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Online Consumer Engagement

For digital marketing practitioners, online consumer engagement (OCE) is one of the most desirable outcomes from digital marketing activity (eMarketer, 2015). Gaining a detailed understanding of engagement is important. There are a number of different ways of conceptualising engagement which help to develop insight into OCE. In addition, a useful way of understanding process and drivers of OCE within social networks is to apply Social Impact Theory (Latane, 1981) to social media activity; this enables us to identify how social influence shapes consumer decision making.

Consumer engagement

Consumer engagement can be associated with positive outcomes such as consumer trust (Hollebeek, 2011), satisfaction and loyalty (Bowden, 2009) and commitment (Chan and Li, 2010) all of them strong indicators of long-term sales, word-of-mouth and brand advocacy. However, the concept of consumer engagement is relatively new in the marketing literature, and research efforts to define the concept and understand its antecedents and consequences are increasing. An accepted definition by Van Doorn et al. (2010) is that consumer engagement is the “behavioural manifestation toward the brand or firm, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers”. It is important to note that consumer engagement can occur offline as well as online.

Online consumer engagement refers to interactive experiences between consumers and the brand, and/or other consumers, and that occur in digital

environments such as online brand communities (Dessart et al., 2016). Online brand communities (OBC) are defined as “a network of relationships between consumers and the brand, product, fellow consumers, and the marketer” (McAlexander et al., 2002:39). From a marketing perspective, OBCs are of special interest because they enable new and extended forms of consumer interaction, and the development of consumer-brand relationships (Brodie et al., 2013).

Consumer engagement is distinct from the concepts of consumer involvement and consumer commitment. Consumer *involvement* is defined as the perceived importance that a consumer gives to a focal object – a product or brand (Mittal, 1995). Note how involvement does not suggest any behavioural outcomes, instead it remains at the cognitive and affective level within the mind of the consumer. Similarly, consumer *commitment* relates to the willingness to sustain a relationship with the product or brand, which again does not necessarily mean that the consumer will go beyond purchasing the product in the long-term (Goldsmith and Horowitz, 2006). Therefore, consumer *engagement* is more active and involves the consumers within cognitive, affective but also behavioural dimensions.

A consumer can be engaged with not only the brand. The literature argues that consumer engagement can occur not only between a consumer and a firm but also between consumers, depending on the platforms where the process is occurring (Brodie et al., 2011). For example, consider how highly engaged Apple consumers try to ‘evangelise’ others to join the brand, and defend it against its detractors. This means that consumer engagement may change according to context and will also be responsive to the ongoing dynamics of the interactions and the motivations whilst being engaged.

Brands may not have complete control of how and when consumer engagement occurs. Many customer-to-customer engagements occur in blogs and forums that are not controlled by the brand/firm, but that relate to them. As Solis (2010) points out, people are already speaking about and advocating the brands they like and discouraging others from using the brands they do not, and this is happening regardless of the official presence of that brand. Brand communities are another example of such activity. Brand communities are defined as “specialised, non-geographically bound communities, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand” (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006:45). Brand communities are environments where social interaction is not initiated by the brand but is driven by the participation of its members due to the commitment that they feel to the brand.

Exercise 5.1: iOS or Android?

Two of the major operating systems for smartphones are Apple's iOS and Google's Android. Search for "Google vs iOS" and identify links to forums on the topic. Click on any of them and examine whether the definition of brand communities suggested by Bagozzi and Dholakia (2006) can apply.

Which of the two groups (i.e. Google or iOS customers) seems to be more engaged? List the activities that you can find, beyond purchase, as examples of consumer engagement.

Different manifestations of consumer engagement

It is accepted that consumer engagement results in behavioural outcomes, however prior to such behaviour there are cognitive and affective states (Figure 5.1). This means that consumer engagement is multi-dimensional and includes cognitive and emotional components (Vivek et al., 2012).

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Table 5.1: Dimensions of manifestation of consumer engagement

Dimension	Definition	Example
Cognitive	The level of absorption of consumers' thoughts in relation to the brand	A customer thinking he made the right choice by purchasing insurance for his smartphone from company X as it was good value for money.
Emotional	The range of emotions that consumers experience as a result of interacting with the brand.	A customer feeling relieved that he bought insurance when his mobile was stolen during a night out.
Behavioural	The actions consumers take in relation to the brand.	The customer writes a review of his experience with the insurance brand on Google and recommends it to others when he has the chance.

The cognitive dimension of engagement is the "level of absorption and vigour that individuals demonstrate" in their interactions with a brand (e.g. the focal object) (Patterson et al., 2006:4). A consumer's brand-related thoughts do not necessarily have to be positive; they can also be negative suggesting a valence of engagement. The emotional dimension of engagement is the consumer sense of belonging to a group, and the pride, enthusiasm, enjoyment and passion that consumers can experience as a result of branded interactions which includes purchase (Dessart et al., 2016; Patterson et al., 2006).