

## Positive and negative valence influencing consumer engagement

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The current service landscape is increasingly dynamic, and consumers' engagement in market-related behavior is constantly changing. Developments in technology further influence this continuous dynamism. Therefore, it is important to understand the factors that may cause different engagement valence, especially as only some consumers actively engage in online platforms. This paper characterizes factors that positively and negatively influence consumer engagement and suggests theoretical and managerial implications for the different factors that determine consumer engagement.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This paper conceptualizes factors that influence consumer engagement based on their characteristics (behavioral, emotional, and cognitive) and the type of influence (positive or negative). The study uses customer-dominant logic of service, which focuses on emancipated customers and idiosyncratic customer logic, rather than on provider-orchestrated customer experiences of brands, firms, or offerings. An abductive research approach is used to qualitatively explore consumer engagement in the context of online interest communities.

**Findings** – The study identifies the behavioral, emotional, and cognitive factors that positively and negatively determine consumer engagement in the context of online interest communities.

**Research limitations/implications** – Through the focus on customer logic, the study provides a detailed and nuanced view of factors that influence consumer engagement. Future research is needed to explore how this framework can be applied to other online communities and different service contexts.

**Practical implications** – The paper provides insights into the presence of an interest area in consumers' lives. The study indicates how firms may be involved in consumers' lives and how firms may create successful customer relationships based on consumer engagement.

**Originality/value** – This study enhances previous research in four ways: 1) by characterizing factors that determine engagement, paying particular attention to its negatively valenced factors and examining the interplay of the factors that positively and negatively influence engagement, 2) by describing consumers' connection to the interest area instead of positioning the brand as the link between the consumers and the provider, and 3) by discussing the theoretical and practical challenges associated with understanding and managing consumer engagement.

**Keywords** Customer engagement, Consumer engagement, Customer-dominant logic, Valence, online community, Interest community

**Paper type** Research paper

## **Introduction**

Today's service landscape is driven by change. Most industries face continuous transformation and dynamism as a result of technology advancements, increasing customer participation in service provision, and intensified competition from global organizations and non-commercial actors. Researchers and practitioners agree that the dynamic nature of customer behavior is managerially challenging and understanding that dynamic nature is critical for maintaining and deepening customer relationships. Consumer engagement is an important strategic challenge for firms when they are managing customer relationships to generate profit (Kumar *et al.*, 2010). Consumer engagement—the consumer's intensity, participation, connection, and investment in an organization's brand, offerings, or activities (Brodie *et al.*, 2013; Hollebeek and Chen, 2014; Vivek *et al.*, 2012)—is a vital element of firm performance, but the intensity of consumer engagement varies within firms for several reasons (Kumar and Pansari, 2016). In a study of relationship velocity, Palmatier *et al.* (2013) showed that the rate and direction of change in consumer engagement influence business performance. Blocker and Flint (2007) also demonstrated that because consumers' and business customers' needs are dynamic, firms' target segments are unstable. The interplay of positive and negative perceptions results in different levels of customer engagement, thus causing customer relationships to strengthen, fade, or terminate (Bowden *et al.*, 2015). More research into the different expressions of engagement is needed, especially as the majority of existing research on engagement emphasizes its positive, stable, and pervasive psychological character (Brodie *et al.*, 2011; Hollebeek, 2011), and few studies address the positive and negative valences of engagement (Hollebeek and Chen, 2014). Because engagement involves an iterative process with various triggers and transitory states (Brodie *et al.*, 2013), it is important to understand the different aspects that determine engagement.

From a customer perspective, the level of consumer engagement can vary between positive or negative (Bowden *et al.*, 2015) and materializes in consumers' contribution to service processes. In general, technology developments enable consumers to engage in business activities, such as value co-creation; however, there are large variations in individuals' engagement. Several studies on online brand communities (Brodie *et al.*, 2013; Dessart *et al.*, 2015; Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001; Schau *et al.*, 2009; Seraj, 2012) have shown the diversity of member engagement in online communities. For example, despite individuals' widespread interest in online behaviors and interactions on social networking sites, only some consumers actively contribute to online content (Berthon *et al.*, 2008). Many consumers are *not* interested in contributing to and engaging in online content, and the existence of active and passive consumers is particularly challenging for managers (Heinonen, 2011a, 2011b). Still, managers make assumptions about and rely on consumers' interest in engaging and creating value with firms through, for example, online brand communities (Kumar *et al.*, 2010). Therefore, it is critical for managers to acquire a deeper understanding of the factors that positively and negatively determine consumer engagement.

The aim of the present study, therefore, is to present a nuanced view of factors that determine consumer engagement based on positive and negative influences. By focusing on characteristics and influence, the paper seeks to deepen our understanding of consumer engagement and to delineate theoretical and practical implications for enhancing consumer engagement. The focus is not on describing engagement as a dynamic process but on characterizing the factors that positively and negatively influence engagement. Factors represent every fact, circumstance, or influence that positively and negatively contributes to engagement. This is similar to triggers initiating consumer engagement (Brodie *et al.*, 2013), but this study focuses not on the initiation of engagement but on the factors that influence engagement in all

stages of the engagement process. Following MacInnis (2011), this study investigates some of the conceptual issues that determine consumer engagement and provide a deeper view of why engagement changes. The goal of this approach is to question assumptions and “to see something that has been identified in a new way; to reconfigure, shift perspectives, or change” (MacInnis, 2011, p. 138). In this paper, engagement is viewed through the lens of customer-dominant logic, and an abductive research approach is applied. This approach contrasts other recent studies that have taken an interactive approach between the customer and the organization (c.f. Vivek *et al.*, 2012; Brodie *et al.*, 2013).

The customer-dominant approach to service (Heinonen and Strandvik, 2015) focuses on customers, their logic, and their idiosyncratic lives, rather than customers’ experiences or co-creations with brands, firms, offerings, or service systems (Heinonen *et al.*, 2010). Customer-dominant logic posits that the customer context outside the service provider(s)’ view is an important arena for understanding consumer value, engagement, and loyalty. Specifically, what customers do beyond the point of interaction with the service provider may be just as vital for enabling customer engagement as what happens during service encounters. By applying customer-dominant logic to consumer engagement, the current paper specifically explores the consumer perspective of engagement and how the consumers’ context can broaden the scope of engagement. The abductive research approach involves continuous interplay between the theoretical framework and the empirical data (Dubois and Gadde, 2002) and a constant questioning stance toward theory and empirical findings (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007). The empirical setting is online interest communities, which are defined, for the purpose of this study, as websites where members are able to interact, share opinions, and gather information about mutual interests and goals. Following the research on customer engagement (Brodie *et al.*, 2011), this paper defines consumer engagement

as community members' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral investments in a specific area of interest. The object of engagement is the interest area of the online community, excluding other potential relationships that users may have with specific brands, organizations, or other community consumers.

The paper contributes to the existing research on consumer engagement in three ways: 1) It characterizes factors that determine engagement, paying attention to negatively valenced factors and examining the factors that positively and negatively influence engagement. 2) It studies consumers' connection to the interest area, instead of positioning the brand as the connection between firms and consumers. 3) It portrays the theoretical and practical implications associated with understanding and managing consumer engagement.

## **Theoretical background**

### *Customer-dominant logic*

Perspectives guide what we, as researchers, explore and describe. Depending on our ontological and epistemological assumptions, we focus on different aspects of focal constructs, such as consumer engagement. With this in mind, and inspired by the extant discussions regarding different service perspectives and their conceptual foundations and practical differences (c.f. Grönroos and Gummerus, 2014; Heinonen, *et al.*, 2010; Lusch and Vargo, 2014), this paper scrutinizes some of the fundamental approaches to consumer engagement. This questioning approach is in line with MacInnis' (2011) suggestion about revising concepts and taking what is known or presumed and seeing it differently in order to change the conception of the construct.

Existing consumer engagement studies have only implicitly questioned the underlying assumptions that guide and confine studies' conceptual and empirical explorations. Thus, the

present study suggests that researchers must explicitly acknowledge the ontology often used for consumer engagement research. This study proposes viewing engagement using a customer-dominant logic (CDL) of service (Heinonen *et al.*, 2010; Heinonen and Strandvik, 2015). CDL is relevant as a marketing perspective largely because researchers and practitioners increasingly agree that customers are valuable resources in business performance. In recent decades, service researchers have explored the roles of customers in various business settings, focusing primarily on value co-creation and on value created, not only by the provider but also through interactions between the provider and the customer (Grönroos and Voima, 2013). The classic notion of value as created by the firm has been challenged by the inclusion of active customers in the value creation process (Grönroos, 2008). The notion of the customer as a key player in business activities is widely accepted (Drucker, 1974; Grönroos, 2008; Heinonen *et al.*, 2010; Vargo and Lusch, 2004) but often not achieved in practice (McGovern *et al.*, 2004; Strandvik *et al.*, 2014). Also in the context of consumer engagement, the provider perspective has been over-emphasized (Kunz *et al.*, 2017).

CDL is a conceptually distinct service perspective that places the customer as the nexus of service. This perspective is different from other similar perspectives, such as service-dominant logic and service logic (Grönroos and Gummerus, 2014; Lusch and Vargo, 2014), in that CDL focuses on the customer, rather than on the providers' offering (i.e., product or service), interaction, or system of providers (i.e., service [eco]systems; Heinonen and Strandvik, 2015). The customer, as a concept, includes not only consumers and business customers but also customers of public service and non-profit organizations, as well as online community members. CDL understands service as potentially embedded in the patterns of customers' everyday activities and experiences.

In this study, CDL is used as a theoretical backdrop to deepen the understanding of consumer engagement.

### *Consumer engagement*

Consumer engagement, as a nascent phenomenon, has increasingly been recognized in academic research and business practice, with several studies examining consumer engagement in the context of online communities and social networks (Breidbach *et al.*, 2014; Brodie *et al.*, 2011; van Doorn *et al.*, 2010). In offline and online contexts, different aspects of consumers' engagement in focal objects have been identified. However, in general, as the following discussion will show, the negative valence of and influence on engagement must be explored further.

Many engagement-centered concepts, such as brand engagement, consumer engagement, student engagement, and job engagement, have been proposed (Brodie *et al.*, 2011). Patterson *et al.* (2006, p. 3) suggested an all-encompassing definition of engagement as “the level of a customer's physical, cognitive, and emotional presence in their relationship with a service organization.” As previous research has scrutinized the concept of engagement in detail (for a literature review, see Brodie *et al.*, 2011), this paper focuses on consumer engagement in online communities. In the context of online brand communities, Brodie *et al.* (2013, p. 107) proposed the following definition: “Consumer engagement in a virtual brand community involves specific interactive experiences between consumers and the brand, and/or other consumers of the community.” Similarly, Vivek *et al.* (2012, p. 127) defined engagement as the “intensity of an individual's participation in and connection with an organization's offerings and/or organizational activities, which either the consumer or the organization initiate[s].” Hollebeek and Chen (2014, p. 62) focused explicitly on brand engagement defined as the “level of a member's cognitive,

emotional and behavioral investment in specific brand interactions.” Commonly, engagement is seen as a positively connoted term related to concepts such as passion, affection, absorption, and dedication (c.f. Hollebeek and Chen, 2014; Patterson *et al.*, 2006).

Researchers have studied the overarching categories of engagement and are now increasingly focusing on its cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects (Brodie *et al.*, 2011; Dessart *et al.*, 2015; Vivek *et al.*, 2012). From a customer perspective, the level of customer engagement can be positive or negative (Brodie *et al.*, 2013). However, although researchers are gradually embracing these three overarching categories of engagement, a broader conceptualization of consumer engagement has been called for, with particular emphasis on negative valence (Hollebeek and Chen, 2014). For example, Dessart *et al.* (2015) explored the affective, cognitive, and behavioral elements of engagement and suggested seven aspects: enjoyment, enthusiasm, attention, absorption, learning, endorsing, and sharing. However, they did not conceptualize the negative valence of consumer engagement. Our review indicates that researchers have failed to fully explore factors that negatively influence engagement although these factors together with positive factors determine engagement and possibly even disengagement.

The negatively valenced aspects of engagement, such as disengagement, are important in the holistic understanding of engagement. However, how and why consumers may distance themselves from a focal object has received less focus in existing research. As an example, in the context of work engagement, Kahn’s (1990, p. 694) thorough study of moments of personal engagement and disengagement across individuals focused on the psychological conditions of engagement. However, the study did not explicitly identify any factors that determine engagement or disengagement. Other studies have shown the relevance of negative expressions of engagement.



For example, a study of online communities revealed aspects that disconnect individuals from such communities, including inaccessibility, unreliability, inflexibility, conservatism, fear of change, lack of involvement, and task inappropriateness (Romm *et al.*, 1997). Moreover, elements that disconnect members from other members, such as deindividuation and lack of physicality (de Burgh-Woodman and Brace-Govan, 2007), represent consumers' negative manifestations of engagement. These studies only indirectly focused on factors that cause a decrease in engagement.

Hollebeek and Chen (2014) were among the first in the service field to explicitly explore the negative valence of engagement. They developed a conceptual model of positive and negative brand engagement valences and revealed their key triggers and consequences. The authors described engagement as a construct with positive and negative valences based on immersion, passion, and activation. The authors proposed six antecedents that influence engagement: brand actions, brand quality/performance, brand value, brand innovativeness, brand/company responsiveness, and delivery of brand promise. All of these antecedents were related to the customers' experience of the brand or company, and none were related to aspects in the customers' domain. Moreover, the antecedents were not specifically either positive or negative; instead, when a factor was perceived as favorable, it was expected to result in positive engagement. Similarly, negative engagement was expected to occur with an unfavorable experience of a trigger. An explicit emphasis on the factors that weaken engagement was missing.

Therefore, due to the lack of research, a combined analysis of factors that strengthen and weaken engagement is needed, especially considering that engagement and disengagement are highly connected (Bowden *et al.*, 2015) and that different triggers may cause transitory states of engagement (Brodie *et al.*, 2013). Brodie *et al.* (2013) studied the existence, nature, and process of customer disengagement in two different service contexts and found an interplay between

engagement and disengagement. Although the study focused primarily on the (dis)engagement process and thus, did not explicitly report factors that influence (dis)engagement, the study revealed utilitarian and relational triggers. To understand the different factors that determine engagement, further characterization of the factors that positively and negatively influence engagement is needed, with a particular focus on factors that may elicit disengagement.

In addition, the nexus and object of the engagement concept warrant further exploration, as they are typically not problematized but are taken for granted. The majority of engagement studies are based on the primacy of the brand (Dessart *et al.*, 2015) and examine consumers' relationships with the service provider or specific service category. Customer engagement is about "customers' interactive, cocreative experiences with other stakeholders in focal, networked service relationships" (Brodie *et al.*, 2011, p. 253), such as a course/module, brand, product, or organization (Brodie *et al.*, 2011). This also applies to studies that investigated customer engagement either in one firm or in the broader multi-stakeholder service system (Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014). For example, Bowden *et al.* (2015) studied functional/utilitarian and participative/co-creative services. Exceptions include studies that examined personal and/or work engagement, with personal and psychological conditions that influence engagement. For example, Kahn (1990) suggested that engagement is based on people's experiences of themselves, their work, and its contexts, including rational and unconscious elements. From this perspective, the focal object is the self and its own sense-making, rather than the brand. From this personal sense-making of the self, it is obvious that individuals are interested and involved in objects other than firms, brands, or service relationships, such as personal interest areas, activities, hobbies, personal relationships, etc. Analogous to this broader notion of individuals' interest, engagement seems to extend much further than the consumer-provider relationship. Consequently, we argue that the

conceptualization of the engagement object should be broader. This idea is the focus of the present study. In the following, we develop this idea further in the context of consumer engagement in interest communities.

### *Consumer interest communities*

The classic definition of consumer communities states that they are “groupings of people who have common interests and who may not ever physically meet each other” (Hill, 1996, p. 433). Communities can be either geographic or relational (McMillan and Chavis, 1986). As the popularity of online communities among consumers grows, technology is improving people’s opportunities to interact and share ideas with one another. Online communities gather people with specific needs and interests around organizational practices, such as brands, services, products, or common fields of interest (Canniford, 2011). Communities do not always embrace brands or products but are reinforced by rituals, homogeneity, collective cultures, and shared meaning. Canniford (2011) categorized three common forms of communities based on the core of each type of community: 1) subcultures of consumption, which are based on consumers’ commitments to a particular activity, lifestyle, or product brand (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995); 2) brand communities, which are based on “rituals and traditions typically center[ing] on shared consumption experiences with a brand” (Muñiz and O’Guinn, 2001, p. 421); and 3) consumer tribes, who congregate around a broader hybrid of products and services (Canniford, 2011). Essentially, all types of communities are built around consumer engagement and a commitment to a shared focal object. Existing studies of online communities have linked information, entertainment, and social aspects to online community behavior (Lee *et al.*, 2011; Shao, 2009). Key issues influencing consumer attitudes and behavior are based on rational (utilitarian) and

emotional (hedonic) elements. For example, in the context of an online gaming community, utilitarian and hedonic elements have been found to induce consumers' continuance intentions (Chang *et al.*, 2014).

Recently, Dessart *et al.* (2015) observed that the community is often secondary to the brand in research on brand communities: "The role of the online brand community is only partially acknowledged, being framed as a background context that sustains engagement with a focal brand" (p. 32). More information is needed regarding communities centered on lifestyles (Heinonen, 2011; Gordon *et al.*, 2015; Närvänen *et al.*, 2013), not just the community members' relationships with brands. Thus, current research has recognized a fourth form of online community: one that revolves around members' interests (Gordon *et al.*, 2015; Heinonen, 2011a; Närvänen *et al.*, 2013). Undeniably, interest communities—communities centered on consumers' interests, such as hobbies, practices, or activities (de Burgh-Woodman and Brace-Govan, 2007)—provide a fresh perspective on online communities. Although interest communities are, to some extent, similar to the other three forms of online communities, these communities differ in the sense that they are not only based on the sense of shared belonging and a connection among the members as a collective but also formed around members' involvement in and sense of connection to a particular lifestyle or interest area (Heinonen, 2011). Examples of such online communities include dietary communities (Närvänen *et al.*, 2013), sports betting communities (Gordon *et al.*, 2015), fan communities (Yoshida *et al.*, 2015), and social networking communities (Wei and Lu, 2014). Understanding the links between customers' logics of living their lives (Heinonen and Strandvik, 2015) and customers' engagement in a community shifts attention away from how a product or brand is represented by the community to how consumers' interests and lifestyles are embedded in the consumers' lives. This starting point challenges the role of the brand or the firm and suggests

that firms may play only a marginal role in consumers' online experiences. Essentially, interest communities represent pertinent study samples to address the recent call for research into customers' idiosyncratic logic (Heinonen and Strandvik, 2015) and the heterogeneous distribution of consumers' sense-making (Thomas *et al.*, 2013). These types of communities are especially interesting in the context of broadening the scope of engagement, as the focus shifts from the brand, firm, or offering to the interest area as the nexus of engagement. Given this background, in the following, we conceptually broaden the current representation of consumer engagement.

We argue that further theoretical and empirical research on consumer engagement is called for in the following areas: 1) Negatively valenced factors that influence engagement, which have been overlooked in favor of positive ones (Hollebeek and Chen, 2014), must be examined. 2) The nature of consumer engagement, especially the co-existence of factors that positively and negatively determine consumer engagement, should be reviewed in order to generate a more nuanced conceptual understanding of engagement as a whole. Once researchers acknowledge that engagement is influenced by positive and negative factors, it becomes evident that engagement is dynamic and intertwined with disengagement (Brodie *et al.*, 2013; Bowden *et al.*, 2015). Consumers are faced with more alternative communities to engage in, and thus, it becomes more challenging for companies to induce strong positive engagement. 3) Many studies about engagement are conceptual (for a review, see Dessart *et al.*, 2015) and do not sufficiently investigate empirical issues and managerial challenges associated with encouraging members to engage in the online community. Thus, describing managerial approaches for responding to factors that positively and negatively determine consumer engagement to encourage engagement should be essential. 4) Research on consumer engagement in customer-created communities, such as interest communities based on embeddedness in customers' life worlds (Heinonen *et al.*, 2010), is

needed. Similar to the research on online communities, research on consumer engagement typically emphasizes customer–brand relationships (Dessart *et al.*, 2015; Hollebeek, 2011; Närvänen *et al.*, 2013). To approach these issues, in the following we discuss the methodological underpinnings of the present study.

## **Method**

An abductive research approach was used to qualitatively explore consumer engagement. The abductive research process is based on a non-positivistic methodology in which the researcher uses systematic combining to develop deep understanding (Dubois and Gadde, 2002, 2014). The researcher is driven by preconceptions about theory that are deepened through empirical study (Dubois and Gadde, 2014). Insights emerge from the data, and these insights cannot be specified in advance, because the researcher goes “‘back and forth’ from one type of research activity to another and between empirical observations and theory” (Dubois and Gadde, 2002, p. 555). In this study, the abductive research approach involved positioning the study within customer-dominant logic focusing on factors that positively and negatively influence consumer engagement.

### *Data collection*

A structured qualitative study was conducted in an online community associated with a magazine’s website. Although the magazine maintained the online community’s website, the community was not centered on the brand; instead, the community was interested in the magazine’s broader themes, including domestic and family-related topics such as pregnancy, childcare, and family life. Our choice of this community was justified because members’ interest in and requirements for a specific topic have been found to strongly influence members’

commitment (Wang *et al.*, 2012). Furthermore, communities linked to specialty magazines have shown high levels of commitment and interconnectedness (Davidson *et al.*, 2007). The current study takes the customer-dominant perspective on communities, starting with engagement in community members' life theme interests. Building on previous definitions (cf. Brodie *et al.*, 2013), consumer engagement is seen as a multidimensional construct of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions. The interest area of the community, not a specific firm, service, or brand, is the object. Therefore, for the purpose of this paper, consumer engagement is defined as *community members' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral investment in a specific area of interest*. The empirical study characterizes factors that determine consumer engagement in online communities.

The data were collected in the online community by posting a link to an online questionnaire on two separate occasions with a two-year delay. The second data collection was conducted after major changes were implemented on the site. The two-stage approach was used mainly to collect more data, but it also provided additional insight into the potential existence of factors that negatively influence engagement, yielding a rich and diverse set of data. The two questionnaires were identical, resulting in comparable datasets. The respondents were self-selected, with a total sample size of 243 individuals. The questionnaire included three open-ended qualitative questions about the respondents' relationship with the online community. The first question emphasized the beginning of the relationship and asked the respondents to describe when they decided to use the online community for the first time. The second question concerned the respondents' reasons for visiting this specific online community. The third question asked respondents to describe their relationship with the online community. The narratives resulting from this qualitative portion of the questionnaire captured the respondents' comments and reflections

verbatim. Questions concerning the respondents' demographics, commitment to this online community and other communities, and use frequency were also included. Questions concerning perceived relationships with other members were beyond the focus of this study and were therefore excluded from the following analysis. The dataset is summarized in Table I.

INSERT TABLE I HERE

**Table I.** Overview of the two data collection phases

### *Data analysis*

The narratives were coded, and their contents were analyzed for similarities and differences using the NVivo coding program. A thematic variable-oriented approach (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Strauss and Corbin, 1998) was used to identify themes that appeared across cases. The respondents' own terminology was used to develop the codes for the categories of consumer engagement by conceptualizing and abstracting the meanings of the words (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The codes were subsequently analyzed and reduced using an open-coding technique (Miles and Huberman, 1994), which has been argued to be especially appropriate for theory building. Additionally, insights from the literature were used to identify consistencies with the qualitative data. This refinement in coding is consistent with abductive logic (Dubois and Gadde, 2002; Patton, 2002), in which theoretical and qualitative insights evolve iteratively. The qualitative data were categorized into two themes: positive factors and negative factors that determine respondents' engagement with the online community. The themes for the two categories evolved inductively. The results from the two data collection phases were initially separated but were later



collated in the subsequent data analysis. The final analysis involved grouping the positive and negative influential factors into behavioral, emotional, and cognitive categories.

## **Results**

Within the two main categories, ten factors that positively and five factors that negatively determine consumer engagement were drawn from the responses on the questionnaires. Table II summarizes these features and their occurrence in the two phases of the study, reported based on the frequency of mentions by respondents.

INSERT TABLE II HERE

**Table II.** Factors that influence engagement in online interest communities

### *Factors that positively influence engagement*

Table III summarizes the ten factors that positively influence engagement.

INSERT TABLE III HERE

**Table III.** Factors that positively influence engagement

*Peer support.* Peer support positively determines members' engagement in an online community. Relationships and friendships among members create a sense of belonging and increase the perceived value of a community. Community members share their ups and downs with their peers and in this way, provide each other with important social support. Members also post tips and ideas to solve domestic problems. Thus, peer support involves being able to share

and obtain useful, although individual, advice. Essentially, the online community provides goal-directed problem solving and community-building. Peer support, as a positively valenced factor, is associated with feelings of belonging; however, the goal-directed characteristic of peer support also suggests a behavioral element. Thus, peer support includes emotional and behavioral characteristics.

*Personal relevance.* Another factor that positively determines engagement is the variety of discussions among community members. This factor differs from peer support in the sense that the substance, not the relationships, is important in the discussions, including the perceived usefulness of the information, perspectives, and content. The significance of the topics discussed in the community varied, ranging from pregnancy issues to clothing and accessories, depending on the members' personal areas of interest. The more an individual's reality is linked to a community topic (e.g., pregnancy or small children), the stronger the positive influence on the member's engagement in the community. Relevance is associated with members' cognitive sense-making related to the community and its content.

*Ease of use.* The ease of use of an online community's site is a tangible aspect of the community experience and positively influences consumer engagement. A community needs a clear online structure that enables members to easily navigate the site and find relevant sections. This factor refers to facilitating members' activities associated with the community and thus is a behavioral factor that influence engagement.

*Intensity of discussions.* Another factor that positively determine engagement is the intensity of the discussions. The breadth of topics is dependent on the quantity and quality of the discussions. The more members share their feelings and experiences and reveal glimpses of their private lives, the stronger the perceived value of a community. Thus, discussion intensity is a

function of the quantity (number of discussants) and quality (feeling of understanding) of discussions. Feelings are significantly represented in this factor.

*Self-identification.* Online interest communities are based on particular topics or themes, and the community in this study was interested in family, parenthood, and domesticity. Members' understandings reflected the frequency and intensity of their visits to the community site. Members' perceived similarities to other members positively influenced engagement. Such self-identification denoted links to what members did within the community and beyond. Thus, this factor is related to members' emotions.

*Routines.* Visiting an online community site may become a habit, which has a positive influence on members' relationship with an online community. In this study, the respondents who noted that they had visited the site as a habit or pastime also typically frequently made such visits. Thus, routines and recurring practices represent behavioral factors that influence engagement.

*Brand familiarity.* Another factor that positively determines engagement in the online community is brand familiarity; that is, the community is linked to an existing brand. The links between the magazine's brand and the community are subject to the respondents' understanding of the magazine and brand experiences. This factor entails a certain level of reasoning and sense-making.

*Member endorsement.* Members' social environments, member-to-member communications, and word-of-mouth also positively influence engagement. Individuals often follow the examples and behaviors of other members or acquaintances, who influence individuals' perceived engagement in a community. When members recommend the community to friends or share their hands-on exemplary insights with others, this behavior positively influences

engagement. Member endorsements reflect reasoning associated with the community and its members.

*Entertainment.* An important positive influential factor is the community's recreational and playful character, including the prevalence of enjoyable, provocative, and fascinating discussions and content. In many ways, reading community discussions serves as a supplement to reading gossip magazines. This factor has an emotional influence on engagement.

*Inspiration.* The theme of the interest community was relevant to the respondents, who also mentioned how community content can be inspirational and lead to the discovery of new ideas. The respondents reported that some information and discussions inspired them to buy products or change their behaviors. This factor differs from personal relevance in the focus on dreams and imagination. Whereas personal relevance is linked to the lived reality of the individual, inspiration is based on the individual's imaginary reality. Inspiration is idiosyncratic and is an emotional factor that influences engagement.

#### *Factors that negatively influence engagement*

Five factors that negatively influence engagement were found (Table IV).

INSERT TABLE IV HERE

**Table IV.** Factors that negatively influence engagement

*Irritation.* The activities of other community members can also be perceived unfavorably, and irritation was identified as negatively determining community engagement. This factor is related to the misbehavior of others and frustration about other members' discussions, including

members' obscene, nonsensical, or moralistic postings. Irritation refers to the perceived disturbances of other members' actions rather than to the actions themselves; irritation is related to members' emotions and thus is an emotional factor that influences engagement.

*Community intimacy.* Community intimacy can negatively influence consumer engagement when users do not feel that they belong to the community or when they feel closer to another community. This feeling is partly a negative side effect of peer support and self-identification. If commitment is strong among some members, these members may start to develop exclusive groups into which only certain members are invited. These groups may not be situated in the main community. Such situations negatively affect members. A high level of community intimacy is also a negative influential factor, since such intimacy may indicate the exclusion of some members. Community intimacy is related not to actual exclusion but to perceived exclusion; thus, it refers to members' feelings toward other members in the community.

*Time.* Time negatively influences engagement. Users who felt that they did not have enough time to spare reported a lack of interest in the community. This perceived lack of time was also related to users' interests and needs. This factor is related to members' behaviors in relation to the community.

*Community changes.* Changes in the user interface negatively affect member engagement in a community. New site structures or changes in technical community functions may be perceived as complex and thus, disengaging. This aspect is associated with the technical aspects of members' usage of the community site; thus, it involves a behavioral element.

*Subjectivity.* The amount of information available through a community is important to members. However, the subjectivity of this information, in terms of personal opinions and advice,

can be experienced as detrimental to community engagement. This factor is based on members' reasoning related to the community.

The factors that positively and negatively determine consumer engagement demonstrate the diverse characteristics that determine consumer engagement. In the following section, we further elaborate the conceptual understanding of factors that determine consumer engagement.

### **Factors that influence consumer engagement**

To provide a more nuanced view of why engagement varies, we structured the findings according to the engagement category and the engagement influence. Engagement factors are characterized in three categories: 1) cognitive, 2) emotional, and 3) behavioral. The influence is classified as either positive or negative. This model deepens previous conceptualizations of factors that influence consumer engagement by also focusing on the factors that negatively determine engagement. In Figure 1, the two elements are combined in a three by two matrix, depicting six types of factors. The categorization framework, consisting of positive and negative influential factors with behavioral, emotional, and cognitive characteristics, depicts why consumer engagement changes in the context of online interest communities (Figure 1). Factors related to the reasoning associated with the online community are categorized as cognitive, factors related to the feelings toward community use are categorized as emotional, and factors related to members' functional processes associated with the community are categorized as behavioral factors.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

**Figure 1.** Factors that influence consumer engagement in online interest communities

Behavioral factors that influence community engagement include members' activities and processes. The right-hand column shows the positive influential factors associated with online community activities, such as easy navigation, routine activities, or relevance to members' life situations. In contrast, changes in processes or temporal constraints represent negative influential behavioral factors. Emotional factors that determine community engagement are related to members' feelings toward a community. This category refers to positive social connections, such as peer support, discussion intensity, or idiosyncratic emotions (such as inspiration or entertainment). Emotional factors are also associated with negative feelings toward community members, such as irritation toward other members or imbalanced community intimacy. Cognitive factors that influence community engagement involve members' thinking and evaluation of the online community and the interest area. This supports Hollebeek and Chen's (2014) suggestion of the cognitive facet of engagement based on thoughts, concentration, and reflection related to the brand. Brand familiarity, member endorsement, and topic relevance are positive influential cognitive factors, whereas content subjectivity represents a cognitive factor that negatively influences engagement. On the aggregate, these positive and negative influential factors result in different levels of engagement. For example, emotional factors involve the social constellation of irritation and peer support. The factors 'changes' and 'routines' exemplify the opposite characteristics of positive and negative influential behavioral factors. Therefore, a combined analysis of the behavioral, emotional, and cognitive categories is helpful for describing the various factors that influence the intensity of engagement. Table V provides a characterization of the factors that influence consumer engagement.

INSERT TABLE V HERE

**Table V.** Characterization of factors that influence consumer engagement

First, behavioral factors that influence engagement involve members' different activities and processes, and these factors are linked to consumers' everyday lives. Behavioral factors emerge in the interplay between routines and changes, which are coupled with simplicity. Engagement is, thus, influenced by aspects that facilitate (or hinder) customer activities and processes. As the factors involve everyday activities, they are more concrete, visible, and externally oriented than the other types of factors that influence engagement.

Second, emotional factors are characterized by social connections to the community, its site content, and its members. These factors are based on mental processes that have internal and external cues. Emotional factors may emerge from a positive (gut) feeling that emerges from the process of community interaction, as well as an inner dialogue with the self. Furthermore, emotional factors stem from an individual's collective experiences with other individuals, and thus, are also based on communal elements, which are not as apparent in the other types of factors that influence engagement. Emotional factors are associated with consumers' interactions with and reactions to each other, as well as mental experiences and associations. Thus, compared to behavioral factors, which are related to activities, emotional factors result from social and interactional elements of online communities. These factors are overt and covert, because they are dependent on interactions with other members and the personal feelings of the individual.

Third, cognitive factors that influence engagement are associated with members' perceptions of the community's subjective relevance. These factors are based on members' idiosyncratic reasoning and sense-making of the different parts of the site's content and the community's perspectives. Cognitive factors relate to the significance of the aspects for the member, not the activities, as such. For example, engagement is not only influenced by other



members endorsing the community but also involves the perceived implications of these endorsements for the member. Thus, unlike the other two categories of factors that influence engagement, engagement is influenced by cognitive aspects, such as idiosyncratic thinking and experiences. Specifically, in relation to emotional factors with unconscious and hidden processes, cognitive factors involve much more speculative and questioning endeavors. These factors are different from the other forms of factors in the abstract and subjective processes that emerge from individuals' previous experiences and recollections of multiple signals from the past.

### **Discussion and implications**

This study described the multiple factors that determine consumer engagement in online interest communities. The qualitative research approach provided a comprehensive analysis of the factors that positively and negatively influence consumer engagement in such communities. The study contributes to the extant engagement literature by describing the positive and negative influential factors with cognitive, behavioral, and emotional characteristics. The study's primary contributions manifest in the conceptual issues for future inquiry and related managerial challenges. For researchers and managers, the conceptual categorization is a tool for increasing awareness of different aspects that may elicit different levels and intensities of consumer engagement. Table VI summarizes the key theoretical and managerial challenges associated with each category of factors that influence consumer engagement.

INSERT TABLE VI HERE

**Table VI.** Challenges for researchers and managers

### *Theoretical implications*

This study has several implications for researchers in terms of contribution and avenues for further research. It contributes to the ongoing research on consumer engagement in the service literature by advancing a different emphasis. Many of the existing studies take the brand, the firm, or the service system (all stakeholders) as the object of engagement (e.g., Verhoef *et al.*, 2010; van Doorn *et al.*, 2010; Brodie *et al.*, 2013; Chandler and Lusch, 2015). In contrast, this study supports recent suggestions in research for a stronger focus on the consumer perspective of engagement (Kunz *et al.*, 2017). The current study presents an alternative approach to engagement from a customer-dominant perspective (Heinonen *et al.*, 2010) where factors beyond consumers' interaction with the brand, firm, or service system may influence engagement. Traditionally, the focus is on firm-controlled factors, such as the antecedents of brand community engagement, including brand actions, brand quality/performance, brand value, brand innovativeness, brand/company responsiveness, and delivery of brand promise (Hollebeek and Chen, 2014). In contrast, factors that emerged from this study included personal relevance, self-identification, and inspiration. Such factors in the consumers' domain emerging in the consumers' ecosystem are sometimes invisible to the firm but can be even more important for the consumer (Medberg and Heinonen, 2015). The study thus showed the need to look beyond the factors that are easily managed by the firm and to recognize, for example, idiosyncratic factors that emerge in consumers' social interactions and individual reasoning. This approach to consumer engagement as emergent and based on sense-making processes is in contrast to the mainstream service research that assumes service providers can manage experiences through service systems (Heinonen *et al.*, 2013; Lipkin, 2016).

The cognitive, behavioral, and emotional factors that determine engagement provide a comprehensive understanding of the nature of engagement. Engagement and its dimensions have been adopted differently in previous research (Hollebeek, 2011), and exploring different factors that influence engagement provides much-needed detail about the concept. The present study was designed to serve this purpose. Examining influential factors with behavioral, emotional, and cognitive characteristics generated a number of relevant issues for further research and practice (see Table VI). Questions in each category elicited issues through which researchers can broaden the scope of factors that influence and determine consumer engagement. The questions concern aspects in the individuals' domain, such as their ongoing activities, behavioral pattern, social relationships and their connections, real and imaginary experiences and emotions, as well as sense-making patterns and future aspirations. These aspects all contribute to a broadened understanding of consumer engagement.

The study uncovered several issues for future research. An important avenue is the relative influence of the factors and their categories on engagement. Further research needs to explore how the different factors influence each engagement dimension. For example, do cognitive factors have a stronger influence on cognitive engagement compared to emotional engagement? In addition, in this study, we investigated the factors that positively and negatively determine engagement. This approach relies on the assumption that all factors are equally important; however, this may not be the case. Whether one engagement factor is more important than others is not evident. What is the relative influence of the factors in relation to each other? Investigating this issue would provide further insight into individuals' holistic engagement.

Furthermore, the present study offers an improved understanding of the factors that positively and negatively influence consumer engagement. This understanding further contributes

to the recognition of engagement as having positive and negative valences (Hollebeek and Chen, 2014). The findings deepen previous findings about factors triggering disengagement (Bowden *et al.*, 2015), and examine factors that weaken engagement provides further insight into the dynamism of engagement. Identifying factors in different engagement phases, and not only the triggers that initiate (dis)engagement, also provides support to the findings that different contextual contingencies drive different levels of engagement (Brodie *et al.*, 2011). However, negative influential factors were mentioned by a relatively small number of respondents. Future research may need to delve into disengaged consumers in order to further explore negative valence and characterize disengagement. The present study results showed that some factors are seemingly opposites in terms of valence; for example, community members' closeness is the opposite of community intimacy and peer support. Acknowledging different intensities of engagement is important, as it highlights the possibility of members being neutral to, or even detached from, a brand or firm. Thus, further research is needed to explore not only the factors that influence engagement but also their intensity and relationships.

The findings suggest several other avenues for further research. One avenue involves the nexus of engagement. The object of this study was the topic connecting members of interest communities, which differed from the more commonly discussed brand communities that tend to emphasize brands and their related products (Schau *et al.*, 2009). Member discussions in the studied community did not specifically address topics concerning the host magazine's brand; instead, the discussions covered issues related to the magazine's interest area of family affairs. Thus, the focal object of this paper was online interest communities, which shifted the focus from the individual–brand nexus to the individual–life theme nexus. This shift revealed the issues that emerge in members' interactions with other members and objects indirectly related to the firm.

Examples of such aspects include the intensity of discussions, inspiration, and peer support, which materialize primarily in community members' own life contexts, rather than in direct interactions with firm representatives. The study thus emphasized how online interest communities are integrated into and provide support for members' daily lives. This result is congruent with previous findings on value creation and with the distinction between the domains of the firm and the customer (Heinonen *et al.*, 2010; Grönroos and Voima, 2013). Further research is needed to explore how brands, offerings, and specific providers are integrated in consumers' lives and especially brands' relative embeddedness in consumers' lives. The abstract nature of the framework and the resulting findings can be assumed to be transferable to other online interest communities that connect people with shared interests in specific areas of life themes or hobbies. Further research can use this study design to explore online communities of practice, brand communities, and social networking sites that connect members with similar interests.

Although the study investigated members' relationships with the online community and the members' engagement in the interest area, the results show that member-to-member relationships and their role in member engagement with the community as a whole are important. The identified factors that influence engagement were socially and individually constructed, and there were some similarities to customer-based antecedents of engagement (e.g., van Doorn *et al.*, 2010) related mainly to brand familiarity. This finding suggests that engagement has a social element and that further research is required to explore the existence and characteristics of social engagement. Engagement can have different sources represented by the object (e.g., a brand, product, or work). The (co-)existence of multiple objects that may jointly and separately influence consumers' engagement is an important area for future research. Specifically, future research should explore the relative existence of different objects in consumer engagement, as well as how

engagement is associated with the theme of a community, how member relationships are associated with brands, and how consumers are associated with other consumers with whom they interact through the online community. In other words, factors related to the firm, context, and other members (customers and non-customers) are likely to influence engagement either positively or negatively. This is consistent with the current emphasis in the service literature on systemic and societal issues of service (Ostrom *et al.*, 2015).

Additionally, members' characteristics may play a role in the members' engagement, including their level of online activity and their contribution to online content. Thus, one avenue for future research is to distinguish differences in members' online activity and the influence on consumer engagement in the online community. As consumers' online activities positively influence consumers' perceptions of online services and relationships (Hsu *et al.*, 2011), it can be expected that individuals who are more active are more engaged in online communities. For example, considering the differences in the behaviors of posters and lurkers (Schlosser, 2005), are lurkers less engaged than posters? For these reasons, there is a call for more studies regarding the role of member activity in the engagement manifestations of online communities. Future research should investigate how engagement is represented for different consumer segments.

### *Managerial implications*

This study has several implications for online community management and consumer engagement strategies. A key managerial consequence is the recognition of the presence and relative role of factors that influence engagement. By acknowledging the different factors that determine consumer engagement, firms and online community managers can encourage stronger

consumer engagement. To maintain and foster consumer engagement, we develop three managerial strategies: supporting members' experiences of choice, connection, and competence.

Behavioral factors that influence engagement are related to members' activities and life processes, and facilitating these activities is one of the main ways to encourage engagement. For the firm, facilitating means accepting a secondary, supportive role in individuals' lives. Such a role may include providing tools for simplifying everyday routines (e.g., self-tracking sleep tools) or offering information about topics relevant to members' lives (e.g., nutrition and health). Other actions include facilitating site use, creating clear links among sections, providing continuity in activities, and guiding members through the website sections. Essentially, providing users with the *choice* to influence their own activities and processes should be a key strategy. Drawing on market trends and being alert to weak signals from member behaviors in the community may help site administrators support significant areas of their members' lives, such as health issues or financial decision making.

Emotional factors that influence engagement are associated with individual emotions and social connections among members. These factors emphasize the importance of the self and other members, not the firm–individual dyad. The interactive arena should be extended from company–customer communications (such as direct marketing communications and advertising) to member-to-member discussions, interactive blogs, and content sharing. The key managerial strategy emerging from emotional factors is to support a *connection* to the self and other members. Providing members with informative and entertaining content is a simple strategy. However, identifying strategies for encouraging emotions is challenging, as they are based on individual needs and preferences and the characteristics of the member constellation. A firm may engage members by making their communications more transparent, for example, by requiring member

registration and profile descriptions or by balancing between open and closed topics. Achieving this goal is a question of reducing friction among users and supporting member-to-member relationships by encouraging member advocacy and enforcing community protocols. Mediation by the administrator may provide a sense of control, but member autonomy is a significant issue that creates a sense of meaning and belonging. The individual aspects that influence engagement may suggest additional alternatives. Engagement can be encouraged by, for example, supporting individuals' learning and sense-making through relevant content linked to past community activities.

Cognitive factors that influence engagement are associated with members' idiosyncratic logic and stress the importance of personal skill and excellence. Strategies for enforcing engagement via cognitive factors are related to improving member *competence*. These strategies involve introducing different discussion themes and sections for questions, answers, and information about product use, as well as developing website layouts that facilitate lively and varied online member conversations. Moreover, the ability to identify and support different members' idiosyncratic logics is a key cognitive element that encourage engagement. One starting point is to "listen in" to members' discussions about their different activities, experiences, and practices. This will enable a deeper understanding of members' capabilities, needs, existing resources, and so on, as well as the firm's potential role in supporting and facilitating these processes. Another strategy for enhancing members' competence is encouraging members to collaborate and co-create content or sections of the site. This aim can be accomplished through collaborative competitions or crowdsourcing campaigns.

Other managerial implications follow from this study. The emphasis on negative influential factors emphasizes the multifaceted nature of engagement. In support of recent research, one



implication of this study is that engagement is not based solely on positive expressions; instead, it can also materialize through neutral and negative consumer expressions. These neutral and negative expressions illustrate the need for managerial attention to not only enhance positive engagement but also to avoid distant or difficult member emotions. The opposing expressions of factors that influence engagement imply a need for different approaches, which may be especially challenging to implement because they can neutralize one another. As much of the online community experience is socially influenced, one possible way forward to reduce negatively valenced factors that influence engagement is to support members' collaboration and networking ability. In practice, this means that, rather than focusing primarily on providing an effective user interface, community administrators should also develop opportunities for members to interact and connect. These interactions may enhance members' feelings of belonging and sense-making among their peers, which will indirectly improve their feelings of engagement toward the site. Managerial actions may include discouraging inconsiderate and malcontent behaviors among members through disciplinary protocols and formal mediation, minimizing changes to the site, and facilitating heterogeneous topics and discussions.

An additional managerial implication is related to the empirical context of interest communities. The community can function as an important facilitator of value creation and service provision, as the community can supply cues for providers regarding how to support consumers in their everyday lives. The focus on interest communities, rather than brand communities, offers opportunities for firms to develop and maintain beneficial customer relationships. Interest communities represent external platforms from which firms can learn about (non-)customers' activities, experiences, and concerns. These issues go beyond individuals' experiences about the brand, linking instead to a broader portion of individuals' everyday practices and choices. For

example, firms may come to understand how non-customers use different products, services, and providers, thus learning about the relative positions and roles that different resources have in this system. This information can be used to build deeper connections with existing customers by increasing involvement in their various activities. Furthermore, acknowledging the relevance of a broader set of interests in (non-)customers' lives encourages managers to realize that their brand(s) may not be as important as they assume. This is one step in the direction of shifting from an inside-out perspective of brand/firm primacy to an outside-in perspective of customer primacy.

A related issue is the opportunity for the online community to facilitate service provision through members' participation in and contribution to the community. Engaged members can function as advocates for a service, brand, or firm. The online community can support consumer value creation through peer-to-peer community interactions. Peer support, member endorsement, and self-identification may encourage members to try out new service offerings, learn novel ways to complete tasks, adopt new service contribution roles, and disseminate common service-related images and stories about a service. These activities may also play a role in societal well-being. For the firm, these activities can function as a means to stimulate innovation, provide smarter and more efficient services, and ultimately improve the firm's competitive advantage and performance.

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