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How does engagement affect customer journeys and experience?

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Customer experience (CE) is considered a key source of differentiation and competitive advantage for firms, resulting in considerable attention among academics and practitioners alike. Recent service and marketing literature suggest that understanding customer experiences requires consideration beyond individual encounters in firm-customer dyads: First; contemporary markets are fragmented into multiple channels and complex delivery networks (Tax et al., 2013), accentuating the role of customer journeys as opposed to individual service encounters in defining customer experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Second, the roles of customer and providers have become blurred as customers increasingly influence other customers' experiences and take upon behaviours beyond the traditional customer role, conceptualized as customer engagement (Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014).

To fully understand customer journeys, both company-controlled touchpoints, as well as touchpoints beyond customer-firm interaction should be considered (e.g. Meyer and Schwager, 2007). Nevertheless, extant research on customer journey is strongly focused on company /brand owned touchpoints, and while the importance of customer engagement for journeys has been indicated (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016), virtually no research has sought to establish the analytical connection between these two concepts.

To address this gap, the purpose of this conceptual paper is to analyse how customer engagement affects customer journeys that are the key platforms for the emergence of experiences. This is done by critically reviewing extant engagement research to inform journey research: we analyse research findings on engagement and interpret that in the light of customer journeys. The main contributions of this paper is bridging the domains of customer journey and engagement, and creating new knowledge to customer journey research by illuminating in particular the customer-owned and social touchpoints (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

Research background: Customer journeys are typically composed of three stages: pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). A key aspect of customer experience is its emergence through customer's subjective response to any direct or indirect contact with the company or its offering, across multiple touchpoints during the entire journey (Meyer and Schwager, 2007, Verhoef et al., 2009). Understanding the nature of these touchpoints is critical to successful service experience, but the greater the number of touchpoints, the more complex and interactive is the particular journey (Zomerdijk and Voss, 2010, Richardson, 2010). Lemon and Verhoef (2016) identify four types of touch points which customers will experience in their journey: 1) brand-owned touchpoints (designed and managed by the brand and under their control); 2) partner-owned touchpoints (interactions jointly controlled by the brand and any partner organizations); 3) customer-owned touchpoints (where the customer has influence over their own journey); and 4) social/external touchpoints (where the actions of others affect the customer journey).

Research on customer engagement has been growing in importance in the last decade. Brodie et al (2011) define customer engagement as a psychological state with cognitive, emotional and behavioural dimensions: engagement here reflects a customer's on-going interest, commitment and

motivation to invest their time and other resources in a focal object. In addition, the behavioural manifestations of engagement refer to behaviours which occur beyond normal transactions (Van Doorn et al., 2010, Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014). Such customer engagement behaviours (CEB) may include (Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014):

- co-developing to facilitate the focal firm's development of its offering
- influencing to affect other actors' perceptions, preferences, or knowledge regarding the focal firm
- augmenting to add to or extend the focal firm's offering
- mobilizing to stimulate other actors' actions towards a focal firm.

Lemon and Verhoef (2016, p. 73) highlight the importance of research which explores customer engagement and the customer journey and explores how a customer 'reaches out to and initiates contact with the firm whether attitudinally or behaviourally'. Although the authors suggest engagement touchpoints will emerge through interaction with communities, employees or other customers to date, no research has explored how engagement impacts on the customer journey.

Development of a conceptual framework the main content of the paper comprises developing a conceptual framework by examining the impact of different manifestations of engagement on the customer journey. We analyse how the journey of a focal customer can be affected by a) the customer's own engagement towards the focal product/brand and/or b) engagement behaviours by other customers. The role these play across stages of customer journey will be explored in more detail. 1.

Customer Engagement by the focal actor: In a customer's journey the level of their psychological disposition towards a focal object (e.g. product/brand/service offering) is likely to have a more significant impact across journey stages. For instance, high level of engagement would impact on information searches in the pre-purchase phase and thereby increase the number of brand-owned touchpoints (the customer visits a firm website) as well as social touchpoints (the customer explores references to the product online or in social media). These prepurchase touchpoints mean that the customer experience is already beginning to emerge in this early stage. In the purchase phase the heightened interest of engaged customers may increase the intensity or duration of interactions with the firm/ brand/ offering.

Finally, post purchase, engaged customers are likely to spend more time with the product/brand (customer-owned touchpoints related to product usage). Engagement behaviours, in addition, generate new touchpoints at various points in the purchase journey. Through influencing behaviour, customers share their experiences with other customers. For example, a customer when going on holiday may share their booking experience pre-purchase, broadcast live from the airport or resort in the purchase phase and then write a review on Tripadvisor post-purchase. Such engagement behaviours generate social touchpoints with other prospective customers or other actors. Co-developing behaviours in turn relate to customers reaching out the focal firm with contributions to firm product/service development, hence creating new touchpoints with the firm /brand, beyond the basic purchase journey.

This leads us to propose: P1: Engagement generates greater number of touchpoints. P2: Engagement increases the intensity of existing touchpoints. 2. Customer Engagement Behaviours of other actors Jaakkola and Alexander (2014) reveal how CEB at a systemic level effects other stakeholders who can, then, alter their own resource contributions towards a focal firm. In our conceptual framework we can predict how CEB of other actors will also affect focal customer journeys. For example, in

social touchpoints during the pre-purchase phase customers will use other actor influencing behaviour to learn about other customer experience of an offering and may adjust attitudes and decisions or legitimize needs accordingly. Customers may be attracted to specific offerings or brands due to the existence of other customer augmenting or co-developing behaviour, suggesting that they are drawn to particular purchase journeys because of CEB. For example, buying shoes at a NIKE store (brand-owned touchpoint) may be more attractive knowing that you can engage with other users via the NIKE+ site (social touchpoints). Other customer mobilizing behaviour can completely change the course of a customer journey, such as in the case of a customer 'boycott' of a specific product or service.

Finally, social touchpoints can assist customer evaluate the value of the offering by engaging with a brand community post-purchase. This leads us to propose: P3: Engagement behaviours trigger shared touchpoints that connect actors' journeys to each other. P4: Engagement by other actors introduces new touchpoints to the journey. P5: Engagement by other actors can change the course of the focal customer journey.

Conclusions and contribution:

This study postulates that engagement can affect the range, volume, and nature of customer journey touchpoints. It is also argued that engagement behaviours service to connect individual customer journeys to each other: interactions between customers focused on sharing experiences form discrete social touchpoints along each customer's journey that affect how customer interact with the focal firm, and could even change the fundamental course of a customer journey. This analysis contributes to customer journey research by illuminating in particular the customer-owned and social touchpoints of customer journeys that have been very seldom addressed (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). This paper is among the first to focus on the intersection of customer experience and customer engagement, two of the perhaps most influential concepts in contemporary service research. Ongoing research needs to consider the extent to which a customer's own engagement disposition impacts value assessments of their journey. For managers, this study highlights the importance of considering social and customer-owned touchpoints as critical elements in the customer journey. Although firms cannot directly design or control such touchpoints, they can provide platforms for such; or ensure presence in firm-external touchpoints e.g. through attractive content creation (Holliman and Rowley, 2014)

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