

Exploring customer brand engagement: definition and themes

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Organizations are increasingly seeking customer participation and engagement with their brands. Despite significant practitioner interest, scholarly inquiry into the ‘customer brand engagement’ (CBE) concept has transpired in the literature only relatively recently, resulting in a limited understanding of the concept to-date. This paper addresses this research gap by providing a literature review in this area, and developing a CBE conceptualization based on an integrative deductive (literature-based)/inductive (data-based) approach. Data were sourced from exploratory, qualitative depth-interviews and a focus group employing a total of 14 informants. Extending previous research, CBE is viewed from relationship marketing (RM) and service-dominant (S-D) logic perspectives, whilst an integrative linkage to social exchange theory (SET) is also drawn. Based on the analysis, CBE is defined as ‘the level of a customer’s cognitive, emotional and behavioral investment in specific brand interactions’. Further, three key CBE themes are identified, including ‘immersion’, ‘passion’ and ‘activation’. The paper concludes with an overview of key research limitations and implications.

Keywords: customer engagement; brands; in-depth interviews/focus group; conceptualization

1. Introduction

A rapidly proliferating practitioner literature addresses the ‘customer engagement’ concept (Ursem, 2008). To illustrate, Appelbaum (2001) laments that conventional constructs focused on past experience, including customer satisfaction and perceived quality, have proven inadequate in predicting and/or explaining consumer behavior. Hence instead, measures gauging the interactive nature of customer/brand relationships have been advocated (Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004), including ‘customer engagement’ (Van Doorn et al., 2010).

Recent research suggests the ‘customer engagement’ concept is expected to contribute to developing our understanding of customer experience and/or retention dynamics (Bowden, 2009), which is supported by the concept’s inclusion in the Marketing Science Institute’s *2010–2012 Research Priorities* (MSI, 2010). Amazon’s recently re-branded tagline ‘serving the world’s largest engaged online community’, and the recent *Customer Loyalty Engagement Index* (Brand Keys, 2011), which winners are those brands able to successfully engage consumers, create loyalty and drive profitability across pre-specified categories, provide additional illustrations of the increasing practitioner interest in

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customer engagement and its potential contributions. However, despite profuse developments in the practitioner environment, academic inquiry into customer engagement has lagged behind, resulting in a limited understanding of the concept to-date (Verhoef, Reinartz, & Krafft, 2010).

Further scholarly scrutiny of customer engagement is advocated particularly from relationship marketing (RM; Vivek, Beatty, & Morgan, 2010), and service-dominant (S-D) logic perspectives (Brodie, Hollebeek, Ilic, & Juric, 2011), which are centered on the importance of enduring, co-creative interactions and relationships amongst value-generating stakeholders. To illustrate, the S-D logic addresses the importance of consumers' proactive contributions in co-creating their personalized experiences and perceived value with organizations through active, explicit and ongoing dialogue and interactions (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008a, 2008b), which is also at the core of RM (Carter, 2008; Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, & Evans, 2006).

Specifically, customer engagement is anticipated to contribute to the core RM tenets of customer repeat patronage, retention and loyalty through affecting the customer experience (Verhoef et al., 2010). Analogously, from an S-D logic perspective, customer engagement reflects the dynamics of networked agents including organizations, customers and/or other stakeholders, producing interactively generated, co-created value through service provision (Vargo, Maglio, & Akaka, 2008). 'Co-created value' is defined as 'the level of perceived value created in the customer's mind arising from interactive, joint and/or personalized activities for and with stakeholders' (cf. Dall'Olmo-Riley & DeChernatony, 2000, pp. 146–147; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004, pp. 5–6). In summary, with its conceptual foundations in interactivity (Gambetti & Graffigna, 2010), customer engagement is expected to complement scholarly insights in the broader theoretical areas of RM and the S-D logic alike (Brodie et al., 2011).

Despite its expected contributions, research addressing 'customer engagement' has transpired in the marketing literature only relatively recently (Van Doorn et al., 2010). Therefore, the conceptual nature, dimensionality and measurement of customer engagement and/or its specific sub-forms, including 'customer brand engagement' (CBE), remain nebulous to-date (Hollebeek, 2011; Sprott, Czellar, & Spangenberg, 2009). While Vivek (2009) developed a measure for the conceptually broader 'consumer engagement' concept, a psychometrically valid CBE measurement instrument is yet to be developed. Specifically, such measure would be valuable for adoption by marketing scholars and practitioners seeking to advance insights into customer retention/brand loyalty dynamics (Verhoef et al., 2010). By proposing a CBE conceptualization, this exploratory paper provides preliminary insights in this area, which may be used to guide future inquiry.

This paper is structured as follows. A literature review of engagement in other academic disciplines and marketing is presented in Section 2, followed by the research objective and methodology in Section 3. Section 4 provides an overview of the qualitative research findings, including a proposed CBE conceptualization. The paper concludes with an overview of key research limitations and implications in Section 5.

2. Literature review

2.1 *Social exchange theory and customer brand engagement*

Under RM theory and the S-D logic alike, customers are thought to make proactive contributions to brand interactions, rather than merely act as passive recipients of brand-related cues (Grönroos, 1997; Vargo & Lusch, 2008a). Customers may thus devote relevant cognitive, emotional and/or physical resources based on their perceived value levels obtained from specific brand interactions (Higgins & Scholer, 2009).

Under Blau's (1964) social exchange theory (SET), customers are predicted to reciprocate positive thoughts, feelings and behaviors toward an object (e.g. a brand) upon receiving specific benefits from the brand relationship (Pervan, Bove, & Johnson, 2009). Social exchange thus entails unspecified obligations, whereby one party (e.g. the brand's representative/service personnel) doing another (e.g. the customer) a favor (e.g. by providing exceptional service/expertise), is motivated by the objective of some future return (e.g. customer loyalty; Rousseau, 1989). Under SET, the exchange partners are thought to strive for balance in the relationship and, if imbalance occurs, balance-restorative attempts will be made. For a customer in an exchange, what (s)he gives may be perceived as a cost, while what is received may be viewed as a reward, and the individual's behavior is modified as the difference between the two (i.e. profit) changes (Homans, 1958). This cost/reward perspective corresponds to the interactive nature of customer engagement (Hollebeck, 2011), as addressed in Section 2.2.

While conventional definitions of reciprocity center on 'tit-for-tat' interpretations typified by the *immediate* return of benefits (Pervan et al., 2009), Sin et al. (2005, pp. 187–188) conceptualize reciprocity as 'a provision of favors, or the making of allowances for the other in return for similar favors/allowances to be received at a later date'. Specific brand-related favors/allowances comprise customer organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs), including the provision of positive word-of-mouth, displays of affiliation, flexibility and benevolent acts of service facilitation (Bove, Pervan, Beatty, & Shiu, 2009). By contrast, favors/allowances credited to customers include the receipt of exceptional service from the firm. Hence from a RM or SD-logic perspective, customer brand-related reciprocity may result from a series of accumulated perceived brand benefits, rather than being confined to a single (e.g. the most recent) brand interaction necessarily.

The future return is based on the individual trusting the other party to fairly discharge their obligations over the long term (Holmes, 1981). Specifically, with a brand offering benefits over and beyond its expected performance (e.g. through outstanding service provision), the objective may be to foster specific customer OCBs. As such, while RM and S-D logic theory support the notion of proactive customer contributions to their brand relationships (Brodie et al., 2011), SET addresses customers' underlying rationale/motivation for making such proactive contributions. The next section traces engagement research in other academic disciplines and marketing.

2.2 Customer brand engagement: conceptual foundations

2.2.1 Overview: academic engagement research

The engagement concept originates in disciplines including psychology, sociology and organizational behavior (Brodie et al., 2011). An overview of selected engagement conceptualizations identified within specific academic disciplines is provided in Table 1 (cf. Brodie et al., 2011), which reveals the following observations. First, despite a considerable level of conceptual breadth across the reviewed disciplines, the definitions signal positively valenced (i.e. favorable) expressions of relevant engagement forms. For example, Fredricks et al.'s (2004, p. 60) 'student engagement' comprises individuals' 'willingness to master particular skills'; and Schaufeli, Martínez, Pinto, Salanova, and Bakker's (2002, p. 465) 'employee engagement' is described as a 'positive, fulfilling work-related mindset' and activities.

Second, Table 1 exposes the highly interactive nature of engagement (May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004), whether stated explicitly, or implicit in particular conceptualizations. To illustrate, Achterberg et al.'s (2003, pp. 213–214) 'social engagement' explicitly

Table 1. Overview: engagement conceptualizations (selected academic disciplines).

Discipline	Concept	Author(s)	Definition	Themes/dimensionality
Sociology	Civic engagement	Jennings and Zeitner (2003)	Behaviors & attitudes regarding (quasi-)political processes/institutions	Multidimensional: 1. Media attentiveness 2. Trust 3. Political involvement
Psychology	Social engagement	Achterberg et al. (2003); Tsai et al. (2009)	A high sense of initiative, involvement & adequate response to social stimuli, participating in social activities, interacting with others	Multidimensional: 1. Ease of interacting with others 2. Ease of doing planned/structural activities 3. Ease of doing self-initiated activities 4. Establishing own goals 5. Pursuing involvement 6. Acceptance of invitations to group activities
Educational psychology	Student engagement	Fredricks et al. (2004)	The multifaceted nature of student engagement exists in the following dimensions: (a) cognitive, e.g. willingness to master certain skills; (b) emotional, e.g. positive/negative reactions to teachers; & (c) behavioral, i.e. participation (e.g. in academic/extracurricular activity)	Multidimensional: 1. Cognitive 2. Emotional 3. Behavioral
	Student engagement	London et al. (2007)	A student's level of academic investment, motivation & commitment with their institution, perceived psychological connection, comfort & sense of belonging toward their institution	Multidimensional: 1. Academic investment 2. Academic motivation 3. Commitment to institution 4. Perceived psychological connection to institution 5. Comfort with institution 6. Sense of belonging to institution
Organizational behavior	Occupational engagement	Bejerholm and Eklund (2006)	A lifestyle characteristic including the external/objective & internal/subjective aspects of occupational performance, which involves both anticipation & comprehension thereof, and serves as the basis for an ongoing, cyclical means of maintaining a sense of self & well-being	Multidimensional: 1. Daily rhythm (activity/rest) 2. Occupational variety/range 3. Place 4. Social environment 5. Social interplay 6. Interpretation 7. Extent of meaningful occupations 8. Routines 9. Initiating performance
	Employee engagement	Schaufeli et al. (2002)	A positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind [and work-related activities]	Multidimensional: 1. Absorption 2. Dedication 3. Vigor

Source: Adapted from and extending Illic (2008) and Brodie et al. (2011).

incorporates ‘interacting with others’, ‘participating in social activities’ and ‘adequate response to social stimuli’. Similarly, Bejerholm and Eklund’s (2007, p. 21) ‘occupational engagement’ entails ‘the ability to move around society and interact socially’. The ‘interaction’ concept is often used synonymously with ‘interactivity’ (Hoffman & Novak, 1996).

The particular level of interactivity pertaining to specific engagement forms was found to be dependent on factors including: (a) personal characteristics, for example ‘initiative’ (Achterberg et al., 2003), or ‘motivation’ (London, Downey, & Mace, 2007), which under SET, is contingent upon an individual’s perceived value level extracted from particular interactions; and (b) contextual contingencies, for example ‘positive/negative reactions to teachers’ (Fredricks et al., 2004), which may vary across contexts, and/or interact with specific (inter-) personal characteristics.

Third, the reviewed conceptualizations shared a multidimensional perspective of engagement, which appears dominant in the literature (May et al., 2004). Specifically, the majority of reviewed conceptualizations reveals a generic, tri-partite (cognitive, emotional, behavioral) engagement dimensionality, with particular context-specific variations observed (Brodie et al., 2011). For example, Jennings and Zeitner’s (2003) ‘civic engagement’ dimensions include (cognitive) media attentiveness, (emotional) trust and (behavioral) political involvement.

2.2.2 Engagement research in marketing

Scrutiny of engagement research in marketing indicates the emergence of several engagement sub-forms, including ‘customer engagement’ (Patterson, Yu, & De Ruyter, 2006), ‘customer engagement behaviors’ (Van Doorn et al., 2010), customer brand engagement (CBE; Hollebeek, 2011), ‘consumer engagement’ (Vivek, 2009) and ‘engagement’ more generically (Higgins & Scholer, 2009). While the majority of research adopts an intra-individual, consumer psychology-based perspective, Van Doorn et al. (2010) take a more company-centric view by observing the effects of specific customer engagement behaviors through an organizational lens. An overview of key marketing-based engagement research is provided in Table 2 (cf. e.g. Brodie et al., 2011).

Analogous to the observation in Section 2.2.1, Bowden (2009) posits the existence of focal, two-way interactions between a specific subject (e.g. customer/consumer) and object (e.g. a brand/product or organization; Patterson et al., 2006) as a necessary condition for the emergence of relevant engagement levels. The CBE concept, in particular, addresses specific interactions between a focal *customer* and a particular *brand* (Hollebeek, 2011).

Key tenets typifying CBE include the concept’s individual-level, motivational and context-dependent nature, giving rise to fluctuating CBE levels over time (Hollebeek, 2011). Whilst a general consensus regarding the generic, multidimensional (cognitive, emotional, behavioral) nature of relevant marketing-based engagement forms is observed from Table 2 (e.g. Patterson et al., 2006; see Section 2.2.1), the expression of specific engagement dimensions may vary across contexts (Brodie et al., 2011). To illustrate, while Mollen and Wilson’s (2010, pp. 922–923) online ‘engagement’ dimensions include ‘active sustained cognitive processing’, ‘instrumental value’ and ‘experiential value’, Van Doorn et al.’s (2010, p. 256) organization-centric ‘customer engagement behaviors’ are theorized to comprise the dimensions of ‘valence’, ‘scope’, ‘nature’ and ‘customer goals’.

Moreover, research addressing the nature and dynamics underlying specific CBE relationships with other focal concepts is sparse to-date (Hollebeek, 2011). For CBE, examining the nature of conceptual relationships with other specific *branding* concepts,

Table 2. Overview: engagement conceptualizations (marketing literature).

Author(s)	Concept	Definition	Engagement dimensionality
Gambetti and Graffigna (2010)	Engagement	Rather than a specific definition, the following marketing-based engagement sub-forms are identified: consumer-, customer-, brand-, advertising- and media engagement	Focal engagement sub-forms may comprise the following dimensions: 1. Soft (relational) 2. Pragmatic (managerial)
Vivek (2009)	Consumer engagement	The intensity of a consumer's participation & connection with an organization's offerings &/or its organized activities	Multidimensional: 1. Awareness 2. Enthusiasm 3. Interaction 4. Activity 5. Extraordinary experience
Patterson et al. (2006)	Customer engagement	The level of a customer's physical, cognitive & emotional presence in their relationship with a service organization	Multidimensional: 1. Vigor 2. Dedication 3. Absorption 4. Interaction
Hollebeek (2011)	Customer brand engagement	The level of an individual customer's motivational, brand-related & context-dependent state of mind characterized by specific levels of cognitive, emotional & behavioral activity in brand interactions	Multidimensional: 1. Cognitive 2. Emotional 3. Behavioral
Van Doorn et al. (2010)	Customer engagement behaviors	The customer's behavioral manifestation toward the brand or firm, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers	Multidimensional: 1. Valence 2. Form 3. Scope 4. Nature 5. Customer goals

Phillips and McQuarrie (2010)	Advertising engagement	Modes of engagement are routes to persuasion	Multidimensional: Consumers engage ads to:
			<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Act 2. Identify 3. Feel 4. Immerse
Calder and Malthouse (2010)	Media engagement	A motivational experience; being connected to a specific media	Multidimensional: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Transportation 2. Irritation 3. Promotion 4. Rejection
Algesheimer, Dholakia, and Herrmann (2005)	Brand community engagement	Positive influences of identifying with the brand community through the consumer's intrinsic motivation to interact/co-operate with community members	Multidimensional (inferred): <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Utilitarian 2. Hedonic 3. Social
Abdul-Ghani, Hyde, and Marshall (2010)	Engagement	Requires consumer connection (e.g. with specific media)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Utilitarian 2. Hedonic 3. Social
Higgins (2006)	Engagement	Being engaged is to be involved, occupied & interested in something	Multidimensional (inferred): <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Cognitive 2. Emotional 3. Behavioral

Source: Adapted from and extending Hollebeck (2011) and Brodie et al. (2011).