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Demystifying customer brand engagement: Exploring the loyalty nexus

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Abstract With its conceptual roots in fields including psychology and organisational behaviour, the engagement concept is emerging in the marketing literature, with preliminary research indicating that engaged consumers might exhibit greater loyalty to focal brands. Despite these advancements, the engagement concept remains underexplored to date. This paper addresses this gap by reviewing literature in other disciplines and marketing, and developing a tripartite customer brand-engagement conceptualisation comprising activation, identification, and absorption dimensions. Further, a conceptual model illustrating the conceptually distinct nature of and relationships between customer brand engagement and other marketing constructs is proposed, followed by a customer engagement/loyalty-based segmentation analysis. Enhanced insights into customer engagement are expected to be valuable for marketing scholars and practitioners seeking to enhance customer relationships, retention, and loyalty. The paper thus concludes with a set of research and practitioner implications, which may be used to guide future developments in this promising area.

Keywords customer engagement; brands; loyalty; conceptual model; segmentation; (curvi)linear relationship

Introduction

The limitations of conventional marketing constructs, such as perceived quality and customer satisfaction, in explaining and predicting consumer behaviour outcomes, including loyalty, are widely acknowledged in the literature (e.g. Sureshchandar, Rajendran, & Anantharaman, 2002; Taylor & Baker, 1994). The literature suggests that although ‘satisfaction is a necessary step in loyalty formation [it] becomes less significant as loyalty begins to set through other mechanisms’ (Oliver, 1999, p. 33). It is the examination of such other mechanisms that are of interest in this paper, with a specific focus on the emerging customer brand-engagement concept, which may be a superior predictor of customer loyalty relative to traditionally used marketing constructs (Bowden, 2009).

Kahn (1990, p. 700) defines ‘personal engagement’ as ‘the simultaneous employment and expression of a person’s “preferred self” in task behaviours promoting connections

to tasks/others, personal presence and active, full role performances', which may serve to enhance an individual's motivation (May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004). In the organisational behaviour literature, employee engagement has been found to generate heightened morale, cohesion, job satisfaction, organisational commitment, citizenship behaviours, customer evaluations, reduced absenteeism, and consequently improved financial performance (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002; Saks, 2006; Salanova, Agut, & Peiró, 2005).

As a result of the valuable insights offered by investigations of engagement across various other disciplines, academic interest in the concept is emerging in the marketing literature (Bowden, 2009; Heath, 2007) where it is typically applied as 'customer engagement' (Bowden, 2009; Patterson, Yu, & De Ruyter, 2006), reflecting customers' individual, context-specific engagement with particular objects, such as brands (Sprott, Czellar, & Spangenberg, 2009), products, or organisations (Patterson et al., 2006). Paralleling the heightened levels of academic interest in customer engagement is a surge of practitioner interest in the concept (Appelbaum, 2001; Greenberg, 2008).

The potentially significant predictive power of customer engagement to loyalty outcomes is thus starting to become documented in the literature, albeit largely restricted to conceptual relationships to date (e.g. Bowden, 2009). The paper is structured as follows. Findings of a literature review addressing the conceptual foundations of engagement obtained from specific other academic disciplines are first presented, followed by a review of emerging literature on engagement in marketing. A conceptual model illustrating the distinct conceptual nature of the customer brand-engagement concept relative to other interrelated marketing constructs is addressed in the following section, followed by a preliminary customer brand engagement/loyalty segmentation and relevant implications.

Engagement: Conceptual foundations

Engagement has been previously examined across a range of academic disciplines, including sociology, psychology, political science, and organisational behaviour (Ilić, 2008). In educational psychology, for instance, 'student engagement' was found to be pivotal in a student's receipt of teacher support (Skinner & Belmont, 1993) and achieved results (Bryson & Hand, 2007). Moreover, many organisations measure, and intend to optimise, their 'employee engagement' levels based on the notion that heightened such engagement levels may contribute to productivity and profitability increases (Greenwood, 2007). The meaning of engagement is, however, context-specific, giving rise to potential variations in the interpretation of the concept (Little & Little, 2006). To develop a better understanding of the concept, engagement conceptualisations across a number of disciplines are reviewed in the present section.

In the field of social psychology, Achterberg et al. (2003) conceptualise 'social engagement' as 'a sense of initiative, involvement and adequate response to social stimuli, participating in social activities and interacting with others'. In educational psychology, London, Downey, and Mace (2007) define 'student engagement' as 'students' academic investment, motivation and commitment to their institution, their perceived psychological connection, comfort and sense of belonging towards their institution'. Moreover, in organisational behaviour, Saks (2006) defines 'employee engagement' as 'the amount of cognitive, emotional and physical resources an individual is prepared to devote in the performance of one's work roles', which is thought to be contingent on the economic and socio-emotional

resources received from the organisation. An overview of key engagement tenets obtained from the literature review is provided in Table 1 (Ilić, 2008).

Analysis of Table 1 reveals that engagement represents an individual-specific, motivational, and context-dependent variable emerging from two-way interactions between relevant engagement subject(s) and object(s). Engagement subjects cited in the literature have included students (London et al., 2007), employees (Saks, 2006), and nation states (Resnick, 2001). Further, engagement objects have included schools (Norris, Pignal, & Lipps, 2003), other individuals including co-workers (Saks, 2006) and fellow students (Bryson & Hand, 2007), or more intangible objects including employees engaged with their jobs (Catteeuw, Flynn, & Vonderhorst, 2007).

Addressing brand engagement from an employee perspective, Buckingham (2008) views employees as customers of an employer brand, thus rendering potential applicability of extending the employee-engagement concept into the customer domain. For example, Wellins and Concelman (2005) found that employee engagement might affect the amount of discretionary effort (time and energy), passion, and excitement exhibited by employees in performing their jobs. The present research thus views the employee-engagement concept to have particular applicability for extension into the customer-engagement domain. The key tenets of the engagement concept identified in Table 1 are applied to the proposed customer-engagement concept in the next section.

Table 1 Key engagement tenets.

Engagement tenet	Author(s)
Individual-level variable	Bakker et al. (2007, 2008); Bejerholm and Eklund (2007); Catteeuw et al. (2007); Fredricks et al. (2004); Kahn (1990); London et al. (2007); Luthans & Peterson (2002); Saks (2006); Salanova et al. (2005); Schaufeli, Martínez et al. (2002a); Schaufeli, Salanova et al. (2002b); Vibert and Shields (2003)
Motivational variable	Achterberg et al. (2003); Balsano (2005); Bandura and Cervone (1986); Frank et al. (2004); Jennings and Stoker (2004); Jennings and Zeitner (2003); Luthans and Peterson (2002); Schaufeli, Martínez et al. (2002a); Schaufeli, Salanova et al. (2002b); Skinner and Belmont (1993)
Context-dependent variable	Fredricks et al. (2004); Kahn (1990); Little and Little (2006); London et al. (2007); Saks (2006); Skinner and Belmont (1993)
Emerges from two-way interactions between subject/object	Achterberg et al. (2003); Bejerholm and Eklund (2007); Handelsman et al. (2005); Little and Little (2006); Resnick (2001); Robinson et al. (2004); Saczynski et al. (2006);
As an outcome may exist at different intensities	Achterberg et al. (2003); Bakker et al. (2007, 2008); Bryson and Hand (2007); Fredricks et al. (2004); Salanova et al. (2005); Schaufeli, Martínez et al. (2002a); Schaufeli, Salanova et al. (2002b); Skinner and Belmont (1993)
As a process develops over time	Bejerholm and Eklund (2007); Katch (1988); Kenny et al. (2006); Marks (2000); Owen et al. (2001); Smith et al. (2007)

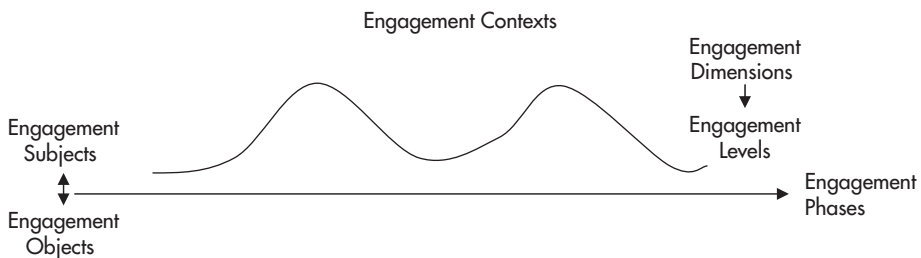
Table 1 further indicates that engagement has been viewed as a state or outcome variable existing at a particular intensity at a specific point in time, and with differing engagement intensities predicted to generate distinct behavioural outcomes (Salanova et al., 2005; Schaufeli, Martínez, Pinto, Salanova, & Bakker, 2002; Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002). In addition, engagement is thought to reflect a process in which engagement intensity may develop over time (e.g. Resnick, 2001). Despite its potentially dynamic nature, Schaufeli, Martínez et al. (2002) and Schaufeli, Salanova et al. (2002) view engagement as a relatively persistent and pervasive state, thus rendering its potential applicability as a consumer benefit segmentation variable in marketing research (Wedel & Kistemaker, 1989). Similarly, the concept of involvement has been widely used for consumer benefit segmentation, generating valuable insights across differentially involved consumer segments (Hollebeek, Jaeger, Brodie, & Balemi, 2007).

Extending Table 1, Figure 1 provides a dynamic model incorporating key engagement facets. Specifically, Figure 1 shows that within specific engagement contexts, focal two-way interactions between relevant engagement subject(s) and object(s) depicted on the left-hand side of the model give rise to the emergence of specific engagement levels at a particular point in time, representing relevant engagement states. Further, relevant sequenced engagement states may generate the unfolding of focal engagement phases comprising the engagement process, as demonstrated by the curve in Figure 1.

Moreover, relevant emergent engagement levels are informed by the particular engagement dimensionality adopted, as shown in Figure 1. A lack of consensus regards the dimensionality of engagement is observed in the literature (Little & Little, 2006) with unidimensional (e.g. Achterberg et al., 2003; Resnick, 2001), as well as multidimensional (e.g. Frank, Finnegan, & Taylor, 2004; Handelsman, Briggs, Sullivan, & Towler, 2005; Lutz, Guthrie, & Davis, 2006) proposed perspectives. Under both perspectives, further debate exists regards the specific dimensionality of the construct. For example, within the unidimensional perspective, Guthrie and Cox (2001) emphasise the cognitive aspect of engagement, while Catteeuw et al. (2007) and Pomerantz (2006) highlight the emotional and behavioural aspects respectively.

Within the multidimensional perspective, various combinations of the cognitive, emotional, and/or behavioural aspects are observed. For instance, while Marks and Printy (2003) propose a two-dimensional cognitive/emotional engagement conceptualisation, Bejerholm and Eklund (2007) advocate a cognitive/behavioural view. Norris et al. (2003), by contrast, adopt an emotional/behavioural conceptualisation of the concept. Further, the three-dimensional view, incorporating

Figure 1 Dynamic model – Key engagement facets.



cognitive, emotional, and behavioural engagement aspects, appears to have found widespread acceptance in the literature (e.g. Bakker, Hakanen, Demerouti, & Xanthopoulou, 2007; Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter, & Taris, 2008; Handelsman et al., 2005; Ilić, 2008; Jennings & Stoker, 2004; Klem & Connell, 2004; Salanova et al., 2005; Schaufeli, Martínez et al., 2002; Schaufeli, Salanova et al., 2002). The proposed dimensionality of the engagement concept in marketing is addressed in the next section.

Outlining key challenges for research, Little and Little (2006) identify a lack of conceptual clarity regarding the engagement construct to date, and limited insights into its interrelationships with other constructs addressed in the literature. By proposing a conceptualisation for the emerging customer brand-engagement concept, and examining its conceptual relationships with conventional marketing constructs in a conceptual model, this paper seeks to address this gap in the following sections.

Towards a conceptualisation of customer brand engagement

While the engagement concept has received considerable attention across various academic disciplines, the concept currently is only emerging in the marketing literature. The engagement concept has been viewed in the discipline as a promising variable that may provide enhanced predictive power of customer loyalty outcomes (Bowden, 2009). As such, it fits within the broader relationship marketing and customer retention literatures (e.g. Grönroos, 2007; Rust, Lemon, & Zeithaml, 2004) emphasising the importance of retaining value-generating customers.

The concepts of engagement subject and object were addressed in the preceding section. In the marketing literature, engagement has been applied primarily with the consumer/customer as the focal engagement subject (Barnatt, 2001; Bowden, 2009; Patterson et al., 2006). Further, key engagement objects cited in the literature have included brands (Spratt et al., 2009), products, and/or organisations (Patterson et al., 2006). As such, applications of the engagement concept in marketing appear to follow the [*who* subject, e.g. customer *engages with what* object, e.g. brand]' approach observed in other disciplines (e.g. Handelsman et al., 2005), as addressed in the previous section.

Applying Figure 1 to engagement in marketing, the engagement process unfolds by virtue of two-way interactions between the engagement subject (e.g. customer/consumer) and a specific engagement object, such as a brand (e.g. Spratt et al., 2009), generating particular customer/consumer engagement states typified by specific engagement levels under particular contextual conditions. Pertaining to engagement contexts, Bogatin (2006) highlights the importance of customer engagement in Web 2.0 applications including weblogs, podcasts, wikis, multimedia sharing, and social networks (Anderson, 2008). In support of this contention, social engagement metrics were found to represent the Holy Grail in Web 2.0 contexts (Owyang, 2007). Further, Bezjian-Avery, Calder, and Iacobucci (1998) found that consumer engagement, combined with ad persuasiveness, may be used to assess the effectiveness of interactive media advertising.

Throughout the engagement process, relevant engagement phases may be observed (Bowden, 2009), which are predicted to be highly context-dependent (Heath, 2007) and may vary by factors including industry, product/service attributes, and/or consumer needs and interests (e.g. Patterson et al., 2006), thus rendering applicability of a

person-by-situation interactionist approach (Srivastava, Alpert, & Shocker, 1984). Such phases may be typified by differing engagement intensity (Spratt et al., 2009), which are determined based on the particular engagement dimensionality employed, as addressed further in the present section. An overview of the key literature addressing engagement in marketing is shown in Table 2.

Table 2 shows that the relative lack of exploration of engagement in marketing incurs a lack of clarity and consensus regarding the appropriate definition, forms, dimensionality, and thus operationalisation of engagement. For instance, while Bowden (2009) uses the term 'customer engagement', Foley (2006) adopts the potentially broader 'consumer engagement' concept. Further, Algesheimer, Dholakia, and Herrmann's (2005) 'community engagement' concept specifies the engagement *object* (i.e. community), rather than the *subject* (e.g. customer) in consumer/brand relationships. Moreover, Spratt et al. (2009) propose the specific engagement sub-type of 'brand engagement in self-concept'. Varying levels of the concept's specificity are thus observed in the marketing, as well as other disciplines' literatures. A clearer, universal conceptualisation of engagement in marketing is thus required (cf. Little & Little, 2006).

Further, insights into the specific types of engagement antecedents, or drivers, are limited to date. While Bowden (2009) acknowledges the role of previous customer experience with a service brand as an antecedent to ensuing customer-engagement levels, insights into other types of engagement antecedents remain largely underexplored to date. An initial attempt to explore this gap is presented in the next section.

The debate surrounding the appropriate dimensionality of engagement observed in other disciplines is also apparent in the marketing literature. For example, Table 2 shows that while Heath (2007) proposes a unidimensional, emotion-centric perspective of (consumer) engagement with an ad, Patterson et al. (2006) propose a multidimensional perspective of customer engagement, comprising the dimensions of vigour, dedication, and absorption, which were found to coincide with the behavioural, emotional, and cognitive facets of engagement respectively (May et al., 2004). Ilić (2008) extends this view by incorporating additional aspirational and social-engagement dimensions, although these may also be viewed as particular sub-components of the emotional dimension of customer engagement.

Definition: Customer brand engagement

Based on the findings from the literature review in the preceding and present sections, 'customer brand engagement' in the present research is defined as 'the level of an individual customer's motivational, brand-related and context-dependent state of mind characterised by specific levels of cognitive, emotional and behavioural activity in direct brand interactions'. The concept of 'direct brand interactions' refers to customers' *direct, physical* contact-based interactions with a focal brand, as opposed to indirect brand interactions that may occur, for example, by observing a brand through mass communications (Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantello, 2009). Examples of customers' 'cognitive' brand-related activity include the individual's level of concentration and/or engrossment in the brand, while 'emotional' activity may be represented by a customer's level of brand-related inspiration and/or pride (cf. Schaufeli, Martínez et al., 2002; Schaufeli, Salanova et al., 2002). Further, customers' 'behavioural' brand-related activity may be expressed through a customer's level of energy exerted in interacting with a focal brand (Patterson et al., 2006).

Table 2 Engagement conceptualisations and dimensionality in the marketing literature.

Author(s)	Research type	Construct	Definition	Engagement dimensionality
Bowden (2009)	Conceptual	Customer engagement	A psychological process that models the underlying mechanisms by which customer loyalty forms for new customers of a service brand, as well as the mechanisms by which loyalty may be maintained for repeat-purchase customers of a service brand.	Multidimensional (<i>Inferred</i>)
Ilić (2008)	Empirical: Qualitative	Consumer engagement	A contextual process that consists of interactions with 'engagement object(s)' over time and may exist at different levels.	Multidimensional: 1. Cognitive 2. Emotional 3. Behavioural 4. Aspirational 5. Social
Heath (2007)	Conceptual	Engagement with an ad	The amount of subconscious feeling occurring when an ad is being processed.	Unidimensional
Patterson et al. (2006)	Conceptual	Customer engagement	The level of a customer's physical, cognitive and emotional presence in their relationship with a service organisation.	Multidimensional: 1. Vigour 2. Dedication 3. Absorption 4. Interaction
Sprott et al. (2009)	Empirical: Quantitative	Brand engagement in self-concept (BESC)	An individual difference representing consumers' propensity to include important brands as part of how they view themselves. This conceptualisation builds on self-schemas to investigate the role of brands in the self-concept.	Unidimensional
Algesheimer et al. (2005)	Empirical: Quantitative	Brand-community engagement	Positive influences of identifying with the brand community through the consumer's intrinsic motivation to interact/co-operate with community members.	Multidimensional <i>Inferred</i> : 1. Cognitive 2. Emotional 3. Behavioural

The present conceptualisation of customer brand engagement directly builds upon Schaufeli, Martínez et al.'s (2002), Schaufeli, Salanova et al.'s (2002), and Salanova et al.'s (2005) proposed employee-engagement concept, as well as Patterson et al.'s (2006) customer-engagement conceptualisation, and, as such, incorporates a tripartite taxonomy of cognitive, behavioural, and emotional engagement elements respectively (May et al., 2004). Moreover, similar to Macey and Schneider (2008), Schaufeli, Martínez et al. (2002), and Schaufeli, Salanova et al. (2002), the present conceptualisation focuses on positively valenced expressions of customer brand engagement, which are thought to have the potential to contribute to customer loyalty outcomes (Bowden, 2009; Patterson et al., 2006).

Academic development of the customer brand-engagement concept is in its infancy to date. While pioneering, exploratory investigations centre on its conceptual development (e.g. Bowden, 2009). A literature search revealed the existence of the CE¹¹, an 11-item, consulting-led customer-engagement metric developed by The Gallup Group (Appelbaum, 2001).

CE¹¹ measures rational formulations of customer loyalty based on overall satisfaction with the brand, brand repurchase intent, and intention to recommend the brand (i.e. attitudinal loyalty). In addition, CE¹¹ incorporates eight measures of emotional attachment to a brand measured on the dimensions of brand confidence, perceived brand integrity, brand-related pride, and passion for the brand (Appelbaum, 2001). As such, the CE¹¹ incorporates relevant cognitive, emotional, and behavioural elements similar to the proposed customer brand-engagement conceptualisation.

Appelbaum (2001) posits that a customer's brand-engagement score represents the most powerful predictor of customer loyalty available (Appelbaum, 2001). Despite these advancements in the practitioner literature, academic development of the customer brand-engagement concept is lagging behind to date, while comprehensive empirical testing and validation of the CE¹¹ metric is nebulous. As such, further academic research into the nature, dynamics, and measurement of the customer brand-engagement concept is required.

Customer brand engagement: Conceptual relationships

Customer brand engagement is thought to be related to, yet is conceptually distinct from, a number of other marketing constructs (Bowden, 2009; Patterson et al., 2006). Key constructs exhibiting conceptual relationships to customer brand engagement, which were uncovered from a literature review, are listed in Table 3. Definitions for each concept, in addition to the theorised nature of relationship to customer brand engagement, and key distinctive features are provided.

Analysis of Table 3 indicates that each of the constructs addressed is of a conceptually distinct nature relative to customer brand engagement. Involvement and interactivity are viewed as antecedents required prior to the emergence of customer brand-engagement levels. Flow, although conceptually related to the cognitive and/or emotional dimensions of customer brand engagement, represents either a precursor of peak experiences, which are relatively ephemeral, transient, yet powerful, personally meaningful, and potentially transformative experiences, or may also overlap with these (Schouten, McAlexander, & Koenig, 2007). Thus in contrast to flow and peak experiences, which are relatively transient in nature, the cognitive and/or emotional dimensions of customer brand engagement reflect the potentially more

Table 3 Customer brand engagement: Relationships to other marketing constructs.

Construct	Definition	Relationship to customer brand engagement (CBE)
Involvement	An individual's level of interest and personal relevance in relation to a focal object/decision in terms of one's basic values, goals, and self-concept (Mittal, 1995; Zaichkowsky, 1985).	CBE antecedent required prior to the expression of a customer's relevant CBE level.
Interactivity	A variable characterised by some form of customer-firm interaction (Bolton & Saxena-Iyer, 2009).	CBE antecedent required prior to the expression of a customer's relevant CBE level.
Flow	A state of optimal experience characterised by focused attention, clear mind, mind and body unison, effortless concentration, complete control, loss of self-consciousness, distortion of time, and intrinsic enjoyment (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).	Although conceptually similar to the cognitive CBE dimension, flow acts as antecedent state to short-term peak experiences not directly captured by the cognitive CBE dimension (Patterson et al., 2006).
Rapport	Perceived level of harmonious, empathetic, or sympathetic connection to another, which is viewed in some way as congruent to the self (Brooks, 1989). A sense of genuine interpersonal sensitivity and concern (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993).	Potential CBE consequence in human-based customer/brand interactions (new and/or existing customers). Potential CBE antecedent (existing customers primarily).
Co-created value	Level of perceived value created in the customer's mind arising from interactive, joint, and/or personalised activities for and with stakeholders (Dall'Olmo-Riley & deChernatony, 2000; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004).	Potential CBE consequence in cases of human-based customer/brand interactions.
Brand experience	A subjective, internal consumer response (sensations, feelings, and cognitions) and behavioural responses evoked by brand-related stimuli (design, packaging, identity, communications, and environment) (Brakus et al., 2009).	Potential CBE consequence, which in contrast to the latter 'does not presume a motivational state; (Brakus et al., 2009, p. 53).
Perceived quality	A consumer's appraisal of a product/service's overall excellence/superiority (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Zeithaml, 1988).	Potential CBE consequence particularly in service and/or value co-creative contexts.
Customer satisfaction	A customer's overall evaluation of the performance of an offering to date (Gustafsson et al., 2005; Johnson & Fornell, 1991).	Potential CBE consequence (new and/or existing customers) with a potential positive relationship between these constructs (cf. Saks, 2006). Potential CBE antecedent (existing customers primarily).

(Continued)

Table 3 (Continued).

Construct	Definition	Relationship to customer brand engagement (CBE)
Trust	Consumer-perceived security and reliability in brand interactions, and the belief that the brand acts in the consumer's best interests (Delgado-Ballester et al. 2003; Rotter, 1967).	Potential CBE consequence (new and/or existing customers) with a potentially positive relationship between these constructs. Potential CBE antecedent (existing customers primarily).
Commitment	Valuing an ongoing relationship with a specific other party so as to warrant maximum efforts at maintaining it, that is, a desire to maintain the relationship (Moorman et al., 1993; Morgan & Hunt, 1994)	Potential CBE consequence (new and/or existing customers) with a potential positive relationship with the identification dimension of engagement (cf. Saks, 2006). Potential CBE antecedent (existing customers primarily).
Customer value	A consumer's overall assessment of the utility of a product/service based on perceptions of what is received and what is given (Zeithaml, 1988).	Potential CBE consequence with a potentially positive relationship between these constructs.
Brand loyalty	Repeated purchases (behavioural loyalty) prompted by a strong internal disposition (attitudinal loyalty) (Day, 1969) over a period of time (Guest, 1944).	Potential CBE consequence with a potential positive relationship between these constructs (Bowden, 2009).

pervasive, enduring disposition of the engagement construct (Schaufeli, Martínez et al., 2002; Schaufeli, Salanova et al., 2002).

Flow has been referred to as total immersion in an activity achieved through intense focus in the mastery of an activity, which may serve to motivate individuals and contribute to their psychological well-being (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Schouten et al., 2007). A further distinction is thus that while the cognitive and/or emotional dimensions of customer brand engagement may occur within a range of pre-specified levels, the occurrence of flow is restricted to higher levels on the spectrum. As such, the cognitive and/or emotional dimensions of customer brand engagement permit a more extensive range of ensuing levels relative to flow, thus potentially providing broader insights into relevant customer brand-engagement dynamics, including those at low intensity.

Moreover, while Csikszentmihalyi (1990) appears to equate the concepts of flow and engagement, engagement in the present research is viewed as a conceptually broader construct comprising three dimensions (i.e. cognitive, emotional, and behavioural), rather than cognition alone, thus providing a broader perspective of the engagement concept (cf. Bakker, Hakanen et al., 2007; Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008; Bakker, Schaufeli et al., 2008; Salanova et al., 2005). The transient nature of flow and peak experiences alike may render these variables less suitable for consumer benefit segmentation (Wedel & Kistemaker, 1989) relative to the more persistent construct of engagement (Schaufeli, Martínez et al. 2002; Schaufeli, Salanova et al., 2002).

The concepts of rapport, trust, commitment, and customer satisfaction are labelled as potential customer brand-engagement consequences for new and/or existing

customers, while these may also represent engagement antecedents primarily for existing customers. For example, while existing customers may have a level of commitment to a particular brand established *prior to* a particular brand encounter (i.e. commitment as a customer brand engagement antecedent), new customers are expected to engage first with the brand whilst only subsequently developing a level of brand commitment (i.e. commitment as a customer brand-engagement consequence). For existing customers, however, preformed commitment levels may also serve to affect customer brand-engagement levels in subsequent direct brand interactions. As a result, the role of commitment as a customer brand-engagement consequence may apply to new, as well as existing, customers. This analysis is in line with Bowden (2009), who explicitly adopts a new/existing customer dichotomy in investigating customer engagement. Further, in organisational behaviour, engagement has been viewed as conceptually distinct from commitment by virtue of its unique two-way nature (Little & Little, 2006; Robinson, Perryman, & Hayday, 2004) as addressed in the literature review.

The concept of customer brand experience represents a potential consequence of customer brand engagement. While brand experience includes a behavioural aspect evoked by brand-related stimuli, Brakus et al. (2009, p. 53) explicitly state that brand experience 'differs from motivational and affective concepts, including involvement', thus extending to engagement, in that 'it does not presume a motivational state'. By contrast, engagement and involvement alike are based on consumers' needs and values, motivating the individual toward a specific object such as a brand (Sprott et al., 2009). The motivational and/or behavioural aspect thus differentiates engagement from the customer brand-experience concept. Further, while brand experiences are characterised by individuals' cognitive, affective, and behavioural *responses* to brand-related stimuli (Brakus et al., 2009; Meyer & Schwager, 2007; Verhoef et al., 2009), customer brand engagement allows for the emergence of more proactive, as opposed to merely reactive/responsive, customer endeavours (e.g. during the service encounter), which, in turn, may generate customer-perceived co-created value. The customer experience concept encapsulates the notion of relatively ephemeral concepts of flow, and peak, experiences (Schouten et al., 2007).

Table 3 also provides further support for the particular applicability of customer brand engagement in service and/or Web 2.0 settings (Bogatyn, 2006; Bowden, 2009; Patterson et al., 2006), which may be characterised by specific forms of human interaction. The concepts of interactivity, rapport, and value co-creation in particular are highly relevant in service contexts typified by human interactive forms (Bolton & Saxena-Iyer, 2009; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). A distinction may also be made between 'value co-creation', referring to a process of the development of customer-perceived value, and 'co-created value', representing the specific level of customer-perceived value created by virtue of interactive, joint, and/or personalised activities for and with stakeholders.

Although of Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry's (1988) five service-quality dimensions, responsiveness and empathy appear conceptually most closely related to customer brand engagement in service settings, Patterson et al. (2006) highlight the distinction between *employee* and *customer* initiatives in the service encounter. Thus while responsiveness and empathy in Parasuraman et al.'s (1988) work refer to employee behaviours, the focus of the customer brand-engagement concept is on customer rather than employee behaviours, cognitions, and emotions. Further, customer brand engagement allows for the expression of a customer's preferred contextual self (Patterson et al., 2006), as opposed to the typically more scripted

nature of employee actions and behaviours. Finally, the potential contribution of customer brand engagement to the customer satisfaction, customer value, and loyalty nexus is starting to transpire in the literature (Bowden, 2009; Patterson et al., 2006).

Conceptual model

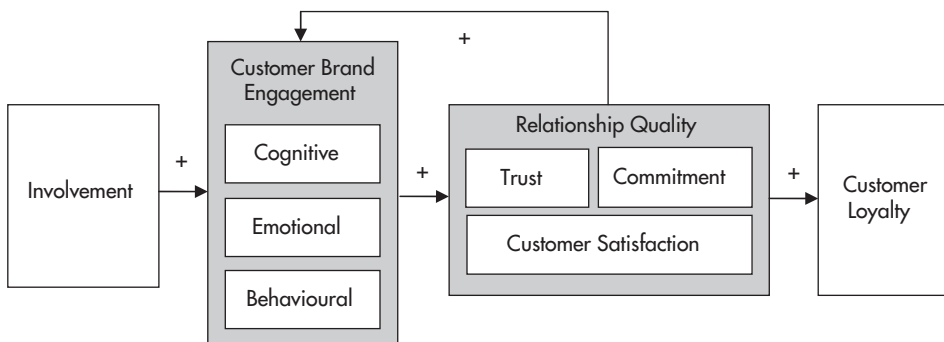
The present section introduces a conceptual model illustrating the hypothesised nature of relationships between customer brand engagement and selected concepts addressed in the previous section, which are thought to exhibit a key association to customer brand engagement. Illuminating the nature of these interrelationships also provides initial literature-based support for the conceptually distinct nature of customer brand engagement relative to other constructs.

As addressed in the previous section, the model shows consumer involvement as a customer brand-engagement antecedent. Further support for this contention is provided by Saks's (2006) investigation of employee engagement, which highlights the conceptually narrower scope of the involvement construct relative to customer brand engagement, which incorporates a behavioural aspect, in addition to cognitive and/or emotional facets. As such, a level of customer interest and/or personal relevance (Mittal, 1995; Zaichkowsky, 1985) with respect to a focal brand is required prior to the emergence of specific customer brand-engagement levels. Further, paralleling Saks (2006) in the context of employee engagement, a positive relationship is expected between these constructs as summarised by the following research proposition:

P1: Involvement is positively related to customer brand engagement.

Relationship quality represents a higher-order construct comprising the dimensions of trust, commitment, and customer satisfaction (Dorsch, Swanson, & Kelley, 1998; Ulaga & Eggert, 2006), which were defined in the preceding section and are shown in Figure 2. While the association between perceived relationship quality and customer retention has received previous attention in the literature (e.g. Hennig-Thurau & Klee, 1997), research investigating the relationship between customer brand engagement and relationship quality was not found in an extensive literature review. Saks (2006), however, identified a positive relationship between employee engagement and job

Figure 2 Conceptual model.



satisfaction, as well as organisational commitment. Analogously, the nature of these relationships may extend to the association between customer brand engagement and customer satisfaction and commitment.

Further, the concepts of consumer trust and commitment have been found to share a positive association in previous research (e.g. Ganesan & Hess, 1997; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Consequently, customer brand engagement is expected to be positively related to trust. Further, for existing customers who have relevant, pre-established levels of satisfaction, trust, and commitment with a focal brand, extant perceived relationship quality levels may act as antecedents to customer brand engagement, as addressed in the previous section and indicated in Figure 2 by the reversely directed arrow between these constructs. The above rationale is summarised by the following proposition:

P2: Customer brand engagement is positively related to relationship quality.

Hewett, Money, and Sharma (2002) report a significant relationship between buyers' perceived relationship quality and their repurchase intentions. Moreover, Hennig-Thurau and Klee (1997, p. 755) equate the concepts of customer retention and loyalty. Although controversy exists regarding the nature of the relationship quality/loyalty relationship, the traditional, linear model of the association between these concepts has received widespread support in the literature (Hennig-Thurau & Klee, 1997). Based on this analysis, the following proposition was developed:

P3: Relationship quality is positively related to customer loyalty.

Customer brand engagement/loyalty segmentation

Based on the preceding analysis, a preliminary customer engagement/loyalty taxonomy was developed, which is shown in Figure 3. The model is applicable to customers' direct brand interactions, which occur during first-hand, physical contact with the brand, as opposed to indirect interactions where a brand is presented, for example, through forms of mass communication (Hoch & Ha, 1986). While the extant CE¹¹ customer brand-engagement measurement instrument addressed may be

Figure 3 Preliminary customer brand engagement/loyalty segmentation.

		Customer Brand Engagement	
		Low	High
Loyalty	High	Apathists	Activists
	Low	Exits	Variety Seekers

subject to tenuous levels of relevant forms of validity, this instrument may be used to approximate customer brand-engagement levels in the absence of a psychometrically validated academic instrument to date.

The purpose of the present section is to place a caveat on the implicit suggestion made in previous research that customer engagement is implied to share a positive, linear relationship with customer loyalty (e.g. Bowden, 2009; Patterson et al., 2006). Specifically, the literature to date suggests a positive nature of the customer brand engagement/loyalty relationship (cf. Bowden, 2009), supporting the notion that appropriate levels and forms of customer-perceived stimulation/activity and minimised customer tedium (e.g. in services) are expected to impact favourably on satisfaction and loyalty ratings under all circumstances.

The present section, however, challenges this contention by asserting that while higher customer brand-engagement levels may contribute to enhanced customer loyalty outcomes up to a particular point, further customer brand engagement increases beyond this optimum may be detrimental to customer loyalty outcomes for particular customer segment(s). As such, a curvilinear, rather than linear, relationship may be observed between customer brand engagement and customer loyalty for particular consumer segment(s), as elucidated in the present section.

The conceptual rationale underlying this assertion is based on the concept of occupational 'burnout', which is referred to as a work- and/or study-related stress reaction (Bakker, Van Emmerik, & Euwema, 2006). As such, burnout may occur because of excessive employee- and/or student-engagement levels (Schaufeli, Salanova et al., 2002). Analogously, Wright's (2008) review of task engagement under high-performance conditions reports that task engagement increases with (a) increasing levels of an individual's self-perceived performance capacity, for example, striving driven by expectations of success, yet also (b) decreasing levels of an individual's self-perceived capacity to perform based on a potential 'compensatory function' of engagement in performance circumstances. For example, a modestly gifted athlete may make up for a reduced performance capacity by expending herself to an extra degree. In both cases, excessive engagement levels may lead to fatigue and/or draining in the individual (Wright, 2008). A similar rationale may apply to customer brand engagement, which at excessive levels may generate customer draining and/or fatigue potentially detrimental to customer loyalty outcomes. The specific extent and/or dynamics associated with such potential 'customer draining', however, may vary across different customer segments. Therefore, an engagement-based customer loyalty segmentation is proposed in the present section.

Specifically, Figure 3 shows four hypothesised customer segments classified based on exhibited customer brand engagement and ensuing loyalty levels. First, the 'apathist' segment is characterised by relatively low customer brand engagement, yet displays comparatively high levels of loyalty. These customers, who may experience a level of brand-related inertia, may prevail in necessities/utilitarian product categories and/or where few choice alternatives are perceived. Based on their relatively moderate customer brand-engagement levels, this segment is not expected to exhibit a particular propensity to customer draining and/or fatigue. Analogously, in the context of viewer engagement with television viewing, Burns and Anderson (1993) report that 'inertial engagement' does not carry over from one look at television to the next, thus suggesting individuals' ability to detach themselves from the particular stimulus (in this case the television), which is thought to be inversely related to customer fatigue and/or draining.

Second, 'exits' are relatively low-engaged customers who tend to act as expected by leaving the organisation. Similar to the apathist segment, the comparatively low

customer brand-engagement levels observed for this segment induce a relatively limited probability of brand-related fatigue and/or draining in apathist customers (cf. Wright, 2008). Third, 'activists' are highly engaged, relatively loyal customers who appear desirable in an organisation's customer base (cf. Bowden, 2009; Reichheld & Sasser, 1990). In contrast to the apathist and exit segments, inference made from Wright (2008) indicates that activist customers may be more prone to customer fatigue and/or draining based on their relatively high exhibited customer brand-engagement levels, which may exert an adverse effect on loyalty outcomes for these customers. For instance, undue levels of customer-perceived physical and/or emotional fatigue developed because of a particular direct brand interaction (e.g. a service encounter) may reduce the individual's propensity to repurchase the particular brand.

Fourth 'variety seekers', despite being highly engaged customers, tend to defect from the organisation nevertheless. In contrast to exits, however, variety seekers are more likely to continue their custom in the category (i.e. brand switching), rather than discontinuing their category purchases altogether. Further, based on these individuals' inclination to switch brands, their degree of brand-related fatigue and/or draining may be difficult to trace back to a single brand (cf. Wright, 2008).

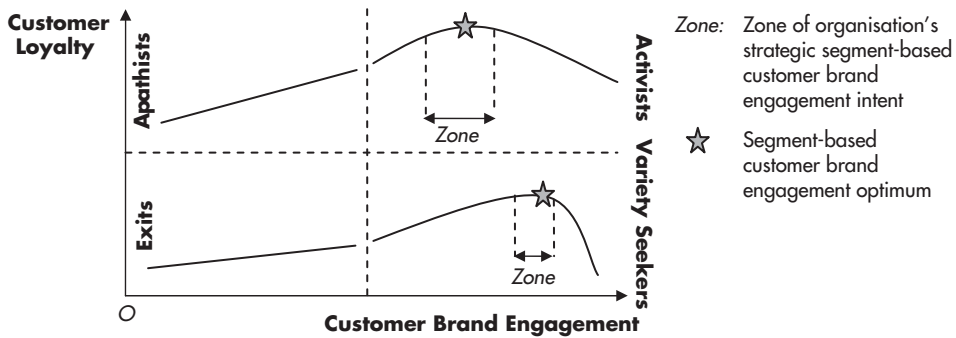
Based on the present analysis, the organisation may incur a strategic risk, for instance where activist customers migrate to a strategically less attractive segment, such as the variety seekers, who display lower loyalty levels. Thus while organisations may reap customer loyalty-related benefits from elevated customer brand-engagement levels up to a point, an optimal such engagement level may exist for specific segments beyond which further engagement increases may have a detrimental effect on loyalty.

For the activist segment, the customer brand engagement/loyalty nexus may, therefore, be more appropriately modelled using a curvilinear, rather than linear, association. Such curvilinear association has also been observed for fear and humour appeals used in advertising (Eisend, 2009; Tanner, Hunt, & Eppright, 1991). For example, Bryant, Brown, Silberberg, and Elliott (1981) report low humour levels incurring essentially the same level of persuasion as no humour, while the extensive use of humour was found detrimental to persuasion. Similarly, while the use of a fear appeal in advertising may assist persuasion up to a particular threshold of tolerance, use of additional fear appeals beyond this threshold becomes counterproductive in generating persuasion (Janis, 1967), and may even contribute to message rejection (Tay & Watson, 2002).

Based on the literature reviewed on occupational burnout (e.g. Bakker et al., 2006), task engagement (Wright, 2008) and fear and/or humour appeals in advertising (e.g. Janis, 1967), increasing customer brand-engagement levels in the activist segment may thus generate enhanced customer loyalty only up to a particular engagement optimum, after which loyalty starts to decline, as shown in Figure 4. Customer brand-engagement levels within a particular latitude of this optimum, which may vary by industry, organisation, and/or consumer (Srivastava et al., 1984), may be viewed from an organisation's perspective as a 'zone of favourable segment-based customer brand-engagement levels' contributing to organisational strategic objectives, including customer loyalty enhancement. Customer brand-engagement-focused organisations may thus purport to optimise segment-based customer numbers within their particular strategic zone.

Second, the variety seeker segment, although highly engaged, is predicted to be less prone to developing brand-related fatigue and/or draining relative to the activist segment because these customers are more likely to switch brands within a category or adopt brand substitutes. Therefore, a steeply declining slope beyond the identified

Figure 4 Illustrative scenario – Customer brand engagement/loyalty nexus by segment.



customer brand-engagement optimum is observed for this segment based on the relatively high propensity of these customers to defect from the organisation. Consequently, a key strategic challenge with respect to the variety-seeker segment is to optimise customer brand-engagement levels, which, once captured appropriately, are expected to extend the period of these customers' loyalty to a focal brand. Ultimately, however, customers in this segment, fuelled by their desire for new experiences, are expected to defect from the organisation, thus giving rise to a potentially steeply declining curve beyond the customer brand-engagement optimum, as shown in Figure 4. Scrutiny of the activists' and variety seekers' specific zones of strategically desirable customer brand-engagement levels also indicates a potentially varying width of the relevant zones across these segments.

Third, the apathist segment, characterised by relatively low customer brand engagement yet high loyalty, may experience a level of brand-related inertia in their purchase decisions. Based on these characteristics, these customers are less likely to show sharply declining loyalty relative to the activist or variety-seeker segments. Organisations, however, may be challenged to capitalise fully on these customers' attitudinal loyalty expressions, such as recommendations and positive word-of-mouth communications, based on their relatively low engagement with the brand. Therefore, as shown in Figure 4, elevating apathist customers' brand engagement levels is expected to generate enhanced customer loyalty (cf. Bowden, 2009), which may be attitudinal and/or behavioural in nature. When increasing levels reach the high brand engagement threshold, customers may migrate to the activist segment.

Fourth, while the exits segment similarly is characterised by relatively low customer brand engagement, these customers exhibit a corresponding low loyalty level, thus behaving as expected (Bowden, 2009). While the customer brand engagement/loyalty relationship for these customers may be of a positive, linear nature, that is, with customer brand engagement increases generating enhanced loyalty, the slope may be less pronounced relative to that observed for the apathist segment as shown in Figure 4 because these customers are more likely to switch to a different brand and/or category as a result of their lower loyalty levels.

The preceding analysis has identified differential customer brand engagement and ensuing customer-loyalty outcomes to occur across the four proposed segments of apathists, activists, exits, and variety seekers. The analysis has further illuminated that while a linear, positive customer brand engagement/loyalty relationship may be observed for the relatively low-engaged segments of apathists and exits, as consistent

with pioneering academic and practitioner literature on engagement in marketing (e.g. Bowden, 2009; Patterson et al., 2006), the nature of the particular association may be more appropriately modelled using a curvilinear association for the highly engaged segments of activists and variety seekers.

Implications and future research

The present paper has reviewed literature on engagement across a range of disciplines, and proposed its integration into the study of customer loyalty. Despite widespread adoption of the term, the literature review indicated the existence of considerable semantic and definitional confusion surrounding the engagement concept across a range of disciplines, including marketing. As such, the underdeveloped state of the engagement concept merits future research to be undertaken in this area (Little & Little, 2006).

Based on growing practitioner and academic interest in marketing applications of the engagement concept, a tripartite customer brand-engagement conceptualisation was developed in the present paper, followed by a discussion of the conceptual relationships between customer brand engagement and other marketing constructs, thus providing preliminary support for the construct validity of the customer brand-engagement concept. A conceptual model and associated research propositions were developed, which may be used to guide future research in this area. Moreover, a customer brand engagement/loyalty-based segmentation framework was proposed, which predicts potentially differential consumer behaviour outcomes across the proposed segments of activists, variety seekers, apathists, and exits. As such, the present analysis generates a number of research and practitioner implications.

Future research implications include, first, the need for further conceptual development of relevant customer/consumer and/or other stakeholders' engagement in marketing (cf. Greenwood, 2007). While initial investigations have typically centred on customer/consumer engagement, the paradigmatic shift from traditional transactional, towards more relational and/or network perspectives on marketing (Merz, He, & Vargo, 2009) calls for the development of additional marketing-based engagement forms. Further, insights into the specific drivers of customer brand engagement are limited to date, as well as any interactions between these variables, which may be illuminated in future research.

Second, empirical testing and validation of the proposed tripartite customer brand-engagement conceptualisation and its interrelationships with other marketing constructs are required for further advancements to be made in this area. Specifically, the future development of a psychometrically sound customer brand-engagement measurement instrument is pivotal. To this end, investigations may undertake psychometric testing of The Gallup Group's consulting-led CE¹¹ customer-engagement metric, or develop novel conceptualisations. Furthermore, while customer loyalty is viewed as a customer brand-engagement consequence in the present research (cf. the conceptual model), the concept is incorporated as an explicit customer-engagement dimension in the CE¹¹ metric (Appelbaum, 2001). Therefore, further conceptual refinement is needed to attest the nature of the customer brand engagement/loyalty relationship. Further, empirical testing of the research propositions specified in the proposed conceptual model is required in order to obtain enhanced insights into the relationships of the customer

brand-engagement concept to other focal marketing constructs. Formal tests for establishing the construct validity of customer brand engagement are also required.

Moreover, empirical exploration and validation of the proposed four-part customer brand engagement/loyalty segmentation are needed to investigate the extent to which distinct customer brand-engagement levels may generate differential loyalty outcomes across relevant consumer segments. For example, while the present analysis suggests a potential (curvi)linear nature of the customer brand engagement/loyalty relationship across the four proposed customer segments, statistical modelling (e.g. through cluster-analytic procedures) and empirical testing/validation of this segment-based association are needed under a range of consumer, organisation, industry, and/or other contextual conditions. For instance, what proportion of an organisation's customers resides in each of the hypothesised engagement-based segments of apathists, activists, exits, and variety seekers, and how stable are these over time?

Further, little is known as to the strategic factors and/or actions required to maintain customer brand-engagement levels within the organisation's 'zone of strategic customer brand engagement intent' for specific customer segments. Further insights into the types of strategic organisational actions contributing to elevated customer brand-engagement levels up to the engagement optimum would also be valuable to marketing scholars and practitioners alike. Moreover, which factors drive customers' slipping brand-engagement levels, and what can be done to recoup these? Moreover, comparative research into customer brand-engagement levels and dynamics across industries and cultures is required to elucidate further the nature of the construct.

Paralleling the increasing academic interest in customer engagement is a surge in practitioner interest in the concept based largely on its expected benefits, with a particular focus on improved ability to predict and/or explain customer loyalty outcomes. Since the cost of retaining current customers is substantially lower than that of acquiring new ones (Reichheld & Sasser, 1990), customer relationships, retention, and loyalty are paramount in today's highly competitive business environments (Grönroos, 2007). Customer brand engagement may thus facilitate insights into, and help to explain and/or predict better such loyalty outcomes, as illuminated in this paper.

Therefore, managerial implications arising from the present paper may include enhanced practitioner awareness of customer brand engagement, an emerging new performance metric that is thought to represent a superior predictor of customer loyalty outcomes relative to traditional measures, including perceived quality and satisfaction (Appelbaum, 2001; Bowden, 2009). As such, strategic initiatives purporting to elevate relevant customer brand-engagement levels are expected to generate enhanced customer loyalty outcomes. However, despite the promising nature of preliminary findings, further research is first needed to clarify the nature, roles, and potential benefits of customer brand engagement before managers will be able to capitalise fully on its benefits.

Further, this paper has purported to prompt managerial awareness of the potentially distinct loyalty outcomes across differentially engaged customer segments. For example, while previous research suggests a positive, linear relationship between customer engagement and loyalty, the present paper has highlighted that excessive customer brand-engagement levels, which may occur in specific, highly engaged customer segments, may be detrimental, rather than beneficial, to the development of customer loyalty outcomes. Further refinement and empirical testing/validation of this contention are, however, first needed before

managers will be able to leverage the expected benefits of customer brand engagement addressed in the present analysis.

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