



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

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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.

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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 emphasizes 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

engage with an online community primarily when perceived utility value and interest outweigh the level of perceived risk.

A third is that transient engagement states occur within broader, dynamic, iterative engagement processes (Bowden, 2009a). As such, aggregation of focal engagement states results in broader processes describing individuals' engagement with particular brands over time. A fourth theme addresses engagement as a multidimensional concept comprising cognitive, affective and behavioral dimensions. Patterson et al. (2006), for instance, define "customer engagement" in terms of the cognitive "absorption," emotional "dedication" and behavioral "vigor" and "interaction" dimensions, as addressed in Section 2.2.

The fifth theme recognizes that consumer engagement plays a central role in the process of relational exchange, where other relational concepts (e.g. participation, involvement) act as engagement antecedents and/or consequences in dynamic engagement processes occurring within the brand community. The iterative nature of the consumer engagement process implies that specific relational consequences of engagement may act as antecedents in subsequent engagement (sub-) processes and/or cycles (Hollebeek, 2011).

The five themes lead to the development of a working definition for the investigation of consumer engagement in this exploratory study. The working definition is:

Consumer engagement in a virtual brand community involves specific interactive experiences between consumers and the brand, and/or other members of the community. Consumer engagement is a context-dependent, psychological state characterized by fluctuating intensity levels that occur within dynamic, iterative engagement processes. Consumer engagement is a multidimensional concept comprising cognitive, emotional, and/or behavioral dimensions, and plays a central role in the process of relational exchange where other relational concepts are engagement antecedents and/or consequences in iterative engagement processes within the brand community.

This working definition provides a broad direction for the undertaking of the exploratory research presented in this paper. In particular, the definition parallels Bowden's (2009a), Van Doorn et al.'s (2010) and Hollebeek's (2011) process perspective of customer engagement. The proposed working definition also provides a broader conceptualization of online brand engagement, in contrast to Patterson et al.'s (2006), and Vivek et al.'s (forthcoming) definitions, which adopt more specific descriptions of the behavioral, cognitive and emotional dimensions of engagement, as well as Mollen and Wilson's (2010) proposed definition of online brand engagement. The nascent state of theoretical development of the customer/consumer engagement concept in the marketing literature necessitates an initial delineation of the key characteristics of consumer engagement to precede the concept's more context-specific scrutiny.

Central to the proposed working definition is that consumer engagement embodies specific interactive consumer experiences. This theoretical perspective has its roots within the expanded domain of relationship marketing (Vivek et al., forthcoming) and the S-D logic, as outlined in Section 2.1. Within this theoretical framework other relational concepts (e.g. participation, involvement, telepresence) act as engagement antecedents, while engagement consequences may include commitment, trust, self-brand connections, consumers' emotional brand attachment and brand loyalty.

#### 2.4. Consumer behavior in virtual brand communities

In the last two decades, the emergence and rise of the Internet as a communications medium has enabled geographically-dispersed individuals with shared interests to gather online (Thomsen et al., 1998) culminating in radically new forms of customer/firm interactions. For example, Hoffman and Novak (1996) highlight the Internet's

capability for many-to-many (e.g. C2C) communications. The virtual world not only connects companies, but also consumers, and thus provides access to online content, and communication through this medium (De Valck et al., 2009).

Within the emerging Internet environment, consumers are increasingly active participants in interactive processes comprising multiple feedback loops, and highly immediate (potentially even real-time) communication (Hoffman and Novak, 1996; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004b). Examples of virtual interaction and communication tools include electronic discussion forums, bulletin boards, list servers, chat rooms, newsgroups, email, personal Web pages, social networks and blogs (De Valck et al., 2009). These tools enable and facilitate new and extended forms of interactive consumer experiences, which may contribute to the development of customer and/or consumer engagement with specific brands. Specifically, interactive customer/firm relationships in virtual brand communities reflect Vivek et al. (forthcoming) "expanded relationship marketing" domain, and Vargo's (2009) "transcending view of relationships" alike, which provide a conceptual foundation for the consumer engagement concept, as addressed in Section 2.1.

While Algesheimer et al. (2005) examine consumers' "community engagement" in the offline brand community context of a European car club their research highlights the interactive, two-way nature of consumer engagement, which is pivotal in a virtual brand community context. Further, Nambisan and Baron (2007) report that customer participation in business-to-consumer (B2C) virtual product support communities is motivated primarily by a belief in the benefits of engaging in such activities, thus implying that consumers find participating in reciprocal, interactive communications and activities rewarding in specific ways. The undertaking of such reciprocal behaviors concurs with the key findings presented in Sections 2.1 and 2.2. Similarly, in consumer-to-consumer (C2C) contexts individuals may find proximity, affiliation, social interaction and bonding through virtual communities (Hoffman and Novak, 1996; Oldenburg, 1999).

Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) report eight specific factors, which motivate consumers to make contributions to (i.e. engage with) online communities, including (1) venting negative feelings, (2) concern for other consumers, (3) self-enhancement, (4) advice-seeking, (5) social benefits, (6) economic benefits (e.g. cost savings), (7) platform assistance, and (8) helping the company. Of these, social benefits influence consumers most strongly, thus concurring with Oldenburg (1999) and Figallo (1998), and emphasizing the interactive, two-way nature of the consumer engagement concept.

Wiertz and de Ruyter (2007) examine firm-hosted online communities, in which consumers interactively engage to help solve each other's service problems. The results suggest that the highest-contributing community members, in terms of quantity and quality, act predominantly out of commitment to the community. Additional key factors include individuals' online interaction propensity (i.e. an individual's prevailing tendency to interact with relative strangers; people they have never met offline, in an online environment), and the perceived informational value of interacting with the community. Further, Mathwick et al. (2008) investigation indicates the importance of voluntarism, reciprocity and social trust, which may impact upon individuals' consumer engagement levels, in peer-to-peer (P2P) problem solving contexts.

Nolan et al. (2007) undertook a three-year longitudinal study into the development of a particular online business community. Their findings show that individuals engage with an online community when they perceive utility value and interest to outweigh the level of perceived risk. In addition, engagement flourishes when consumers perceive the value and authority of the interactive experience to exceed the perceived level of effort exerted in the particular interaction (cf. Mollen and Wilson, 2010). This analysis shows that an individual's perception of the "balance" between relevant



cost/benefit factors accruing from a specific interaction may influence their engagement intensity (Nolan et al., 2007).

The effects of electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) in virtual brand communities may also be significant (De Valck et al., 2009), as recommendations can occur at virtually no cost and spread rapidly, both within and beyond the virtual brand community. Chatterjee's (2001) findings support the applicability of specific word-of-mouth (WOM) dynamics of traditional, offline contexts, in online environments. For instance, consumers are more likely to search for, and accept, especially negative e-WOM when they lack information and experience (Richins and Bloch, 1991). For instance, Chevalier and Mayzlin (2006) report that reader numbers of online book reviews may affect book sales, with negative reviews having a larger detrimental effect on sales, than the positive reviews.

Brand community members sharing an interest, which produces affinity, may create a bond (De Valck et al., 2009), and generate consumer feelings of empowerment (Cova and Pace, 2006). These qualities, coupled with the level of perceived credibility of specific consumer evaluations, make the virtual brand community a powerful, interactive engagement platform for consumer-to-consumer (C2C) recommendations (Sawhney et al., 2005). Furthermore, the virtual brand community is an environment where the community members and visitors, through individual and collaborative effort, create and co-create value for themselves, other members, and/or organizations (Porter and Donthu, 2008; Schau et al., 2009).

While the majority of research addressing consumer behavior in virtual brand communities fails to conceptualize consumer/customer engagement explicitly, the literature provides a foundation on which to base the empirical study.

### 3. Research approach

#### 3.1. Netnography

The five themes and the working definition of consumer engagement in a virtual brand community provide the basis to guide the empirical research that examines consumer engagement in the online community in terms of a psychological state, followed by an examination of the consumer engagement process and constituent sub-processes. The method selected for this research is netnography, which Kozinets introduced in the late 1990s. Netnography is a qualitative research methodology, which adapts ethnographic research techniques to the study of online communities (Kozinets, 1997). Since this pioneering work a number of studies have adopted netnographic methodology to investigate consumers' online discussions, and examine the behavior patterns of online user groups (e.g. Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001).

This research uses a multi-method approach to the study of online communities (Bryman and Bell, 2007; Kozinets, 2002). The first stage involves the observation of communication in the community. Further, the second stage involves the use of qualitative depth-interviews with community members. This second stage also allows for a more in-depth examination of the meanings the participants ascribe to their experiences within the online community.

#### 3.2. Research setting and observations

The authors selected the company Vibra-Train Ltd, with its online platform <http://www.vibrationtraining.net>, as the research setting. Vibra-Train Ltd states on the website that the objective of its online platform is to facilitate the availability of "expert information and frank discussion on all aspects of Whole Body Vibration," which the company describes as a relatively innovative method of exercise aimed at improving individuals' health and fitness levels. The benefits of selecting this setting included the relatively extensive number of participants who regularly posted messages about different aspects of

vibration training. At the time of data collection in 2008 the community had a core of approximately ten to fifteen regular members (i.e. consumers, studio owners and/or trainers, equipment manufacturers and/or retailers) who showed elements of Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) three markers of community: shared consciousness, shared rituals/traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility.

The investigation adopted theoretical sampling, where the researcher first collects, codes, and analyzes data. Then, in order to refine the preliminary "consumer engagement" conceptualization, a decision is made about which specific data to collect next and where to collect this data. Bryman and Bell (2007) recommend this data collection process when the research objective is to generate and/or refine theory.

The researchers, with the help of the web administrator, selected all end-users of vibration training products and services commenting in the blog. Bloggers who made only a small number of comments would not be likely to provide insights into consumer engagement within the specific brand community. Thus, the research scope is narrowed to six information-rich end-users (consumers), as characterized by these individuals' high frequency of visits to the online community, as well as the length of their visits. According to the blog's statistics, 176 consumers made 808 (out of 2370) comments in the blog prior to March 1, 2008. More than fifty percent (i.e. 427/808) of these consumers' postings were made by six members (i.e., the most frequent contributors in the community), who therefore became the focus of this research. Table 1 provides further detail about the length of specific user comments, and the specific participation intervals for these particular highly engaged, information-rich participants.

The Vibration Training online community provided the researchers with an abundance of text. The data consisted of 427 posts (56,804 words), which the participants posted in the period from November 2006 to March 2008, and was processed using NVivo 7.0 software. Part of the data collection effort involved observing all the vibration training blog activities to reduce the gap between the text and the text's interpretative framework, and to align the participants' narratives with their experiential contexts.

Two coders initially coded and categorized all contributions. After successive readings, and discussions between the two coders, the researchers decided to modify the interpretations and codes. This iterative process is in line with what Bryman and Bell (2007) refers to as "investigator triangulation" – that is, using several different researchers to interpret the same body of data. The process of open coding revealed the basic themes, such as consumer engagement objects and sub-processes, and the axial coding resulted in the development of a conceptual model.

**Table 1**  
Details about participation of six highly engaged consumers.

a. Length of blog posts (comments)			
Participant	Number	Number of words	Average length
A	177	33,744	191
B	85	5118	60
C	60	5652	94
D	51	5549	109
E	27	2212	82
F	27	4529	168
Total	427	56,804	117
b. Participation intervals			
Participant	Initial post	Final post	Number of days
A	17 March 2007	19 February 2008	332
B	19 October 2006	19 August 2007	300
C	20 September 2006	4 May 2007	224
D	29 July 2007	4 December 2007	125
E	30 July 2007	25 December 2007	145
F	26 December 2006	7 February 2007	41

The researchers conducted follow-up interviews with a sub-sample of four of the six highly-engaged participants. Specifically, the researchers undertook a total of over twelve hours of face-to-face, Skype and phone interviews, with each lasting at least 1 hour. The researchers prepared and pre-tested an interview guide to provide direction for the semi-structured interview process, and which permitted the emergence of key themes of “consumer engagement”. For example, when the participants mentioned they engaged through “socialization,” they were asked to discuss this aspect of their engagement in greater depth. These in-depth interviews served as an effective means of data triangulation, and of improving the credibility of findings and the interpretation of the analysis (Bryman and Bell, 2007).

#### 4. Findings

Brodie et al.'s (2011) five themes underpinning the working definition of “consumer engagement” guided the analysis of the data. The first sub-section of the findings examines the nature of the consumer engagement concept by focusing on consumers' specific interactive experiences, engagement objects, motivational states and engagement dimensionality within the context of the Vibration Training brand community. The second sub-section examines the process of consumer engagement, while the third sub-section addresses focal consumer engagement sub-processes. The final section examines the key consequences of consumer engagement.

##### 4.1. Consumer engagement and engagement objects

The analysis and interpretation first led to the development of a conceptual model illustrating the facets of consumer engagement, as shown in Fig. 1. The model reveals established relationships between the cognitive, emotional and behavioral aspects of consumer engagement and the specific engagement objects characterizing the level of complexity of focal consumer engagement states. The findings

also reveal the interplay between the emotional, cognitive and behavioral aspects of engagement generating differing levels of engagement intensity.

For example, emotional engagement may generate increased levels of cognitive and/or behavioral engagement, as illustrated by one of the interview respondents:

“The blog eventually meant so much to me that I would do anything to assist anyone connected to it in any way I can.”

The respondent's post to the blog further illustrates the individual's heightened levels of cognitive and/or behavioral engagement:

“My thanks to A for all the knowledge selflessly imparted and looking forward to learning further from him. I have been able to help a colleague and last night, my wife, with back injuries using the stretch exercise suggested by A.”

The analysis identifies numerous engagement objects in specific postings to the blog. Specifically, participants engage with the themes discussed, including brands, products and services associated with exercise programs, organizations and/or the industry; and with the online community, their community roles and other community members. Consumers, typically, engage initially with specific inanimate object(s) of interest (e.g. a brand), and then progress to two-way interactions with other members of the online community, thus serving to impact upon their specific consumer engagement states and/or levels.

Discussions about brand-related topics are the most prevalent area of interest comprising approximately one-third of the 2370 blog postings. Further, participants earned the “right” to discuss specific brands in the online community. Specifically, the following ways illustrate this observation: (a) Only the members who engage in the community are able to discuss brands in their posts; and (b) only the brands, which the highly engaged members consider to be “ethical”

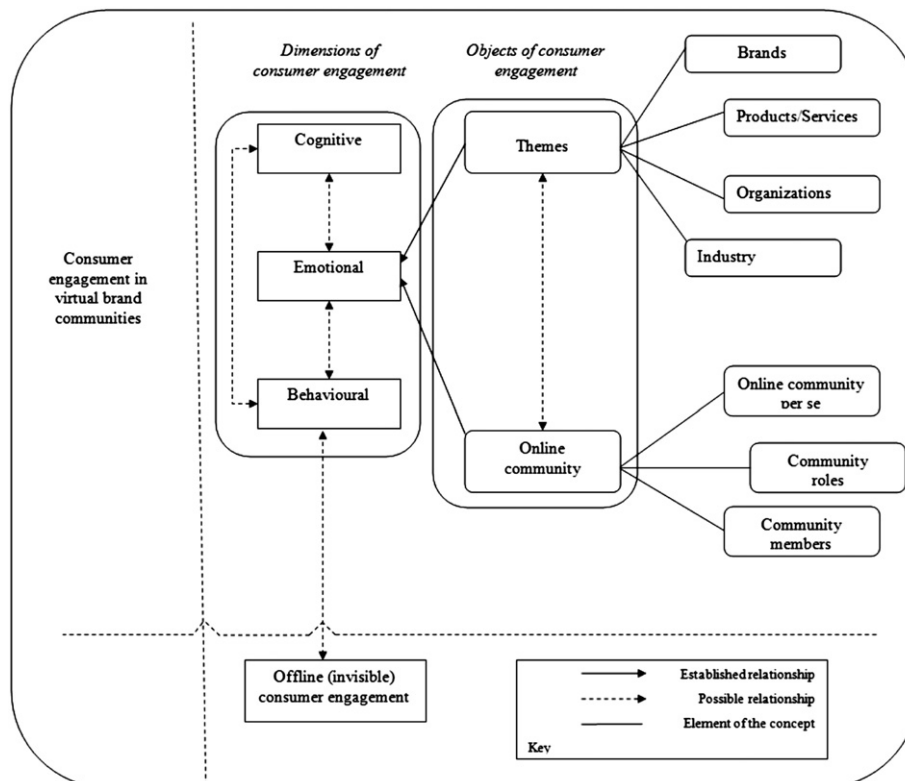


Fig. 1. Consumer engagement and objects in a virtual brand community.

are able to receive favorable reviews in the blog. The brands “permitted” for the community members’ recommendation are brands, which have met relevant perceived industry standards, as illustrated by one of the interviewees:

“The only brands really that are allowed to be talked about on the forum... it’s more of an earned right. You’d notice that [brand name] is mentioned a few times. It’s because they’re one of the only companies that has signed a declaration.”

Also, a considerable amount of discussion occurs about prices, quality, performance (i.e. safety and benefits), and personal experiences with specific brands. Of particular interest are the discussions addressing the development of relevant industry standards and/or a code of practice/ethics for the emerging fitness sector, how to monitor specific standards and how to establish an industry regulating body, thus illustrating consumers’ empowerment and value co-creation within the brand community, resulting in a potential impact for the industry at large.

The highly engaged members show all three elements of brand community, including shared consciousness, shared rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001; Schau et al., 2009). Members also engage with their own personal roles within the community, and with fellow members and their respective roles. These behaviors include the roles of learners, of members sharing their experience and knowledge, brand advocates, companies and/or co-developers of ideas with relevance not only within the online community, but across the broader health and fitness industry.

The emotional aspect of consumers’ online brand engagement emerged as polar negative/positive, low/high-intensity and short/long-term affective attitudes directed toward specific engagement objects (e.g. a brand). The emotional gratification participants feel from engaging in the community stems from feelings of gratitude, empathy, trust, feeling safe, and from a sense of belonging to the group, thus highlighting the importance of the social aspect of consumer engagement. Further, the researchers were able to identify a cognitive dimension of consumer engagement as the members built value-laden relationships by sharing information and experiences. The members’ participation in the community, their online activities in the blog and their offline actions reported in the online community (i.e. postings about offline activities related to the community purpose) display the behavioral dimension of their engagement.

Further, while specific consumer engagement behaviors are positive in nature (e.g. providing social support), others reflect more negative expressions of consumer engagement (e.g. criticizing the brand, giving misleading brand-related advice).

#### 4.2. Consumer engagement process

Fig. 2 shows the dynamic conceptual model derived from the researchers’ analysis and interpretation of the blog posts. First, the model shows that specific triggers, such as a need to reduce information search cost and perceived risk, may prompt an individual to join, and/or participate in, the online community. This observation parallels de Chernatony and Christodoulides’ (2004) analysis pertaining to the nature and functions of brands in an interactive environment. Other triggers for joining the community may include a perceived lack of information about the organizations offerings (i.e., consumer/firm information asymmetry), as well as consumer perceptions of the bias inherent in the nature of commercial information. The following interviewee’s statement illustrates this observation:

“I think consumer engagement in the blog starts by somebody needing some information. And so they come, they find the site maybe through Google. They read about it, but they don’t want to read it all, or it’s just easier to come in and ask a question, and they’re welcome to do that. It goes from there. They might stay engaged for a period of time.”

Further analysis of the data results in the identification of five specific consumer engagement sub-processes including “learning,” “sharing,” “advocating,” “socializing” and “co-developing.” Section 4.3 defines these terms. The data also suggest that the consumer engagement process generates consumer loyalty, satisfaction, empowerment, connection, commitment and trust. Finally, the consumer engagement process may include a transitory state of dormancy, and/or termination, at particular points in time. “Dormancy” is a temporary state of inactive, passive engagement by individual consumers who have previously been more actively engaged with the online community. “Termination” represents a state of more permanent disengagement, and as such, refers to the conclusion of a consumer’s engagement with a particular brand community.

The analysis reveals that the consumer engagement process does not follow an orderly, sequential progression of phases over time.

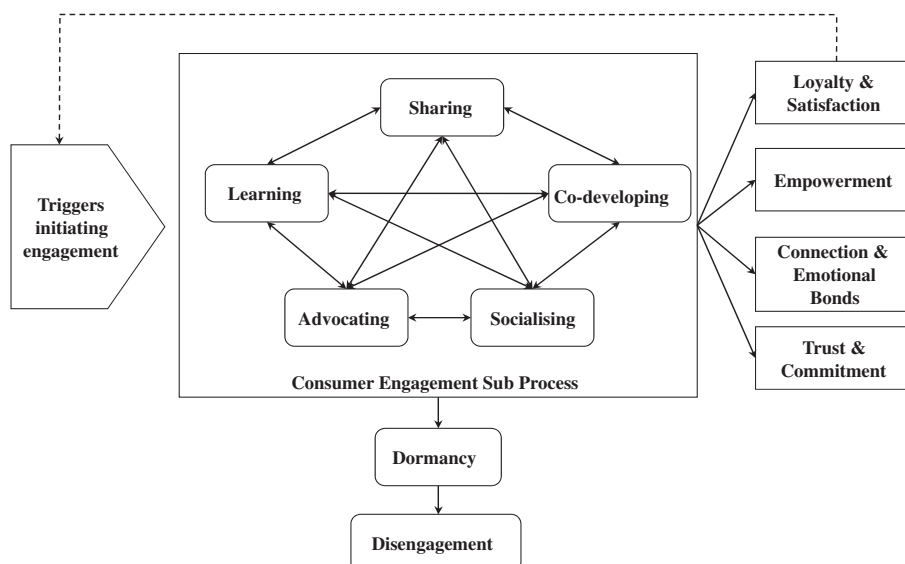


Fig. 2. Consumer engagement process in a virtual brand community.

Rather, consumer engagement is an interplay, or iteration, of relevant sub-processes (cf. Resnick, 2001), which is consistent with the findings reported by Customer Engagement Strategies, Inc. (2006). Fig. 2 thus includes bidirectional arrows representing the two-way, iterative nature of the consumer engagement concept.

#### 4.3. Consumer engagement sub-processes

The triggers prompting the onset of specific consumer engagement states occur when the consumer recognizes a need to solve a specific problem or satisfy a want, performs a search, identifies a specific online community, and begins an interactive relationship with the community by posting a comment. The triggers lead to the interplay of the five consumer engagement sub-processes identified in Fig. 2.

*Learning* characterizes the vicarious acquisition of cognitive competencies that consumers apply to purchase and consumption decision-making. The online community member most highly engaged through the process of learning posted the following messages:

"B and C, I'm not promoting anything. I'm just at the learning stage. Thanks B and C. Could you inform those of us still learning about the different ranges and their proper use? Again, thanks."

*Sharing* of personal relevant information, knowledge and experiences through the process of active contributions to the co-creation of knowledge within the online community, reflects the behavioral and/or cognitive dimensions of consumer engagement:

"There's not a lot I can add to the debates on this site as I am not a professional or employed in the industry but as I have 7 months experience of using wbv machines and learning about them I can add to the discussions, especially when newcomers ask simple questions."

"I was shown a great website in the weekend to help people get active and on a great nutritional plan....It mainly gives you a great aerobic exercise plan tailored to you, which will work in very well to see results faster when you combine it with Vibration training for strength training. ... OH AND ITS FREE!! Let me know what you think, my partner and I just signed up."

*Advocating* is an expression of consumer engagement, which occurs when consumers actively recommend specific brands, products/services, organizations, and/or ways of using products or brands:

"I think that the [brand name] is suitable for you. Very powerful and very underpriced."

"This site doesn't show where people live but If you are looking at that auction, then maybe you are in X, so I suggest you go to a quality vibration studio ([brand name] is my preferred one) and see if that works for you. The people there will talk with you about Vibration training and what you want to achieve."

*Socializing* denotes two-way, non-functional interactions through which consumers acquire and/or develop attitudes, norms and/or community language (Longmore, 1998). One of the interview respondents provided supporting evidence for this contention:

"...because the community had a small number of regular members (10–15), we all have a feeling of knowing each other."

*Co-developing* is a process where consumers contribute to organizations and/or organizational performance by assisting in the development of new products, services, brands or brand meanings.

The following post illustrates the participant's active engagement in the development of a new product, namely a DVD containing the vibration training exercises:

"I've mentioned to A some time ago to consider doing a short wbv exercise video with voice over as it would be so much more like being in a studio with a real instructor. I'm sure it would make the top 20 and I for one and a lot of others I'm sure would be definite buyers. Come on D use your influence."

Further, consumers engaging with the community may contribute to the development of the online community by virtue of establishing specific rules and/or regulations. Further, consumers may recruit new community members. Additionally, members may exhibit high levels of engagement with the specific industry as a whole, and help to develop industry codes and standards, and monitoring compliance.

#### 4.4. Consumer engagement consequences

The analysis identifies a number of outcomes, which may arise as a result of a level of perceived value co-creation through specific consumer engagement processes. These outcomes include "consumer loyalty" and "satisfaction," "consumer empowerment," "connection," "emotional bonding," "trust" and "commitment."

*Consumer loyalty* and *satisfaction* emerge in a number of ways. Almost all of the participants expressed their loyalty to the brand and community by recommending and expressing satisfaction with their preferred brand:

"[...] I believed after all the questions I asked on this forum and comparing many makes of machine that the [brand name] was the best buy and best value for money. That and the confidence given me by A and D was the final persuader. Regrets? Absolutely none!"

"Hey D [...] How is your [brand name] going? The 2 I imported to X are going great. Couldn't be happier, with the help of you guys I definitely made the right choice. I've achieved more with body shape in 6 months with wbv than with a year in the gym."

*Consumer empowerment* also occurs in a number of ways. For example, a participant first blogged:

"Some players are falling especially here in (country X). I've just heard of one who had a studio and has now retreated into the corner of a local gym and isn't doing well. Others are being forced to rebrand to remove themselves from bad publicity (or is that to escape from the truth about their machines), others have closed down. Let's hope the 'scary' [the blog] pushes the honest players to embrace the 'exciting' and get ready for the influx!"

An additional post appears eight days later, which states:

"The last of the original [brand name] labeled studios in (country X) has closed its doors. The public face of this threat to our industry has been wiped out.[...] [brand name] will still try to promote its product along with its lack of ethics, and we will encourage people to stand up to them at every turn."

In an interview with another participant two days later the respondent states:

"If we in the blog write bad reviews about some brand — the company will lose money, lose profit [...] It was when I found this blog and after I was totally involved that I began thinking about



wider and higher things. We can change something through our blog! We can change the face of the industry! [...] I am fighting with my gym, A is fighting with many more people and companies but mostly with [brand name], and one by one wby inch, we are improving this industry.

*Connection and emotional bonding* also emerge in a number of ways. For example:

"It's difficult not to become emotional when you receive that sort of connection from perfect strangers. And you would have to be made of stone not to feel something. [...] I just feel that I want to give others the same sort of help that I received."

Finally, the analysis identifies *trust* and *commitment* as consumer engagement outcomes. The highly engaged members report their trust in A (an expert), who helps these members by sharing knowledge and recommending brands in vibration training:

"Thanks a lot A. I will try your options [...] Thanks again, because you are the only person I trust in WBV industry."

"[...] Someone in these blogs said 'throw away the poster that comes with the machine and use A basic positions.' I've accordingly downloaded and printed both the illustrations and the printed instructions from his site."

"Back to the Sheep comment, as that's what my country is famous for. Sheep follow! So if we consumers are Sheep, then we need trustworthy Shepherds. I'm going to give praise to A. He's not the only one worthy of trust but he is the one that I have met."

Furthermore, the following participant statement provides an example of the individual's *commitment* to the online community and the industry:

"I am indebted and grateful for their help [...] They are altruistic and selfless people giving freely their time and effort. They wholeheartedly broadcast their passion all over the 'community', to everybody in need. This is why I want to contribute – with whatever I'm able to. This blog indeed meant a lot to me after I've spent some time involved in it. Now I passionately fight to improve the industry... And this is but one of the results of my active membership in the blog."

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Empirical findings

This pioneering empirical study examines consumer engagement in a virtual brand community. From the literature five themes emerge, which serve as a basis for a working definition of consumer engagement in a virtual brand community context. Using netnographic methodology this study explores the proposed conceptualization. The exploratory research findings provide strong evidence to support the five underlying themes as the basis for the proposed working definition.

In particular, the research highlights consumer engagement as an interactive, experiential process, based on individuals' engagement with specific objects (e.g. brands, organizations), and/or other brand community members. This finding provides support for Brodie et al.'s (2011) fundamental theme addressing the interactive, experiential nature of the engagement concept, and distinguishes consumer engagement from other relational concepts, including involvement

and participation. The findings highlight consumer engagement as a context-dependent, psychological state with specific levels of intensity, thus providing exploratory support for Brodie et al.'s (2011) second theme.

Consumer engagement is an interactive process, which may emerge at different intensity levels over time reflecting distinct engagement states. This observation provides evidence to support Brodie et al.'s (2011) third theme, which states that transient engagement states occur within broader, dynamic, iterative engagement processes. In addition, the research provides evidence that consumer engagement is a multi-dimensional concept comprising cognitive, emotional and behavioral dimensions, thus supporting the fourth proposed theme of consumer engagement.

Further, the analysis shows that the consumer engagement process is initiated largely by consumers' need for information. Further, the consumer engagement process is highly interactive, experiential, and based on a number of sub-processes, including "learning," "sharing," "advocating," "socializing" and "co-developing" (cf. Fig. 2). By sharing personal experiences and influencing others, advocating focal brands, suggesting ways to exercise and/or improve skills in using the exercise equipment relating to Vibration Training – consumers may influence value-in-exchange and value-in-use (Lusch and Vargo, 2006; Schau et al., 2009).

Finally, the analysis identifies a number of consequences of the consumer engagement process, which arise as a result of the perceived co-created value by virtue of the engagement process. Key consumer engagement consequences include consumer loyalty and satisfaction, consumer empowerment, connection and emotional bonding, trust and commitment. This observation provides evidence to support Brodie et al.'s (2011) fifth theme, which states that consumer engagement plays a central role in the process of relational exchange where other relational concepts are antecedents and/or consequences in specific, iterative engagement processes.

### 5.2. Managerial implications

From a managerial perspective, the research findings demonstrate the importance of understanding how consumers engage in specific brand communities, and the consequences of this engagement. The research indicates that consumer engagement enhances loyalty and satisfaction, empowerment, connection, emotional bonding, trust and commitment. The study also illustrates how the level of control over specific brands is shifting within online communities by highlighting the role of consumer engagement and empowerment in co-creating brand meanings. Specifically, online communities welcome marketers only if they are contributing to the community. Thus, businesses need to listen to and "engage in engaging" consumers in brand communications, which consumers perceive to be "non-commercially driven" (i.e. more objective), within brand communities. As such, knowledge sharing, educating, and enabling consumers to co-develop, become important tasks for marketers (Andersen, 2005; Ramaswamy, 2009).

Sawhney et al.'s (2005) and Ramaswamy's (2009) notion of "engagement platforms" provides a useful avenue to explore managerial applications of the consumer engagement concept, as does Payne et al. (2008), and Payne et al. (2009) recent research on managing the co-creation of value. Further managerial attention needs to be given to the relationships among relevant variables linked to the consumer engagement process, including specific engagement antecedents and consequences, and the relative importance and/or existence of any interactions among the dimensions of consumer engagement. Further, Kumar et al. (2010) extend the customer value management framework to "Total Customer Engagement Value," which represents an important advance in managerial thinking that has implications for managing online brand communities. Finally, the modeling of the consumer engagement process generates challenges,



which include both the development and dissolution of focal consumer engagement states. Bijmolt et al. (2010) provide an excellent classification of the models available to analyze these behaviors.

### 5.3. Limitations and further research

Due to its exploratory nature, this research has a number of limitations, which provide a platform for the undertaking of further theoretical and empirical research in this emerging area. At a theoretical level, the roots of consumer engagement lie within the expanded domain of relationship marketing, and the service-dominant (S–D) logic. However, further theoretical research needs to integrate other relevant theoretical perspectives. For example, the linkages between the service perspective and consumer culture theory (CCT) provide an important avenue for research (Cova and Salle, 2008). Further, relevant links with other, consumer behavior theories that address individual and/or social identity (Kozinets, 1999) are also important within this emerging integrative perspective.

This exploratory study is based on a relatively small online community, which comprises six members forming the core “highly engaged” respondent base. While the research offers initial insight into the nature of consumer engagement within a virtual brand community, further research needs to incorporate studies examining larger online groups across different product categories, and/or drawing on larger samples of consumers. Specifically, the adoption of this approach will lead to more generalizable findings.

The role of focal engagement platforms, employee interactions and the co-creation of value are also important areas warranting further research (Ramaswamy, 2009). The dyadic and/or networked aspects of engagement within specific consumer-to-consumer (C2C) interactions, consumer-to-business (C2B), business-to-business (B2B), and business-to-consumer (B2C) interactions (Forsström, 2004; Kothandaraman and Wilson, 2001) merit further attention. Also, the specific interactive experiences between consumers, business, government and/or other agencies merit further scrutiny. Given the complexity of this emerging research area in the marketing discipline, future empirical research employing a pluralistic approach, integrating the use of interpretative and quantitative methods, is appropriate.

Further research also needs to pay attention to the specific roles of different engagement objects. While the brand and the associated community have been important objects of engagement in this research, other types of engagement objects may be equally important, including the roles of specific people, organizations and/or institutions. Consumer engagement takes place within broader intra- and extra-organizational networks, and as such, generates a need for future work on consumer engagement in network settings. Additionally, the dynamic nature of focal consumer engagement processes and/or sub-processes, including examinations of focal consumer engagement antecedents and consequences, and/or the iterative, cyclical nature of such processes requires further attention. Van Doorn et al.'s (2010) theoretical model, which links customer engagement behaviors to specific customer-, firm- and contextual antecedents and consequences, provides a useful framework to guide future research in this area.

Issues also exist with regard to the extent that organizations are able to manage, or influence, focal consumer engagement processes, and the extent that these are self-managing. Related to this discussion, the application of concept of “customer brand equity” (Keller, 1993) to online brand communities appears important. Central to this discussion is the extent to which specific social networks co-create value (Schau et al., 2009; Mertz, He, and Vargo, 2009). Further research may also wish to investigate the managerial applicability, within specific online environments, of Sawhney et al.'s (2005) and Ramaswamy's (2009) notion of “engagement platforms.” Furthermore, Kumar et al.'s (2010) concept of “Total Engagement Value” and

specific models available to analyze these behaviors (e.g. Bijmolt et al., 2010) require further research.

Finally, virtual communities are becoming increasingly prevalent. However, this virtual community prevalence does not imply the substitution of online, for offline, activity (Ward, 1999). Thus, there is the need for comparative research, which focuses both on consumer engagement in offline, “physical world,” and in online “virtual” settings.

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