CHAPTER 13

The Emotional Engagement Paradox

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Customer engagement (CE) is widely viewed as an important component of a firm's long-term success. The purpose of this exploratory investigation is to examine how customers' WOM behaviors differ based upon emotional engagement (EE) levels towards the brands that they use in different industry categories. This research contributes to the engagement literature by providing new insight into the relationship between EE and WOM behaviors. Specifically, we examine how customers' WOM behaviors relate to different levels of positive and negative EE. We find that high self-brand connection among consumers that are high in both positive and negative EE generates the most positive and negative online WOM. We refer to this surprising relationship as the *Emotional Engagement Paradox*.

Kumar et al. (2010) propose four core dimensions by which CE creates value for the firm: (1) customer purchasing behavior, (2) customer referral behavior (CRV), (3) customer influencer behavior (CIV), and (4) customer knowledge behavior (CKV). The researchers argue that CE value provides an "umbrella metric" (p. 299) for consumer behavior in and outside of the realm of transactions. Interestingly, outside of customer purchasing behavior (i.e. CRV, CIV, and CKV), the components of CE

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value are directly related to word of mouth (WOM connections and interactions.

Despite this recognition, however, there is no consensus among academics and practitioners regarding the definition of CE. CE has been conceptualized as a psychological state (Brodie et al. 2011; Jaakkola and Alexander 2014), a behavioral manifestation (van Doorn et al. 2010), or a combination of psychological, behavioral, cognitive, social, and other dimensions (Vivek et al. 2012; Patterson et al. 2006). For a review, we direct the reader to Maslowska et al. (2016). See Table 13.1 for a review of relevant literature. While all of these definitions differ, there are also general points of commonality. Simplistically, customer engagement reflects a level of involvement or absorption with a brand/firm that generates attractive or repulsive emotional or behavioral responses (Higgins and Scholer 2009).

As noted earlier, one of the most important behavioral responses from a managerial point of view is the generation of WOM. While research exists on WOM and CE, much of this research actually infers engagement from the presence of positive WOM behavior (e.g. Dwyer 2007). This research takes a different approach in the hope of gaining new insights into the relationship between CE and WOM behaviors. Specifically, we

Table 13.1 Review of relevant literature

Key concepts		*References*
Customer Engagement	Customer engagement as a psychological state	Brodie et al. 2011; Jaakkola and Alexander 2014
	Customer engagement as a behavioral state	Van Doorn et al. 2010
	Customer engagement as an emotional/affective state	Mano and Oliver 1993; Higgins and Scholer 2009
	Customer engagement as a combination of psychological, behavioral, cognitive, social, and other dimensions	Berger 2014; Vivek et al. 2012; Patterson et al. 2006)
	Customer engagement ecosystems	Maslowska et al. 2016
	Customer engagement and value creation	Kumar et al. 2010; Higgins and Scholer 2009
Routes to Word of Mouth	Customer engagement as a route to WOM	Kumar et al. 2010; Dwyer 2007
	Self-brand connection as a route to WOM	Kwon and Mattila 2015; Park et al. 2008
	Consumption emotions as route to WOM	Ladhari 2007

refer back to the early research in marketing on engagement, specifically the work of Mano and Oliver (1993) on engagement, and examine its relationship to WOM behaviors in order to better understand how WOM behaviors differ based upon EE levels towards brands they use in different industry channels. To do so, we examine data from 3022 US consumers who provided EE information and linked this to their WOM behavior across different channels.

In some ways, our findings support prior research. In particular, EE driven by positive affect tends to generate positive WOM, EE driven by negative affect tends to generate negative WOM, and a lack of EE (either positive or negative) results in lower positive and negative WOM behaviors. Interestingly, however, consumers high in both positive and negative EE generate the most positive and negative online WOM and provide the most recommendations to family and friends. We argue that this happens because these customers also have the highest self-brand connection; we refer to this as the *Emotional Engagement Paradox* (i.e. customers with high positive and negative EE engage in greater positive and negative WOM than would occur if either positive or negative affect was absent).

Emotional Engagement

As noted earlier, there is no consensus regarding the definition of consumer engagement. Rather than seek to define CE, however, our goal is to gain a better understanding of the relationship between WOM and engagement. To that end, we examine engagement using the framework of Mano and Oliver (1993; Oliver 2010, p. 318) who use the affect circumplex of emotions to equate engagement with a high level of arousal associated with either positive or negative affect. We recognize that researchers in CE likely believe that this notion of engagement is incomplete, particularly given the numerous investigations into the nature of CE. We argue, however, that because CE value—and in some cases the proposed definition of CE itself (e.g. Dwyer 2007)—involves WOM behaviors, important information regarding the relationship between engagement and WOM may be convoluted.

To make explicit that our examination of engagement focuses on high arousal emotion levels, we refer to this as *Emotional Engagement (EE)*. By disentangling EE from WOM behavior, our investigation can better examine how these constructs relate to one another.

Numerous studies have investigated WOM behavior. For a review, we direct the reader to Berger (2014) and King et al. (2014).

The growth of social media has dramatically changed the opportunities for consumers to engage in WOM. Moreover, it has expanded the breadth of a consumer's WOM reach (e.g. online, blogs, forums, etc.) in addition to the traditional voice communication (largely to family and friends). Keiningham et al. (2016) find that WOM channel impacts the type and level of WOM activity.

Specifically relevant to this investigation, researchers have found that both pleasure and arousal are positively associated with WOM behaviors (Ladhari 2007). Because to date, however, all studies (of which we are aware) have examined the relationship between consumers' pleasure, arousal, and WOM behaviors regarding a single brand or industry category, it is unclear if the relationships in these constructs reflect a general customer characteristic (e.g. consumer positivity or negativity predisposition) or experience-dependent arousal. Specifically, do consumers' WOM behaviors differ significantly when their levels of arousal and pleasure for different brands diverge?

Data and Methodology

We collected cross-sectional survey data that gathered information about positive and negative WOM, giving volume across a variety of channels including friends and family, online, forums, and blogs. We also collected information on common drivers of WOM reported in the literature (e.g. overall satisfaction, repurchase intention, positive and negative emotions, self-brand connection, and consumer demographics). Data were collected from 3022 unique respondents in the United States. The sample was 51% male and 49% females representing a broad distribution of age ranges: 5% age 18–24, 18% age 25–34, 25% age 35–44, 28% age 45–54, and 24% age 55+.

Respondents were asked about their product/services usage of different industry categories and then given the opportunity to fill out the survey for up to two different product/services categories depending on whether or not they made purchases in the category. Out of all respondents, 1656 (55%) evaluated only one brand, whereas 1366 respondents (45%) evaluated two brands that represent different product/services categories. In total, 4388 brand ratings were provided by 3022 respondents. Thus, the unit of analysis in the final file is best

described as "respondent-rating level" (sometimes referred to as a "stacked" data file) containing 4388 records and where each record represents the rating of one brand by one respondent and where the number of records in the file corresponding to each respondent is equal to the number of brands he or she rated. Brands rated were distributed across nine industries in the USA: Automotive (11%), Gaming Consoles (10%), Handheld Devices/PDA (9%), Hotels (9%), Mobile (10%), Pharmacy (10%), Software OS (10%), Software Websearch (10%), and Retail (11%).

Measures

WOM Behavior WOM giving behavior was measured via the following question. "How many times in the last year, have you [given WOM in a particular way]?" The one-year time frame is adopted from Yang et al. (2012). WOM behavior was further divided by whether or not recommendations/complaints were made to family and friends or online. We also distinguish between "when asked" and "spontaneously" to disentangle whether someone gave the WOM information with or without active solicitation (Wien and Olsen 2014).

Emotions Respondents were asked to indicate on a 10-point scale, where 1 = strongly disagree and 10 = strongly agree, the extent to which they agreed that the brand/firm made them feel an emotion. The list of 24 included both positive and negative emotions: angry, irritated, regret, afraid, nervous, worried, sad, helpless, miserable, embarrassed, humiliated, self-conscious, secure, fulfilled, peaceful, delighted, thrilled, happy, loved, desired, warm-hearted, pride, important, and self-respect (Oliver 1993, 2010).

Self-Brand Connection Because we expect engagement and self-brand connection to be related (Sprott et al. 2009), we asked a battery of eight questions designed to gauge the extent to which respondents felt a personal connection to the brand (per Escalas and Bettman 2005). Principal components analysis strongly suggests a single-factor solution, with only a single eigenvalue over 1 (6.86) accounting for 86% of the variance across variables.

Analysis

The 24 emotions variables were included in a principal components analysis (using varimax rotation) to determine the dimensionality of emotions and to create factors for use in our analysis. The principal components analysis suggests a two-factor solution that accounts for 80% of the variance across variables. The first principal component is comprised of the positive emotions (pride, warm-hearted, important, etc.), such that higher values characterize positive emotional engagement with the brand, while lower values characterize the absence of positive EE. The second principal component conversely is comprised of the negative emotions (afraid, sad, humiliated, etc.), such that higher values characterize negative emotional engagement with the brand, while lower values characterize an absence of negative EE. Our findings support those of Watson and Tellegen (1985), who argue for a circumplex characterized by positive and negative affect. As a result, we are able to cross the two factors on at their medians to create EE quadrants: a brand characterized by both high (i.e. above average) positive and negative EE would fall into the upper-right quadrant. A brand characterized by positive EE would fall into the upper-left quadrant. A brand with no EE would be in the lower-left quadrant, while a brand high on negative EE would fall in lower-right quadrant.

We then conducted a simple exploratory means analysis of WOM behavior by quadrant accompanied by one-way ANOVA tests (see Table 13.2).[1] Some generalities become immediately apparent. As would be generally expected, the absence of both positive and negative EE corresponds to the lowest levels of all forms of giving WOM. Paradoxically, however, with the exception of giving negative WOM to family/friends, the highest levels of WOM behavior occur when customers' experience demonstrates both positive and negative EE. By contrast, the highest satisfaction, recommend intention, and repurchase intention levels are associated with the presence of positive EE only. The highest levels of self-brand connection, however, are associated with having both positive and negative EE. Figure 13.1 summarizes the key information contained in Table 13.2.

Since our goal is to differentiate WOM behaviors between brands with different levels of emotional engagement, we conducted additional examination limiting our sample to only those respondents who provided feedback on two brands and who also demonstrated different levels of emotional engagement between the two brands rated with respect to placement in the EE grid. Of the 1366 respondents who provided information

Table 13.2 Word-of-mouth behavior means by emotional engagement quadrant

	Positive and negative EE	*Positive-only EE*	*Negative-only EE*	*No EE*	*One-way ANOVA Sig*
N	1252	1004	813	1319	
Brand Identification	**0.75**	0.33	−0.67	−0.55	***
Recommended [company/brand] to family and friends (Spontaneously)	**2.32**	1.72	0.62	0.75	***
Given negative feedback about [company/brand] to family and friends (Spontaneously)	0.24	0.06	**1.18**	0.14	***
Posted positive comment about [company/brand] on forums/blogs (Spontaneously)	**0.89**	0.20	0.07	0.12	***
Posted negative comment about [company/brand] on forums/blogs (Spontaneously)	**0.20**	0.01	0.11	0.06	***
Given a positive review about [company/brand] online (Spontaneously)	**0.80**	0.18	0.07	0.11	***
Given a negative review about [company/brand] online (Spontaneously)	0.13	0.01	**0.13**	0.05	***
Recommended [company/brand] to family and friends (When asked)	**2.57**	2.12	0.86	1.12	***
Given negative feedback about [company/brand] to family and friends (When asked)	0.26	0.09	**0.86**	0.18	***
Posted positive comment about [company/brand] on forums/ blogs (When asked)	**0.84**	0.22	0.08	0.16	***
Posted negative comment about [company/brand] on forums/ blogs (When asked)	**0.15**	0.03	0.10	0.08	
Given a positive review about [company/brand] online (When asked)	**0.86**	0.26	0.09	0.16	***
Given a negative review about [company/brand] online (When asked)	**0.18**	0.02	0.12	0.08	**
Recommend Intention	8.41	**8.85**	5.68	7.59	***
Repurchase Intention	4.40	**4.46**	3.66	4.20	***
Overall Satisfaction	8.39	**8.76**	6.24	7.90	***

***p < .001, **p < .01, *p<.05

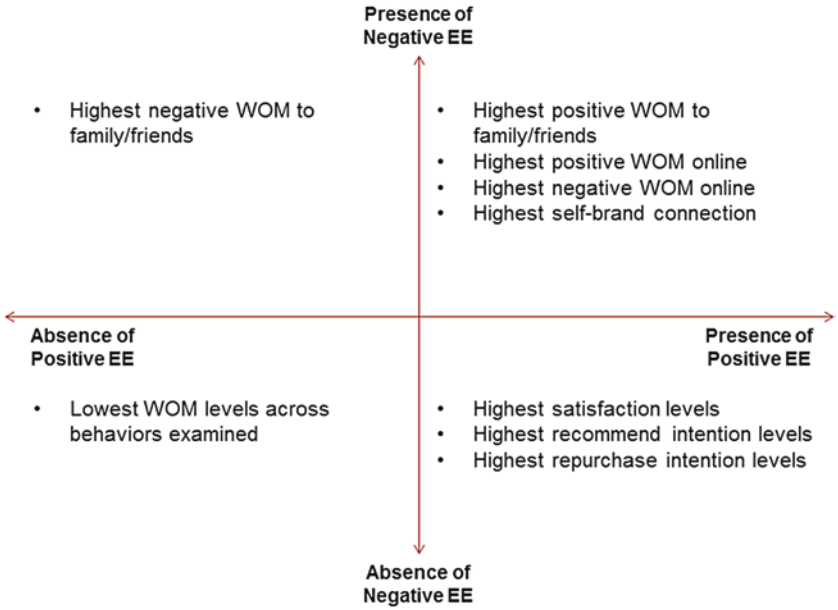

Fig. 13.1 Average word-of-mouth behavior by emotional engagement quadrant

on two brands, 696 (51%) demonstrated different levels of emotional engagement for those two brands. The final analysis file consists of two records for each respondent, producing a final stacked data file of 1392 records. The main results of the EE quadrant analysis were unchanged.[2]

Conclusion

This exploratory investigation provides new insight into what we know about the relationship between emotional engagement (EE) and word-of-mouth (WOM) by examining how customers' WOM behaviors relate to different levels of positive and negative EE. In keeping with prior research, our findings indicate that positive/negative EE are associated with positive/negative WOM behaviors. Our findings, however, also identified an *Emotional Engagement Paradox*—specifically, the highest levels of positive and negative online WOM, as well as the most recommendations to family and friends, occur for customers having both positive and negative EE.

We argue that this paradox is related to Hirschman's observations regarding the voicing of complaints in his seminal work, *Exit, Voice and Loyalty* (Hirschman 1970). Hirschman argues that more loyal individuals are also more likely to voice their concerns than less loyal individuals. Specifically, the combination of the positive and negative EE is also associated with the highest levels of self-brand connection.

Self-brand connection has already been shown to be associated with higher WOM levels (Kwon and Mattila 2015). The literature to date, however, tends to associate this connection with favorable WOM behavior (e.g. Park et al. 2008). By contrast, we argue that customers holding a higher self-brand connection are also more likely to be loyal to the brand. As a result, they are more likely to be actively engaged with the brand, and therefore are more likely to voice their concerns as well as their praise. Anecdotally, we can think of fans that are intensely loyal to particular sports teams; it is common to hear their laments at coaching decisions, player errors, and so on, in addition to praise for their beloved teams.

These findings have important implications for researchers and managers. First, our findings indicate that emotionally engaged consumers are more likely to spread positive and negative WOM than are customers who hold only positive or negative EE. Therefore, the simple notion that customers high on EE recommend a brand and those low on EE complain about a brand is incomplete. Given that the general goal of many firms is to have more intensely engaged customers, the end result of these efforts is likely to be an increase in both positive and negative online WOM. Therefore, managers need to develop systems to monitor and manage online WOM (e.g. Gatorade's Mission Control (Ostrow 2010)). Moreover, where possible, managers need to identify customers who are providing both positive and negative online WOM, as these customers are more likely to be personally connected to the brand. These engaged customers need to have their concerns recognized and addressed to maintain the strength of their relationships.

What's Next? Relative Metrics and Share of Engagement

Researchers and managers have come to accept the importance of customer engagement, particularly as it relates to increasing firm performance through WOM behaviors (Kumar et al. 2010). We believe, however, that research into engagement still has many things yet to be understood. In particular,

research into customer engagement is almost always examined for a single firm/brand (as opposed to firms/brands used by a customer in a category). This unit of analysis is easy to understand since it is the level most strongly under management control, and it is the level that is easiest to link to firm/brand-specific outcomes.

The primary problem with this level of analysis, however, is the strong possibility that heavy users in a particular category may be "category" engaged, and therefore demonstrate engagement behaviors towards multiple brands in the category. Research has demonstrated that heavy users in a category are much more likely to divide their spending among multiple brands in the category (Stern and Hammond 2004). Moreover, there is empirical evidence that a brand's best customers (in terms of spending with the brand) are also its competitors' best customers (Cameron 2014; Cushion 2016). Given this, we argue that heavy users in a category are more likely to demonstrate engagement behaviors across competing brands.

Additionally, research shows that consumers allocate their category spending across brands by assigning a relative rank to each of the brands used in terms of their ability to satisfy them (Keiningham et al. 2015). Given this, it is logical to believe that multi-brand customers use a similar ranking system when engaging in WOM related to the industry category. This notion argues that there is indeed a "share of engagement" that is distinct from the more commonly used "share of category spending" (aka share of wallet).

Of course, it is also indeed possible that multi-brand customers with high category engagement use different criteria to drive WOM behavior. For example, it is easy to imagine a scenario where lower ranked brands receive greater negative WOM precisely because of their inability to raise performance to the level of the perceived first place brand.

Therefore, there is a clear need for future research that identifies whether share of engagement reflects a managerially relevant outcome. If that is the case, research needs to identify how customers decide to which firms they are both positively and negatively engaged, and how what level of engagement is assigned to each brand.

Notes

1. Respondents were allowed to provide answers regarding up to two brands. As such, the cases are not entirely independent. So in addition to the one-way ANOVA tests (the assumptions of which are not entirely satisfied), we also ran mixed regression models, including respondent ID as a random effect and

controlling for sector of the brand(s) rated. The results of the mixed models are substantively similar to the ANOVA tests with regard to the statistical significance of quadrant assignment. We present the significance test results of the ANOVA in Table 13.1 for simplicity sake. Averages in the table are calculated directly from the respondent-rating level data without any intermediate aggregation to the brand level (i.e. a brand rated by multiple respondents is included in the calculation of the quadrant average multiple times).

2. The highest mean repurchase intention was associated with high positive and negative EE instead of positive EE only. It should be noted that in both analyses, the mean repurchase intention levels were very close for the positive/negative EE quadrant and the positive-only EE quadrant. Additionally, "Posted negative comment about [company/brand] on forums/blogs (When asked)" and "Given a negative review about [company/brand] online (When asked)" appear in the no EE quadrant.

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