A Critical Analysis of Consumer Engagement Dimensionality

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Abstract

The Marketing Science Institute’s 2014-2016 Research Priorities underline the need for further research in terms of the concept of consumer engagement and emphasize customer the problematics of engagement’s measurement as a research priority in its Guide. So far, studies of consumer engagement and its dimensionality were used widely in social sciences literature, but these studies are inconsistent whereas results – controversial. Therefore, the paper aims to validate dimensions of consumer engagement by performing a critical analysis of consumer engagement dimensionality. The paper presents an analysis of consumer engagement dimensionality based on the overview of conceptual and empirical studies of consumer engagement. This paper aims to identify and systemize the most common dimensions described in the scientific literature with reference to previously identified characteristics and specific expressions of consumer engagement dimensions.

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Introduction

Nowadays, poorly informed and passive consumer changes to the consumer that is active, social and engaged in business activities (e.g. the creation and development of products and services) (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Noteworthy that Marketing Science Institute (acronym: MSI; MSI identifies priority areas of scientific research) emphasizes the problematics of conceptualization and measurement of consumer engagement. There is a huge variety of marketing contexts (scientific and business) where consumer engagement is studied. These contexts include social networks, value cocreation paradigm, usage of media, consumer experience, loyalty programmes,

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management of consumer relations, development of brand, engagement to the creation and development processes of products and services, service marketing, consumer behavior and others. Despite the abundance of researches related to consumer engagement, it is worthy to note that the dimensionality of consumer engagement remains relevant and timely research object.

According to this, the paper aims to validate dimensions of consumer engagement by performing a critical analysis of consumer engagement dimensionality. The paper presents an analysis of consumer engagement dimensionality based on the overview of conceptual and empirical studies of consumer engagement. Based on the consumer engagement dimensions described in the scientific literature and previously identified characteristics and specific expressions of consumer engagement dimensions, the most common dimensions are identified and systemized in this paper.

1. Literature review on the dimensionality of consumer engagement

The concept of engagement has been studied in various scientific disciplines including organizational behavior, psychology, sociology and political sciences. A variety of engagement forms (e.g. engagement of employees, civic engagement, consumer engagement etc.) determined the variety of interpretations of the concept. Brodie, Hollebeek, Juric, Ilic (2011) performed studies of conceptualization of engagement construct in social sciences. Brodie et al. (2011) cites researchers who emphasize that engagement is a form of social and interactive behavior which can be defined as transitive state developed through the time in the relevant engagement processes. The terms „engage“ and „engagement“ usually are used in the discussions concerning cocreation, development of decisions and interaction. According to Hollebeek (2011a), engagement is potentially strongly oriented to the context, and it can be influenced by consumers decision related to particular engagement objects, e.g. brands, products or organizations. The studies of consumer engagement also are related to deeper analysis of consumer engagement causes.

Javornik, Mandelli (2013) performed the significant study in terms of the development of the consumer engagement concept and identification of research perspectives. First of all, authors performed a thorough analysis of existing consumer engagement literature (Brodie et al., 2011; Gambetti, Graffigna, 2010; Hollebeek, 2011a; Hollebeek, 201b; Vivek, Beatty, Morgan, 2012). Secondly, according to the results of the analysis, Javornik, Mandelli (2013) suggested four research perspectives of consumer engagement: behavioral, psychological, social and multidimensional. The last mentioned perspective has been comprehensively analysed by Brodie, Hollebeek, Juric, Ilic (2011), Hollebeek (2011a, 2011b), Hollebeek, Glynn, Brodie (2014). According to Javornik and Mandelli (2013), based on the generalization of consumer engagement dimensionality researches, the number of dimensions is defined by the perspective of consumer engagement (is it considered to be unidimensional or multidimensional construct). Moreover, the definition of dimensions depends on the object of engagement (e.g. brand, brand community, advertisement, online social platform, website etc.). In the case of both perspectives, there is no consensus on which and what dimensions should be included in the concept of consumer engagement.

In the case of first perspective, (unidimensional view to engagement) one dimension is identified as the dominant one. Usually, different researchers identify different dimensions. According to Hollebeek (2011a), Guthrie, Cox (2001) emphasized the importance of cognitive dimension, whereas Catteeuw et al. (2007) claimed emotional dimension, and Pomerantz (2006) – behavioral dimension to be the most significant one. It is necessary to note that there also are no consensus in the researches of a multidimensional perspective.

The very first studies of consumer engagement dimensionality were performed in 2005-2006. Patterson, Yu, De Ruyter (2006) stated that the main dimensions of consumer engagement are absorption, dedication, vigor, and interaction. Authors argued that the consumer must be focused on the engagement object, enthusiastic, determined to devote energy and to interact with the object of engagement. Vivek (2009) agreed that consumer engagement is a multidimensional construct – researcher performed a qualitative study in order to classify attributes of the engagement construct. According to the results of this study, Vivek (2009) identified five conceptual consumer engagement dimensions:

- Awareness – being conscious of and having knowledge of the focus of engagement i.e. object of engagement;
- Enthusiasm – Strong excitement about the object of engagement;
- Interaction – interchange of ideas, thoughts, feelings about the object of engagement with others;
- Activity – actions focused on the program or offering the person is engaged in;
Extraordinary experience – sense of newness of perception and process.

It is worth to note that consumer engagement dimensions identified by Patterson et al. (2006) and Vivek (2009) are similar in main aspects: consumer’s focus, enthusiasm, willingness to act and interact. Moreover, Hollebeek et al. (2014) suggests that the term „engagement“ defines a multidimensional concept that consists of three dimensions: cognitive, emotional and behavioral. Researchers also emphasize that different dimensions of consumer engagement are interrelated. Brodie, Ilic, Juric, Hollebeek (2013) identified that emotional engagement may cause an increase of intensity level of other (cognitive and behavioral) dimensions.

Hollebeek (2011a,b), Hollebeek et al. (2014) analyzed previous studies on the characteristics and common expressions of consumer engagement dimensions. The main result of this analysis was a classification of consumer engagement dimensions to most commonly identified cognitive, emotional and behavioral dimensions:

- Cognitive dimension - a consumer's level of engagement object related thought processing, concentration and interest in specific object (business enterprise, brand, online social network, brand community);
- Emotional dimension – a state of emotional activity also known as the feeling of inspiration or pride related to and caused by engagement object;
- Behavioral dimension – a state of consumer behavior related to engagement object and understood as endeavor and energy given for an interaction.

Hollebeek (2011a) illustrates a cognitive consumer engagement dimension by the examples related to brand activities, for example, when consumer focuses on or shows a great interest in the brand. In recent studies, Hollebeek et al. (2014) identify the dimension of “cognitive processing”. This dimension is defined as “a consumer's level of brand-related thought processing and elaboration in a particular consumer/brand interaction”. Based on this interpretation dimension of “cognitive processing” can be referred to “traditional” cognitive dimension. Moreover, Abdul-Ghani, Hyde, Marshall (2011) identified “utilitarian” (in their study researchers identified three engagement dimensions: utilitarian, hedonic and social) and Patterson's et al. (2006) „vigor“ dimensions also can be approached as cognitive dimension of consumer engagement. „Utilitarian“ dimension is reasoned by consumer’s evaluation of the utility and advantages of the online auction website. A dimension of „vigor“ defines consumer’s level of mental flexibility and stability during the interaction with organization or brand, other consumers. This dimension also reflects consumer’s willingness to devote energy, time and endeavor for the participation in business activities.

An emotional dimension of engagement can be argued by the statement of Heath (2007) that engagement is described as a subconscious emotional construct. The term “emotion” defines any stimulation of feelings. Abdul-Ghani et al. (2011) identifies hedonic dimension of engagement that also can be expressed by consumer’s experienced pleasure while using online auction sites – it is stated that consumer engaged in the activities of such websites experience a pleasure, i.e. positive emotions. In the scientific researches whereas the object of engagement is a particular brand, emotional dimension is expressed by “dedication” (Cheung, Lee, & Jin, 2011; Patterson et al., 2006) or „affection“ (Hollebeek et al., 2014). Patterson et al. (2006) states that “dedication” refers to „the consumer’s sense of belonging as a consumer - the consumer is proud of the firm they patronize and is enthusiastic and passionate to play their role“. According to Hollebeek et al. (2014) emotional dimension of engagement also can be expressed as consumer’s „attachment“, i.e. positive feelings for a specific brand in particular consumer-brand interaction.

The behavioral dimension of consumer engagement is related to direct meaning of the word „engage“. This word is a verb that has multiple different meanings, but all of them emphasize behavioral aspect – action (van Doorn et al., 2010). Patterson et al. (2006) identified the equivalent of behavioral engagement dimensions – dimensions of energy and interaction that define consumer’s communication with employees, interaction among consumer, brand, business enterprise or other consumers.

The research results revealed that in the majority of studies consumer engagement is considered to be a multidimensional construct that consists of behavioral (action), cognitive (thoughts) and emotional (feelings) dimensions. Malciute (2012) also notes that, even though, there is still a relatively large number of researchers, who view engagement from the unidimensional perspective, the focus remains on the three mentioned dimensions. According to Gambetti, Graffigna (2010), Malciute (2012), Gambetti, Graffigna, Biraghi (2012), usually researchers that support unidimensional perspective of consumer engagement dimensionality signifies the importance of
behavioral dimension and the other dimensions (theoretically considered to be emotional and cognitive) declares as supplementary but also important and required.

2. Research findings

The analysis of scientific literature and recently performed studies allows to summarize that the majority of researches of consumer engagement dimensionality are theoretical (Bowden, 2009; Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek, 2011; Hollebeek, 2011; Patterson et al., 2006; Pham & Avnet, 2009; van Doorn et al., 2010; Vivek et al., 2012) and the minority of empirical researches – qualitative (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005; Calder, Malthouse, & Schaedel, 2009; Phillips & McQuarrie, 2010). All these studies aim to identify and validate dimensions of consumer engagement. There are two approaches to the dimensionality of consumer engagement in the scientific literature: (1) consumer engagement – unidimensional construct and (2) consumer engagement – multidimensional construct. The first approach distinguishes a particular dimension as the most important one that is defined differently by various authors. Moreover, it is important to note, that in the studies of consumer engagement as a multidimensional construct there is no consensus. Various researchers suggest different combinations of consumer engagement: Marks, Printy (2003) – cognitive and emotional; Bejerholm, Eklund (2007) – cognitive and behavioral; Norris et al. (2003) – emotional and behavioral (Hollebeek, 2011a). Despite the ongoing discussions concerning dimensionality of consumer engagement, it is noted that different dimensions of consumer engagement are interrelated and has a significant impact on each other.

Based on the results of researchers related to the dimensionality of consumer engagement, the conclusion that the conceptual essence of consumer engagement is best revealed by multiple dimensions, i.e. consumer engagement is a multidimensional construct, whereas mostly cognitive, emotional and behavioral dimensions are identified. This conclusion is supported by the inferences of the concept of consumer engagement – usually consumer engagement is related to particular behavior, emotional and cognitive endeavor or commitment. The first consumer becomes familiar with engagement object that later on evoke particular emotions or associations (positive or negative). Finally, such emotions motivate actions, i.e. the consumer is not a passive; consumer becomes an active participant in the interaction with engagement object. Mutual coordination and enabling of dimensions are necessary for the successful consumer engagement.

Conclusions and implications for future research

Considering the results and insights of the researches of consumer engagement dimensions (Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek, 2011a, 2011b; Hollebeek et al., 2014), it was concluded that the number of dimensions used for measurement of consumer engagement is determined by the perspective of consumer engagement (engagement as an unidimensional or multidimensional construct). Moreover, the definition of these dimensions depends on the object of engagement (brand, brand community, advertisement, social media sites, websites, etc.) Usually, consumer engagement is associated with certain emotions, behavior and consumer’s cognitive efforts or commitment. It should be noted that studies of marketing researches usually are based on the active role of consumer emotionally or cognitively engaging to brand, to behavior related to the brand after the purchase or participation in value creation processes. After summarizing consumer engagement studies, the multidimensionality of the construct was reasoned – consumer engagement is a multidimensional construct that consists of three main dimensions – cognitive (consumer focus and interest in a particular engagement object), emotional (feelings of inspiration or pride caused by an engagement object) and behavioral (consumer effort and energy necessary for interaction with an engagement object).

It should be noted that so far studies of consumer engagement and its dimensionality were used widely in social sciences literature, but these studies are inconsistent whereas results – controversial. The consumer engagement dimensions proposed and validated in this paper will let to expand studies on consumer engagement antecedents related to the expression of emotional, behavioral and cognitive dimensions. Also, these results will enable researches to perform studies on the identification of the specific impact on consumer behavior and thus the performance of the company caused by a particular dimension.
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