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# Customer engagement's strategic motivations, expected and unexpected consequences

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## Abstract

The importance of undertaking further research into customer engagement has been widely recognised by scholars and practitioners alike, as reflected by the Marketing Science Institute's identification of customer/consumer engagement (CE) as a key area for further research (MSI, 2014). Specifically, under their Tier 1 Research Priority of 'Understanding Customers and Customer Experience,' the MSI states (MSI, 2014, p. 4): 'How should engagement be conceptualised, defined and measured? [And] how do social media and other marketing activities create engagement?' The extant literature has gone some way to addressing these issues. Specifically, research into the 'CE' concept has developed rapidly in the academic marketing literature in the last five to seven years (e.g. Bowden, 2009; Brodie, Hollebeek, Ilic, & Juric, 2011; Van Doorn et al., 2010).

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## Introduction

Key contributions attained in the area include the development of particular CE and theoretically related conceptualisations, including 'customer brand engagement' (Hollebeek, 2011a, 2011b, 2013), 'media engagement' (Calder, Malthouse, & Schaedel, 2009), 'audience engagement' (Scott & Craig-Lees, 2010), 'customer engagement behaviours' (Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014), 'brand engagement in self-concept' (Sprott, Czellar, & Spangenberg, 2009) and 'social media engagement behaviour' (Dolan, Conduit, Fahy, & Goodman, 2016). While the proposed conceptualisations are subject to specific theoretical differences, they predominantly reflect a focal individual's psychologically based willingness to invest in the undertaking of focal interactions with particular engagement objects (e.g. a brand or firm), often beyond purchase (Groeger, Moroko, & Hollebeek, 2016; Vivek, Beatty, & Morgan, 2012). Further, the literature largely concurs regarding the tripartite (i.e. cognitive, emotional and behavioural) dimensionality underlying the engagement concept (Brodie et al., 2011; Calder et al., 2009; Hollebeek, 2011a, 2011b, 2013). Following this generic engagement perspective, a number of efforts

regarding the operationalisation and measurement of engagement is reported in the literature. To illustrate, Hollebeek, Glynn, and Brodie's (2014) 'consumer brand engagement' scale comprises three dimensions consistent with Brodie et al.'s (2011) tripartite perspective of engagement. Others, including So, King, and Sparks (2014), Calder et al. (2009) and Vivek et al. (2012), extend this generic tripartite model to incorporate explicit recognition of individuals' social connections and interactions. As a further illustration, Kumar and Pansari (2015) address the importance of social influence, knowledge sharing, incentivised referrals and customer purchase engagement. Overall, these engagement scales permit the quantification of individuals' focal engagement levels towards a focal object (e.g. a brand), and thus facilitate the undertaking of large-scale, quantitative investigation into this emerging area (Leefflang, 2011). Further to the need for the conceptualisation and measurement of engagement, the MSI calls for research generating enhanced understanding regarding the development and maintenance of suitable customer engagement levels across contexts.

While early engagement research adopted a predominant focus on online contexts, including social media (e.g. Brodie et al., 2013), a recent shift is observed towards the examination of engagement in offline contexts, including retail settings (Vivek et al., 2012), tourism services (So et al., 2014), nursing homes (Verleye, Gemmill, & Rangarajan, 2014) and public transportation services (Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014). In commentaries at the conclusion of this special issue (Calder, Malthouse, & Maslowska, 2016; Hollebeek et al., 2016), further elaboration on key observed trends in recent engagement research is provided, along with the development of an engagement-based future research agenda. We also note that while engagement research within focal online and offline contexts has started to emerge, little is known regarding the engagement-based interface of these platforms (Sawhney, Verona, & Prandelli, 2005); that is, how do these interact to generate focal engagement-based expressions, and key ensuing outcomes? Much of the research addressing engagement within broader nomological networks has focused on individual-specific, or intra-individual CE antecedents (e.g. involvement) and consequences (e.g. brand loyalty; Hollebeek et al., 2014), thus reflecting limited investigation into focal firm-based engagement activities (Van Doorn et al., 2010), or specific cross-context (e.g. industry, or utilitarian, versus hedonic, brands; Hollebeek, 2013) comparative research (Kumar & Pansari, 2015) – thus resulting in limited generalisability of key findings.

While engagement, traditionally, has been heralded to generate superior contributions to organisational performance, including sale growth, cost reductions and enhanced customer loyalty, little remains known in the literature regarding negatively valenced engagement (Bowden, Gabbott, & Naumann, 2015; Hollebeek & Chen, 2014; Juric, Smith, & Wilks, 2016). To illustrate, how may the dissemination of negative brand-related word-of-mouth, which may be viewed to represent a tenet of behavioural engagement, affect customers' attitudinal and behavioural loyalty, and that of individuals within their broader networks? Which consequences may consumer materialism (Goldsmith, Flynn, & Clark, 2011), purchase of counterfeit branded goods, or theft of focal branded items, have for organisations, individuals and broader service systems?

Further, which may include the key negative (detrimental) effects of engagement, whether positively or negatively valenced from a consumer perspective, from focal marketing actions? To illustrate, a social media campaign designed to retain or improve individuals' top-of-mind brand awareness, which results in consumer-initiated negative brand-related word-of-mouth, clearly has unintended (and potentially unfavourable) consequences for the organisation. Thus, what actions can marketers take to

minimise the emergence of such unintended engagement consequences, towards ensuring the attainment of positively valenced engagement (or minimising the occurrence of negatively valenced engagement), and the attainment and leveraging of favourable ensuing engagement outcomes?

Overall, the literature, to date, has rested on the implicit assumption that higher engagement levels will translate, either directly or indirectly, into enhanced brand-related or organisational performance outcomes (Brodie et al., 2011). However, in-depth investigation, including further conceptual development and empirical testing, are required to assess and validate this claim across contexts. This special issue adopts a particular focus on the nature, types and expressions of focal engagement-based conceptual relationships within broader nomological networks, which, despite having received initial conceptual and empirical attention from scholars (e.g. Hollebeek et al., 2014), have yielded limited insight to date, particularly with respect to focal unanticipated or undesirable outcomes, which are expected to incur negative consequences for the firm (e.g. diminished or lost revenue, and potential brand equity dilution).

This special issue of the *Journal of Marketing Management*, responding to the surging academic and managerial interest in engagement, presents seven papers authored by scholars from seven different countries, which address focal aspects relating to strategic drivers, anticipated and/or unanticipated outcomes of engagement. Further, we provide two commentaries by authors actively conducting research within the topic area of engagement (i.e. Calder, et al. 2016; Hollebeek et al., 2016), which provide more in-depth discussions of specific issues arising from the papers published in this special issue, reflect on the state of marketing-based engagement research generally, and provide future research avenues in this growing topic area.

The opening paper by Dessart, Veloutsou and Morgan-Thomas theoretically refines and operationalises engagement by espousing the duality of engagement with two distinct engagement objects (i.e. brand and community). Adopting pluralistic research methodology, this study develops and validates a 22-item scale consumer engagement scale, which may be adopted to operationalise engagement with a number of distinct engagement objects. The authors also examine key implications arising from these analyses.

In the second paper, Malthouse, Calder, Kim and Vandenbosch examine the increasing adoption of social media to publicly engage consumers with a brand. In particular, contests in which consumers create engaging user-generated content, which encourages consumers to actively think about, or elaborate on, personal, brand-related goals, serves to affect actual buying decisions. The results show that

the impact of consumer engagement via content elaboration is not accounted for by mere participation in the social media activity, or by rewards offered to participants. Implications of these analyses are also discussed.

In the third paper, Solem and Pedersen undertake an experimental study of a Nordic insurance firm's Facebook-based brand activities. The findings suggest that regulatory fit represents a key driver of consumer brand engagement, as well as brand preference. The existence of both regulatory fit, and regulatory non-fit effects on psychologically anchored consumer brand engagement are identified, thereby challenging key contentions underlying regulatory engagement theory and regulatory fit theory. The results imply that service firms can benefit from the adoption of both promotion- and prevention-oriented activities in social media, which are found to exert positive emotional, cognitive, intentional and behavioural engagement effects on eager and/or vigilant customers, respectively.

In the fourth paper, Maslowska, Malthouse and Collinger advance the notion of the 'customer engagement ecosystem,' which encompasses brand actions and actors, customer brand experience, shopping behaviours, brand consumption and brand-dialogue behaviours. The model posits that interactions between these elements are non-linear and reactive, implying that each action causes a reaction not only from the intended message recipient, but the entire ecosystem, thus reflecting the interconnected nature of contemporary marketing environments. It also recognises different forms of brand dialogue behaviours utilising brand-related goal relevance and interactivity, which describe customers' non-purchase focused behaviours.

In the fifth paper, Marbach, Lages and Nunan develop a theoretical framework of online customer engagement anchored in 28 semi-structured interviews with social media brand community members. This research generates novel insight regarding seven

personality traits as antecedents of online customer engagement, and customer-perceived value as a novel consequence. The findings are expected to assist companies in the improvement of their online brand community-based customer engagement by suggesting which specific types of customers (in terms of personality traits) are more likely to engage online, and by exploring customer-perceived value of online engagement.

In the sixth paper, Yang, Lin, Carlson and Ross investigate how three types of brand social engagement (i.e. affiliation, conversation and responsiveness) influence search engine advertising effectiveness, including click-through rate and conversion rate. The authors find that firms' social media efforts exert a significant impact on search engine advertising effectiveness. Specifically, the results show that affiliation, conversation and responsiveness increase click-through rate, as well as conversion rate, of search engine advertising. Moreover, brand social engagement strengthens the relationships between advertisement rank and search engine advertising effectiveness. These results demonstrate that a combination of online marketing efforts is more useful, relative to focusing on one particular form, to the exclusion of others.

In the final paper, Leckie, Nyadzayo and Johnson examine key drivers and outcomes of consumer brand engagement in the context of Australian mobile phone service providers. The results reveal that consumer involvement, consumer participation and self-expressive brand exert differential effects on the consumer brand engagement dimensions of cognitive processing, affection and activation, and brand loyalty. Managerial and academic implications as well as areas for future research are discussed. We are delighted to present this special issue and hope you will enjoy reading and reflecting on the papers it contains, and that it will foster discussion, debate and ideas for further research within your communities.

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