**INNOVATION ECO-SYSTEM**

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Joining the Images of Research Exhibition 2015, the author has submitted a freehand sketch illustrating a collaborative innovation environment in product innovation. Using the structure of the Earth and ecosystem analogy, the author transfers the concept of Innovation ecosystem and its importance in expanding sources of development. The innovation ecosystem also highlights the complexity and necessity of different actors and the interactions between them in aiding the firms in achieving innovation purpose.

Sketching the image, the author placed the firm seeking for product innovation as the inner core of the Earth, covered by the crust constituted by different co-creator groups. Customers can be found as the dominant component in the image to highlight their pivotal roles in innovation for many reasons. First, customers are known for their contribution in inventing radical product innovation and generating improvements for new product development (NPD). This can be found in a record of the primary role of customers in 82% of major functional improvements in scientific instruments, 85% major pultrusion-processing machinery innovation (von Hippel, 1999) and other product improvements in various industries, from medical to consumer products. Second, extant research has suggested that deeply integrating customers into innovation process could decrease the failure rate (Piller & Lindgens, 2011). Third, the evaluation of a product or service innovation relies on how customers evaluate its attributes with certain use purposes and situations in mind (Vandecasteele & Geuens, 2010; Gardial, et al., 1994). With this respect, an innovation is perceived to be successful and meaningful only when they are adopted by consumers (Hetet et al., 2014). The emergence of NPD literature has witnessed the shift of notions of innovation towards a customer-centric approach. If traditional viewpoint classifies innovation into radical and incremental stages (Cooper, 1998), recent studies have shown a broader perspective with commercially attractive innovation, positive societal impact, or technology dependency (Schweizer et al., 2014; Garcia & Calantone, 2011). Whilst the term innovation is deemed notoriously ambiguous, the current approach focuses on the core value of NPD, which is helping customers pursue a better quality of life and adding value to customers (Lee et al., 2012, O’Sullivan & Dooley, 2008). This has construed the notions of user-friendly and user-experience enhancement in product innovation.

Emphasising the role of customers as a critical group in the innovation ecosystem, the image also depicts them with different portraits. This stems from the author’s epistemology of the heterogeneity of customers in co-creating values differently in an innovation process. Besides theories explaining customers in their co-creation activities based on their lead-user characteristics (Piller et al., 2011, von Hippel, 1986) or high expertise in technology (Hoffman et al., 2010; de Bont & Schoormans, 1995), recent studies have proposed using personality traits as a theoretical lens to gain insight of the customer co-creation in NPD literature (Stock et al., 2014; Boeddrich, 2004). To respond to their call for empirical research, the author contends that the types of new product will be suggested by types of idea owners and each personality traits can be pertinent for different co-creation activities. The Big Five theory with five personality traits, as depicted in the image, has become the main body of knowledge which is deployed in conducting the research.

The image of the author’s research can still be accessed through the page of Birmingham Museum and Arts Gallery as one of the exemplified images in 2015. After the exhibition event, the idea has been further improved and brought the author to other conferences of Innovation management and Marketing, where her research proposal was accumulatively polished. The objective of research is expected to be achieved through ethnographic study to fully explain the customers’ behaviours and performance during a collaboration process. Findings are aimed to bring contributions in stimulating new ways of thinking of a ‘customer journey’ and innovation notions. In addition, established mind-set of customers’ competence will be challenged to open venue for further research, such as leveraging customers’ creativity and bringing “human flourishing” whilst joining innovation project.