A Consumer-based Taxonomy of Digital Customer Engagement Practices ☆

Anniek W. Eigenraam *& Jiska Eelen& Arjen van Lin& Peeter W.J. Verlegh

Department of Marketing, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, De Boelelaan 1105, 1081 HV Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Abstract

Consumers can engage with brands online in a variety of ways, ranging from playing a branded game to writing a review or viewing branded content. This work presents a consumer-based taxonomy of these digital engagement practices. By means of a literature review and expert surveys, we created an overview of the ways in which consumers digitally engage with brands across different media formats and platforms. A consumer sample then classified all practices into five distinct types of digital engagement practices (for fun practices, learning practices, customer feedback, work for a brand, talk about a brand). A subsequent survey on another consumer sample showed that the five types of practices are differently related to the three motivational states of customer brand engagement (cognitive, emotional and behavioral). The taxonomy of digital engagement practices integrates prior research. We provide implications for managing digital customer engagement.

Introduction

Fueled by rapid developments in digital environments, and by a desire to build personal connections with consumers, brands are increasingly seeking to engage with consumers on digital platforms (Alvarez and Fournier 2016; Kumar and Gupta 2016; Lamberton and Stephen 2016). On different digital platforms, a wide range of engagement practices has evolved, including, for example, playing advergames, reading (and writing) customer reviews, and watching, liking and sharing brand videos, blogs, and other content. These practices may be conceptualized as behavioral manifestations of customer brand engagement, which has been defined as "a consumer's positively valenced brand-related cognitive, emotional (or affective) [1] and behavioral activity during or related to focal consumer/brand interactions" (Hollebeek, Glynn, and Brodie 2014, p. 159). As noted by Van Doorn et al. (2010), engagement practices are motivated behaviors, which go beyond the mere purchase and consumption of products and services.

Studying marketing forms in the quickly maturing digital world has been recognized as a challenge for academic research (Kannan and Li 2017; Lamberton and Stephen 2016). Indeed, there is a lack of integration of research into customer engagement practices, which is reflected in the multitude of practices and behavioral concepts that have been researched. The literature provides many examples of studies that focus on online engagement practices like

☆ Declarations of interest: none.
 * Corresponding author.
  E-mail addresses: anniek.eigenraam@vu.nl (A.W. Eigenraam), j.eelen@vu.nl (J. Eelen), a.van.lin@vu.nl (A. van Lin), p.verlegh@vu.nl (P.W.J. Verlegh).

[1] The customer engagement literature has shifted from denoting customer engagement as a psychological state with cognitive processing, affection and activation as components (Hollebeek, Glynn, and Brodie 2014) to customer engagement as a motivation to actively invest *cognitive, emotional, behavioral and social resources during, or related to, specific brand interactions* (Hollebeek, Srivastava, and Chen 2016). Henceforth, this research focuses on the intrapersonal customer resources and will use the following terms interchangeably: "emotional" and "affective", "behavioral" and "activated".

consumer co-creation (Luo, Zhang, and Liu 2015), consumer-generated advertisements (Lawrence, Fournier, and Brunel 2013), endorsement of brands (Bernritter, Verlegh, and Smit 2016), and playing advergames (Terlutter and Capella 2013), to name just a few. Each of these studies provides valuable insights on a subset of the wide range of digital engagement practices. It is not clear, however, how these different practices relate to each other. For instance, how is writing a review for a brand essentially different from playing an advergame? And how can we generalize across practices on different platforms? To answer such questions, it is necessary to make an inventory of all investigated engagement practices and obtain insights into the similarities and differences that consumers perceive among those practices. To this end, we aim to develop a taxonomy for digital engagement practices and provide integration and standardization in this area.

A Consumer-based Research Approach

With the interactive role of consumers in the marketplace, we enter a new era where the consumer plays an active role in the practice of marketing (Schultz 2016). It is therefore especially important to understand digital engagement practices from the consumer's perspective. In this sense, our approach is similar to research by Azar et al. (2016) and Muntinga, Moorman, and Smit (2011), who have described classifications based on consumer motives for engagement practices, building on the uses and gratifications framework (Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch 1973/1974). An important difference with prior classifications, however, is that we develop a taxonomy of the engagement *practices* themselves, instead of focusing on consumers' *motivations*. In addition, and unlike earlier classifications of relevant concepts (Hollebeek, Juric, and Tang 2017; Jaakkola and Alexander 2014; Muntinga, Moorman, and Smit 2011; Schau, Muñiz, and Arnould 2009), our classification of practices is not based on a conceptual, but an empirical approach, relying on quantified consumer judgments (see Table 1, in which we compare our classification to other classifications).

A Taxonomy Robust to Changes in the Digital Landscape

Unlike many earlier classifications of relevant concepts, our taxonomy defines practices independent of platforms and media channels (e.g., "watching videos" instead of "watching a campaign video on YouTube"). This should make the taxonomy relatively robust to changes in the digital landscape, such as the emergence of new platforms and media. In this sense, the classification differs from classifications that rely on a specific platform (social media: Azar et al. 2016; Muntinga, Moorman, and Smit 2011; brand communities: Hollebeek, Juric, and Tang 2017; Schau, Muñiz, and Arnould 2009) or a specific brand (Jaakkola and Alexander 2014).

Contributions to Practice

Customer engagement practices have been linked with financial, reputational, and competitive advantages (Kumar and Pansari 2016; Pauwels, Aksehirli, and Lackman 2016; Van Doorn et al. 2010). However, effectively anticipating engagement practices is complicated when technological advancements give rise to new, unexplored platforms and media. By developing a taxonomy that is robust to changes in the digital landscape, we aim to help practitioners organize their portfolio of digital engagement practices in a manner that recognizes the dynamic nature of the landscape. Second, by categorizing digital engagement practices according to our taxonomy, opportunities for employing new practices are revealed: by comparing their existing brand engagement offerings to the taxonomy, marketers can easily see which types of practices are under- or overrepresented, and adjust their portfolio accordingly. Finally, by grouping practices that are perceived as similar, our taxonomy provides a basis for follow-up research (either by academics or practitioners) that allows for a linkage of consumer segments to types of digital engagement practices. The final study in our paper provides an illustration of such linkage, based on customer brand engagement.

Overview of the Research

Our research is structured in three phases. In the first phase, we made an inventory of all digital customer engagement practices. We derived the practices from a systematic literature review and refined and validated the list in consultation with marketing scholars and practitioners. These practices were the basis for developing the taxonomy in research phase 2. In this

Table 1
Comparison of existing classifications of digital engagement.

Author(s)	Concept	Application area	Quantitative research method	Consumer-based data	Classification on the level of practices
Azar et al. (2016)	Motivations for consumer–brand interactions	One social medium (*Facebook*)	X	X	
Muntinga, Moorman, and Smit (2011)	Consumers' Online Brand Related Activities (COBRA's)	Social media (but studied on one: *Hyves*)		X [a]	X
Jaakkola and Alexander (2014)	Customer Engagement Behavior	One brand (*First ScotRail*)		X [b]	
Schau, Muñiz, and Arnould (2009)	Brand community practices	Brand communities		X	X
Hollebeek, Juric, and Tang (2017)	Virtual brand community engagement practices	Brand communities		X	X
Our study	Consumer engagement practices	All digital platforms	X	X	X

[a] Consumer-based data was used only to study motivations, classification of COBRA's was based on literature.
[b] The sample also included other stakeholders, such as employees.