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The determinants of stakeholder engagement in digital platforms☆

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ABSTRACT

Consumer engagement has been heralded as strategic in facilitating sales growth, competitive advantage, and profitability. Expanding the notion of consumer engagement to the stakeholder context, this study examines the determinants of multi-stakeholder digital engagement. Based on a digital setting (Expo2015), this study collected all the social media posts (n = 984) in the Facebook page with restricted access to the stakeholders involved in the event. Initial regression results suggest that the presence of transformation, in terms of activation of creative resource integration in posts, is a strong predictor of compliant and interactive engagement. Fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) shows the configurations of cognitive and emotional attributes leading to compliance and interaction. Stakeholder engagement is an interactive experiential process based on actors' engagement with a focal organization, but more intensively with other stakeholder community members.

1. Introduction

Despite the growing importance of stakeholder integration in practice, academic discussion of stakeholder inclusion remains in its infancy (Driessen, Kok, & Hillebrand, 2013), especially regarding the role played by social media. Following Hillebrand, Driessen, and Koll (2015), the marketing discipline should expand its rather restrictive focus on customers toward a view of marketing that acknowledges the interrelatedness of stakeholders. Stakeholder relationships constitute a source of competitive advantage (Surroca, Tribó, & Waddock, 2010) that generate financial benefits, protect the firm against hostility (such as product harm crises), favors corporate social responsibility (Barrena, López, & Romero, 2016) and contribute to firm survival (Choi & Wang, 2009). More specifically, strong and positive stakeholder relationships reflect the willingness of stakeholders to support the firm with their resources (Maignan & Ferrell, 2004).

Stakeholder engagement has recently risen on the agenda of marketing studies mostly due to the introduction of digital media. The relevance of engagement is illustrated by the inclusion in the Marketing Science Institute's 2014–2016 and 2016–2018 Research Priorities (MSI, 2014, 2016), and by the growing interest on the topic from academics and practitioners. Within a multi-stakeholder ecosystem paradigm fostering stakeholders' content generation in social media is not a simple task. Organizational messages in fact often bounce randomly around in the online environment (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; Hennig-Thurau, Hofacker, & Bloching, 2013), being comparable to a pinball match. Engagement cannot be forced. It can be facilitated by a *tertius iungens* (or "third who joins") (Obstfeld, 2005) platform that provides extra value and contributes to the analyses of issues that are relevant to stakeholders.

Addressing the calls for research (e.g., Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2013) on dyadic and/or networked aspects of engagement beyond consumers, this analysis intends to explore the determinants of engagement within a broader intra and extra-organization focus. As such, this research explores an ecosystem that, indeed, embraces a much wider socio-cultural system than pure traditional stakeholder relationships such as employee/organization or supplier/organization. The rationale underlying such an approach is that engagement captures relationships among many different groups. Gyrd-Jones and Kornum (2013) defined this new broader perspective as a "stakeholder ecosystem", which encapsulates both the network nature of these relationships and the complex set of subcultures that make up this ecosystem.

Expo2015's Facebook closed group, with restricted access to 248 stakeholders involved in the event (e.g., governments, civil society, chambers of commerce, universities, companies), represents an appropriate avenue to explore the determinants of engagement in the digital realm. Expo2015 is a Universal Exposition, a global event that is held every five years and has attracted over 20 million of visitors.

The aim of the paper is unpacking the determinants of online

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stakeholder engagement, showing the peculiarities with respect to consumer engagement. In addition, the study investigates how the focal organization, i.e., the offline or online platform that connects stakeholders, can help to maximize stakeholder engagement.

The next section presents the theory, discussing the constituents and the actors of online stakeholder engagement. The section ends with a visual conceptual model. The empirical Expo2015 case, assessed through regression and QCA, validates the theory. After presenting the findings, the paper concludes with the theoretical and practical implications and clarifies the role of the focal organization in enacting stakeholder engagement.

2. Theory

Stemming from Schmitt (2012), psychological engagement can be seen as functional or social. The first is object-centered and functionally driven while the second derives from an interpersonal and socio-cultural perspective and it is typical of consumer relationships (Martí & Bigné, 2014). Considering the paucity of studies on stakeholder engagement, an analysis of the current debate from a consumer perspective is essential to define a working definition of Stakeholder Engagement. Dijkmans, Kerkhof, and Beukeboom (2015) define engagement in terms of a combination of cognition (e.g., being interested in a company's activities), emotions (feeling positive about a company's activities) and behaviors (participation in the company's activities). Mollen and Wilson (2010) suggest that a consumer's engagement extends beyond mere involvement, as it encompasses an interactive relationship with the engagement object. Brodie et al. (2013) propose that the view of consumer engagement has theoretical roots within the expanded domain of relationship marketing and brand interactions. According to these authors, consumer engagement in a virtual brand community involves specific interactive experiences comprising positive cognitive and emotional dimensions, which are able to trigger behaviors (Hollebeek, Glynn & Brodie, 2014). In this sense, consumer engagement plays a central role in the process of relational exchange.

In the marketing literature, service-dominant logic was used to discuss engagement. The S-D logic defines customer engagement as a customer's motivationally driven, volitional investment of focal operant resources including cognitive, emotional, behavioral, social knowledge and skills, and operand resources (e.g. equipment) into brand interactions in service systems (Hollebeek, Srivastava, & Chen, 2016). Consumer engagement can be passive, when the organization-related content is merely consumed, or active, when consumers contribute to or create organization-related content (Muntinga, Moorman, & Smit, 2011).

While consumer engagement has been shown to lead to sales growth, superior competitive advantage, and profitability (Bijmolt et al., 2010; Gambetti & Graffigna, 2010), it has not received the same attention from a stakeholder perspective. Greenwood (2007) defines stakeholder engagement as the practices an organization undertakes to involve stakeholders in a positive manner in its activities. Although stakeholder engagement often assumes that negotiations will be adversarial, more recent approaches interpret stakeholder engagement as a creative opportunity to engage in more collaborative and effective interactions (Corus & Ozanne, 2012).

Transferring the notion of consumer engagement (Brodie et al., 2013) to the stakeholder domain, this study examines the fluctuating intensity levels of engagement that occur among actors in the process of cocreating a mega-event. Engagement can be seen as a process that points to different levels and intensity of emotional, cognitive and behavioral activation (Gambetti & Graffigna, 2010). This study explores the emotional and cognitive components of engagement that trigger the *behavioral activation component*, in that this is a stage where engagement can effectively be measured through visible interactions. Extending the approach of passive and active customer engagement into the stakeholder perspective, this study differentiates between sources of mild engagement, i.e., compliant engagement, and sources of active engagement, i.e. interactive engagement (Van Doorn et al., 2010; Verleye, Gemmel, & Rangarajan, 2014). This multiple approach is consistent to the perceived prominence of the multidimensional perspective of engagement (Brodie et al., 2013).

As for consumer engagement, the diffusion of social media, and with it the increased use of interactive platforms such as blogs and user communities, has facilitated interactions among stakeholders as well as between stakeholders and organizations. On social media platforms stakeholders share information and experiences, discuss products/services and opinions, evaluate, and provide new product ideas or feedback (Viglia, 2014).

Within the stakeholder marketing literature, there is little empirical evidence substantiating how stakeholders engage in decision-making processes. More importantly, there is the need of evidence on how these processes take place online. Information Technology enables the combination of competences, capabilities, and knowledge (Srivastava & Gnyawali, 2011). More specifically, social media can reflect real-world actions and practices that were started offline or they can actively represent a first initial pump priming for future real-world actions. These platforms are fruitful when stakeholders are interrelated as players, in that they can form a coalition for strengthening knowledge (Neville & Menguc, 2006) and more accurate decision-making (Invernizzi, Menozzi, Passarani, Patton, & Viglia, 2017). The modality the information is made available is relevant. On the one hand social media extend networks by expanding the widespread and interrelations. On the other hand, to avoid energy and time dispersion and allow effective encounter moments, social media platforms might offer spaces with restricted access (closed groups).

2.1. The constituents of stakeholder engagement

Engagement has been defined in psychology by Kahn (1990) as the sum of supportive conditions for authentic expression. The identified fertile conditions for engagement according to this author can be grouped in two main areas, cognitive, such as a rational work goal, and emotional, i.e., a state of mind that affects behavior. Following Van Doorn et al. (2010), customer engagement can be seen as customers' behavioral manifestations with a brand or firm, beyond purchase. Brodie et al.'s (2013) conceptual model on consumer engagement also reveals established relationships between the cognitive, emotional and behavioral aspects of consumer engagement. Such dimensions appear to be strategically important also for Hollebeek (2011), according to whom customer engagement is the level of a customer's motivational state of mind characterized by specific levels of cognitive and emotional activities during interactions with the brand or organization. Building on this reasoning and adopting a stakeholder approach the study portrays that:

H1. Cognitive and emotional factors affect stakeholder engagement.

The emotional aspects that stem from feelings of gratitude, empathy and trust, are central for consumers engaging in the community (Brodie et al., 2013). This picture is rather different in the stakeholder territory where multi-stakeholders mainly engage with the focal organization because of goal-directed behaviors such as accomplishing some predetermined purpose (Pera, Occhiocupo, & Clarke, 2016). In general, need for cognition is considered to be higher in stakeholders (Barnett, 2014) with respect to regular customers. Compared to consumers, multi-stakeholders are more functional and rational in their effort allocation, focusing on activities that are means to achieving an end.

H2a. Cognitive factors are the strongest factor for interactive stakeholder engagement. Emotional factors will activate only compliant engagement.

Social media enhances relationships among customers in business environments (Gamboa & Gonçalves, 2014).

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