
Original Article

Behavioral perspectives of customer engagement: An exploratory study of customer engagement with three Swiss FMCG brands

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ABSTRACT The article discusses different angles of customer engagement phenomenon and aims to provide an outline of the debate within which the phenomenon can be further investigated. It explores in depth the behavioral perspective, as this approach represents one of the prevalent directions of the current debate on customer engagement phenomenon, especially in the social media environment. The behavioral approach is also being adopted in the empirical part. Through an online survey and a focus group, an exploratory study investigates the willingness of customers to engage with three Swiss premium food brands online and offline. The findings suggest that customers are not willing to engage with FMCG brands if they are not being offered a unique value proposition. The study suggests new implications for those brand strategies whose aim is to foster customer engagement.

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INTRODUCTION

In the recent literature in marketing, customer engagement has received an increasing attention from the academics.^{1–8}

It is a phenomenon and a branding practice that stands on the crossroads of the relationship marketing^{2,6,9} and the value co-creation paradigm.^{2,10} The dynamic of

its development is much influenced by the diffusion of social media^{11,12} and social mobile,⁵ based on user-generated content and the ubiquitous and continuous encounters between brands and consumers.

The communication and marketing process between brands and consumers has changed radically, together with paradigm shift from company-centric marketing approach to customer-centric.^{13,14} The traditional focus on goods' exchange and tangible values has been replaced with a more dynamic process of value co-creation, based on the service-dominant marketing logic, where consumer is deemed a co-producer of value, and therefore more intensely involved in the process of value creation.¹⁵⁻¹⁷ Despite the popularity of the value co-creation concept in marketing theory or maybe exactly because of that, it has also been pointed out that there is a lack of critical discussion around the concept, and that different levels of value co-creation have to be distinguished so that the concept can be applied correctly,^{5,16} which is also valid for the discussion and conceptualization of customer engagement.⁵

Further on, the rise of digital interaction and social media has also radically changed the nature of interactions between brands and customers.^{11,18-22} Brands and corporations can no longer direct the communication process hierarchically, as consumers play at least equivalent, if not stronger, role in the process – not only as individuals, but also as members of communities,²¹⁻²⁵ and thus the dialogues evolve to trialogues.⁸ In addition, demands and needs of customers are becoming increasingly more difficult to satisfy, and consequently, customer loyalty and retention represent a significant challenge for the brand.²⁶⁻²⁸ These are only some of the reasons why brands are trying to build more collaborative relationships with their customers, using explicit strategies for customer engagement.

CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT

There is not yet sufficient theoretical clarity around the concept of customer engagement. Although practitioners often try to adopt it as one of the core layers of marketing strategies,^{6,28,29} academic discussion seems to be still in the process of elaborating serious reflections and empirical studies on that topic.^{2-4,7}

At this point it seems useful to recognize that on macro level, the eventual models can focus on at least three general perspectives: the consumer's, the firm's or the stakeholders'.

The aim of the consumer's perspective is to understand the (psychological, socio-psychological and behavioral) drivers behind engaging (active and collaborative) activities, to investigate the types of engaging behaviors and to discover possible consequences that arise from it. From a larger (post)modern perspective, these collaborative practices can be included in studies of the new changing consumer cultures.^{2,21,23}

The firm's perspective focuses more on strategies for engaging customers, on investigations of the value of engaged customer for a brand, on ways to enhance customer acquisition, loyalty and retention, and on strategic implications of customer engagement.^{6,30}

The third, the stakeholders' perspective, has not yet been researched in depth and calls for further studies that would investigate the larger context of customer engagement and embed it in dynamics of relationships with different stakeholders and take into account broader environment (social, economic, digital and institutional), in order to provide a larger framework that would reflect the complexity of the reality beyond the customer-brand connection in the engagement perspective. Some directions for possible research have already been indicated,³ also in the theory of value co-creation.³¹

First attempts have already been made to provide theoretical models of customer

engagement.^{2,3,6,7,30,32,33} These models offer various possibilities of how customer engagement can be conceptualized and propose diverse suggestions with regard to different media,⁷ user experience,¹ consumer behavior^{3,4,9} and psychological processes.^{32,33} Clearly, there exists a need for categorization and differentiation of customer engagement conceptualizations that require an in-depth analysis and are not going to be a subject of this particular article. However, it is important to recognize the fact that the customer engagement concept can be approached and conceptualized in different ways.

Our analysis adopts a behavioral perspective of customer engagement. Even though there are other possible approaches to customer engagement, the behavioral approach seems one of the most prominent ones at the moment, as it has been consolidated^{3,4,27} and has also already been applied in practice.³⁴

DEFINING THE PHENOMENON

The notion of engagement has a solid tradition in different fields, such as organizational behavior (that is, employee engagement), cognitive psychology, pedagogy (that is, student engagement) and political studies (that is, community engagement, civil society engagement). Recently, there have appeared numerous attempts to define it also in the field of marketing studies.^{3,4,6,30}

The topic of customer engagement in marketing emerged among others in the field of customer management and, according to Verhoef *et al*, can be described as an overarching construct that captures non-transactional customer behavior.⁴ A popular definition of customer engagement was proposed by van Doorn *et al*,³ who defined it as ‘... customers’ behavioral manifestation toward a brand or a firm, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers’. (p. 254). The argument for the behavioral focus

lies in the semiotic analysis of different meanings of the word *engage*, as they all imply behaviors.

There are three important implications of this definition. First, it places attention upon the *consumer* and emphasizes his perspective, which is aligned with customer-centric paradigm in marketing theory.

Second, the emphasis is put on the *behavioral manifestation*, which highlights the active role of consumers. Passive consumption has long been *passé*, and the rise of increasingly powerful and influential buyers is even putting the wording ‘consumer’ under question mark, as it no longer seems suitable because of its connotation of passivity. There have been attempts to provide new wording to signify the new role of modern active buyers, such as ‘prosumer’ or ‘multipliers’ (the latter option highlights the collective power of modern consumer communities).¹⁸

Third, it is crucial to recognize that customer engagement activities are not at all related only to decision-making of eventual purchases, but also to other aspects of consumption, as customer engagement encompasses both positive and negative behavioral manifestations that go beyond purchases.³ Customers are not important (just) because of their buying intentions; their other activities also imply an incremental value.

The common element of most definitions of behavioral perspective of customer engagement is emphasizing the increasingly active role that the customer is taking in the process of consumption.

An exhaustive classification of exact activities of customer engagement has not yet been provided in the academic literature; however, many authors indicated some of them.

Bijmolt *et al*³⁵ claim that manifestations of customer engagement are word-of-mouth, customer co-creation and complaining behavior. Van Doorn

*et al*³ add the following activities to the list: recommendations, helping other customers, blogging, writing reviews and even engaging in legal actions. Customers and brands also engage in new products or service development, which is more often called customer involvement in product or service development.^{36–38} Even if customer involvement in service or product development can be perceived as a customer engagement activity, it represents an autonomous field of study *per se*, and thus should not be confused with customer engagement.

Roberts and Alpert²⁷ defined an engaged customer as a loyal one who also actively recommends the brand to others and initiates an effective word-of-mouth. In their model of customer loyalty ladder, the advertising and promotion activities are the base for the purchase, and if the customer's experience with the product or service is positive, then customer retention to the brand is established. Further on, the customer's affinity for the brand can get developed. If the customer gets really engaged, then he will also recommend the brand to others and become its advocate. However, the conceptual link between customer loyalty and engagement that the authors suggest²⁷ has not been proven through sound empirical research and has yet to be confirmed.

Sashi⁶ followed a similar conceptualization of the consumer engagement phenomenon. Sashi's customer engagement cycle is composed of the following stages: connection, interaction, satisfaction, retention, commitment, advocacy and engagement. The emotional and relational bonds represent important elements for customer engagement, but various behavioral components need to precede them and are indispensable for the establishment of engagement.

From the firm's perspective, the process of marketing communication is thus not focusing anymore just on conveying the

marketing message, but on establishing meaningful relationship and experience where customers can get actively engaged and involved.^{21,29,39–42}

Recently, numerous new definitions and conceptualizations of customer engagement have been elaborated.^{2,3,6,7} They are trying to depict the complexity of customer engagement phenomenon more holistically and reaching beyond the mere behavioral perspective of consumer engagement.

Not everybody in the field agrees with this direction of research,⁵ where customer engagement is conceptualized beyond behavioral perspective, as that could lead to the possible confusion between the concepts of customer engagement and those of value creation and co-creation (see Grönroos for a critique of the overlapping between customer engagement and value creation).¹⁶ Further theoretical debate is much needed in order to understand the phenomenon correctly and to prevent further confusion with its conceptualization.

RESEARCH DESIGN

We were interested in understanding the key factors that lead consumers toward behavioral engagement with the brands, and also to explore the levels of loyalty of consumers in the fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) industry sector, where it is especially challenging to establish meaningful interactions with customers.⁴³ As behavioral manifestations are perceived to represent indications of customer engagement^{3,4} and as there are progressive levels of behavioral customers' engagement,^{27,34} the purpose of the study was to investigate behavioral customer engagement with FMCG brands.

The ice-cream, chocolate and coffee food categories were chosen from FMCG industry as representative categories of the sector. The general idea was to explore whether popular premium food brands were able to foster and activate significant customer engagement despite the general

low customer engagement in the FMCG sector.⁴³ The chocolate brand Lindt, coffee brand Nespresso and ice-cream brand Mövenpick were chosen because of their high brand awareness, strong brand equity and diverse branding and advertising activities. For instance, both Lindt and Nespresso successfully endorsed celebrities who had a positive impact on the brands' image, and were very active on social media in establishing conversations with their customers and engaging them in co-creating brand-related content.^{44,45} Mövenpick is less active on social media; however, it is using specific strategies for positioning itself as a premium ice-cream brand and for establishing brand associations to *haute cuisine* and to creation of superior desserts; nevertheless, its tendencies for engaging customers in brand activities are not as visible as the ones of Nespresso and Lindt. As engagement with basic FMCG products is middle to low,⁴³ the aim was to explore if that was also the case for premium FMCG brands such as Lindt, Nespresso and Mövenpick. In addition, the study wanted to discover whether social media can be proven more effective for customer engagement with FMCG brands, as traditional marketing tools proved to be less successful in that.⁴³

The combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods was used; first, a survey aimed to investigate the willingness of customers to engage with the above-mentioned brands among the students of Università della Svizzera italiana. The method of acquiring the responses was through mail invitations and also through snowball method. Out of the collected responses, 66 were usable for the analysis. On the basis of the reviewed literature, we defined the indicators of customer engagement to be: willingness for repurchase, willingness to engage in word-of-mouth (that is willingness to recommend or to complain about the brand), willingness for participating in

a brand community online and willingness for brand advocacy. These indicators were supposed to represent progressively increasing levels of behavioral customer engagement. We also asked the respondents about their loyalty and attitude toward the brands in order to explore the links between the behavioral engagement and emotional attachment to the brands.

After the survey, a focus group was conducted in order to investigate the results of the survey. As some interesting trends were indicated, the focus group was especially useful for gaining further insight into the discovered behavioral patterns.

In addition, case studies of the three brands' marketing communication were conducted in order to analyze what efforts the brands are making to engage their customers, which was then used to suggest further improvements for brand strategies.

FINDINGS

The first general observation is that customers do not engage intensely with FMCG brands, which confirmed the study conducted by Leahy.⁴³ The survey analysis showed that they get engaged, but only to a limited point – they spread the word-of-mouth (recommend the brand or complain about it) and repurchase it. Despite the fact that the respondents claimed moderate-to-high loyalty toward these premium FMCG brands, they would engage with these brands only within a certain limit and did not display willingness for behavioral manifestations of high engagement such as brand embassy and participation to the brand community.

It was important to obtain information about how respondents related to these brands. When measuring the attitudes toward the three brands, it was observed that Lindt was the most popular one with 46.4 per cent of responses liking it and 46.4 per cent loving it. Mövenpick was liked by 44.6 per cent of respondents and loved by 21.4 per cent. Nespresso was also

liked or loved by the similar proportion (42.9 per cent love it and 16.1 per cent like it) as the other two brands. When comparing the loyalty of respondents toward the three brands, it was observed that they seemed to be most loyal to Lindt and the least loyal to Mövenpick. Therefore, in general, we could see that respondents have a positive attitude toward the brands.

The majority of respondents were willing to buy other products from any of the three brands if they had a positive experience with it (92.4 per cent of all respondents). In addition, the large majority of respondents were willing to recommend the three brands (93.9 per cent) if satisfied with them.

When analyzing complaining behavior, the willingness to engage in that activity was also noted quite high, but not anymore as high as the previous behavioral manifestations. Of the respondents, 50.8 per cent would complain to their friends if unsatisfied with Lindt, 49.2 per cent would complain to friends about Mövenpick and 46 per cent would complain about Nespresso. Even if brands do not encourage customers to complain about them, this type of behavior still indicates a pattern of behavioral customer engagement.

On the basis of these findings, we can claim that the respondents had in majority positive attitude toward the three brands and that they were willing to repurchase its products and recommend it when they were satisfied or complain about it if they are unsatisfied. Therefore, it can be suggested at this point that premium FMCG brands can trigger some behavioral manifestations of customer engagement.

However, the motivation largely decreases when we asked respondents about their willingness to engage as brand ambassadors and to engage in online communities of these brands. Of the respondents, 84.4 per cent did not want

to be members of the Lindt online community and 89.1 per cent did not want to be members of the Nespresso or Mövenpick online community. When analyzing willingness for brand embassy, the same pattern was revealed. Of the respondents, 80.6 per cent did not consider themselves as Lindt brand ambassadors and did not want to be one, and 87.1 per cent did not want to be Mövenpick or Nespresso brand ambassadors.

In Figure 1, there is a display of the trend of decreased willingness for customer engagement with Lindt when the engagement progresses towards higher, more complex behavioral manifestations (advocacy, participation to community). In addition, for both Mövenpick and Nespresso, the trend of willingness for customer engagement is very similar to the one for Lindt.

Despite the fact that for consumers the brand is more important for the chocolate category than for the other two, we found no significant difference among the three brands when it comes to high levels of behavioral engagement, such as brand embassy or participation in the brand online community – all respondents showed very limited willingness to engage.

Despite the small number of respondents that would engage in higher levels of behavioral customer engagement, the relationship of dependency among the variables was investigated further on with the help of cross-tabulations, among others, in order to explore which variables might influence the higher levels of behavioral customer engagement. It was, for instance, observed that there is a significant dependency (Cramer's V and Phi (Sig. < 0.05)) between the higher levels of loyalty towards Nespresso and the willingness for engaging in brand embassy for Nespresso (Tables 1 and 2). The same dependency was confirmed for Lindt and Mövenpick.

In addition, a classification and regression tree for Nespresso brand embassy confirmed

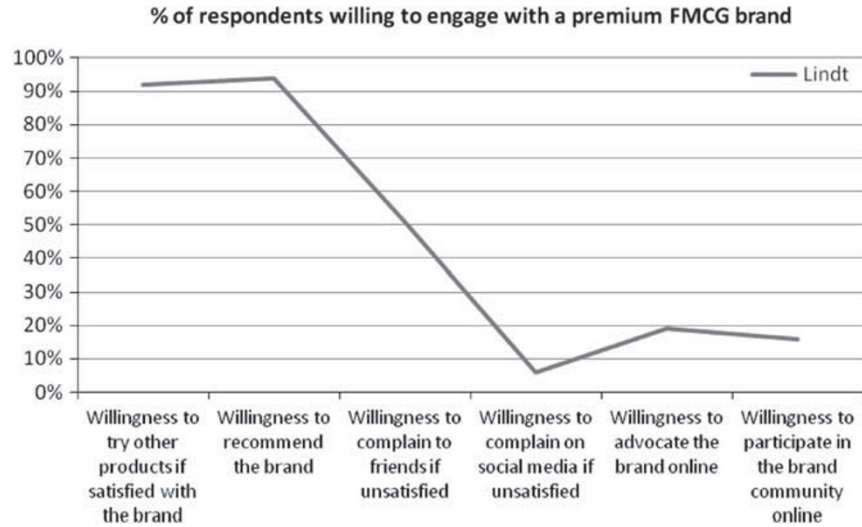


Figure 1: Percentage of respondents willing to engage with a premium FMCG brand.

Table 1: Cross-tabulations between loyalty to Nespresso and willingness for brand embassy

Loyalty toward Nespresso		Brand ambassador Nespresso			Total
		I do not consider myself as a brand ambassador, but I would like to be one	No, I do not consider myself as a brand ambassador	Yes, I consider myself as a brand ambassador	
1	Count	0	19	0	19
	% within Loyalty toward Nespresso	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0
2	Count	0	5	0	5
	% within Loyalty toward Nespresso	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0
3	Count	1	21	0	22
	% within Loyalty toward Nespresso	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0
4	Count	2	4	2	8
	% within Loyalty toward Nespresso	0.3	0.5	0.3	1.0
5	Count	0	5	3	8
	% within Loyalty toward Nespresso	0.0	0.6	0.4	1.0
Total	Count	3	54	5	62
	% within Loyalty toward Nespresso	0.0	0.9	0.1	1.0

Table 2: Measures for significance of dependence

Nominal by nominal	Value	Approx. sig.
Phi	0.646	0.001
Cramer's V	0.457	0.001

that the loyalty appeared to have the strongest influence on the willingness to be a brand ambassador for all the three brands. Similar trends were observed for Mövenpick.

Despite the limitations of a small sample, we can still observe that loyalty is

a significant characteristic of those who are willing to engage intensely (that is to become brand ambassadors or members of the brand's community), which implies that the behavioral manifestations of customer engagement could be correlated with loyalty.

Certain trends reveal interesting insights into patterns of behavioral customer engagement, which led us to further questions: Why are respondents not willing to engage highly with these brands? Are they reluctant to engage only with the

brands from these product categories? If so, which categories would they engage with more intensely?

FOCUS GROUP

There were six participants of the focus group between 23 and 30 years of age and they were all students of the Università della Svizzera Italiana, and all of them were also survey respondents. The focus group aimed to explore the reasons for the limited willingness to engage with FMCG brands that was discovered in the survey. Special attention was placed upon online engagement.

The participants of the focus group claimed to be comfortable to engage, in general, with brands in social media. The privacy was mentioned as an important issue, but if brands are not invading the personal space in online communities in an aggressive way, then consumers like to see and comment on brands' images and sometimes participate in discussions, especially if their friends do so or if the content is highly relevant. They constantly mentioned that there are some brand categories that they really like to engage with, such as fashion, computer, cosmetics, car brands and so on. This choice is probably related to the group age and the lifestyle. However, owing to the scarcity of the free time that all the participants mentioned, the brand must provide a good incentive or a good value proposition that makes consumers willing to spend their time interacting with a brand. In addition, many participants claimed that people often prefer to talk online about luxury brands because they desire to upgrade their own image with the luxury image of the brands.

Furthermore, they mentioned some strong emotional connections with the ice-cream, chocolate and coffee brands. However, despite the relatively high importance of these products in their life, participants did not see a high value in engaging intensely with the brands Lindt,

Nespresso and Mövenpick in social media. The brands of food products are first of all not a kind of subject that would often appear in everyday conversations as maybe some other fashion or high-tech brands. The participants also often mentioned that their preferred forms of engagement with FMCG brands are events and live interactions at the point of sales and promotions.

In general, willingness for online engagement with FMCG brands is quite limited. However, they all emphasized that creative approach, interesting videos, meaningful content, celebrity endorsement and high quality of campaigns would always attract their attention and significantly increase their willingness to engage. They also agreed that creative campaigns create buzz and word-of-mouth regardless of the product category, for instance, the Nespresso campaign with George Clooney, which made many consumers talk about the brand and the coffee even if they normally do not. When asked about willingness to join these brands' communities and clubs, respondents did not show excitement or readiness to engage in these kinds of activities. However, Nespresso club was emphasized and praised as a valuable concept, where membership provides an important value to members, as they can order capsules via the club that are not available in any store other than Nespresso. Therefore, the club represents not only a supplementary selling channel but also carries a significant value.

Lindt, Nespresso and Mövenpick are not the respondents' first choice when engaging with brands. These brands do not contribute an added value to the personal image as some other fashion, cosmetics, high-tech and other brands do. Again, it was suggested that consumers like to engage online with those brands that upgrade their personal image and identity, that is brands that are 'cool', cost a lot and are perceived as luxurious. If a brand does not represent

that, then the motivation for online engagement often decreases.

It can be stated that apparently the online engagement with these premium FMCG brands does not provide a convincing value proposition to customers to engage with them. It seems that customers do not find useful information on these brands' social media sites or websites and they are also not entertained by the content. In this context, it has to be reemphasized that many focus group respondents confirmed that they would engage more intensively online with Mövenpick, Nespresso and Lindt if those brands provided them with better value, such as more entertaining content, good quality videos, more celebrity endorsement, attractive campaign and so on.

Despite the limitations that only one focus group was conducted, the findings provided a possible explanation for the results of the survey and offered directions for future investigation of the customer engagement in FMCG and also in other industries.

CONCLUSION

This article aimed to provide insight into customer engagement phenomenon and discussed its importance in the marketing field. It adopted the behavioral approach to the investigation of the phenomenon, as it seems most convenient and most consolidated for investigating the active role of customers and their behavioral manifestations, such as customer involvement in product collaboration, engagement in word-of-mouth, brand embassy and so on. The empirical part focused on analyzing trends of different levels of behavioral customer engagement in FMCG industry. The results indicate that FMCG industry can encounter challenges when trying to intensely engage customers. Recommendations for improvements were indicated.

For the future research of the behavioral aspect of customer engagement, it is suggested to investigate more in depth the

correlations between different emotional and cognitive dimensions of consumer behavior, such as motivations, needs and experience, and different forms of behavioral manifestations. That is especially relevant online, where new forms of participation in communities are constantly arising, and collective power of consumers bring new opportunities to both consumers and brands. In addition, customer engagement activities and manifestations should be defined and analyzed more in details.

In addition, in the perspective of brand–consumer relation, it would be important to investigate how trends of customer engagement differ across different industries, and discover how high (or low) is the dependency of the willingness for customer engagement with different product categories. In this sense, this study aimed to make some contribution by showing how the engagement with FMCG brand is challenging and specific.

Furthermore, in progressively more demanding marketing environment, engaged customers are those who can bring long-term value to the brand and its performance. The brand perspective of customer engagement should focus on establishing strategies for engaging customers and also measuring how this creates loyalty and monetary value for a company. The stakeholders' perspective also remains to be explored further on. Finally, consumer engagement should be further investigated in other macro contexts, such as consumer culture theory and theories of social media.

Not able to confirm a solid definition or conceptualization of the phenomenon, customer engagement still risks being just a fad, both in practice and in theory. Regardless of whether this happens or not, it is significant in the sense of depicting the changing customer–brand dynamics, and indicating the future directions for (online) customer relationship management.

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