

Online Customer Engagement and Brand Love

More brands increasingly engage customers online in an attempt to develop customers' brand love towards the brand. However, the effectiveness of such a strategy is still unclear. Drawing on the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, the study aims to investigate both the bright and dark sides of online customer engagement in building brand love. Customer empowerment (bright side) and stress (dark side) are proposed as the mediators in the relationship between customer engagement and brand love. Extroversion is postulated to be the moderator. Findings from 205 survey responses indicate that empowerment positively mediates the impact of online customer engagement on brand love whereas stress negatively mediates the link. Extroversion only moderates the engagement-stress link. The study deepens our understanding of the online engagement strategy by providing empirical evidence of the underlying mechanism between customer engagement and brand love in the virtual community.

Keywords: *Brand love, Online customer engagement, Conservation of resources theory.*

Introduction and Research Aim

Developing brand love is vital in building brand relationship nowadays (Palusuk, Koles and Hasan, 2019). The rapid development of digital technology fosters brands to adopt marketing strategies in the online platform, of which social media platforms have been used extensively by brands to engage customers in recent years (Alvarez and Fournier, 2016). Previous research has stated that customer engagement plays a significant role in eliciting brand loyalty and customer satisfaction (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006). However, calls for research exist to investigate customer engagement across contexts and countries because the effect of customer engagement in specific contexts may differ (Calder, Malthouse and Maslowska, 2016). Furthermore, while brands invest many resources to engage customers in the virtual community (Johnson, 2016) particularly social media platforms (i.e., online customer engagement in this paper), the effectiveness of such strategies on brands such as brand love is still unknown. Our research question is thus related to the extent to which online customer engagement facilitates brand love and how it works for brand love. Drawing on the COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989), we propose that online customer engagement bears both positive and negative impacts on brand love via consumer empowerment and stress respectively. We also examine the moderating role of extroversion, a key customer personality in the engagement-brand love link.

Background and/or Conceptual Model

The study uses COR theory as a theoretical framework. COR theory was built on two fundamental tenets. The first tenet is resource conservation and acquisition while the second is resources investment (Halbesleben et al., 2014). The resources can refer to an object, condition, states, characteristics that are valuable for individuals (Hobfoll, 1989). Drawing on this theory, we argue that online engagement could be a double-edge sword. On the one hand, engagement enables customers to protect and generate more resources (i.e. knowledge, relationship, etc.) (Labrecque et al. 2013), making them psychologically empowered (i.e., consumer empowerment in this study). Such an empowerment process may help enhance the customer-brand relationship (Yuksel et al., 2016) that lead to brand love. On the other hand, online engagement also causes stress because it may reduce customers' resources available for another domain (i.e. hanging out with friends) when customers invest resources (i.e. energy, time, effort) in online brand engagement. Thus, we postulate that consumer empowerment positively mediates while stress negatively mediates the engagement-brand love link. Furthermore, considering resources investment may be influenced by personality traits (Chen et al., 2020) and extroversion is related to social relationship compared with introversion (Ryan and Xenos, 2011), extroversion is hypothesized to be a moderator. We argue that extroversion negatively moderates the engagement-empowerment link while it positively moderates the engagement-stress link.

Methodology

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, convenience and snowball sampling was adopted using an online survey. Items of different variables anchored on a 5-point Likert scale are adapted from the previous measurement. Target respondents are those who had engagement experience in the past two years. Prior to the large-scale data collection, a pre-test of 30 samples was conducted to check the clarity of measure statements and scale reliability. The final sample comprised 205 valid responses, of which 45.9% are female and 49.8 are male.

Findings and/or Discussion

Findings from regression analysis with PROCESS Marco 3.3 in SPSS indicate that engagement is significantly related to brand love ($b=0.244, p<0.01$), empowerment ($b=0.624, p<0.001$) and stress ($b=0.644, p<0.001$) respectively. As predicted, empowerment ($b=0.259, p<0.01$) is positively related to brand love while stress ($b=-0.138, p<0.01$) is negatively associated with brand love when engagement is controlled, implying potentially significant indirect effects via the two mediators. The point estimate of indirect effect of online customer engagement on brand love through consumer empowerment is 0.162, and the confidence interval (CI) doesn't include zero (LLCI: 0.053, ULCI: 0.270), indicating that the mediation effect of consumer empowerment is significant. Meanwhile, stress also shows a significant but negative mediation effect in the engagement-brand love link with a point estimate of -0.088 (LLCI: -0.169, ULCI: -0.027). Furthermore, a moderation test showed that the interaction between extroversion and online customer engagement on stress is significant ($b=0.261, p < 0.05$) whereas the interaction between extrovert and online customer engagement on empowerment is not significant ($b=-0.024, n.s.$). To sum up, online customer engagement has a significant impact on brand love both directly and indirectly via consumer empowerment and stress. Extroversion is found to only positively moderate the engagement-stress link.

Implications for Theory and Practice

The findings in this research suggest a need to consider the dark side of online customer engagement in launching online marketing campaigns. While extant research has focused mainly the bright side of online customer engagement, this research sheds light on both the dark and bright sides of online customer engagement. This study is the first attempt to investigate the underlying mechanism and boundary conditions of the relationship between online customer engagement and brand love. Findings have provided insights for scholars and marketers to develop suitable engagement strategies to enhance brand love and reduce negative impact to the brand image.

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