

Consumer Engagement Patterns In Car Communities

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Abstract. Despite the extensive use of the term “engagement” in the context of communities, the theoretical meaning and foundations underlying this term remain underexplored in the literature to-date. Drawing on a literature review, this study adopts phenomenology methodology to explore the nature and scope of consumer engagement in an car community environment. The study reveals the complex multidimensional and dynamic nature of consumer engagement, which may emerge at different levels of intensity over time, thus reflecting distinct engagement states. Further, the consumer engagement process comprises a range of sub-processes reflecting consumers' interactive experience within car communities, and value co-creation among community participants. Engaged consumers exhibit enhanced consumer loyalty, satisfaction, empowerment, connection, emotional bonding, trust and commitment. Data from this study was obtained through in-depth interviews Paguyuban Komunitas Otomotif Barlingmascakeb (PKOB). The paper concludes with a discussion of implications for practice and further research.

Keyword: Consumer Engagment, Consumer Behaviour, Brand Engagment, Brand Loyalty, Car Communities

1. INTRODUCTION

Central to discussions about brand communities is the use of the terms “engage” and “engagement” to describe the nature of participants' specific interactions and/or interactive experiences. For example, in a pioneering article addressing the social influence of brand communities, Algesheimer et al. (2005) use the terms “engage” and/or “engagement” over fifty times. More recently Schau et al.'s (2009) analysis of the contribution of brand communities to value creation, draws on these terms seventy-five times. However, despite the increasing usage of these terms, marketing scholars have paid relatively little attention to the theoretical development of the “engagement” concept, and of “consumer engagement” in the real world brand communities.

The discourse portrays consumer engagement as a vehicle for creating, building and enhancing consumer relationships. Consumer engagement is seen both as a strategic imperative for establishing and sustaining a competitive advantage, and as a valuable predictor of future business performance (Sedley, 2008). Specifically, Neff (2007) views consumer engagement as a primary driver of sales growth, while Voyles (2007) suggests consumer engagement enhances profitability.

Since 2005 the term “engagement” has been increasingly used in the broader academic marketing literature. However, despite this increasing use, scholarly enquiry into defining the term, or examining how the term differs from similar relational terms, including “participation” and “involvement,” has been limited. The Marketing Science Institute's 2010–2012 Research Priorities (MSI — Marketing Science Institute, 2010) emphasize the need for further research addressing the consumer/customer engagement concept. Within the broader priority area of “Understanding Customer Experience and Behavior,” the MSI identifies “customer engagement” as a key research area contributing to enhanced academic insight into consumer behavior in complex, interactive and/or co-creative environments. Further, the 2010 Journal of Service Research Special Issue, which includes a number of papers addressing “customer engagement,” directly responds to this MSI Research Priority. Nambisan and Baron (2007) provide further support for the need to investigate consumer engagement in the context of online brand communities. Recently De Valck et al. (2009), p. 185 define “virtual brand community” as “a specialized, non-geographically bound, online community, based on social communications and relationships among a brand's consumers.” The authors conclude that the nature of brand communities and their effect on consumer behavior

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remains nebulous to-date. Thus research into the nature of brand communities and their effect on consumer behavior represents an important area for research.

This paper responds to De Valck et al.'s (2009) observation regarding the need for further empirical research addressing the nature of brand communities and their effect on consumer behavior. By using phenomenology methodology, this exploratory research aims to provide insight into consumer engagement within a car community.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of engagement

Building on Brodie et al.'s (2011) characterisation of engagement, namely, as a customercentric value co-creative process, a number of researchers have endeavoured to explore the conditions, processes and outcomes of engagement with further conceptual and empirical studies. This emerging body of literature links engagement to various brand-related outcomes, such as brand loyalty, self-brand connections and brand usage intent (e.g. Hollebeek et al., 2014; Dessart et al., 2015). Table I presents integrations and reclassifications of previous research on engagement and additions to the theoretical sources, whereby we synthesise the central characteristics of extant engagement research. In this endeavour, rather than comparing divergent perspectives on brand engagement per se, we highlight that there is a growing need to understand how the consumer and more socially oriented perspectives of brand engagement can be meaningfully integrated.

Based on our synthesis of the rapidly expanding literature on engagement, summarised in Table I, we can make three key observations. First, while theoretical and empirical studies on engagement vary in terms of their focus (e.g. brand engagement, community engagement, self-engagement, etc.), they commonly recognise the necessarily interactive and value co-creative nature of engagement processes. In other words, engagement, as a theoretical construct transcends involvement and, therefore, requires mutual interactions between the objects such as brands and/or subjects of its relationship. Second, extant research on engagement has focussed on the dyadic relationship between the company and a consumer. Indeed, even where studies have exclusively focussed on communal engagement – thus, suggesting a broader focus on the consumer's life worlds (Webster and Lusch, 2013) – the outcomes of engagement processes examined were restricted to what companies, rather than consumers, considered as being “valuable” (e.g. brand loyalty, brand usage, word-of-mouth). For instance, in a recent study on brand engagement in online communities, Dessart et al. (2015) discuss various social processes that underpin engagement, such as online brand identification, sharing and networking. Yet, their study still conceives brand loyalty as the ultimate outcome of brand engagement. Third, while many early studies on engagement looked at what engagement may represent for individual consumers (e.g. phenomenological experiences, psychological processes, etc.), more recent studies have shifted their attention towards examining engagement at the collective level and consider, for example, phenomena such as community norms, and institutions. Thus, there appears to be an early recognition of different levels of engagement (i.e. individual and social); however, there have been few attempts to integrate these two levels meaningfully, in order to provide a more holistic perspective.

Table I. Overview of engagement literature

Level of analysis	Engagement processes	Engagement outcomes	Selected studies
Individual	Co-creative experiences; fostering relationships between actors and focal objects; cognitive,	Self-brand connections; self-expression; brand loyalty;	Brodie et al. (2011), Hollebeek (2011), Hollebeek and Chen (2014), Hollebeek et al. (2014), Dessart et al.

	emotional and behavioural investment; goaldriven pursuit; attitudes	brand love; brand usage intent	(2015), Vivek et al. (2014), Baldus et al. (2015), Wallace et al. (2014)
Collective	Co-creative practices; institutions; sharing; interactions	Brand loyalty; positive word of mouth; value co-creation; community engagement	McCull-Kennedy et al. (2012), Gambetti et al. (2016), Akaka et al. (2014), Jaakkola and Alexander (2014), Chandler and Lusch (2015), Kozinets (2014)

Overall, the emerging body of literature on engagement recognises the necessity of mutual interactions in order to elicit consumer engagement. It also emphasises the distinction between the engagement concept and other relational concepts such as participation and involvement, which do not reflect practices of value co-creation and value-in-use. Furthermore, more recent studies also recognise that engagement cannot be restricted to the dyadic relationship between a customer and the brand (Chandler and Lusch, 2015); rather, engagement comprises the personalised properties of single relationships as well as a myriad of various stakeholders' encounters with brands, which are interconnected at the broader social level. Thus, consumer engagement requires an understanding at both the individual and social levels of analysis, a gap which we address in this paper.

brand engagement experiences and practices

The view of brand engagement experience as both an intersubjective and phenomenological concept prompts us to re-examine how brand experiences emerge from brand engagement practices. Given that consumers' experiences and performances of brand engagement practices are intersubjectively and phenomenologically determined, marketers may encounter an infinite number of kaleidoscopic narratives about what brand engagement represents for each consumer. This can be informative, but it does not offer a holistic perspective, because in order to make meaningful connections and decisions, these kaleidoscopic brand narratives need to have both some sort of distinguishing collectively shared pattern, while remaining situated and differentiated to reflect the consumers' individual agency.

In eliciting the conceptual domain of engagement, Brodie et al. (2011) assert the importance of value co-creation, which distinguishes the engagement concept from participation and involvement, because these fail to reflect the practices of value co-creation and value-in-use. Thus, value-in-use emerges as an important concept that is related to both practices and experiences of engagement. McCull-Kennedy et al. (2012) provide a comprehensive literature review of the recent research on value co-creation, where they discover perspectives converging towards the view of value as "value-in-use" – that is, that value cannot be realised until service is consumed. Consequently, they offer a conceptual definition of value co-creation as "benefit realised from integrating of resources through activities and interactions with collaborators in the customer's service network" (McCull-Kennedy et al., 2012, p. 376). Interestingly, while "engagement" is not mentioned in this definition, McCull-Kennedy et al. (2012) describe activities and interactions as "performing" or "doing", namely, in practice-oriented terms, and as the ways in which individuals engage with others to realise the benefit. We have also previously noted that brand-related value-in-use is phenomenologically defined by each individual (Vargo and Lusch, 2008). Therefore, by replacing "activities" and "interactions" with "engagement" and "benefit" with "experience", in line with the intersubjective phenomenological perspective, we define value-in-use within the conceptual domain of brand engagement as an intersubjective preferential benefit realised through integrating resources through engagement in value co-creation practices by a means of individualised and collective experiences in service networks. Furthermore, we posit that the integration of resources happens through consumers' integration of brand-related resources and performance of value co-creative practices that elicit brand engagement.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

The research approach used in this study is a qualitative approach. Qualitative research methods can be interpreted as research based on the philosophy of postpositivism, used to examine natural object conditions, (as opposed to experiments) where researchers are key instruments, data collection techniques are triangulated (combined), data analysis is inductive / qualitative , and the results of qualitative research emphasize the meaning rather than generalization. (Sugiyono, 2014). The type of qualitative research in this study is descriptive. Descriptive methods aim to systematically describe the facts or characteristics of a particular population or a particular field in fact and carefully (Isaac and Michael, 2012).

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Result

The analysis and interpretation first led to the development of a conceptual model illustrating the facets of consumer engagement. The findings also reveal the interplay between the emotional, cognitive and behavioral aspects of engagement generating differing levels of engagement intensity.

For example, emotional engagement may generate increased levels of cognitive and/or behavioral engagement, as illustrated by one of the interview respondents:

“The community eventually meant so much to me that I would do anything to assist anyone connected to it in any way I can.”

The analysis identifies numerous engagement objects in community. Specifically, participants engage with the themes discussed, including brands, products and services associated with exercise programs, organizations and/or the industry; and with the, their community roles and other community members. Consumers, typically, engage initially with specific inanimate object(s) of interest (e.g. a car brand), and then progress to two-way interactions with other members of the online community, thus serving to impact upon their specific consumer engagement states and/or levels.

Discussions about brand-related topics are the most prevalent area of interest comprising approximately one-third of car community in banyumas. The brands “permitted” for the community members' recommendation are brands, which have met relevant perceived standards, as illustrated by one of the interviewees:

“The only brands really that are allowed to be talked about on community it's more of an earned right. You'd notice that [Toyota] is mentioned a few times. It's because they're one of the only companies that has signed a declaration.”

Also, a considerable amount of discussion occurs about prices, quality, performance (i.e. safety and benefits), and personal experiences with specific brands. Of particular interest are the discussions addressing the development of relevant industry standards and how to monitor specific standards and how to establish an industry regulating body, thus illustrating consumers' empowerment and value co-creation within the brand community, resulting in a potential impact for the industry at large.

The highly engaged members show all three elements of brand community, including shared consciousness, shared rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility (Muniz and

O'Guinn, 2001; Schau et al., 2009). Members also engage with their own personal roles within the community, and with fellow members and their respective roles. These behaviors include the roles of learners, of members sharing their experience and knowledge.

The emotional aspect of consumers' brand engagement emerged as polar negative/positive, low/high-intensity and short/ long-term affective attitudes directed toward specific engagement objects (e.g. a brand). The emotional gratification participants feel from engaging in the community stems from feelings of gratitude, empathy, trust, feeling safe, and from a sense of belonging to the group, thus highlighting the importance of the social aspect of consumer engagement. Further, the researchers were able to identify a cognitive dimension of consumer engagement as the members built value-laden relationships by sharing information and experiences.

Further, while specific consumer engagement behaviors are positive in nature (e.g. providing social support), others reflect more negative expressions of consumer engagement (e.g. criticizing the brand, giving misleading brand-related advice).

4.2 Conclusion

Our study provides a novel theoretical foundation for understanding brand engagement in the context of intersubjective orientation of value co-creation, which broadens extant views of how consumers engage with brands. In this endeavour, we discuss the importance of focussing on consumers' experiences of brand engagement practices, which embody engagement in the broader context of consumers' social lives. Furthermore, we incorporate the phenomenological nature of brand engagement experiences, and address how these experiences are related to value-in-use and practices. Specifically, within our framework, value-in-use serves as a nexus between idiosyncratic brand experiences and the established socially constructed brand engagement practices which these experiences reflect.

Additional empirical studies that examine the dynamic nature of brand engagement practices in different local and cultural contexts would be also beneficial. For example, further research is required to examine how brand engagement practices emerge, exist or disappear, and how this varies across the individual consumers' life stages. Of particular interest could be also to explore how brand engagement practices and experiences differ between individual and community contexts, and within different consumer collectives united by the linking value of beloved brands or by communities that are in opposition to them.

Furthermore, in our paper, we have predominantly framed brand engagement as a positive concept. There has been a nascent and recent interest in negative engagement (Hollebeek and Chen, 2014). Thus, it would be of interest to explore how brand engagement practices, brand experiences and value-in-use would be different when brand engagement outcomes are negatively-valenced. Another avenue for future research is to explore the role of brand constellations and combinations within particular consumer consumption categories such as travel, food consumption, entertainment and luxury, and not only single brands in isolation. Finally, we welcome alternative theoretical and methodological approaches to better illuminate the nature of brand engagement practices, such as conversation analysis and ethnomethodology.

4.3 Implication

Theoretical implications

In a recent commentary on potential research directions and contributions to the contemporary service-dominant logic discourse, Domegan et al. (2012, p. 209) note that "it is important to establish the conditions in which multiple actors, practices and research perspectives frame and thus illuminate and obscure what are considered outcomes". A growing body of service research

adopts an intersubjective orientation in order to develop a deeper understanding about such conditions (Edvardsson et al., 2011; Löbler 2011). In line with these endeavours, result the riset described in this study offers several important theoretical insights.

Finally, given that such consumer-generated stories – our common direct method to understand consumers – reflect first and foremost individual brand experiences (Thompson, 1997), by exploring how consumers' brand experiences emerge from the performance of the associated socially constructed brand engagement practices, we can explore how engagement materialising at the individual level, in turn, reflects the social construction of brand engagement. In other words, while it is brand engagement practices that allow us to observe what consumers commonly do when they engage with brands, our understanding of these practices is mediated by the individual experiences of “how” consumers experience brands within the context of their personal life worlds.

In this endeavour, we provide insights as to how researchers can construct knowledge about brand engagement using empirical data inductively derived from the consumer-generated texts, thereby advocating for the use of interpretivist methodologies, including phenomenological interviews, participant observation and other forms of ethnographic inquiries.

Practical implications

The theoretical insights that we have discussed above offer several practical contributions within the specific domains of designing and implementing of service research and practice. First, our framework can be operationalised empirically to examine brand engagement in diverse contexts. For instance, the framework can be applied to derive intersubjective insights through understanding how consumers narrate stories about instances when they, themselves, felt to be engaged with brands in specific contexts, as well as focussing on what actually consumers “do” with brands. As meaning and sense-making is articulated and revealed through language and discourse (Gergen, 1999; Löbler, 2011) and brand-related practice performances, the consumer brand narratives can reveal the consumers' sense-making in relation to their brand-related experiences. An example of this would be stories that are derived from the phenomenological interviews in situations when the social value for brands was constructed (e.g. shared meaning). These narrated stories would reflect the consumers' sense-making in relation to the brand-related experiences – consumers' personalised and socio-cultural understandings of brand engagement – which can be then reinterpreted in relation to the practices of brand engagement.

The importance of intersubjective meanings for consumer relationships with brands is also evident in the context of brand communities. Specifically, the research on brand communities (e.g. Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006; Schau et al., 2009) discusses how connections between consumers themselves, in addition to consumers relationships with brands, can become the central source of value that consumers individually and collectively derive (e.g. Kozinets, 2014). In this context, brands operate as shared resources that are used to facilitate value co-creation, whereas brand engagement emerges from the practices that are performed and sustained by and within the community of brand enthusiasts (e.g. Muniz and Schau, 2005; Schau et al., 2009). Cova and White (2010, p. 260), in particular, argue that “consumers now increasingly see brands as shared cultural property”, whereby communal practices create new forms of capital associated with the brands. Accordingly, within the context of brand communities, both individual consumer considerations (e.g. quest for selfidentity, enjoyment, altruistic motivations, etc.) as well as social interactions (e.g. social norms, rituals, etc.) are foundational to the value-in-use that consumers derive from brands and brand-related encounters (Lee et al., 2011). Thus, within this context, result the riset can be applied to develop a deeper understanding of various consumer experiences of engagement, and how such experiences are framed by broader social practices of communal brand engagement.

Finally, our integrative framework supplements and extends recent work by Ramaswamy and Ozcan (2016, p. 96) who view brand engagement in a real world as comprising “the joint capabilities

of both individuals and enterprises, as an ecosystem of brand capabilities from which engagement platforms emerge, and are enabled and supported, as individuals and enterprises engage through these platforms in differentially creative ways”. In this context, the current limiting focus on how organisational brand activities and digital enterprise engagement platforms facilitate multiple stakeholder brand meaning and value co-creation, could be extended by incorporating our framework to consider how multiple actor activities, in addition to technology, can frame brand experiences and practices over time.