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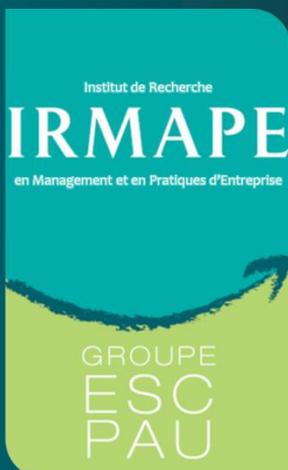
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Engagement: Theoretical

Foundations

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Digital Customer Engagement: Theoretical Foundations

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ABSTRACT

The digital revolution had a disruptive take on almost every field in the business realm. Not only did it change the conventional perception of business relationships and operations, but it also had an impact on customer behavior. In fact, today's connected customer is in the heart of a heated battle between all sorts of brands hunting down his/her attention, like, share, view and comment. In the meantime, this very customer evolved to become selective, demanding, with higher expectations than ever, all of which make the task of engaging this customer a challenging one. Brands are faced with the mission of creating digital strategies that stand out from the crowd in order to get the customer to engage with them. Therefore, digital customer engagement is getting more traction than ever which calls for a solid theoretical understanding of the concept. This article seeks to explore, highlight, and summarize the existing literature on digital customer engagement, which will cover the following: i) definitions ii) dimensions iii) customer engagement antecedents iv) customer engagement outcomes v) theoretical foundation of customer engagement.

Keywords: *Customer engagement, customer behavior, digital marketing*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The digital revolution had a disruptive take on almost every single field in the business realm. Not only did it change the conventional perception of business strategies, relationships and operations, but it also had an important impact on customer behavior. In fact, today's connected customer is in the heart of a heated battle between all sorts of brands hunting down his/her attention, and reaction: click, like, share, view and comment.

In the meantime, this very customer evolved to become selective, demanding, with higher expectations than ever. All of which make the task of engaging this customer a challenging one for digital marketers. Brands are faced with the mission of creating digital strategies that stand out from the crowd in order to get the customer to engage with their content online.

An engaged customer online is more likely to take action, in this context, make a purchase. This naturally led online customer engagement to get more traction both between professionals and academics.

From an academic point of view, working on building a theoretical understanding of the concept became a priority of the marketing research community. Seeking to provide deeper insight on these three main questions:

What is online customer engagement?

Why is it relevant?

Who are the subject and object of this engagement?

How to engage customers online?

Purpose:

The ever growing number of connected individuals led businesses to take their online presence even more seriously. In fact, brands online presence serves multiple purposes such as:

- Fostering brand awareness
- Driving traffic to merchant websites
- Building trust and loyalty

However, and to achieve said purposes, brands have to invest more into engaging their customers across all relevant digital platforms: websites, forums, social media platforms, messaging services. An engaged customer is more likely to take action with the brand. This action could go from a click, like, comment, to, ultimately, a transaction with the brand. This begs the question: how to get the customer attention? How to engage the customer?

In fact, customer engagement has been for some time now in the heart of digital marketing professionals and academic concern. As much as the outcomes of customer engagement seem clear and less debatable, the “how” is still something of a mystery. Not to mention the fluid nature of digital trends.

To this date, some of the best practices of online customer engagement strategies are:

- Education
- Entertainment
- Gamification
- Community building

This research aims to explore online customer engagement practices targeting a Moroccan audience.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION OF CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT

1. Introduction:

The concept of customer engagement is widely recognized as a substantial research priority in the marketing field of study (Bolton, 2011). However, this concept is still under explored to-date.

The rapidly growing number of connected customers worldwide is a key factor encouraging brands to seek engaging their customers (Gómez-Suárez et al., 2019). Customer engagement earned its importance when brands started realizing that a focus on building positive relationships with customers was not enough (Pansari& Kumar, 2017), and that in order to ensure positive relationship outcomes (i.e, loyalty and profitability) they ought to put more focus on engaging their customers. Only then, and through the potential power of customer engagement to influence customers behavior (Gambetti & Graffigna, 2010), key brand relationship outcomes will ensue. Key brand relationship outcomes are detailed in the literature as follows: trust, satisfaction, commitment, loyalty and empowerment (Casalo et al., 2007; Hollebeek, 2011; Appelbaum, 2001; Bowden, 2009a; Brodie et al., 2011a; van Doorn et al., 2010; Andersen, 2005; Casalo et al., 2007; Schouten et al., 2007; Cova and Pace, 2006; Füller et al., 2009; Zimmerman and Warschausky, 1998). While others, link customer engagement with increased sales and profitability (Neff, 2007; Voyles, 2007).

The concept of engagement is also used in a large variety of academic disciplines such as sociology, psychology, political science and organizational behavior studies (Gómez-Suárez et al., 2019).

Therefore, engagement, according to (Bowden, 2009) is a process, which stems from a combination of “calculative commitment, followed by the development of trust, involvement, and eventually affective commitment”.

As a result, we can state that customer engagement, is therefore mainly concerned with examining the above-mentioned process, and the elements that compose it in the specific context of customer-brand relationship. Or, as Bowden (2009) puts it: “the formation and development of customer-brand relationships and the mechanisms that drive loyalty for new customers to a specific brand versus repeat customers to a specific brand”.

2. Engagement concept across disciplines:

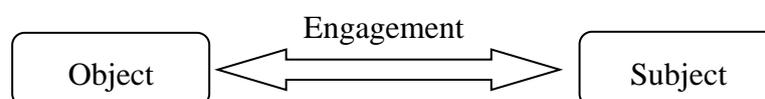
a. Engagement definitions from other disciplines:

This section aims to provide a broader understanding of the concept of engagement beyond the marketing realm. Vivek (2012) observed through a wide range of academic research on engagement that came to define it as a state of mind that impact the individual’s behavior in different context. In fact, engagement research start way back in time in a few different fields, namely:

- Psychology
- Education
- Employee engagement

b. Engagement object and subject:

The engagement is a form of an interactive relationship between two main parties: the object and the subject.



The engagement object refers to the “what” of the engagement process (organization, school, community, or brand). The engagement subject refers to the “who” to be engaged, or in other word, who is attention and interaction we desire to acquire (employee, student, or in our context: the customer).

3. Customer engagement: Definitions

Despite the increasing interest and body of research on consumer engagement within the marketing domain, there is no widely agreed definition of the construct (Gómez-Suárez et al., 2019). There are different ways and angles from which we can approach this concept. The following table gathers some of the definitions gathered to date.

4. Customer brand engagement dimension

The literature review of the concept of customer engagement shows diverging opinions when it comes to its dimensions. Some authors support the unidimensionality of customer engagement, thus focusing on the behavioral dimension. However, it has been found that the multidimensional approach is largely adopted by a body of scholars (Brodie et al. 2011; Calder et al. 2009; Hollebeek 2011; Hollebeek et al. 2014). This tripartite dimensionality concerns the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions. While this tripartite dimensionality is widely accepted, Calder et al. (2009), Mersey et al. (2010) and Vivek et al. (2012) advocate for the integration of a fourth dimension: the social dimension. However, and to attain a holistic conceptualization of customer engagement, it is necessary to include experiences, social interaction and motivations (Unal et al., 217).

Table 1: Definitions of customer engagement

Author	Definition
Van Doorn et al. (2010)	<i>“Customer engagement is defined as behaviors [that] go beyond transactions, and may be specifically defined as a customer’s behavioral manifestations that have a brand or firm focus, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers”</i>
Hollebeek (2011)	<i>‘Customer brand engagement’ in the present research is defined as “the level of an individual customer’s motivational, brand-related and context-dependent state of mind characterised by specific levels of cognitive, emotional and behavioural activity in direct brand interactions”</i>
Vivek et al. (2012)	<i>“We define Customer Engagement as the intensity of an individual’s participation in and connection with an organization’s offerings and/or organizational activities, which either the customer or the organization initiate”</i>
Marketing Science Institute (2010)	Customer Engagement <i>“customers’ behavioral manifestation toward a brand or firm beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers”</i>
Sedley (2010)	Customer Engagement <i>“repeated interactions that strengthen the emotional, psychological or physical investment a customer has in a brand”</i>
Wirtz et al. (2013, p. 229)	Customer Engagement is the <i>“consumer’s intrinsic motivation to interact and cooperate with community members”</i>

Table 2: Customer engagement dimension

Dimension	Description
Cognitive	Cognitive activities refer, for example, to the level of engrossment and concentration on the brand (Harmeling et al., 2017; Gómez-Suárez et al., 2019).
Emotional	Customer delight helps build affective commitment, and later on, loyalty. (Bowden, 2009).In fact, affective activities imply the positive feelings generated when the consumer interacts with the brand (Gómez-Suárez et al., 2019).
Behavioural	Behavioral activities refer to manifestations that go beyond direct transactions, for example, referrals, word of mouth, blogging, recommendations, writing reviews, and providing customer ratings (Jaakkola& Alexander, 2014; Kumar et al., 2010;van Doorn et al., 2010) that contribute to the company’s marketing function (Gómez-Suárez et al., 2019)

5. Customer brand engagement antecedents and outcomes

Customer engagement does not come from nowhere, nor does it happen without results. As the following figure (Figure 2) shows, customer engagement requires antecedents which help set it in motion. Then, there are the outcomes of this engagement.

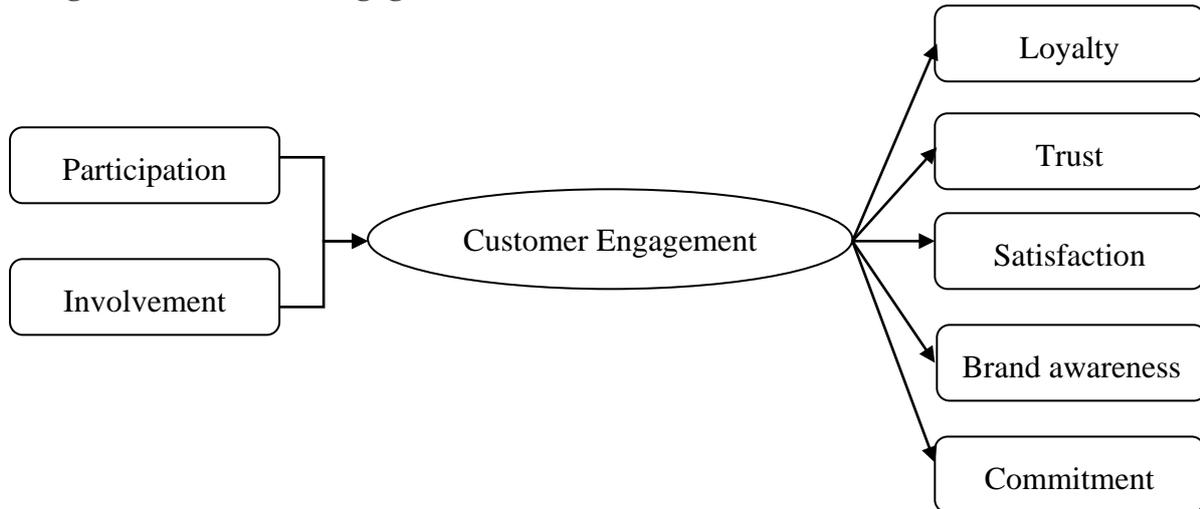
a. Customer engagement antecedents :

- Participation : Customer participation, is defined as the degree to which the customer is involved in producing or delivering the service(Dabholkar, 1990).
- Involvement : Involvement is the “perceived relevance of the object based on inherent needs, values, and interests” (Zaichkowsky, 1985).

b. Customer engagement outcomes :

Customer engagement outcomes are in fact the drivers of the interest in studying customer engagement. In fact, customer engagement outcomes are what every brand aims for: building trust, loyalty, and satisfaction with their customer base.

Figure 1 : Customer engagement antecedents and outcomes



6. Theoretical foundation of customer engagement :

As customer engagement find its theoretical roots in relationship marketing, this concept is in fact about building the relationship between the customer and the engagement object (e.g. the brand) at multiple levels (Vivek et al. 2012).

Vivek et al. (2012) argue that different types of customers build experience-based relationships through intense, interactive participation with the brand by way of the unique experiences they have with the offerings and activities of the organization. This strongly supports the theoretical foundation of customer engagement in theories like: relationship marketing and service-dominant logic.

In fact, both theories address the interactive and proactive aspects of engagement in the context of brand-customer relationship (Brodie et al., 2011).

a. Relationship marketing :

Starting the 1990s, marketing started experiencing a paradigm shift from a tradition, more transactional approach to a more relationship-oriented approach (Pansari& Kumar, 2017).

Thus, brands started seeking to build positive relationships with customers in order to ensure satisfaction and loyalty.“*Since the early 1980s, pioneers have proposed that relationship marketing (RM) involves “attracting” (Berry 1983, p. 25; Berry and Parasuraman 1991, p. 133) and “establishing”(Gronroos 1990; Morgan and Hunt 1994, p. 22) relationships while also enhancing, developing, retaining, or maintaining relationships.*” (Vivek, 2012)

b. Service-dominant logic:

Contrary to the goods-dominant perspective, S-D logic perspective recognizes that the customer’s interactiveness and value co-creation are the result of specific customer behavior, such as customer engagement (Brodie et al., 2011).

The Service-Dominant logic, is articulated using a set of 10 foundational premises depicting marketing relationships typified by customers’ interactive, co-creative experiences with other stakeholders, including service personnel, firms, and/or other customers (Vargo and Lusch 2008a).

CONCLUSION

The growing interest in customer engagement in the digital age find its roots in the potential benefits of the latter on business growth. As discussed in the previous sections, customer engagement could potentially results in better brand awareness, better conversion rates, loyalty, satisfaction, and trust. To achieve engagement goals, brands should act on the three most prominent dimension of customer engagement which are: emotional, behavioral and cognitive. Thus, crafting digital strategy serving the ultimate purpose of engaging today's digital customer.

With this being said, there are still many questions to investigate in this relatively new and developing field of digital customer engagement: To which extent does the platform impact engagement practices? How does culture impact engagement practices online? What are the factor that impact customer engagement online?

This opens the door wide open to future research opportunities in the field, advancing customer engagement across the ever changing technological landscape.

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