Consumer Engagement As a Motivational Construct: Evidence From Consumption Experiences in an Online Auction

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Two alternative views are widely held regarding the nature of consumer engagement – engagement as a psychological state, or engagement as consumption behaviour. This paper argues for an alternative view, consumer engagement as a motivational construct. This conceptualisation is explored in the context of consumption experiences in a consumer-to-consumer online auction.

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Competitive Papers—Extended Abstracts

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In an era of heightened consumer power, marketers have become increasingly interested in consumer engagement, as a potential explanation for consumer behaviour (van Doorn et al. 2010). Unfortunately, there is not yet agreement on the conceptualization of engagement in a marketing context. Engagement can alternatively be conceptualized as: overt behaviours (van Doorn 2011); a psychological state (Brodie, Hollebeek, Juric, and Ilic 2011); or as a level of enthusiasm for ongoing participation in consumption experiences.

There is general agreement amongst scholars that engagement arises from the experiences of the consumer (Calder and Malthouse 2008). There is also some agreement that engagement is related to value - a point of debate is whether consumers derive value from their experiences, and that is why they are engaged; or alternatively, whether engagement itself is something that is valued (Hollebeek 2013). Given these two concepts, experience and value, are central to the conceptualization of engagement, the aim of this paper is to explore the potential linkages between consumption experiences, consumption value and engagement, and thus provide new insight into the conceptualisation and role of consumer engagement. These aims are addressed within the context of consumer experiences of a consumer-to-consumer (C2C) online auction site, as an example of a contemporary, web-based, C2C consumption experience. As the first phase of a larger programme of research, exploratory research was conducted with a sample of auction buyers and sellers.

Online C2C auctions epitomise consumer empowerment and the importance of C2C interactions in the modern marketing environment (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2010). Hundreds of millions of consumers worldwide are registered members of online auction sites such as eBay. Many of these consumers are long-term users who visit their favoured site on a daily basis. What is the explanation for such dedicated ongoing use? A study of consumer experiences in online auctions provides an opportunity to explore consumer engagement in a C2C environment.

As the first phase of a larger programme of research, exploratory research was undertaken. The research involved qualitative interviews with a purposive sample of 17 users of the Trade Me online auction site in New Zealand. A semi-structured interview guide was prepared. The structure of each interview varied, with frequent use of probing questions. In addition, participants were encouraged to tell stories of their most memorable auction experiences, positive or negative, online or offline. The interviews sought to reveal individual consumers’ experiences, provide insight into the qualities of engagement with the online auction experience, and explore the relationships between online auction experiences, value, engagement and plans for future use of the site. All participants had used the auction site in the previous 12 months to buy or sell at least one item, but were not conducting a business through the auction site. The purposive sample included both genders, age groups from the twenties to the seventies, and varied lengths of experience with the auction site. A sample of 17 participants was sufficient to reach theoretical saturation. Interviews were audio-recorded, fully transcribed, and analysed using thematic analysis and phenomenological analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006, Thompson 1997, van Manen 1997).

Analysis of the interview data revealed seven themes (see Table). Participants spoke at length of their online auction experiences, the outcomes of which were either positive or negative. Auction users gained diverse value from their auction experiences, including various forms of functional, emotional, social and epistemic value. The nature of consumer engagement in the online auction experience was revealed. Phenomenological analysis of consumer statements reflecting engagement revealed seven potential dimensions to consumer engagement with the online auction experience: cognitive (i.e., interest, curiosity, absorption), affective (i.e., enthralled, hooked, passionate), reflecting self-image, control (i.e., mastery, in control), addictive, surprise and motivational (i.e., enthusiastic, motivated, dedicated). Each of these dimensions of consumer engagement likely varies in intensity. Insight was gained into the potential relationships between experiences, value, engagement and ongoing use: there is evidence of the influence of experiences on value, and the influence of value on levels of consumer engagement; it appears likely that high levels of engagement lead to ongoing use of the auction site. Risk was a regular theme in participant’s conversations. Finally, some insight was gained into the consequences of a decline in engagement.

Based on the findings of the exploratory research, a conceptual framework of the antecedents and consequences of consumer engagement is presented. The framework proposes that some of the experiences a consumer has with an object of consumption provide various forms of value to the consumer (functional, emotional, social or epistemic value) (Sheth, Newman, and Gross 1991). Depending on the types and levels of value a consumer derives from their experiences, they are likely to exhibit higher or lower levels of consumer engagement. In this context, consumer engagement is defined as the level of enthusiasm a consumer has for ongoing participation in a consumption activity, arising as a result of perceived value derived from consumption experiences. Consumers who are highly engaged with the consumption experience are likely to interact with the object of consumption more frequently in the future. In the case of online auctions, the consumer is likely to buy and sell goods more often in the future. These new interactions with the object of consumption provide new experiences; thus the process continues in a loop. Consumer engagement with the object of consumption is likely to continue in this way, until such time as the level of value a consumer derives from their experiences falls below a minimal desired level.

The conceptual framework suggests several avenues for future research. Future research could develop a psychometric measure of consumer engagement with consumption experiences. The antecedents and consequences of consumer engagement as a motivational construct could be quantified and tested. The role of specific types and levels of consumption value in the genesis of consumer engagement warrants attention. In this regard, it is likely that the types and levels of consumption value, as antecedents to consumer engagement, vary from one consumption experience to another.
REFERENCES


