

Customer engagement in evolving technological environments

Firms' technological environments have significantly developed over the past few decades. Key change agents have included the rise of e-commerce, e-tailing (e.g. Amazon), social media, social commerce (e.g. via Instagram, Pinterest or Facebook) and virtual brand communities (Marbach *et al.*, 2019; Robertson *et al.*, 2019; Piehler *et al.*, 2019 in this Issue). In addition, emerging mobile trends include location-based marketing (e.g. location-aware music albums that change the music's mood as app users walk by landmarks), mobile store locators (e.g. QR codes), mobile commerce (e.g. sales via mobile apps), personal assistants (e.g. Apple's *Siri*, *Google Assistant*), Internet-of-Things or Internet-of-Everything-based smart devices and mobile payments, which are continually reshaping the way firms do business (Kunz *et al.*, 2017; Viswanathan *et al.*, 2017; Brodie *et al.*, 2013).

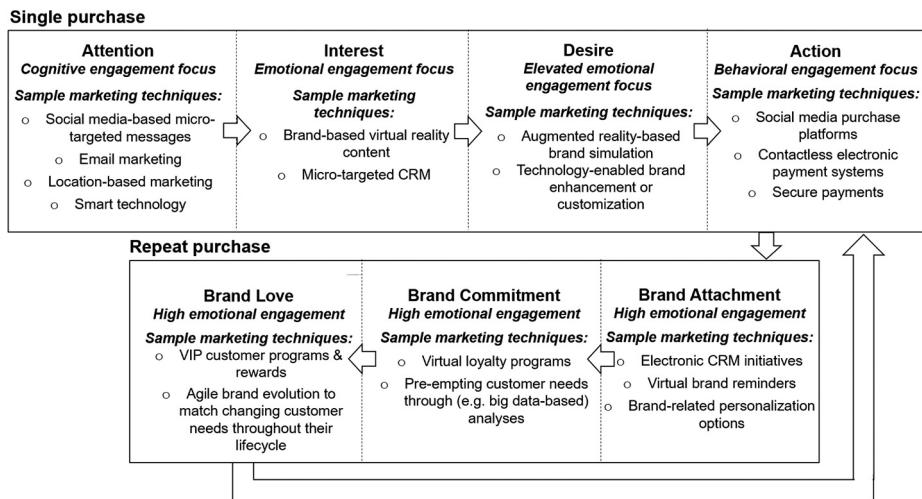
These emerging technologies are not only used to more effectively and efficiently reach (prospective) customers but can also be deployed to foster market research-based insight, including into the customer journey and its evolution (e.g. innovations in neuromarketing, virtual, augmented or mixed reality, and big data, to name a few; see Connell *et al.*, 2019 in this Issue; George and Wakefield, 2018). Parallel trends include omnichannel marketing, mass customization, the growing adoption of service robotics and artificial intelligence-based applications, including intelligent assistants (e.g. IBM's *Watson*; Kumar *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, customer self-service techniques (e.g. airport luggage check-ins), pop-up stores and peer-to-peer interaction-facilitating innovations (e.g. sharing economy applications such as *AirBnB*) can be used to shorten traditional distribution channels (e.g. through additive manufacturing) and foster enhanced consumer engagement and empowerment (Carlson *et al.*, 2019 in this Issue). These trends, in turn, generate a need to redefine firm value propositions and business models and rethink ways to develop, nurture and maintain value-laden customer relationships (Huang and Rust, 2017; Chen *et al.*, 2018).

As a result, marketers are faced with a number of challenges in adopting, leveraging and optimizing the potential benefits of new technology to engage customers throughout the customer journey. Given the relative newness of many of these technologies, little remains known about their optimal deployment in terms of creating value, engaging customers or enhancing the customer experience. Addressing this gap, Figure 1 provides an overview of customer engagement's (CE's) consumer-based returns throughout the customer journey, thereby extending the work of Gill *et al.* (2017) and Lemon and Verhoef (2016). The framework's initial phases comprise the established AIDA model that consists of sequential stages of consumer attention, interest, desire, and action (Barry and Howard, 1990). Here, *attention* represents the consumer noticing a brand or particular brand-related stimuli (e.g. an advertisement). *Interest* reflects the individual's subsequent development of brand-related interest. Next, *desire* denotes the consumer's growing want to purchase the brand, while *action* represents his/her actual purchasing behavior and post-purchase (e.g. usage-related) experience. Collectively, these four stages reflect a consumer's *single* (e.g. first-time) brand-related purchase decision-making process.

However, because the customer journey inherently extends beyond a single purchase, we also incorporate three additional *repeat purchase* stages that are also shown in Figure 1. That is, after purchasing a brand once (and provided the individual perceived a positive post-purchase experience), the customer's repeat purchases will likely yield increasing brand attachment, commitment and love, respectively, particularly for more experiential



Figure 1.
Technology-facilitated
CE throughout the
customer journey



brands (Calder *et al.*, 2018). As CE's scope covers consumers' brand-related dynamics that occur in a *single* interaction (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2019), the concept has relevance at *each* of these individual customer journey stages. Here, technology may be deployed in different ways across the customer journey's seven stages, as discussed further below. In the remainder of this Editorial, we also highlight how each of the papers published in this Issue fits into our core notion of technology-facilitated CE through the customer journey.

In the initial phase, *attention*, the consumer notices, processes and evaluates incoming brand-related stimuli *vis-à-vis* their personal needs, goals and objectives. This phase centers on cognitive brand engagement that has been defined as the "consumer's level of brand-related thought processing and elaboration in particular [brand] interactions" (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014, p. 154; Harrigan *et al.*, 2018), thereby reflecting its motivational nature (Weiger *et al.*, 2019 in this Issue). A positive association between attention and cognitive engagement is expected, such that higher attention is reflected by increasing cognitive engagement. For some offerings (e.g. more experiential brands), this phase may be only short and therefore highly transient. However, for others (e.g. big-ticket items, such as cars or consumer electronics), it has the capacity to last longer as consumers will tend to more actively seek product-related information, thereby extending their initial cognitive engagement (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986).

In this phase, technology can be used to facilitate CE's development in several ways. For example, social media-based micro-targeting offers an effective way to reach exactly those prospects that correspond to the brand's desired demographics, psychographics or positioning (e.g. based on users' clicking or browsing patterns (Willems *et al.*, 2019 in this Issue). Once implemented, social media analytics can then be used to track progress and adjust the firm's strategy as needed. In addition, while artificial intelligence (e.g. machine learning) can be used to tailor each response based on current or past customer requests, email marketing or referral programs can help spark consumer attention towards the brand, and location-based marketing has capabilities to send personalized deals to customers as they approach the store (e.g. Starbucks; see Orsingher *et al.*, 2019 in this Issue). Moreover, smart technology (e.g. smart-watches, wearables) can be used to garner consumer attention to specific offerings, including by sending product-related notifications to their mobile

devices or by notifying them of the technology's particular *rules of engagement* (Letheren *et al.*, 2019 in this Issue). Smart technology also has the capability to collect user-based data and offer health-related suggestions or predictions. As we will see below, several of these technologies can be used not only to stimulate consumer attention but also to foster the customer journey's other stages.

Second, during the *interest* stage, the consumer develops an interest in the brand. This stage centers on emotional brand engagement's development, which has been defined as "the degree of positive brand-related affect in brand interactions" (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014, p. 154). A positive association between interest and emotional engagement is expected, such that higher interest entails rising emotional engagement. However, though consumers' brand-related emotional engagement can be positive, negative or ambivalent in nature (Keeling *et al.*, 2019 in this Issue; Hollebeek and Chen, 2014), it tends to be positively valenced during the *interest* phase. In line with our observation for cognitive engagement, brands differ in their elicited degree of emotional engagement. For example, leisure brands (necessities) are expected to be more (less) emotionally engaging for most consumers, respectively (Hollebeek, 2013).

Here, technology can facilitate consumers' emotional brand engagement in several ways, as shown in Figure 1. For example, brand-related virtual reality (VR) content can be employed to transport the consumer to an alternate reality (e.g. virtual, gamified Wimbledon tennis matches or movies) or to offer a consumer pre-purchase experience, thereby contributing to their emotional brand engagement. In addition, while digital content marketing can prove effective in engaging B2C or B2B audiences (Taiminen *et al.*, 2019 in this Issue; Hollebeek and Macky, 2019), firm-based, micro-targeted customer relationship management (CRM) initiatives enable highly refined customer segmentation, and customized communications and offerings.

Third, during *desire*, the consumer starts wanting to purchase or use the product. Like *interest*, this phase centers on emotional engagement, though here it does so at elevated levels. Thus, once a consumer proceeds to *desire*, (s)he by definition exhibits higher emotional engagement. Similar to *interest*, *desire* also inherently reflects predominantly positive engagement manifestations (i.e. with the customer feeling positive about the brand). Here, technology also represents a valuable resource to help stimulate consumers' emotional engagement. For example, gamification can be used to foster consumer desire to purchase the brand, or digital CRM-based messaging can be deployed to implement brand-based customer reminders (e.g. for newly launched products; Berger *et al.*, 2018).

Fourth, during *action*, the consumer proceeds to purchase the brand, thereby closing the gap between intention and behavior. This phase centers on behavioral brand engagement, which refers to "a consumer's level of energy, effort and time spent on a brand in particular brand interactions" (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014, p. 154). A positive association between action and behavioral engagement is implicit, such that higher action reflects increasing behavioral engagement. Behavioral engagement is however not limited to purchase and may extend to other brand-related behaviors, including citizenship behaviors (e.g. helping other customers, disseminating positive brand-related word-of-mouth; Van Doorn *et al.*, 2010). In this phase, technology can facilitate the development of customers' behavioral brand engagement. For example, social media (e.g. Pinterest, Facebook)-based purchase platforms, contactless electronic payment systems (e.g. mobile wallets), or secure (e.g. blockchain and/or cryptocurrency (e.g. Bitcoin)-based) payment systems are conducive to closing purchase transactions (Sarmiento *et al.*, 2019 in this Issue). As stated, these initial four steps collectively comprise the customer's journey for a *single* purchase decision. We therefore proceed to explore those customer journey phases that center on *repeat* purchases.

Fifth, *brand attachment* reflects a consumer's brand-related bonding, which may entail the individual perceiving a high fit between the brand and themselves, or their life (Sprott *et al.*, 2009; Thomson *et al.*, 2005). A positive relationship between CE and brand attachment is expected, where rising brand attachment is exemplified by higher emotional engagement. Brand attachment is therefore highly affective in nature and correspondingly, implies elevated emotional consumer engagement (Brodie *et al.*, 2011). Technology can be used to facilitate emotional engagement's development (e.g. through personalized brand communications).

Sixth, like brand attachment, *brand commitment* implies high emotional engagement. Brand commitment refers to the consumer valuing an ongoing relationship with a brand so as to warrant maximum efforts at maintaining the relationship (Moorman *et al.*, 1993; Morgan and Hunt, 1994), thereby reflecting its core emotional engagement. To facilitate the development of brand commitment, technology adoption can be conducive. For example, online loyalty programs that reward loyal customers in ways they value can have an effect on these customers' desire to remain with the firm (Dessart *et al.*, 2019 in this Issue). To uncover what particular customers value, sound qualitative or quantitative market research can provide insight, which can be aided by emerging technology (e.g. big data-based tools that help uncover customer needs).

Finally, *brand love* similarly implies high and active emotional engagement. Brand love is a multi-dimensional, higher-order concept that comprises self-brand integration, passion-driven behaviors, positive emotional connection, long-term relationship, positive overall attitude valence, attitude confidence and strength (certainty) and anticipated separation distress (Batra *et al.*, 2012). Technological tools that help develop brand love include customer VIP programs and associated rewards and/or events enabled via apps and online technologies. Such programs provide an agile stance for brands by allowing managers to pre-emptively and adaptively meet evolving customer needs throughout their journeys and lifecycles.

We hope you will enjoy reading this Special Issue and that it will spark discussion and debate within your communities.

Linda D. Hollebeek

*Department of Marketing, Montpellier Business School, Montpellier, France and
Tallinn University of Technology, Tallinn, Estonia*

David E. Sprott

University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming, USA, and

Tor W. Andreassen

Norwegian School of Economics, Bergen, Norway

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