



# Consumer engagement in a virtual brand community: An exploratory analysis

Roderick J. Brodie\*, Ana Ilic, Biljana Juric, Linda Hollebeek

The University of Auckland Business School, Department of Marketing, Owen G Glenn Building, 12 Grafton Road, Auckland 1142, New Zealand

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## ABSTRACT

Despite the extensive use of the term “engagement” in the context of brand communities, the theoretical meaning and foundations underlying this term remain underexplored in the literature to-date. Drawing on a literature review, this study adopts netnographic methodology to explore the nature and scope of consumer engagement in an online brand 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 online brand communities, and value co-creation among community participants. Engaged consumers exhibit enhanced consumer loyalty, satisfaction, empowerment, connection, emotional bonding, trust and commitment. The paper concludes with a discussion of implications for practice and further research.

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## 1. Introduction

The sophisticated information and communication technologies (ICTs), which have developed in parallel with the rise of the Internet, have served as platforms facilitating interaction with and among consumers, and the formation of brand communities (Muñiz and O’Guinn, 2001; Muñiz and Schau, 2005, 2006). 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 online brand communities to-date.

Recent business practice discourse, including reports on conferences, seminars, roundtables, blogs, and organizational reports, also provides evidence of the increasing usage of the term “engagement” in the context of business relationships and branding (Appelbaum, 2001). 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 remains nebulous to-date. Thus research into the nature of brand communities and their effect on consumer behavior represents an important area for research.

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +64 9 529 7469; fax: +64 9 529 444.

E-mail addresses: r.brodie@auckland.ac.nz (R.J. Brodie), anailic@xtra.co.nz (A. Ilic), b.juric@auckland.ac.nz (B. Juric), l.hollebeek@auckland.ac.nz (L. Hollebeek).

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 netnographic methodology, this exploratory research aims to provide insight into consumer engagement within a virtual brand community. The paper proceeds with a literature review addressing the conceptual roots of consumer engagement in Section 2.1, and reviews definitions of consumer engagement and related concepts in Section 2.2. Section 2.3 develops a working definition of "online consumer engagement," while Section 2.4 discusses the expression of specific consumer behaviors within online brand communities, thus providing the context for the empirical research. Section 3 outlines the research approach, including netnographic methodology and the research setting. Section 4 presents the study's findings by first examining consumer engagement in the online community as a psychological state, followed by the broader process, and constituent sub-processes, comprising consumer engagement. Section 5 presents key implications arising from the research, and a future research agenda, which takes into account the study's limitations.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Consumer engagement: theoretical foundations

The theoretical roots of the consumer engagement concept lie in what Vivek et al. (forthcoming) refer to as the "expanded domain of relationship marketing." Similarly, Ashley et al. (2011) suggest relationship marketing theory as the broader conceptual lens through which to examine customer engagement. Further, from a service-dominant (S-D) logic perspective, Vargo (2009) refers to this notion as "a transcending view of relationships," which contrasts with the more traditional view of marketing relationships labeled a "goods-dominant" (G-D) perspective. This broader "transcending" relational perspective, in particular, recognizes that consumer behavior is centered on customers' and/or other stakeholders' interactive experiences taking place in complex, co-creative environments.

Vivek et al. (forthcoming) elaborate on the "expanded domain of relationship marketing" by drawing on Morgan and Hunt's (1994), Vargo and Lusch's (2004, 2008), and Prahalad and Ramaswamy's (2004a, b) research. Within this broadened relationship marketing domain the firm's focus is on existing and prospective customers, as well as consumer communities and their organizational value co-creative networks. As such, the consumer engagement concept centers on specific interactive consumer experiences. Based on this analysis Vivek et al. (forthcoming) posit consumer engagement as a central concept within the marketing system. Similarly, Lusch and Vargo (2010) suggest these, interactive consumer experiences co-created with other actors can be interpreted as the act of "engaging."

### 2.2. "Consumer/customer engagement" definitions

The relatively few authors who have defined "customer/consumer engagement" in the academic marketing literature to-date provide a platform for the development of a working definition of "consumer engagement" in a virtual brand community. Specifically, Patterson et al. (2006) define "customer engagement" as "the level of a customer's physical, cognitive and emotional presence in their relationship with a service organization." By contrast, Vivek et al. (forthcoming, p. 4) define "consumer engagement" as "the intensity of an individual's participation and connection with the organization's offerings and activities initiated by either the customer or the organization, while Hollebeek (2011, p. 6) views "customer brand engagement" as "the level of a customer's motivational, brand-related and context-dependent state of mind characterized by specific levels of cognitive, emotional and behavioral activity in brand interactions."

Mollen and Wilson (2010, p. 5) define "brand engagement" within specific online contexts. The authors describe consumers' engagement as "the cognitive and affective commitment to an active relationship with the brand as personified by the website or other computer-mediated entities designed to communicate brand value." The concept characterizes the dimensions of "sustained cognitive processing", the individual's level of perceived "instrumental value" (i.e. utility and relevance), and "experiential value" (i.e. the level of emotional congruence with the narrative schema encountered in computer-mediated entities). When conceptualizing online "brand engagement," Mollen and Wilson (2010) scrutinize how the concept differs from "involvement." They suggest that a consumer's brand engagement extends beyond mere involvement, as it encompasses an interactive relationship with the engagement object, and requires the emergence of the individual's perceived experiential value, in addition to instrumental value obtained from specific brand interactions. This perspective is consistent with the view of consumer engagement having theoretical roots within the expanded domain of relationship marketing, which emphasize the notions of interactivity and customer experience (Vivek et al., forthcoming).

Bowden (2009a) views "customer engagement" as a "psychological process" comprising cognitive and emotional aspects. Specifically, the author examines the differences in the engagement of new, as opposed to existing, customers. Bowden's (2009a) model illustrates engagement as an iterative process commencing with customer satisfaction, and culminating in customer loyalty, where the transitional pathway to customer loyalty encapsulates calculative and affective commitment, trust, involvement and customer delight. While new customers' "calculative commitment" is predominantly cognitive in nature, "affective commitment" is relevant predominantly to repeat customers, and represents a more emotive basis for re-purchase. By contrast, Van Doorn et al. (2010), and Pham and Avnet (2009) focus on "customer engagement behaviors," by defining engagement primarily with reference to specific customer activity types or patterns. Furthermore, the MSI – Marketing Science Institute (2010) recognizes the potentially enduring nature of customer engagement from pre- through to post-purchase contexts.

A number of researchers have considered the consequences of customer/consumer engagement, which may include the concepts of trust (e.g. Casalo et al., 2007; Hollebeek, 2011), satisfaction (Bowden, 2009a), commitment, emotional connection/attachment (e.g. Chan and Li, 2010), empowerment, consumer value (e.g. Gruen et al., 2006; Schau et al., 2009), and loyalty (e.g. Bowden, 2009a, b). Among these the concepts of loyalty (e.g. Andersen, 2005; Casalo et al., 2007; Schouten et al., 2007), commitment (e.g. Chan and Li, 2010) and empowerment (e.g. Cova and Pace, 2006; Füller et al., 2009; Zimmerman and Warschawsky, 1998) are prominent in online brand community contexts.

### 2.3. A working definition

Brodie et al.'s (2011) review, which addresses customer/consumer engagement in the marketing literature, provides guidance for the development of a working definition of "consumer engagement" in a virtual brand community. Specifically, the authors' analysis identifies five themes. The first is a fundamental theme, which recognizes the central importance of the undertaking of specific interactive experiences between consumers and/or other actors in the marketing and/or brand network. These interactive experiences include consumer-to-consumer (C2C) interactions in brand-related chat rooms or blogs, and/or firm/consumer interactions through online feedback forms (Van Doorn et al., 2010). A second theme is that consumer engagement represents a highly context-dependent, motivational state characterized by a specific intensity level at a given point in time. Nolan et al. (2007), for instance, report on individuals' motivation to

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