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Exploring Consumer-Brand Engagement in Online Environments Designed for Tourism

Abstract: The purpose of this study is to present the role of consumer-brand engagement in the online environment designed for tourism. We explore the consumer-brand engagement construct, in relation to consumers as the engagement subjects and brands (i.e. brands/companies) as the engagement objects. This study starts with an extensive and comprehensive literature review, followed by a qualitative study applying focus group techniques to two distinct panels. As a result, we intend to provide a comprehensive understanding of consumer-brand engagement in the online tourism environment. Our aim is to contribute to advancing the theoretical knowledge of this subject and to provide useful insights that can be used by practitioners, particularly those working in the area of touristic brands, who use interactive platforms to create consumer-brand relationships.

Keywords: consumer engagement, consumer-brand engagement, online engagement, comprehensive literature review, focus group, TripAdvisor

Introduction

Both scholars and practitioners have come to realise that satisfaction alone is not enough to generate a loyal and profitable consumer (Lamberton, Stephen, 2016). In fact, the existing standards for loyal and satisfied customers that create revenue and profit are no longer enough. Companies need to cross new frontiers by creating a new level of desirability for their products

and/or services, by emphasising their distinctiveness from competitors, and by generating a sustainable competitive advantage (Harmeling et al., 2017). Therefore, the company's mindset has evolved from traditional relationship marketing to engaging the consumer in all possible ways with their focal object (e.g. company/brand) (Brodie et al., 2011), which brings us to the term of engagement.

As with every innovative research area, consumer engagement is still in its development stage (Groeger et al., 2016). According to most authors, the existing studies in the area ask many unanswered questions (Harmeling et al., 2017). Moreover, managers and scholars have an increasing access to diverse sources of information and data related to consumers' interactive experience with the focal object (e.g. company/brand). Managers need a more innovative view of consumers that is more global and interactive (towards brands, other consumers, other products or services, different media and channels) that contrasts the fragmented view that they were provided with for some time.

Research questions and objectives

Both companies and scholars are interested in understanding how diverse experiences, such as emotions, social influences or stimuli of experiences interact, in order to create consumer engagement states and consumer-brand relationships. How can companies engage consumers, not only to build loyalty or purchase/repurchase intentions, but to create positive non-transactional behaviours towards the brand, such as referral behaviours (e.g. recommendations, reviews), advocacy behaviours (e.g. supporting a brand), interactive behaviours (e.g. brand communities or online forum membership), or co-creational behaviours (e.g. inputs to develop existing or new products/services). Here, a gap is found in the literature: what are the core conceptualisations of engagement (depending or not on the context, for instance, online/offline) and what drives consumer-brand engagement?

Based on the above argumentation, this study discusses the following general research questions: (i) what are the core perspectives and conceptualisations of engagement?, (ii) what are the relevant stimuli of experience that act as antecedents of engagement?, (iii) what drives consumers to contribute, with their referential effort, to advocating a product or a brand?

The study is conducted in two steps. We start by performing a comprehensive literature review, followed by a qualitative research method, based on

two focus groups. Finally, we present the conclusions, implications, limitations, and suggestions for further research.

Value and originality of this study

This study presents scientific value and originality, due to the novel character of the subject and the research methods employed. Concerning the scientific domain analysed, the literature has devoted limited attention to the contextual aspects of consumer-brand engagement, specifically concerning their interactive contexts (which is enhanced by the diverse online platforms available). With this study, we intend to clarify and advance into this matter with new insights.

Theoretical background from a comprehensive literature review

Comprehensive literature reviews intend to discuss a problem resulting from the enormous amount of studies published every year, often with conflicting findings. Actually, it is not always clear what the overall picture is, which results are more reliable, and which should be used as a guide in making decisions, regarding either future research or managerial implications. Comprehensive literature reviews address this problem by identifying, critically evaluating, and integrating the findings of all relevant high-quality studies in the research field under analysis. So, the purpose of this comprehensive literature review is to conduct an extensive subject literature review that can highlight relevant studies discussing the consumer-brand engagement phenomenon, and, from that, to be able to frame the emerging construct.

Thus, it is our intention to establish and explore the extent to which research has contributed to clarifying the construct, to understand how the main authors outline and define it, to identify different relationships within the construct, and discover how it is interconnected with the remaining marketing literature. Additionally, we hope to pave the future avenues of research for this emerging topic.

Comprehensive literature review methodology

To carry out this systematic literature review, several electronic databases are used, in which we apply different research terms to perform the research process. We chose to make these searches through two distinct search aggregators that include the following databases: EBSCOhost (which includes among others, Academic Search Complete and Business Source Complete), Web of Science, ABI/Inform Collection (which includes ABI/Inform Dateline, Global and Trade & Industry) and EconLit.

We define five different terms to be used in the literature search to ensure that they cover, as much as possible, all the literature addressing the topic. So, we decide to use: (i) customer brand engagement, (ii) consumer engagement, (iii) customer engagement, (iv) brand engagement, and (v) online engagement as search terms. This leads us to a final set of ten searches of the terms.

Regarding the quality and credibility assessment, we assume, as a starting point, that our purpose is to use only cutting-edge research in the best quality papers published in the best journals. To do so, we apply several filters to the database: (i) full-text papers, (ii) peer-reviewed papers, and (iii) scholarly journals. In order to use only the best quality journals, we used the Journal Quality List – Fifty-seventh edition (Harzing, 2016). From this list, the researchers select to apply the WIE 2008 Rating – WU Wien Journal Rating May 2008 List. This list includes only A and A+ journals, and from those on that list, we considered only the journals inside the scope of study (Marketing, General Management and Strategy, and International Business).

At this stage, the methodological procedure must cover content validation. The results of each search are now assessed in terms of Title Reading, Abstract Reading, and Full-Text Reading. After the last screening process (full-text reading), a final group of thirty papers emerges. Finally, we employ a rigorous assessment method with the purpose of analysing the selected final papers. A comparative table – data extraction form – is created in Excel, to present the final group of papers in a clear way and to systematise the main information contained.

Conceptual findings from the comprehensive literature review

Consumer engagement

A growing line of research continues to contribute to the consumer engagement construct (Bowden, 2009; van Doorn et al., 2010; Kumar, 2013; Vivek et al., 2012), creating a valuable amount of knowledge concerning this topic, but also generating considerably different definitions, concepts, and arguments used to define the construct.

However, some concepts appear somewhat constant and coherent throughout the literature. One refers to consumer engagement as an attempt to distinguish consumer attitudes and behaviours that go beyond purchase behaviours (van Doorn et al., 2010; Vivek et al., 2012), the other defends the consumer's role in this concept, which is taken to be active, involved, and co-creational, as opposed to a mere recipient of initiatives from firms (Brodie et al., 2011; Gambetti et al., 2016; Hollebeek et al., 2019; Kumar et al., 2010).

Nevertheless, several research streams have emerged over time. Focusing on an attitudinal perspective, Brodie et al. (2011) discuss the role of interactive consumer experience and co-created value as the basis for this construct, addressing the nature of consumers' interactive engagement experiences across contexts, the value of consumers' dynamic and interactive co-creation role in service fields, and the construct's multidimensional essence through its cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions. Thus, the authors have defined consumer engagement as, "a psychological state that occurs by virtue of interactive, co-creative customer experiences with a focal agent/object (e.g. a brand) in focal service relationships" (2011: 260).

Other authors address this construct from a more behavioural perspective. In fact, van Doorn et al. (2010) introduce the consumer engagement behaviour concept, defined as, "the customer's behavioural manifestation toward a brand or firm, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers" (van Doorn et al., 2010). They propose five dimensions for customer engagement behaviour: valence, form of modality, scope, nature of its impact, and customer goals. They argue that in an increasingly networked society, where customers can interact easily with other customers and firms through the social network and other new media platforms, the non-transactional behaviour from these becomes more important as time goes by.

The research related to customer engagement evolved into several complementary pathways. A focus on how firms can benefit from customer

engagement (Pansari, Kumar, 2017), how to measure customer engagement (Brodie et al., 2013; Calder et al., 2016; Hollebeek et al., 2014), or even distinct aspects of customer engagement value, such as customer referral value or customer influence value (Kumar et al., 2010, 2013). In fact, in this line of research, attention should be given to identifying four components of customer engagement value: customer purchasing behaviour, customer referral behaviour, customer influencer behaviour, and customer knowledge behaviour (Kumar et al., 2010).

Consumer brand-engagement

Different definitions regarding consumer-brand engagement largely comprise engagement as a multidimensional concept, typifying a consumer's interactive state based on cognitive, affective, and behavioural components. In fact, we can find, among the main contributors to the conceptual definition of consumer-brand engagement, several studies stressing these components. Here, we can highlight the definition proposed by Linda Hollebeek, which defines customer-brand engagement as "the level of a customer's cognitive, emotional and behavioural investment in specific brand interactions" (Hollebeek, 2011).

Other authors contribute to this discussion with their perspectives of behavioural dimensions, which appear particularly diversified in their extent. Kumar et al. (2010) have drawn three fundamental behavioural components of customer engagement with a firm: customer's purchase behaviour, customer referral, and customer's influencing behaviour towards other customers. Van Doorn et al. (2010) address 'customer engagement behaviours' that result from motivational drivers, including word-of-mouth activity, customer-to-customer interactions (C2C), and/or blogging activity. Verhoef et al. (2010) have defined customer-brand engagement as a consumer's behavioural manifestation towards a brand or firm that goes beyond transactions.

In this line, other research also discusses and proposes three dimensions of consumer engagement (Hollebeek et al., 2014), which correspond to the generic cognitive, emotional, and behavioural nature of 'engagement'. In this context, the terms used are cognitive processing (consumer's level of relationship with a brand through processing and elaboration in a particular consumer/brand interaction), affection (degree of positive affective-relation with a brand) and activation (level of energy, effort and time spent on a brand).

Online engagement

Engagement means an active and interactive customer connection with a given engagement object. This concept is shared among online engagement, customer engagement and consumer-brand engagement. Baldus et al. (2015) try to conceptualise online brand community engagement as the compelling, intrinsic motivations to continue interacting with an online brand community. They propose a scale, which includes 11 dimensions based on previous studies: Brand influence, Brand passion, Connecting, Helping, Like-minded discussion, Rewards (hedonic), Rewards (utilitarian), Seeking assistance, Self-expression, Up-to-date information, and Validation. However, the manifestation of particular cognitive, emotional and behavioural dimensions depends, extensively, on the engagement actors – engagement subjects/objects – and contexts (Brodie et al., 2011), including media contexts (new online media in contrast to traditional advertising media) (Calder et al., 2009).

Other studies underline the interactive experiential process, based on consumers' engagement with specific products or brands, and other brand community members (Brodie et al., 2013). These authors also discuss how members engage in specific online brand communities. Other authors show that consumers engage in higher levels of online brand-related activities as a result of a learning process (Schivinski et al., 2016). They identify the consuming dimension as an antecedent of consumers' engagement in the contribution of brand-related content on social media, and the contributing dimension as an antecedent of user-generated content. For non-communities' online engagement, Hollebeek et al. (2014) devote attention to the social media context. These authors underline the need to re-think, or redesign, the nature of specific consumer/brand interfaces to increase online engagement and not online brand communities.

Perceptions and knowledge from consumers

In the second part of this study we employ a qualitative methodology using the focus group technique. With this choice, we target two main goals: firstly, to test the preliminary findings obtained from the comprehensive literature review to confirm or refute them, and secondly, to shape and refine the knowledge of the research topic and gain usable consumer insights that could be used in subsequent studies.

The focus group technique is considered 'group interviewing', and is commonly used to understand consumers' attitudes and behaviours (Wimmer, Dominick, 2011). One of the advantages of this method is the fact that it produces the alleged 'group effect' (Carey, 1994), which is an event that occurs in group interaction where members are 'stimulated by the ideas and experiences expressed by each other' (Lindlof, Taylor, 2010). The option of using focus groups as a research tool is also considered an exploratory method that can be used to obtain preliminary results for future research (Wimmer, Dominick, 2013).

As proposed by Malhotra (2010), a focus group is an interview conducted by a trained moderator in a non-structured and natural manner with a small group of respondents. Malhotra (2010) also underlines that a focus group should generally include 8 to 12 members, last between 1 and 3 hours, and be demographically and socio-economically homogeneous, representing a wide spectrum of opinions and personal characteristics. The marketing research literature suggests that focus groups should be characterised by homogeneity, but with sufficient variation among participants to allow contrasting opinions (Krueger, Casey, 2015).

Focus group one

We decided to interview two focus groups because we wanted to narrow down our research. So, we started by forming the first focus group in order to focus on a more general and comprehensive view of the consumer-brand relationship, specifically in the online environment.

To obtain the participants of the focus group, we used a convenience sample. We selected the participants that reflected a range of different attitudes (and skill levels) towards online brands, with different academic backgrounds, although all participants were college graduates, aged between 31 and 52. The study was conducted in the capital city of the country, with all participants living within that metropolitan area. In order to ensure genuine participation and interest, no type of gratification was given to participants (e.g. gift cards, presents, money).

Based on these characteristics, we selected eight participants, four males and four females. The discussion followed a semi-structured path, as the literature reports that, for exploratory purposes, we should consider less-structured approaches (Morgan, Krueger, & King, 1998), so that the individuals would reveal more of their own perspectives on the research topic. Nevertheless, we

prepared and used specific guidelines to avoid having the discussion follow an unreliable course. The researchers recorded the discussion, so it could be transcribed, allowing participants and their comments to be linked.

The focus group session took place in Lisbon, Portugal on 17th February 2016 and lasted around two hours. Although the researchers were in the room, the moderator of this session was chosen from another research team (but also from social sciences) in order to avoid a possible bias (Morgan et al., 1998). The moderator's role was to lead the focus group and to encourage all participants to contribute, alongside attempting to develop 'good group feelings' (Lindlof, Taylor, 2010). Participants were asked to fill in a focus group personal data sheet and researchers had elaborated a focus group script for this study in order to conduct the group discussion.

All participants are daily internet users. In fact, they all referred to several types of daily uses, such as news and meteorology services or search engine services. In fact, among all participants one service brand stood out the most when referring to search engine services: Google. Concerning online shopping experience, all but one mentioned that they had already made at least one online purchase, and several participants said they usually make at least one electronic transaction per month.

Focus group two

The aim of the second focus group was to explore the online customer-brand engagement of a set of participants. For this purpose, we decided to emphasise one specific brand, and we chose TripAdvisor. TripAdvisor is an American internet travel company offering travel reservation services, reviews of travel-related consumer experiences, and online travel forums where community members can interact and exchange opinions (Filiari et al., 2015).

In this focus group, we followed the same research path as in the previous focus group. The difference lied in its purpose, which was to gain insights into the customer-brand engagement focused on the online environment. Although the purposes of both groups differed, the researchers decided to select a different sample of participants for this second focus group. With this option, we intended to assess their perceptions and confirm or reject our preliminary findings, without the influence of the first focus groups findings.

When setting up the second focus group, we faced a new challenge. Our intention was to investigate consumers' insights concerning engagement with

a specific brand, thus we needed to select participants who were active TripAdvisor users, technologically skilled, and consumers of travel products/services. Using the previously mentioned convenience sampling, we obtained a group of people with higher education, aged between 24 and 39, equally balanced in terms of gender.

The focus group session took place in Lisbon, Portugal on 20th June 2016. This session lasted two and half hours. Although the researchers were in the room, the moderator of this session was chosen from another research team (the same as in the first session), in order to avoid a possible bias (Morgan et al., 1998). Participants were also asked to fill in a specific second focus group personal data sheet, and the researchers had also created a focus group script for this study to conduct the group discussion. The focus group session was recorded, so that the researchers could transcribe the session, and correctly attribute the phrases to each participant (Lunt, Livingstone, 1996). The focus group participants had been TripAdvisor users for around four and half years (on average) with one-third being active members of TripAdvisor travel forums. The most common use that participants make of the TripAdvisor site is searching for reviews of travel-related consumer experiences, and taking part in the travel communities forums.

Focus group findings

To be able to properly analyse the information from the focus group sessions, we decided to categorise the available data. Categorisation is a technique that allows researchers to divide and group together data according to existing concepts, themes, or other similar clusters (Lindlof, Taylor, 2010). Furthermore, combining data into categories enables researchers to identify a unit of data as belonging to, representing, or being an example of some more general phenomenon (Spiggle, 1994).

Besides categories, researchers also develop a coding scheme to manage and infer from focus group data. A coding scheme serves as a data management tool to label, separate, compile, and organise the available data (Bowen, 2006). The purpose of using this technique is to mark the units of data as they relate meaningfully to categories, taking the researcher's suggested categories and linking them together (Lindlof, Taylor, 2010). The process of finding categories, and developing a coding scheme, greatly helps researchers when looking for and deciding which validated scales to use in subsequent studies (Lindlof, Taylor, 2010).

Overall, this study provides the researchers with valuable insights. From the first focus group, we gain insights concerning previous experience, namely: important features for consumers like credibility, recommendation, security or information\content quality. Valuable information about customers' purchase intentions also emerges. As mentioned in the literature, satisfaction (Brodie et al., 2013; Sashi, 2012) and ease of use (Loureiro, 2015) appear as positive influences in this construct. Some practical dimensions also emerge concerning previous price experience and price comparison.

In this first study, we are also able to obtain insights into trust. This construct appears connected to different dimensions such as previous positive experience, brand behaviour or third-party recommendation. These perceptions are in line with the literature, which mentions previous experience as an antecedent of trust (Vivek et al., 2012), and also the connection between brand behaviour, or positive word-of-mouth, and customers' brand trust (Hur et al., 2011). The importance of clear and relevant information and content, which is partially related to the evaluation of potential trust in unknown providers, becomes evident. These insights are also in line with certain authors' defence of the importance of information and content, related to the quality of informative features (Han et al., 2006) and to online consumers' willingness to use (Park et al., 2007).

From the second focus group we gain insights into online customer-brand engagement towards a specific brand, i.e. TripAdvisor. Here, some insights similar to the first session arise, such as involvement or previous experience. We also infer about the relevance of dimensions such as website quality, the level of available information, and the quality of contents. Additionally, interactivity emerges. These findings reinforce the results of the first focus group.

An important insight revealed by our study concerns the relation between the online consumer brand engagement construct and both cognitive and emotional dimensions. To some extent, it is related to the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions of consumer-brand engagement suggested by Hollebeek et al. (2014). This finding provides researchers with a path for further studies. Therefore, we have decided to use the validated scale of Hollebeek et al. (2014) in the questionnaire for the forthcoming study. We intend to clarify the relationship between these dimensions, the antecedents, and the consequences of consumer-brand engagement.

In the second focus group we obtain additional relevant insights. The relationship between presence and some dimensions of consumer-brand engagement arises. The results reveal that consumers spend more time than

expected interacting online with a certain brand. Users' absorption in the content and their involvement in the distinct consumer experiences may explain this observation. Nevertheless, further research in this area is needed. A final insight emerges from our inductive approach related to participants' motivations to undertake recommendation behaviours and brand advocacy intentions (namely e-WOM). Most participants say that they contribute with positive references and behaviour that increases as they get more involved and engaged with a specific environment (in this case, an online environment). The researchers also conclude that further detailed observation is required to achieve in-depth knowledge about these questions.

Discussion, implications and conclusion

Theoretical contributions

Following our research questions, and referring to the core perspectives and conceptualizations of engagement, we may start by noting that the construct of engagement is indeed multidimensional. We find out that not only is engagement a complex multidimensional construct but also that its various dimensions are inter-related. We claim that engagement is a construct that comprises distinct dimensions such as cognitive, affective, or activation, among others.

Based on our research, we argue that the engagement goes beyond the dyadic relationship between consumer and brand. As we have seen, some consumer behaviours are triggered by sentiments of fulfilment (from a rewarding perspective), as well as by interaction and share of knowledge with other consumers (from a helping perspective). This leads us to argue that consumers' referral behaviours on online tourism environments can be associated with these perspectives, and that the online environment ends up being a catalyst for the consumer engagement construct.

Concerning the relevant stimuli of experience that act as antecedents of engagement, experience emerges as an important antecedent of engagement. In this domain, we can highlight key features for consumers like credibility, recommendation, security, or information\content. Moreover, we can point out several antecedents of engagement, such as website quality, the available information/content quality, involvement and interactivity.

We are also able to say that stimuli of experience, through consumer-generated, content create incentives that can generate online consumer engagement.

Concerning the distinct types of stimuli of experience, information/content emerges as the most important stimulus of website experience for online engagement. This inference confirms that consumers give significant importance to reliable, relevant, and up-to-date information to be engaged. Our findings reveal that the negative relationship between interactive features and activation reinforces the idea that the presence of links and interaction with other websites does not allow consumers to devote more time to the focal object of engagement (i.e. company/brand).

As our last aim we propose to understand what drives consumers to contribute to their referential effort (e.g. recommendation, reviews) to advocate a focal object (e.g. product/brand). We claim that consumers tend to contribute if they have positive sentiments towards the object, which may lead us to deduce that consumers are more engaged in positively advocating a company/brand than the contrary. We may also say that consumers may disagree with some brand features, but they are still willing to contribute positively to the development of the company/brand, and to inform others about the brand.

Moreover, our qualitative study allows us to understand that consumers have perceived knowledge of the value of their opinion (e.g. review/recommendation) in regards to other consumers, which highlights a possible trigger for consumers' recommendation efforts. Affection also emerges as a significant driver of consumers' referral endeavour, as consumer interaction and involvement with the brand positively influences the consumer, and may lead to recommendation/review efforts. Less relevant in influencing consumers' referral behaviours are the consumer's energy, effort, and time spent in a particular consumer/brand interaction.

Managerial implications

The analysis developed in this study also provides several managerial implications that can be useful for marketing practitioners and managers. First, we can say that the online environment (i.e. social media platforms, online brand communities) presents suitable instruments for setting up relations between consumers and brands. As we have shown, consumers use, interact, and seek information through these diverse types of platforms. Their experience in this environment, concerning website quality, information/content, or design-visual appeal, and also the emotions that arise from this relationship, such as pleasure, arousal, or dominance, motivate consumers to engage with

a focal object (e.g. product/brand). This process leads consumers to be willing to engage with the brand.

The findings of this study should encourage marketing practitioners and managers to take full advantage of social media platforms. In fact, the online environment can be an excellent tool for consumer-brand engagement. The results of our study reveal that brands have the possibility of engaging consumers in an intentional way through the online environment.

Additionally, the results of this study should encourage managers to involve their consumers in the co-creational process. Managers will gain added value if they can incorporate consumer opinion in their product development. To do so, they must involve them in co-creative actions and activities (e.g. opinions on innovative product features or service improvements) through an effortless process where they can give their opinion concerning current features and what they expect in new products/services.

Managers should also pay close attention to the consumers' relationships with other competing brands. As consumers build connections and engage with more than one brand in a certain category, we recommend developing strategies and creating connections that can place their brand near the top of consumers' favourite brands. Brands with high favourable engagement tend to be paid more attention to and be more often recalled, while consumers tend to be less price and time sensitive when assessing them. Managers should not only create conditions for the development of this preference, but they should also consider how to discourage consumers from engaging with competing brands.

Our final remark highlights the fact that the phenomenon of consumer engagement is not limited to the online environment. If managers make efforts to offer engaging experiences to their consumers through their products and services, they not only engage consumers online, but can also engage them offline.

Limitations and future research

This study reveals several theoretical and managerial contributions, but we should exercise caution when interpreting the results due to the limitations of the studies. Regarding the qualitative research using two focus groups, we use a convenience sample to reach both group quorums. Although the focus group is an exploratory technique by nature, we should analyse these results carefully. The group's composition may bias the results, as the sample may not be representative of the general population.

From this study, we suggest exploring engagement in different types of business activities. In this study, we have focused mostly on tourist service-dominated businesses. Thus, research focusing on different types of companies/brands (product-based logic) to test our results would be valuable.

Marketing research also needs to gain new insights and developments concerning co-creation knowledge. In fact, there is some preliminary debate in the literature about the dimensions that interact to affect the brand co-creation experience. We suggest that co-creation may arise as an outcome of engagement, but further empirical research is needed.

As was previously mentioned, negative engagement also deserves further research. Literature devotes considerable attention to the positive views of brand-related constructs. However, consumers can also have negative emotional states towards a brand. Researchers should address this topic not only to gain new insights concerning the unengaged consumer, but also to contribute with tools and frameworks that managers can use.

Finally, future research can expand our study by applying distinct quantitative and qualitative research design techniques to this subject. In fact, new research can be developed with distinct methodologies, new business sectors, or new target populations.

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