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# A Customer Engagement Literature Review and Research Directions: Structured Abstract

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## INTRODUCTION

In the current decade, the marketing literature increasingly acknowledges the active role of customers in brand relationships (Lemon and Verhoef 2016) and, relatedly, examines *customer engagement* both in offline and online contexts. Customer engagement refers to customers' motivational investment of resources in brand-related interactions (Hollebeek et al. 2016a). Managers and scholars recognize the potentially positive outcomes of increased customer engagement for both firms and customers (Brodie et al. 2013; Kumar et al. 2010; Vivek et al. 2012). This study critiques the extant literature on customer engagement, and offers future research directions to support the further theoretical development of this construct.

## BACKGROUND

### Theoretical Underpinnings and Definition

Customer engagement is described as a psychological state in relation to an object (for instance a brand, firm or brand community) that occurs during interactive and co-creative service experiences (Brodie et al. 2011). Academics have asserted that customer engagement is theoretically rooted in service-dominant logic (SDL) and relationship marketing concepts as both fields acknowledge the importance of active dialogue and the customer-centricity of value co-creation during engaging service encounters (Hollebeek 2011). While the dominant discussion on customer engagement derives from SDL foundations, customer engagement is similarly rooted in the much broader service-logic (SL) literature (Brodie 2017), which also recognizes that customers are active value co-creators and resource integrators during interactive service experiences (Grönroos and Gummerus 2014).

The marketing literature offers a diversity of definitions of the customer engagement construct. Descriptions include *a psychological state* (Brodie et al. 2011), *intensity of participation* (Vivek et al. 2012), *process* (Bowden 2009), *volitional investment of focal resources* (Hollebeek et al. 2016a), and *behavioral manifestation* (van Doorn et al. 2010). Also, there is inconsistency on the scope of engagement, and whether it includes non-transactional behaviors (van Doorn et al. 2010; Verhoef et al. 2010; Brodie et al. 2013; Beckers et al. 2017), or both transactional (e.g. purchases) and non-transactional behaviors (Kumar et al. 2010; Pansari and Kumar 2017). Another definitional ambiguity is the lack of distinction between *customer* and *consumer* engagement. Both terms are used interchangeably in the literature (Brodie et al. 2013), even though the term 'consumer' is much broader and might include 'customers'. This distinction might be important in how firms shape their engagement marketing strategies in business-to-consumer (B2C) and business-to-business (B2B) contexts.

## Customer Engagement Conceptualization

Extant literature remains fragmented on the conceptualization of customer engagement. While some scholars studied engagement as a uni-dimensional behavioral construct (see Van Doorn et al. 2010; Jaakkola and Alexander 2014; Pansari and Kumar 2017; Beckers et al. 2017), others adopt a multi-dimensional perspective and view customer engagement as comprising emotional, cognitive and behavioral dimensions (Mollen and Wilson 2010; Brodie et al. 2011; 2013; Hollebeek and Chen 2014). However, to date there is no consensus on the specific nature of these dimensions. For instance, debate exists regarding the behavioral dimension, as some academics include word-of-mouth (WOM) activity (van Doorn et al. 2010; Jaakkola and Alexander 2014; Verleye et al. 2014; Pansari and Kumar 2017), while others denote WOM as an outcome of customer engagement (Vivek et al. 2012). Additionally, some conceptualizations conflate the behavioral dimension with cognitive and emotional dimensions (Wirtz et al. 2013; Hollebeek and Chen 2014; Hollebeek et al. 2014) or view the behavioral aspect as an outcome of the cognitive and emotional dimensions (Cheung and Lee 2011). Recently, Hollebeek et al. (2016a) proposed the inclusion of a *social* dimension. With the advent of the Internet and social media, consumers engage in social interactions that are facilitated by the openness of the platform and the speed and reach of a wide audience (Sawhney et al. 2005; Cheung et al. 2011). Therefore, it seems highly relevant to consider a social dimension for customer engagement.

## Engagement Intensity and Valence

Extant literature suggests that customer engagement varies in terms of intensity and valence (Vivek et al. 2012; Hollebeek and Chen 2014). Although research on these two aspects is currently limited (Li et al. 2018), studies have begun to shed light on how engagement can have a low or high intensity, and can be either positively or negatively-valenced. Customer engagement intensity is a function of how much consumers perceive the benefit versus the cost of investing resources in an interaction (Nolan 2007). De Villiers (2015) proposed a typology where valence and intensity are represented together. Accordingly, positive engagement can be manifested actively (positive WOM, reviews, advocacy) or passively (admiring a brand, following other consumers' positive posts). The same is valid for active (brand sabotage, lobbying, negative WOM) and passive (behavioral inertia, delayed payments) negative engagement.

Outcomes of negative customer engagement include poor brand reputation and low revenues (Zhang et al. 2018; Coombs and Holladay 2007; Azer and Alexander 2018). While the literature emphasizes firms' negative outcomes of negative customer engagement, context may affect whether negative customer engagement is detrimental to a firm. For instance, if customer retaliation results from a service failure, an organization might be able to capitalize upon negative customer engagement and use it to stimulate new product or service development, which would ultimately foster positive relationships with customers (Romani et al. 2013; Lievonon et al. 2018).

Academics state that one form of passive negative customer engagement is *disengagement* (Bowden et al. 2015; Naumann et al. 2017). This occurs when customers withdraw and distance themselves from an interaction (Goode 2012). Withdrawing is a negative act, hence scholars qualify disengagement as negative engagement. Intuitively, however, it could also be neutrally-valenced, especially if the underlying emotions and cognitions are neutral. Withdrawal generally occurs in the context of service failures and negative corporate

practices (de Villiers, 2015). Potentially, however, motives for disengagement might be more complex. For instance, withdrawal might occur where customers are engaged with other brands, occupied with other activities, or choose to not focus on specific products/services at certain times.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY AND PRACTICE**

The field of customer engagement research has grown in the recent few years, yet as the above review highlights, inconsistencies in definitions and conceptualizations, as well as gaps in knowledge persist. Consequently, current definitions of customer engagement can, at best, be described as ‘working’. This article provides a systematic critique of the customer engagement literature and contributes by presenting key areas requiring further investigation. To develop this further, we next present a series of research directions that would provide a deeper theoretical understanding of the customer engagement construct.

Firstly, drawing from the previous discussion, empirical examination is required into the multi-dimensional nature of customer engagement. Specifically, research is needed to discern the nature of the behavioral component. Additionally, empirical examination of the recent conceptualization given by Hollebeek et al. (2016a) is needed to account for the emergent social dimension. Particularly, studying the social aspect in offline vs. online contexts might help in pinpointing where context plays a role. Also, it would be interesting to analyze engagement differences between contrasting online platforms (e.g. social media, company websites, online brand communities).

Secondly, as customer engagement intensity and valence are still relatively understudied (Li et al. 2018), further investigation is needed to explore these varying characteristics in different contexts. Such studies have the potential to offer a more holistic advancement of customer engagement theory. Moreover, firms might feasibly use engagement valence and intensity to segment customers (de Villiers, 2015), and develop more tailored tools to manage and foster beneficial customer/firm relationships. Relatedly, outcomes of negatively-valenced engagement should be further explored, as the literature has not exhaustively considered its resulting positive outcomes. In addition, the disengagement literature is scarce and therefore represents a promising avenue for further empirical studies.

Thirdly, we echo recent calls for future research into the dynamics and drivers of engagement (Hollebeek et al. 2016b; Fehrer et al. 2018). For instance, power dynamics are potentially relevant since customer engagement occurs during brand-related interactions between empowered consumers (Jaakkola and Alexander 2014; Acar and Puntoni 2016). Despite the fact that some studies have provided empirical evidence of a link between consumer power and some aspects of customer engagement (Wu et al. 2016; Naumann et al. 2017; Sembada 2018), the interplay of these constructs is as yet unexplored. Other drivers such as customer personality factors, customer engagement during previous touchpoints, contextual, temporal, and industry-based factors deserve further scrutiny.

Fourthly, extant literature has essentially focused on customer engagement in the post-purchase customer journey phase. Therefore, further research on customer engagement at the pre-purchase stage and during the purchase or service interaction journey is required. This will enrich understandings of whether purchase journeys have an effect on how customers engage. New studies have started to tackle customer engagement in different layers of the

service ecosystem (Alexander et al. 2018; Fehrer et al. 2018); Hollebeek et al. (2016b) and Breidbach and Brodie (2017) state that understanding engagement roles within broader service systems is needed. Likewise, studies have mainly focused on B2C settings; therefore, the need for B2B engagement research is required (Nunan et al. 2018).

Finally, other potentially fruitful research directions include an examination of the role of Big Data in enhancing customer engagement, choosing the right channels to create a better engagement, achieving high performance measures, and possessing better market research approaches (Werner et al. 2017). To date, research from a firm perspective has focused on the associated engagement outcomes. Thus, exploring *why* and *how* firms develop engagement-driven initiatives, and if there is a fit between outcomes and firms' objectives would be significant.

References Available Upon Request