



# CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT AND SOCIAL MEDIA: A REVIEW OF EXISTING LITERATURE

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**Abstract:** The concept of customer engagement is of great importance in marketing, and the opportunities provided by social media to foster close relationships with customers have further increased the importance of this concept. With the advent of social media, practitioners seem to be excited about harnessing the potential of it in a wide variety of industries worldwide, and the academic scholarship alike seems to be interested in exploring the concept of customer engagement through social media. Being an emerging field, the objective of this study is to take stock of existing literature to consolidate the findings of previous studies and to offer suggestions to decision makers for maintaining close relationships with their valuable customers through the power of social media.

**IndexTerms - Customer Engagement, Social Media, Customer Engagement and Social Media.**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Customer engagement (CE hereafter) is widely regarded as a vital agenda that marketers today must actively pursue if they wish to build long term customer interactions and relationships and solidify customer loyalty for their brands (Lim, et. al., 2022; Rosenbaum, et. al., 2017). It is considered critical for the success of all organisations operating across diverse industries, including services (Larivière, et. al., 2017), tourism (Leung, et. al., 2013), retail (Rapp, et. al., 2013), sports (Aichner, 2019), and public health and behavioural change (Bannor, et. al., 2017) and has been linked to a number of positive consequences, such as improved brand image (Blasco-Arcas, et. al., 2016), brand value (France, et. al., 2016), self-brand connection and brand usage intent (Hollebeek, et. al., 2014). The Gallup study accentuates the benefits of keeping customers engaged, noting that engaged customers account for increases in revenue of 7 to 23%, whereas disengaged customers lead to revenue reductions of 1 to 13% (Kumar and Pansari, 2016). Recognizing the importance of this concept, global professional marketing bodies such as the Marketing Science Institute (2018; 2020) have added CE twice to their priority, for 2018 to 2020 and for 2020 to 2022, respectively, to assist marketing professionals in determining the most efficient strategies to create long-lasting engagement with their customers. The concept of customer engagement has been discussed in the academic literature since 2005, however, its popularity can be traced only to 2010 (Lim, et. al., 2022), coinciding with the popularity of social media.

The advent of internet technology and, in particular, social media has revolutionized every aspect of marketing communication, and CE is not an exception. Social media offers several opportunities to foster personal relationships with customers because of its interactive aspects. According to Shawky et al. (2019), the three main marketing advantages of social media are targeted reach, continuing interactions, and relationship building. It offers companies multiple ways to reach consumers, communicate with them, and measure their preferences and purchase-related behaviors (Hennig-Thurau, et. al., 2010). Social media is therefore a crucial tool for marketers that want to interact with customers. Realizing the significance of investment in the digital space, brands around the world have increased their spending in the digital environment (Bhattacharjee, 2020; Cramer-Flood, 2021). To promote stronger customer engagement, nine out of ten medium and large firms spend at least 11% of their overall marketing budget on social media sites like Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Pinterest, and LinkedIn (Harvard Business Review, 2018). Studies have reported that many brands have benefited from enhancing their engagement with target customers using digital technologies, especially through social media, which is instantaneously available, highly accessible, and widely used by society today (Hennig-Thurau, et. al., 2010; Hollebeek, et. al., 2014; Lim, et. al., 2021). A brief overview of the field indicates that the CE literature is relatively recent yet incredibly rich. The rich insights that have accumulated need to be consolidated so that new research is cognizant of the past research. Therefore, a review of customer engagement on social media will help to better understand how CE is manifested on social media, including its antecedents and consequences.

## 2. OBJECTIVE OF THE PAPER

The objective of this article is to review the conceptual and empirical studies to provide an overview of the CE to help marketing scholars and practitioners to position CE in right perspective.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

In their bibliometric review, Lim, et. al., (2022) concluded that the last five years (2016 to 2020) have been the most productive years for CE research, with an average of 50 articles published annually and a total of 649 articles published during this

time, where greater connectivity made possible through the technology advancement brought by the fourth industrial revolution (such as artificial intelligence, big data, machine learning, internet of things) was a defining theme of this era. Consequently, the present review only considers the select CE articles from the last decade that were published in highly ranked academic journals.

We started our review by locating databases for data retrieval. We referred to articles published via Emerald, ScienceDirect, ProQuest, EBSCO, SAGE Journals, JSTOR, and Google Scholar, the most popular online academic databases and search engines. Second, data-screening keywords were identified; the terms “customer engagement”, “consumer engagement”, and “customer engagement and social media” were used to search article titles to identify CE and social media related articles. Finally, of the refereed papers collected in Step 2, seventy-five scholarly articles that were found most relevant to the study were reviewed.

## 4. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 4.1 Customer Engagement Conceptualization

Varied conceptualizations of customer engagement (CE) appear in the literature. According to Brodie, et. al. (2011), CE is a psychological state that “occurs by virtue of interactive, co-creative customer experiences with a focal agent/object (e.g., a brand) in focal service relationships” (p. 260). Hollebeek (2014) defined CE as “a consumer's positively valenced cognitive, emotional and behavioral brand-related activity during, or related to, specific consumer/brand interactions” (p. 151). In contrast, van Doorn, et. al., (2010) explored CE as a behavioral construct, stated that CE is “the customers’ behavioral manifestation toward a brand or firm, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers” (p. 253). Focusing on the experiential and interactive elements of CE, Vivek, et. al., (2012) view CE as “the intensity of an individual’s participation in and connection with an organization’s offerings or organizational activities, which either the customer or the organization initiates” (p. 133). Sashi (2012) explains that the interactive nature of social media facilitates the process of moving customers from one stage to another to establish “enduring intimate relationships”, suggesting that the engagement building process comprises a cycle consisting of seven stages of engagement, namely, connection, interaction, satisfaction, retention, commitment, advocacy, and engagement. The most recent conceptualization came from Lim, et. al., (2022) who argued that the lack of consensus on the conceptualization and operationalization of CE does not necessarily pose a problem and sought to reconcile the varied manifestations of CE, noting that “CE is a concept that can accommodate and be approached from diverse perspectives as long as the perspective captures and explains the “nature of interaction” (e.g., type, characteristic) that customers exhibit, which can then be extrapolated for scrutiny against marketing actions in the pursuit of encouraging desired (e.g., brand loyalty) or discouraging undesired (e.g., brand switching) customer behaviour” (p. 441).

The concept of CE has been approached by the researchers either as a unidimensional or as a multidimensional construct. From a unidimensional perspective, CE has been measured using behavioral conceptualizations including positive and negative word of mouth (Ahmad and Sun, 2018; Choi and Kandampully, 2019), e-WOM (Liu, et. al., 2019), willingness to suggest (Choi and Kandampully, 2019). CE has also been measured using revenue-related indicators such as loyalty card swipes and discounts offered at concessions (Aluri, et. al., 2019). However, majority of the marketing related studies have examined CE from a multidimensional lens involving cognitive, affective (emotion), and conative (or behavior) elements in order to account for its complexity. When approached as a multidimensional construct, the dimensions of CE seem to differ significantly from one study to another. For example, five dimensions of CE based in the form of valence, modality, scope, nature of impact, and customer goals, have been identified by Van Doorn, et. al., (2010), whereas, So, et. al., (2014) defined CE based on five other dimensions in the form of identification, attention, absorption, enthusiasm, and interaction. Ballantyne, et. al., (2011) classified engagement into experiential and reflective dimensions. Acknowledging that CE includes customers’ non-transactional and transactional interactions, Itani, et. al., (2019) considered customers’ purchases, referrals, social interaction, and knowledge sharing as CE dimensions. Li, et. al., (2017) considered CE relative to review volume, review helpfulness (as measured by votes), average review valence, and popularity ranking.

### 4.2 Customer Engagement on Social Media

Social media is essentially "a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of web 2.0, which allow the creation and exchange of user generated content" (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). One of the most profound effects of information technology on business is how social media tools are radically altering how we interact, collaborate, consume, and create. Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and Pinterest are believed to capture the "wisdom of the crowd" because they have millions of daily users. It has enabled customers to access brand-related information within their fingertips (Lamberton and Stephen, 2016). Furthermore, the ease of setting up and using social media has allowed customers today to easily and openly express their attitudes and opinions toward various brands through comments, likes, or shares (Buzeta, et. al., 2020). In this way, social media has contributed to the transformation of customers into active participants (Hollebeek et al., 2014) and co-creators of brand stories (de Vries and Carlson, 2014). The strength of the modern online (i.e., social media-based) CE strategy is that it enables brands and customers to reciprocally engage beyond location and time boundaries (Barari, et. al., 2021). Social media not only allows direct customer-brand exchanges but also exchanges between customers themselves (Carlson, et. al., 2018), thus making CE more complex and dynamic in the online environment. Traditional offline CE processes rely on one-way or linear communication, which allows brands to engage with customers but limits the ability of customers to engage with brands (Greve, 2014). Notably, social media enables businesses the chance to quickly develop CE through open, direct connection and provides them with analytical tools that allow them to assess the efficacy of their engagement with their target customers (Greve, 2014; Labrecque, 2014). This underlines the power of social media for building CE.

Therefore, in a highly networked society of social media, marketers are no longer the only generators of organization’s messages, nor do they have full control over the content of their messages, while customers act as information providers, reviewers and influencers, who increasingly impact other customers’ preferences and purchase decisions (Gómez, et. al., 2019). According to Harmeling, et. al., (2017) Customers are "pseudo-marketers" who frequently have more influence, lower costs, and have a wider audience than their firm-based counterparts. According to Brodie, et. al., (2013), customer engagement on social media enables users to advocate for brands, share personal experiences, and suggest methods to develop their talents. They explain customers are engaged in brand communities through a highly involved process centered on "learning, sharing, advocating, socializing, and co-developing". In a similar vein, Shawky, et al. (2019) highlight social marketing programmes that encouraged peer-to-peer conversations to foster

supportive communities and encourage customers to address their own problems, ask for assistance, express themselves creatively, and share their private experiences were successful due to customer engagement on social media. Additionally, they discuss the use of social media to encourage client involvement in the co-creation of programme activities and designs. A different study by Evans-Lacko et al. (2013) used social media to ask for donations from customers to plan a neighbourhood event intended to engage the community and organisations in combatting stigma and prejudice against persons who have mental health challenges. Among other things, these studies highlight the ramifications of encouraging customer engagement through social media and acknowledge the proactive function that customers play as trade partners and value providers.

In reality, social media is a popular and frequently-utilized tool for developing consumer-brand interactions. Among the social media platforms that brands frequently utilize to interact with their customers are Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, Snapchat, TikTok, and Twitter (Arora, et. al., 2019). Particularly for many brands, Facebook has become the primary platform for customer-brand interactions (Brodie, et. al., 2013). Existing studies have shown that CE in the online setting has a favourable effect on a variety of brand- and customer-related outcomes, including brand evaluations, loyalty, trust, customer purchase intentions and satisfaction (Brodie, et. al., 2013; So, et. al., 2020). In addition, the development of novel and interactive technologies like gamification, virtual reality, augmented reality, and artificial intelligence has the potential to serve as cutting-edge tools to promote CE. For instance, using latent insights from big data machine learning, artificial intelligence can enable brands to better understand their customers and enhance CE. Similarly, virtual reality holds the potential to empower marketers in the curation of personalized, immersive and engaging customer experience in a completely virtual environment (Hollebeek, et. al., 2014). Another promising venue for CE is augmented reality which adds digital elements to live view, thereby providing more freedom for users and more opportunities for marketers. Augmented reality can be used to curate CE in a real-world setting in creative, enjoyable, and playful ways (Heller, et. al., 2021). The idea of gamification also has enormous potential for CE; in recent years, several firms have invested in implementing gamification to increase the effectiveness of their overall marketing initiatives.

### 4.3 Antecedents and Consequences of Customer Engagement on Social Media

Barger, et. al., (2016) identified five categories, each of antecedents and consequences of CE on social media. Specifically, brand factors (e.g, attitude toward brand, brand warmth etc), product factors (e.g, experience with product, product quality etc), consumer factors (attachment to social media, personality traits etc), content factors (e.g, attitude toward content, commerciality of message etc), and social media factors (e.g, perceived usefulness and ease of use, platform characteristics and norms) are the antecedents. Using qualitative comparative analysis, Gligor, et. al., (2019) examined the role of brand related factors such as perceived brand interactivity, brand involvement, brand trust, brand loyalty, satisfaction with the brand, and commitment in positively impacting customer engagement on social media and the results were found in affirmative. On the other hand, brand effects (e.g, brand associations, brand awareness, etc), product effects (e.g, attitude towards product, etc), consumer effects (e.g, consumer power, social capital etc), content effects (e.g, attitude towards ratings and reviews, re-sharing information etc), and market effects (e.g, diffusion of information, purchase intention, sales, etc) are the consequences, where CE is assessed in relation to important social media usage metrics including expressions of agreement, ratings, comments, and shares (Barger and Labrecque, 2013). In the context of hospitality and tourism, So, et. al., (2020) identified six categories of antecedents of CE on social media. These are motivational drivers (individual's desire, prior knowledge), relational drivers (trust, satisfaction, commitment), organizational drivers (error management culture, management responses on websites), situational drivers (time frame), pursuit of special interest, and organizational barriers. Furthermore, four categories of consequences were related to cognitive evaluative outcomes, affective evaluative outcomes, behavioral/intentional outcomes, and economic outcomes.

In their recent systematic review using PRISMA protocol, Lim and Rasul, (2022) were more comprehensive in identifying the antecedents and consequences of customer engagement on social media. Consequently, eight categories of antecedents were identified by them that could influence/explain customer engagement on social media, and they were related to (1) brands, (2) customers, (3) industries, (4) marketers, (5) messages, (6) platforms, (7) societies, and (8) values. Specifically, four brand-related antecedents that encapsulate the characteristics of brands, eleven customer-related antecedents that are related to the attributes of customers, and three marketer-related antecedents that refer to the characteristics and behavior of marketers were discovered. In general, brand-related antecedents (e.g., Garg, et. al., 2020), customer-related antecedents (e.g., Algharabat, et. al., 2020; Hollebeek et al., 2014; Solem and Pedersen, 2016) and marketer-related antecedents (e.g., Agnihotri, 2020; Guesalaga, 2016) were found to have a positive impact on CE on social media. Industry-related antecedents that relate to the factors influenced or shaped by the industry were found to have a mixed impact on CE on social media (Wang and Lee, 2020; Agnihotri, 2020). The features of messages that marketers develop and convey to customers that may have an effect on the customers' participation in social media are known as message-related antecedents. Ten message-related antecedents were found, and the majority of them might be used to manipulate CE on social media (e.g., Wu, et. al., 2019; Ashley and Tuten, 2015; Bai and Yan, 2020; Lee, et. al., 2020). Platform-related antecedents encapsulate the characteristics of social media and five platform-related antecedents were revealed. It was discovered that the nature of antecedent determines the impact of platform-related antecedents on CE on social media. Particularly, social media platforms that demand more work and expose users to more dangers (such as privacy concerns) are likely to discourage CE, whereas platforms that can deliver on their promises and can entertain users in a reliable way are likely to encourage them to use social media (Al-Mamun, et. al., 2020; Quach, et. al., 2019). Social-related antecedents consist of social influences and only one social-related antecedent was revealed i.e., social influence. Since it just examines the impact of friends and family on CE on social media, the antecedent that was discovered was relatively general. Lastly, the advantages that customers stand to gain from using social media are value-related antecedents. Six value-related antecedents were uncovered by Lim and Rasul, (2022) and were found to have a positive impact on CE on social media (e.g., Carlson, et. al., 2019; de Veries and Carlson, 2014; Loureiro and Lopes, 2019; Quach, et. al., 2019).

On the other hand, the outcomes/consequences were grouped into four categories, and they were related to (1) business, (2) brand, (3) customer, and (4) social media. A single business outcome (i.e., business performance) was revealed by Lim and Rasul (2022), as a result of CE on social media. In their empirical study, Bai and Yan, (2020) concluded that CE on social media has a positive impact on business performance comprising of financial performance, market performance, and net profits/returns. Brand-related outcomes pertain to the consequences for brands as a result of their engagement with customers on social media. Thirteen brand-related outcomes were identified by them and in particular, CE on social media enables brands to better connect with customers (Hollebeek, et. al., 2014), creates better brand image and responsiveness in the eyes of customers (Loureiro and Lopes, 2019; Oliveira

and Fernandes, 2020). The effects of CE on social media on the customers themselves are referred to as customer-related outcomes. Two customer-related outcomes were revealed and were positively related to CE on social media (Meire, et. al., 2019; Shah, et. al., 2019). Social media-related outcomes refer to the effects of CE on social media, on social media itself and two social media related outcomes were revealed and it was found that CE on social media produce no significant effect in shaping/reshaping customer perceptions of social media quality in the consumer market (Algharabat, et. al., 2020). However, this engagement could motivate the use of social media for sales (Guesalaga, 2016).

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The research community has largely acknowledged the role played by social media in creating customer engagement and companies all around the world are using these tools more frequently and incorporating them into their communication strategy in an effort to engage customers in dialogue. However, CE on social media is a relatively new marketing phenomenon and there is a need to discover how CE on social media should be created, tracked, and measured (Barger and Labrecque, 2013) as it has an important implication for academic community, practitioners as well as policy makers and it presents a window of opportunity for continued academic research.

The above review suggests that customer engagement is being treated as uni-dimensional as well as multi-dimensional concept, while the multi-dimensional approach dominate the marketing studies with varied definitions across different contexts. It is significant to note that, despite the lack of agreement on the definition of customer engagement, there is agreement on its significance and contribution to the company/brand. Moreover, the increasing growth of digital technologies has also motivated CE research in the digital environment (Hollebeek, et. al., 2014), with CE on social media is getting a lot of attention (Sashi, 2012; Solem and Pedersen, 2016), which could be explained by the platform's ability to increase brand engagement through sponsored ads as well as organic means (e.g., brand communities) (Algharabat, et. al., 2020; Solem and Pedersen, 2016). There are an increasing number of authors studying it in different industries and geographies with empirical studies being widely used (Rosado-Pinto and Loureiro, 2020). The concept has been widely studied with other related concepts such as customer involvement, satisfaction, and trust.

## 6. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

In general, conceptual discussions appear to dominate the existing customer engagement literature, there is a need for research offering practical insight into how digital communications impact organizations (Bianchi and Andrews, 2015). Most marketing research have examined the relationship between CE and other customer-related concepts such brand attachment, commitment, participation, loyalty, satisfaction, trust, and value. The empirical analysis and discussion offered in these works (France, et. al., 2016; Dwivedi, 2015; Kumar and Nayak, 2019; Vivek, et. al., 2012) make several attempts to determine which of the associated marketing concepts can be understood as the antecedents of CE and which ones should be seen as the consequences of CE. Clarification of CE's nomological network is thus necessary.

As mentioned above, social media platforms have made it easier for customers to freely share personal stories about their experiences with brands (Dolan, et. al., 2016). Understanding the value of storytelling for CE on various social media platforms needs to be improved. While previous studies have shed light on the effects of positive and negative valence on CE (Heinonen, 2018), little is known about their specific effects on each CE dimension (e.g., cognitive, emotional, behavioral) and how brands can go about leveraging on positive valence and mitigating or responding to negative valence in order to curate desired forms of CE through social media (Lim, et. al., 2022). Furthermore, research on CE through new-age tools (Artificial Intelligence, Virtual Reality, Augmented Reality, and Gamification) remains in its infancy due to the lack of integrated conceptual frameworks and empirical evidences that can provide comprehensive and convincing explanations about these technologies for CE so that marketers can make an informed decision of the type of technology that they wish to leverage upon to curate CE (Heller, et. al., 2021). Therefore, future research examining how new-age tools can be used to foster CE is warranted.

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