

**Parigi 16-18 Gennaio 2020 – Call for Paper – 19th International Marketing Trends Conference
Marketing Theory Advancement on Consumer Brand Engagement**

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ABSTRACT

Purpose. The literature contribution on CBE suffers several limitations and the topic is still under-conceptualized and, consequently, under-investigated.

The article provides a theoretical contribution in terms of which are the main theoretical advancements that CBE literature is giving to the overall marketing theory.

Methodology/Research design/Approach for empirical investigation. The empirical study, proposed in this paper, adopts a qualitative marketing research approach to explore the topic of CE mainly at a brand level and under a theoretical perspective. A content analysis has been implemented on a corpus text created selecting the discussions and conclusions' paragraphs of 64 articles on consumer brand engagement topic published (from 2011 to 2019) on important international marketing journals.

Expected Findings and Originality. The expected finding is a better understanding of consumer brand engagement role in marketing theory rationalizing and systemizing the theory rather than contributing to create further definitions or conceptual models. The originality lies in the adoption of a text mining analysis focalizing on only discussion sessions.

Research Implications. Advancement in theorizing CBE and brand theory.

Keywords: Consumer engagement, Brand engagement, Community engagement, Brand equity, Marketing Theory, Brand Theory.

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Toda, the consumer is the main supplier of operand resources in business ecosystem, this new vision is contemplated in the Service Dominant Logic (SDL), it is a vision that goes beyond the tangible dimension of the corporate offer and considers the consumer as an active actor in the value co-creation process (Vargo and Lusch 2004). According to this logic, value is always co-created and all actors are resource integrators (Vargo and Lusch 2006 2008b). This creative value is mainly shared between consumers through direct social relationships (theoretical perspective of “working consumer”: Cova and Dalli 2009) and that are collectively engaged in consumer communities, tribes, brand communities or consumption communities (theoretical perspective of consumer/brand communities or tribes: Cova and Cova 2002).

Consumer-brand relationship was debated in traditional goods dominant logic (GDL) making use of different terms: prosumer (Toffler 1980), co-producer (Wilkström 1996; Norman and Ramirez 1993), consum-actor (Cova and Cova 2009), co-creator (Gronröss 2008; Vargo and Lusch 2004; Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004), lead-user (Von Hippel 1986), working consumer (Cova and Dalli 2009).

The conceptualization of the engagement is seminaly rooted in multiple academic disciplines, such as psychology, sociology and organizational behavior (Bowden 2009; Brodie et al. 2011; Hollebeek 2011) and is emerging as an important customer management tool (Verhoef et al., 2010). Therefore, consumer engagement (CE), consumer brand engagement (CBE) and online brand community engagement (OBCE) are topics of spreading interest in the marketing literature and managerial practice.

The engagement is defined as a behavioral manifestation toward the brand or firm that goes beyond transactions (Verhoef et al., 2010), and includes all consumer-to-firm interactions and consumer-to-consumer communications about the brand. Such behaviors include online discussions, commenting, information search and opinion polls. In particular, CE includes all communication through brand communities (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001), blogging and other social media (Van Doorn et al., 2010).

Brodie et al. (2013) stated that the CE *in a virtual brand community involves specific interactive experiences between consumers and the brand, and/or other members of the community. CE is a context-dependent, psychological state characterized by fluctuating intensity levels that occur within dynamic, iterative engagement processes* (p. 107). CE is a multidimensional concept (Isaac et al. 2015) comprising cognitive, emotional, and/ or behavioral dimensions (Hollebeek, 2014), and is “a psychological process that explains the mechanisms by which customer loyalty forms and be maintained for repeat purchase customers of a service brand” (Bowden, 2009, p. 65). Finally, CBE 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 (Brodie et al., 2013)

Moreover, Sprott, Czellar, and Spangenberg (2009) address the concept of brand engagement in self-concept, which, lamentably, fails to fully reflect the rich, interactive nature of CE as outlined above.

In conclusion, the engagement of the consumer towards the brand (consumer-brand engagement) which appears a central reference in the literature as well as in marketing strategy is considered a key driver of brand equity (Aaker 1991; Keller 1993; Schultz and Block 2011; Ferrarese 2011).

Thanks to the rapid spread of digital-based interactive technologies, in particular of online social network (Facebook, Twitter, Myspace, etc.), both marketers and consumers are able to build and manage consumer-brand relationships with higher trade-off of reach and richness (Evans 2000). In particular, the brand communities (Bagozzi and Dholakia 2006) or brand tribes (Cova and Cova 2002) become the engaged relational subjects which, in a collective and social dimension, carry out an active and direct commitment towards companies, brands, products and/or services. Therefore, under this perspective, it has been possible to identify another concept of engagement in the marketing theory and practice named community or tribe brand engagement (COBE).

Recent research focus on understanding and explaining the type of relationships consumers have with branded products. Constructs and measures of brand sensitivity (Kapferer and Laurent, 1992), brand attachment (Thomson et al., 2005), brand commitment (Samuelsen and Sandvik, 1998), brand trust (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001), and brand loyalty (Jacoby and Chesnut, 1978), for example, distinguish among various consumer-brand relationship concepts and segment consumers into groups on the basis of the intensity of those relationships (Fournier, 1998). In light of this great confusion and ambiguity that the term engagement has assumed respect to many other relationship marketing constructs, it is necessary to clarify and try to systematize this concept within the marketing literature.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND FINDINGS OF EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION ON ACADEMICIANS

The research questions investigated in this paper is the following one. RQ: Which are the latent determinants of consumer brand engagement advancements in marketing literature?

The empirical study, proposed in this paper, adopts a qualitative marketing research approach (Carson et al. 2001; Gummesson 2005; Moisander and Valtonen 2006; Cantone and Testa, 2011) to explore the topic of CE mainly at a brand level and under a theoretical perspective and consists in a content analysis (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004) on a corpus text created selecting the discussions and conclusion paragraphs of 64 articles (from 2011 to 2019) on consumer engagement topic published on important international journals. These articles have been selected when they reported the term engagement in their titles and have been published in marketing journals or in discipline close to it. They are articles aimed to better conceptualize and/or to measure/assess the topic in an empirical setting. It was decided to create a corpus text assembled putting together only discussions and conclusions paragraphs, rather than on the overall articles' contents, really in order to consider only the differential contribution to the advancement of the literature on the topic. The articles have been downloaded on main research databases (Scopus and Web of Science) by a keywords research procedure.

Qualitative data emerged during content analysis on literature articles were transcribed in a separate text corpus and analyzed using a text mining software. The content analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004) it is part of an established social science research methodology. The objective was to identify interesting patterns and relationships in textual data (Feldman and Sanger 2007), by completing three tasks: classification, clustering and associations. The procedure of cluster analysis conducted by the text-mining software, has allowed us to identify four cultural repertoires, and defined “thematic clusters”, distributed within a three-dimensional graph, as described in Figure 1. The meaning given to each cluster derives from keywords and key sentences that the software considers more informative on the contents of the same. The text mining software, furthermore, provides, in relation to each cluster, also the literature contributions (articles, working papers, conference papers) that best explain each cluster and so the reading of the relative contents is very explicative of the meaning to assign to each cultural repertoire. In the following, the interpretation given to each cluster on the base of the text mining findings.

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In accordance with all the statements and keywords analyzed, the **cluster 1** refers to content related to the engagement and disengagement of users to the offer systems from firms operating in the services sector. There are three literature contributions that best inform the meaning assigned to cluster 1 (Bowden et al., 2015; Naumann et al., 2017; Breidbach et al., 2014). The first contribution presents a qualitative exploration of the concept of customer disengagement (triggers, nature and the process by which it unfolds) within functional/utilitarian (F/U) and participative/co-creative services (P/C). *“It finds that engagement and disengagement are highly connected and that prior levels of engagement significantly influenced customers' subsequent propensities to disengage”* (Bowden et al., 2015, p. 1). The second contribution *“seeks to address this gap by exploring how positive, disengaged, and negative valences of engagement operate within the social service sector. exploring how different customer engagement valences operate through affective, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions, and in relation to two objects (service community and service provider)”* (Naumann et al. 2017, p. 1). The third contribution highlights that *“the engagement ecosystem concept into the service research literature, explain the nature of the concept's theoretical association to Eps (Engagement platforms), and contribute to the wider discourse on service ecosystems that has recently emerged in the discussion about the S-D logic (e.g. Vargo and Lusch, 2009)”* (Breidbach et al., 2014, p. 604). The **“Customer Disengagement in Service Ecosystem”** is the label assigned to cluster 1 also because the scholar conceptualizing disengagement have moved mainly by Service Logic and Service-Dominant Logic.

The **cluster 2**, introduces contents related to the drivers or factors that better explains the engagement of consumers in online communities, to the publication of comments on online reviews following experiences of purchase, to online consumer behavior. Scientific contributions that better explain the meaning assigned to cluster 2 can be traced back to the following Authors: Wu et al., 2018; Pagani & Malacarne, 2017; Beckers et al. 2018. The first contribution (Wu et al., 2018, p. 1) confirms that *“consumer engagement in a brand community not only increases the likelihood of generating post-purchase reviews but also increases the likelihood of posting positive online reviews”*. In particular, this study identifies in the duration of the community membership a moderating variable that impacts on the relationship between level of online engagement and level of participation in community activities in the form of post and reviews publication. The second contribution (Pagani & Malacarne, 2017) conceptualizes that experiential engagement is a second-order construct that is composed of two first-order "experience" constructs - Personal Engagement (Stimulation & Inspiration, Temporal Experience, Social Facilitation, Community, Self-Esteem) and Social-Interactive Engagement (utilitarian perception, participation and socialization, intrinsic enjoyment). The third contribution (Beckers et al., 2018), on the other hand, highlights the impact that firm-initiated customer engagement has not only on the client but also on shareholders (USA) value. In fact, the study shows that such initiatives in the case of companies that have a strong brand reputation can generate a destruction of economic value due to the concern of shareholders that they may not be successful, that is, a greater perception of the risk

is reflected on the economic value of the share. If the consumer develops an aversion to the brand in digital contexts this condition of “enagement” (negative engagement) can lead to de-struction of value and a consequent weakening of the client's brand relationship (Peeroo et al., 2018). Two different engagement visions are emerging depending on whether the owner of the engagement is the brand or the provider rather than the consumer spontaneously. Thus, we assign to this cluster the **“Firm-initiated consumer brand engagement in online context”** label.

The **cluster 3** is label **“CBE conceptualization in marketing literature**. The first contribution (Hollebeek et al. 2014) explaining the meaning of cluster 3 aims at a better conceptualization of Consumer Engagement, mainly functional to a broaden adoption with respect to the study perspectives that better interpret its meaning (Service Dominant Logic, Consumer Culture Theory, Relationship Marketing). In fact, there is no doubt that the topic of CBE has been developed starting from the theoretical perspective of the SDL (Vargo and Lush, 2004). However, as noted by Brodie et al. (2011) the definitive affirmation of the CBE as a superordinate relational construct is linked to its diffusion also within different and complementary perspectives (mainly, CCT and Service Logic). Moreover, the two first authors of the two contributions mentioned above (Hollebeek et al. 2014; Brodie et al., 2011) appear among the keywords that characterize the cluster 3, underlining the weight they had in the conceptualization of the topic, widely acknowledged in the shared literature. An example of such alternative or complementary perspectives includes the *Nordic School's service logic* (Grönroos, 2006); *which, despite a degree of conceptual similarity, exhibits focal differences related to S-D logic*. Further, Bolton (2011) advocates the adoption of a 'co-creation perspective' of customer engagement (Grönroos and Voima, 2013) (Hollebeek et al. 2014; pp. 162). The model proposed by the Authors considers only one determinant of CBE, namely Consumer involvement (Zaichkowski, 1994) and two result variables, the self-brand connection (Escalas, 2004) and the brand usage intent (Yoo and Donthu, 2001). The second contribution (Gambetti, et al., 2012) proposes the CBE as a multidimensional construct that emerges as a super-ordered or umbrella construct under which other key marketing constructs are or, more properly, should be placed. The CBE is also a multi-phase concept with different levels of investigation. A first level is “*brand enacting*” which means that the consumer puts the brand into action by participating in its world, the second level is that of the “*consumer's formal protagonism*”: brands try to seduce consumers by making them free to be protagonists of the relationship with them (Gambetti et al., 2012). The third contribution (Gambetti and Graffigna, 2011) focuses on the commonalities and the differences between the construct of BE and other equally important constructs that exist in relational marketing (customer experience, involvement, attachment, loyalty, etc.). Through a comparison between academic perception (marketing literature) and practitioners' one, the Authors propose a conceptual advancement aimed at avoiding that the CBE construct conflicts with all the others in the relationship marketing literature (Gambetti and Graffigna, 2011).

The label assigned to the **cluster 4** is related to “*Consumer engagement behavior (CEB) in social network*”. It is possible to identify several studies that well reflects the meaning assigned to the 4 cluster (Pentina et al., 2018; Lu, 2018; Gavilanes, et al. 2018). The first contribution (Pentina et al., 2018) identifies and classifies some concrete consumer activities that impact on the Consumer Engagement Behavior (CEB) in the Social Media (SM) context. These behaviors represent a starting point for new academic researches on digital brand engagement. In this study they have been explored and measured, with reference to the luxury sector, these behaviors that can be traced back to the five conceptual categories: (1) intended engagement audience (though behaviors aimed produce greater co-creation output on new brand meanings); (2) intensity of applied effort and creativity (though initiatives aimed to stimulate conversations towards their brands that can create new meanings and associations); (3) content creation medium (though the use of the main mediums to stimulate negotiating of new meanings to the brand on social media); (4) dominant motivational drivers (the CEBs that produce greater involvement and creativity are those motivated by the need to satisfy multiple needs information, socialization, status, remuneration, entertainment and maintenance of the relationship rather than individual ones). This same direct relationship exists between creativity and intrinsic motivations of the consumer (self-improvement, self-expression, self-actualization) with respect to the extrinsic ones (approval or search for feedbacks); (5) engagement behavior and social media platforms use (any social media platform has several functionalities and a differentialized use from each other in terms of kind of

consumer engagement activities, passive or active, emotional-rational content, skills of the users, etc). The second contribution better explaining the contents of cluster 4 (Lu, 2018) adopts a cultural perspective (Choi et al., 2011) to understand, through a qualitative analysis, as two different geographical and cultural contexts (China and USA) influence the experience and behavior of two important users' social media (Facebook, Renren) engaged with two important global brands in photography (Canon and Nikon). Both users' groups (Nikon and Canon) share experiences about camera's use and brand on both social media. *"The findings show that consumers in the Renren group are actively engaged in social networking practices, sharing information regarding the product or brand encouraging the uses of the product-brand, documenting special occasion with the brand or product. Instead, the consumers in the Facebook group are engaged with networking activities with members"* (Lu, 2018, pp. 304). Therefore, this study emphasizes the influence that different consumption cultures have on engagement behaviors in different social media platforms (Habibi et al., 2014; Choi et al., 2011) and probably could open, if well explored, in the next future, an incidental link of CBE to CCT. The third contribution is a model presented by Gavilanes et al. (2018) measuring how the advertising promoted by the firm impacts on Digital Consumer Engagement (DCE). For this purpose, the main metrics (likes, comments, shares, etc.) available on Facebook are considered valuable predictors of the consumer's response behavior on the digital community.

The evidences findings of the cluster analysis elaborated on the bases of key sentences, key words and critical contributions characterizing each cluster, allow us to give an interpretation to the meaning of the three factors (axes x, y, z) in the clusters' map, as well (Figure 1).

DISCUSSION POINTS

It is possible to distinguish four discussion points. First discussion points: What is the emergent positioning of brand engagement topic within the marketing theories and general theories of consumer-brand relationship? Often, the scientific community proposes the introduction of new conceptual constructs for explaining the relationship between consumer and brand, but sometimes, these constructs nor are able to favour an advancement of the general brand theory or do not integrate in a consistent manner with the pre-existing paradigms in marketing literature. Indeed, as often happens when a new concept proposal arises, the engagement topic proposal has been fully accepted and discussed in the academic community and, only at a later time, has been posed the problem of defining its measurement scale and its declination coherently with other constructs. Moreover, it emerges how the concept of engagement is closely linked to the SDL perspective and, more generally, to service theory. Therefore, it emerges that the engagement is not a concept accepted under all the perspectives, and in particular, it is still difficult to position it within the theories of traditional marketing and strategic management.

Second discussion points: What are the differences and overlap of CBE compared to other existing theoretical constructs in marketing literature? The peculiar role in the CBE in literature requires an attempt to clarify the differences between the concepts of CBE, BE and CBI. The assimilation of the loyalty to the CBE, for instance, can be considered hazardous if one takes into account that the engagement is not always manifested by consumers, customers of the brand. The participation to social media of consumers engaged towards the brand often takes place precisely by not customers, or former customers of the brand, that are not sharing new values communicated by the brand. This bond is very strong and takes on the characteristics of a cult. Therefore, CBE and brand loyalty are difficult to assimilate concepts and not necessarily linked to each other. The CBI is very close to the concept of co-creation as it is related to the arranging by the firm of initiatives to engage the customer in the process of generation of new knowledge useful to improve or optimize the offer system. The company through induced expedients – like “gamification”, or context, or events – may involve consumers to participate in order to acquire them to the brand or to inspire consumers in producing new user generated content. The customer experience is a temporary situation of participation by the customer to the brand. The CE, then, can address one or more exchange situations; differently, CBE should be a situation of lasting bond to a brand and explicitly communicated by the customer, and not the consumer, to the outside. In fact, the CBE presents two distinctive features compared to the other brand relationship constructs. First, it is characterized by a rational decision by the consumer who decides to make it clear to the brand and to other consumers to be inextricably linked to it and, secondly, the CBE is different from the other constructs for the nature of the involvement. The customer, in fact, through digital

channels and, in particular social media, can actively contribute to the creation of values to the brand and to increase its symbolic and cultural meanings.

Third discussion point: What are the antecedents and consequence of engagement in consumer-brand relationship? The empirical research highlights a very high level of confusion in the marketing literature and strategic management regarding the concept of engagement and, in particular, in relation to its antecedent variables, focus and outcomes. In fact, within the 64 articles, 364 variables were isolated, of which 198 considered as antecedents variables, 73 as target, or focus, variables and 93 of outcomes nature. From this analysis it emerges that in the literature there are some authors who consider some variables (customer satisfaction, brand attachment, brand involvement, brand love, loyalty, brand experience, purchase, etc) identified as antecedents, other authors, instead, treat the same ones as focus variables or as outcomes. This sometimes depends on the part of the relationship between consumer and brands that the researcher is trying to analyse over time. Moreover, some models emerge from research aimed at exploring the determinants variables of engagement, others are instead oriented to test a proposal of an overall model of scale measurement, or are confirmatory in their nature, others, finally, still wish to measure the brand engagement in a given research context adopting a particular scale measurement model.

Fourth discussion point: it refers to the elective context in which the engagement initiatives adopted by the firms and the engagement models measured by the researchers are deepened. In particular, with reference to the analysis of scientific advancements on the theme of the CBE, it emerged that it is possible to distinguish a digital engagement initiated by the firm and an engagement behaviour that is instead the result of a maturation of the consumer brand relationship that the digital context facilitates and makes more effective. In fact, one thing is the short-term engagement, activated or initiated by the firm and generally taking advantage of the opportunities offered by new digital technologies. Another thing, however, is the long-term spontaneous engagement of the consumer towards the brand that requires very long evolution time, and which depends on the brand's ability to take on a highly symbolic and cultural significance in the consumer's life, which rewards the brand with a stable, long lasting and trust relationship. In other words, probably from the distinction in question, in the future an interpretation will emerge that will clarify the conceptualization of the CBE allowing a clear distinction with respect to other constructs and consequently an equally sustainable positioning in the marketing literature.

CONCLUSIONS AND NEW RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In summary, it is possible to state that the CBE is a relevant concept in the international marketing literature both from scientific research and managerial practice point of views (Gambetti and Graffigna 2011). However, the CBE presents itself as an extremely complex construct by its nature, strongly influenced by psychological, social, relational, and experiential dimensions (Carbone and Haecckel, 1994). The CBE, in other words, appears to be a multi-faceted, dynamic, changeable and poorly predictable phenomenon since it presupposes the interaction between individuals and between them and their context (Gambetti and Graffigna, 2010). Moreover, the concept of CBE implies a systemic understanding of consumer behaviour: the value of a brand, in fact, does not depend only on the dyadic interaction between brand and consumer, but also on the interaction of the consumer with his peers, and on the mutual influences deriving from it (Gambetti and Graffigna 2011).

Therefore, it can be concluded that a) the CBE measurement problems reflect the confusion problems of its conceptualization, therefore it makes no sense to proceed with the proposals of new measurement and conceptual models if we do not reach a definitive convergence on the definition and conceptualization of the engagement construct. In the managerial practice, the CBE initiatives have not been implemented in traditional communication contexts (typically television advertising or printing), but prevailing in interactive communication contexts between brand and consumer (eg. user-generated content, gamification, context, social media, etc.). Therefore, a possible future research question would be: how organizations can manage this process?; b) this work offers an intuitive input regarding the potential role of the EPC in the advancement of the most extensive theoretical perspectives of relationship marketing, under the SD logic and Consumer Culture Theory (CCT). Therefore, a further future research question would be: how the CBE is able to operationalize the logic SD and CCT?

Future research on the topic should focus on the definition of an interpretation aimed at clarifying the conceptualisation of CBE with respect to other constructs and, consequently, an equally sustainable positioning in

the traditional and emerging marketing literature. Otherwise, this construct will probably be destined to remain limited to managerial practice and can only be used as a synonym for the consumer's response to involvement initiatives undertaken by companies mainly in digital contexts.

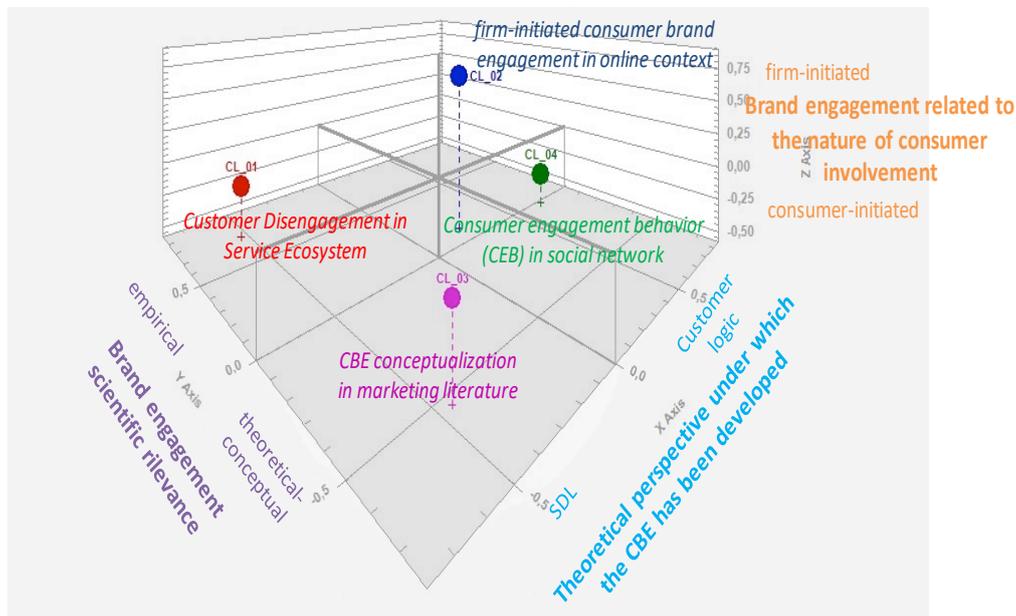


Figure 1. Thematic Cluster Analysis (TCA) of empirical survey on scientific literature

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