather ideas, feedback, and contributions from a broader audience.
- Competitions take place in stages, having an established duration (Mulino Bianco) or until they reach a certain number of required votes (LEGO). The motivation of stakeholders to participate is done by offering them various

rewards, either of a financial nature (LEGO) or by realizing the winning idea (Mulino Bianco). But, beyond these forms of reward, the participants are motivated, in fact, by their own needs, desires, passions, and or even dreams, such competitions helping them to bring them to a certain reality. For example, in the case of LEGO, stakeholders are passionate about the multitude and diversity of the brand's play pieces, starting from the traditional brick, as well as the multitude of ways to combine them and create new ones, releasing the creative/innovative potential, and stimulating their imagination. The stakeholders who contribute with innovative ideas in the competitions organized by Mulino Bianco are both current and potential consumers of the brand.

- Innovative processes are staged (ideation (ideas), development (project), execution (prototype), launch (product)), start and end with the consumer (outside-in process) (Mulino Bianco), are based on market-pull products (LEGO).

Based on the comparative analyses, it can be inferred that the innovation performance of the two creative firms is positively impacted by several factors: image and references towards external stakeholders, expansion of the use of open innovation (continuous innovation), development of collaborative communities, co-created product portfolios, increased brand competitiveness on the market (industry leaders), strong internationalization.

Co-innovation in creative industries thrives on collaboration, diversity, and adaptability. It encourages a dynamic approach to creative problem-solving and leverages the strengths of interdisciplinary teams to drive innovation in the cultural and creative sectors.

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Co-inovarea în industriile creative: analiză tip studiu de caz

Pe plan internațional, implicarea proactivă a stakeholderilor în dezvoltarea de noi produse, servicii și/ sau tehnologii a devenit o prioritate de afaceri pentru acele companii care au înțeles importanța abordării unui management bazat pe inovarea deschisă în vederea creșterii performanței. În acest context, valorificarea mediului online și a rețelelor sociale pentru dialogul deschis și co-crearea atât cu clienții, cât și cu stakeholderii externi pot contribui semnificativ la succesul unei companii, încurajând inovarea, îmbunătățirea relațiilor și, în cele din urmă, stimulând crearea de valoare. Scopul acestei lucrări este de a aduce în prim-plan modelul de afacere bazat pe inovarea deschisă a două dintre cele mai renumite și dinamice companii creative privind implicarea clienților în propunerea de idei și soluții inovatoare, pentru dezvoltarea de noi produse competitive, prin intermediul platformelor online. Prin urmare, cercetarea efectuată și prezentată în această lucrare oferă perspective asupra inovării prin co-creare abordată de Mulino Bianco și LEGO, evidențiind importanța și modul în care diverși actori externi sunt implicați în co-crearea de valoare. De asemenea, o analiză comparativă între cele două firme este realizată pentru a înțelege mai bine modalitățile în care inovarea prin co-creare poate fi abordată, în funcție de resursele și interesele firmelor creative.

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