

Consumer Brand Engagement in Social Media: Conceptualization, Scale Development and Validation

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Abstract

In the last three decades, an influential research stream has emerged which highlights the dynamics of focal consumer/brand relationships. Specifically, more recently the ‘consumer brand engagement’ (CBE) concept has been postulated to more comprehensively reflect the nature of consumers’ particular interactive brand relationships, relative to traditional concepts, including ‘involvement.’ However, despite the growing scholarly interest regarding the undertaking of marketing research addressing ‘engagement,’ studies have been predominantly exploratory in nature, thus generating a lack of empirical research in this area to date. By developing and validating a CBE scale in specific social media settings, we address this identified literature gap. Specifically, we conceptualize CBE as a consumer’s positively valenced brand-related cognitive, emotional and behavioral activity during or related to focal consumer/brand interactions. We derive three CBE dimensions, including cognitive processing, affection, and activation. Within three different social media contexts, we employ exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses to develop a reliable, 10-item CBE scale, which we proceed to validate within a nomological net of conceptual relationships and a rival model. The findings suggest that while consumer brand ‘involvement’ acts as a CBE antecedent, consumer ‘self-brand connection’ and ‘brand usage intent’ represent key CBE consequences, thus providing a platform for further research in this emerging area. We conclude with an overview of key managerial and scholarly implications arising from this research.

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Introduction

In the last three decades a powerful research stream has emerged, which highlights the nature and dynamics pertaining to specific consumer/brand relationships (Aaker, Kumar, and Day 2004; Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004; Fournier 1998). Within this emerging body of work, consumer brand ‘involvement,’ which reflects a consumer’s level of interest in, and personal relevance of a brand, has gained significant attention (Coulter, Price, and Feick 2003; Zaichkowsky 1985, 1994). However, despite the important insights gleaned from ‘involvement’ research, more recently scholarly emphasis is shifting to concepts and theoretical

perspectives which explain or predict the dynamics characterizing focal *interactive* consumer/brand relationships more explicitly, including in specific social media settings (Bolton and Saxena-Iyer 2009; Malthouse and Hofacker 2010).

Within this broader context, the consumer ‘engagement’ concept, which more explicitly accounts for consumers’ interactive brand-related dynamics (Brodie et al. 2011), is gaining traction in the literature (Calder, Malthouse, and Schaedel 2009; van Doorn et al. 2010); thus fitting within the broader theoretical perspectives of consumer culture theory (Arnould and Thompson 2005), the service-dominant logic (Karpen, Bove, and Lukas 2012; Vargo and Lusch 2004, 2008), and relationship marketing (Vivek, Beatty, and Morgan 2012). Brodie et al. (2011) define ‘customer engagement’ as “a psychological state that occurs by virtue of interactive, co-creative customer experiences with a focal agent/object (e.g. a brand).” The rationale underlying this observed shift is a growing scholarly recognition of contemporary consumers’ active, rather than passive, roles and behaviors in specific

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brand-based processes (Hoffman and Novak 1996; Pagani, Hofacker, and Goldsmith 2011; Prahalad 2004; Ramani and Kumar 2008; Singh and Sonnenburg 2012). However, despite preliminary claims, insights into consumers' 'engagement'-related dynamics remain sparse and largely lacking measurement capability and empirical validation to date.

Increasing levels of consumers' brand engagement (CBE) are expected to be conducive to the attainment of superior organizational performance outcomes, including sales growth, cost reductions, brand referrals, enhanced consumer contributions to collaborative product development processes, enhanced co-creative experiences, and superior profitability (Bijmolt et al. 2010; Nambisan and Baron 2007; Prahalad 2004; Sawhney, Verona, and Prandelli 2005). Consequently, CBE has been viewed to represent a key new metric for gaging brand performance (Bowden 2009; Kumar et al. 2010; MSI—Marketing Science Institute, 2010).

Despite significant practitioner interest, the undertaking of scholarly, empirical CBE research has lagged behind, resulting in a limited understanding of the concept and its measurement to date (Bolton 2011; Verhoef, Reinartz, and Krafft 2010). As such, this research responds directly to calls for the undertaking of 'engagement' scale development research in marketing made in Brodie et al. 2011; Leeftang 2011; MSI—Marketing Science Institute 2010. A key exception is provided in Calder, Malthouse, and Schaedel (2009, p 322) i.e., 'online engagement' (OE) scale designed to measure the second-order construct of engagement manifested in "various types of first-order experiences." Despite important insights gleaned, the authors' perspective differs, conceptually, to ours in at least three ways.

First, in contrast to Calder, Malthouse, and Schaedel (2009), our proposed model explicitly reflects consumers' engagement with specific *brands*. Second, as outlined in the section titled 'CBE Conceptual Development', the notion of interactive consumer/brand relationships pervades *each* of our proposed CBE dimensions, rather than existing as an independent dimension, as in the Calder, Malthouse, and Schaedel (2009) model. Third, we offer a more parsimonious 10-item measurement tool comprising three CBE dimensions, relative to the Calder, Malthouse, and Schaedel (2009) proposed eight-dimensional view of OE comprising 37 items.

Further, our model exhibits conceptual divergence from Sprott, Czellar, and Spangenberg's (2009, p 92) 'brand engagement in self-concept' (BESC) scale designed to gage "an individual difference representing consumers' propensity to include important brands as part of how they view themselves". Specifically, following Brodie et al. (2011), we posit 'interactive experience' to represent a core hallmark typifying 'engagement.' However, the conceptual scope of BESC limits the emergence of the interactive nature of 'engagement' (Bezjian-Avery, Calder, and Iacobucci 1998; Leeftang 2011). Hence we adopt a more comprehensive approach focused on the *interactively* generated nature of CBE, as outlined in further depth in the Literature Review: 'Engagement'. Specifically, in four studies we conceptualize CBE and develop and validate a CBE measurement scale.

The CBE scale developed in this paper is expected to generate the following contributions. First, we anticipate the future

deployment of our scale to generate enhanced managerial knowledge regarding the attainment of enhanced organizational performance outcomes, including heightened consumer brand loyalty. Second, the proposed CBE conceptualization and scale contribute novel insights to the emerging 'engagement' literature in marketing. This paper has three major objectives: (1) By developing a CBE conceptualization and an associated measurement instrument which build directly on previous research, this paper seeks to contribute further insights into the nature, dimensionality and measurement of 'engagement' which are limited in the literature to date; (2) By exploring focal CBE conceptual relationships, we provide an enhanced understanding of the nature and directionality of these specific conceptual associations; (3) We show the CBE scale exhibits construct validity.

The next section provides a literature review, followed by an overview of the exploratory qualitative research undertaken for the definitional and conceptual development of CBE (study 1). Next, study 2 applies the proposed CBE conceptualization in a series of exploratory factor analyses to better understand the factorial structure, dimensionality and preliminary items reflecting CBE using a sample of 194 undergraduate students. Employing a new sample of 554 consumers, study 3 documents the undertaking of a series of confirmatory factor analyses serving to corroborate the three-factor, 10-item CBE scale. Next, we adopt an additional sample of 556 consumers in study 4 to explore CBE within a broader nomological net of conceptual relationships from which we draw a number of conclusions.

Literature Review: 'Engagement'

While 'engagement' has received considerable attention across a number of academic disciplines, including social psychology and organizational behavior, the concept has transpired in the marketing literature only relatively recently (Brodie et al. 2011; Leeftang 2011). In this emerging literature, 'engagement' has been viewed as a promising concept expected to provide enhanced predictive and explanatory power of focal consumer behavior outcomes, including brand loyalty (Avnet and Higgins 2006a,b; Pham and Avnet 2009; Schau, Muñiz, and Arnould 2009).

We provide an overview of reviewed 'engagement' conceptualizations proposed in the marketing literature in Table 1, which reveals the following observations. First, we identify a number of 'engagement'-based concepts, including 'consumer-' and 'customer engagement' (Brodie et al. 2011; van Doorn et al. 2010), 'community engagement' (Algesheimer, Dholakia, and Hermann 2005), and so on. Specifically, the multiplicity of emerging 'engagement'-based concepts highlights the nascent developmental state of 'engagement' research in marketing to date. Following Brodie et al. (2013), the focus in the remainder of this paper is on consumers' engagement with particular brands.

Second, 'engagement' reflects a motivational state (van Doorn et al. 2010), which occurs by virtue of an individual's (i.e. the 'engagement subject') focal interactive experiences with a particular object or agent (i.e. the 'engagement object;' Hollebeek 2011a/b), which is key for many online offerings (Malthouse and Hofacker 2010; Sawhney, Verona, and Prandelli 2005; Shankar and Batra 2009). While key 'engagement subjects' cited in the

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