An exploratory study towards understanding the motivational drivers of customer engagement behaviours in the context of new media

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1. **Context and background for the research**

In recent years we have witnessed a rise of new communication technology, which has influenced a significant change to the traditional relationships between brands and their customers (Parent et al. 2011; Booth and Matic, 2011; Fournier and Avery, 2011). New media are digital, pro-active, visible, real-time, ubiquitous, networked and can be defined as ‘digital communication and information channels in which active consumers engage in behaviours that can be consumed by others, both in real time and long afterwards regardless of their spatial location’ (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2010, p.312). Existing literature suggests that consumers have transformed from passive receivers to proactive storytellers, from hard to reach to accessible and from unaware to informed (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). The flow of the consumer generated message has become multidirectional, interconnected and often hard to predict (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2010). Digital platforms have enabled customers not only to share their enthusiasm but also disapproval. In consequence, the non-transactional customer behaviour is becoming increasingly important (Verhgoef et. al. 2010) which leads to a growing interest in customer engagement (CE) concept (Bordie et al. 2011a; Sashi, 2012; Mollen and Wilson, 2010).
2. Literature Review

The construct of customer engagement (CE) stands on the crossroads of the customer management, interactive experience and the value co-creation (Sashi, 2012; Javornik and Mandelli, 2012). Vivek et al. (2012) refer to CE as to the ‘expanded domain of relationship marketing’ (p.194). This relatively new construct generates a very important research stream which changes the traditional view on consumer management that up to date was mainly focused on the transactional side of the relationship (Verhoef, et al. 2010). CE is more holistic in nature as the value comes not just from purchase but also from actions that customers take to influence others (Haven, 2007). Debate in recent literature portrays the CE concept as a vehicle for creating, building and improving customer relationships with potential and existing customers (Vivek et al. 2010; Roberts and Albert, 2010) as well as a strategic imperative for generating loyalty, corporate performance, competitive advantage and profits (Brodie et al. 2011a). The logic behind this lies in the belief that engaged customers are key actors in viral marketing that can promote a product, service or brand (become brand advocates). It is important to acknowledge that while there were some attempts to measure the value of CE (Kumar et al. 2010), there is very limited academic research done to verify these theories.

Despite the increased popularity, the CE construct is not yet fully developed and its definitions are often inconsistent across the marketing discipline (Vivek, 2010; Javornik and Mandelli, 2012). It seems that there is not enough conceptual clarity of the CE and academic debate is still in the process of expanding and observing the phenomenon. Nonetheless, few attempts have been made to conceptualise the notion (van Doorn et al. 2010; Vivek et al. 2010; Browden, 2009; Brodie et al. 2011; Mollen and Wilson, 2010) .These frameworks are split between two different approaches to customer engagement; (1) some academics take on a psychological/multidimensional prospective (Bowden, 2009; Mollen and Wilson, 2010; Hollebeek, 2011; Brodie, 2011) (2) while others consider CE from a strictly behavioural angle (van Doorn et al, 2010; Verhoef et al. 2010; Roberts and Albert, 2010) . In relation to the social media environment; the behavioural approach seems to represent the dominant direction of the current professional debate on the concept (Solis, 2010) and this is the direction which the author plans to follow.

van Doorn and cowriters (2010) were the first to introduce the theoretical foundations of customer engagement behaviours (CEBs) which they defined as ‘customers’ behavioural
manifestation that have a brand or firm focus, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers’ (p.254). This goes in line with the definition provided by MSI stating that CE is ‘customers’ behavioural manifestation towards a brand that goes beyond purchase’ (MSI 2010, p.4, cited in Vivek et al. 2010). This implies that the CE concept is customer centric, requires action and goes beyond purchase. Additionally some suggest CE goes no just beyond purchase but also beyond awareness, beyond satisfaction, beyond retention and beyond loyalty (Sashi, 2012).

While there is no common categorisation of CEBs in the context of digital environment, recent literature suggest that expressions such as eWOM activities, blogging, writing reviews, ‘liking’, commenting and content sharing (Verhoef, et al. 2010; van Doorn et al. 2010) as well as participation in company’s activities, suggestion for service improvement, participation in brand communities (Bijmot et al. 2010) can be considered as behavioural manifestations that reflect customer engagement.

Nonetheless, despite the extensive use of the CEBs concept in relation to new media, theoretical meaning and foundations are still limited. While the existing customer engagement frameworks were developed to organise and encourage further research, up to date the frameworks were not empirically tested. What is more, limited research was done on motivational drivers of CEBs. The aim of this research is address this gap and further explore customer engagement behaviours with particular focus on the motivations behind these behaviours. Drawing from the literature reviewed up to date, the author proposes an initial framework of motivational drivers of CEBs which she intends to further develop (See Appendix 1).

**Proposed methods**

It has been suggested by the recent literature that the nature of engagement requires the use of more flexible and in depth research methods, able to explore and understand better psycho-social construct such as engagement (Holbrook &O’Shaughnessy 1988 cited in Gambetti, Grafigna and Biraghi, 2013). Looking from this perspective, qualitative methods appear to be particularly suitable for the research on CE. What is more, as qualitative research is based around human emotions, opinions and beliefs (Mack, et al. 2009) the author is convinced that qualitative methods will help her to obtain complex data about the perception of consumers and industry professionals and will allow to achieve a broader and deeper understanding of the research question that would not be possible with quantitative methods.
As this research focuses on exploring motivational drivers of customer engagement behaviours from twofold perspective of practitioners and engaged customers the primary research will consist of two stages. During the first stage three focus groups will be conducted in order to explore perceptions of the customers who are engaged with selected brands on social networking sites (a purposive sampling approach- Edinburgh Napier University student). The rationale behind this is to make sure that the participants are actively engaged, and hence could meaningfully answer the questions posed. The researcher decided that focus groups will be the most appropriate research method for the thesis as this type of methodology plays a significant part in not only finding the facts but also the meanings behind those facts. Existing literature supports this by emphasising that ‘the production of insight’ is one of the main advantages of focus group methodology (Larson et al 2008). What is more, group interaction will work as a channel to produce unique perceptions into understanding shared experiences and social norms (Curry & Bradley 2009). The focus groups will be recorded and later transcribed and based on the transcriptions the key themes will be identified and analysed for the purpose of the project.

This will be then supported by semi-structured interviews with a purposely selected sample of senior marketing managers who work for global brands with a well-established social media presence and high levels of customer engagement. The aim of this stage of data collection is to identify from the practitioners’ perspectives the key motivational drivers of customer engagement behaviours on social networking sites. The authors approach is to speak to the interviewees face-to-face, where non-verbal communication can be acknowledged (Adams, 2007) and additional questions can be asked (Burnett, 2009). In addition, interview data will be complemented by content analysis of organisational documents on engagement strategies, approaches and evaluations. Furthermore, the author will ensure a systematic approach to coding and analysing transcripts, which should contribute to trustworthiness, credibility and transferability of the research, which are the key criteria for evaluating qualitative research (Bryman, 2008).

Theoretical and professional contribution of the study

Exploratory study of motivational drivers of customer engagement behaviours will answer the call for further research of CE (Brodie, et al, 2011b; Molen and Wilson, 2010; van Doorn, et al. 2010) and subsequently will lead to a better understanding of the construct. From the professional prospective identification of motivations behind CEBs will provide marketers
with necessary knowledge that can potentially lead to more efficient strategies in relation to managing brand presence in social media context.
References:


Appendix 1
Framework of Motivational Drivers

Customer related drivers
- Self-enhancement
- Attitudinal drivers
- Affective state
- Social benefits

Function related drivers
- Content quality
- Monetary incentives
- Perceived enjoyment

Brand related drivers
- Brand Characteristics

ONLINE CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT BEHAVIOURS
- eWOM, "liking", commenting, sharing, writing reviews, following, participating in brand’s related activities and brand communities

Based on: Verhoef, et.al., 2010; van Doorn et.al., 2010; Wirtz et al., 2013; Javornik and Mandelli, 2012.