

CRANFIELD UNIVERSITY

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Customer Engagement: “*Only Connect*”, a Reconciliation between Scholastic
and Practitioner Perspectives

Cranfield School of Management

Doctoral Program

PhD

Academic Year: 2010 - 2022

Supervisor: Professor Hugh N. Wilson

Associate Supervisor: Professor Emma K. Macdonald

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ABSTRACT

The scholastic view of customer engagement is that it is a critical metric, albeit within the academic world there is a debate as to whether this critical metric is best represented experientially or behaviourally. The practitioner world is divided: for some the construct is a “vanity metric” (Weigel, 2011); others recognise the importance of the phenomenon but discard the experiential metric in favour of behavioural proxies. This thesis aims to achieve concordance between these perspectives by challenging the assumptions of both worlds about the concept’s provenance and utility. It is structured around three papers.

The conceptual paper (paper 1) defines customer engagement as an experiential construct, distinguishes it from neighbouring constructs (notably telepresence and interactivity), and establishes its dimensions, laying the groundwork for scale development. This paper was published in *Journal of Business Research* in 2010. It has become a central part of academic discourse on engagement, having 1590 Google Scholar citations by May 2022.

Paper 2 explores the scholastic-practitioner disconnect about engagement. Through two large-scale surveys of media websites (n=12,125 and 3,030), it: (1) refines paper 1’s definition of engagement to take account of conceptual work in the intervening decade; (2) develops and validates an engagement scale reflecting that revised conceptualisation; (2) compares the impact on outcomes (loyalty, satisfaction and NPS) of this experiential engagement measure (‘CE’) with a behavioural measure (‘CEB@Site’), showing that the former outperforms the latter; (3) refutes the hypothesis, reflecting practitioner heuristics, that CEB@Site is a robust proxy for CE; and (4) illustrates that CEB@Site nonetheless remains a valuable metric in its own right. Context (here, different site ‘genres’) is a moderating factor that does not, however, inhibit comparisons between sites within the same category.

Paper 3 examines the effect of CE on advertising receptivity (AdRecep), another crucial outcome for practitioners. Reusing paper 2’s second survey, it finds that: (1) CE drives AdRecep; (2) CE dimensions differ in their impact on AdRecep by context; (3) contextual targeting is an effective driver of AdRecep, and (4) respondents who are ‘*receptive*’ to advertising are also ‘*responsive*’ to it and exhibit a propensity to be ‘*micro-influencers*’. Paper 3 thereby makes the case for CE as an advertising metric of value.

Keywords:

Customer engagement; Customer engagement behaviour; Telepresence; Interactivity; Advertising receptivity; Perceived content quality; Loyalty; Satisfaction, Net Promoter Score.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Rather like Tolstoy's observation that "happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way," all PhDs are ordeals, but some are more 'ordeal-like' than others. Without wishing to shamelessly elicit the reader's sympathy, I owe an immeasurable debt to certain individuals who 'stuck with me' as I 'stuck at it' despite many setbacks.

First, thanks to Robert, who is the Alpha and Omega of my life – that is simply it. The tribute to others, itemised below, is all his and more. Second to my mother (1931-2019) who gave me boundless love and the gift of wisdom, courage, and resilience. Thanks go to Dr Peter Harper for the 'quantity' of my life. A doctor of wisdom (and gifted entrepreneur), possessed of infinite medical expertise, scientific curiosity (the desire to tinker at the margins – with empirical justification - the accepted protocols) combined with compassion for his patients. He also gave me the most valuable of all gifts – he taught me how to challenge medical assumptions in a field where treatments are constantly emerging. I hope that I have successfully applied his forensic tuition to this work. To Professor Shern Chew, another exceptional physician and scientist, to whom I owe the 'quality' of my life.

An immense debt is also owed to Professor Hugh Wilson and Professor Emma Macdonald. Not just because of their exemplary supervisory performance and expert mentorship but also because they are simply outstanding people. They supported me through many debilitating medical setbacks over the years, through operations and chemotherapy, and always made time for me. I am also filled with admiration with the way they both, when occasionally my will was ebbing, after yet another medical reversal, 'nudged' me into completion.

Thanks also to Professor Jan-Michael Becker who generously agreed to provide expert advice on my PLS-SEM contribution and was also able as 'newcomer' to this research to provide thoughtful and original contributions to the entire corpus of work that undoubtedly improved the final offering.

I am indebted to other individuals at Cranfield University: to Professor Michael Dickmann for agreeing to represent me at Cranfield and for writing the nicest, kindest note in support, to Professor Stan Maklan for his kind, generous words at my final review, to Debbie Bramwell for her words of encouragement and for guiding me through the endless requests for sabbaticals and to all those in the School of Marketing who taught me in the early years of the doctoral programme. I also owe thanks to the Cranfield Library: access allowed me to consult the New England Journal of Medicine, and, thanks to the university's statistical tuition, I could argue the case for a clinical trial. One could say that Cranfield itself, and the skills that it taught me, also helped save my life.

I also need to acknowledge practitioner contribution. Thanks are due to Andy Jonesco, Boss, Mentor, Friend, who taught me everything I know about 'Management', and without whom this research would not have been possible, and to Rebecca Rangeley, now at Pinterest, who was at the time of the BSKyB initiative, the Research and Insight controller, and who kept the research "on track" and, thanks to her timely contribution, kept the research "on point".

Finally, thanks to all my friends. I refuse to list them because that always implies some sort of hierarchy. Thanks for your love, wisdom, and undeviating support. They are threatening some sort of celebration, which for an extreme Myers Briggs INTJ is somewhat alarming!

Last, for any PhD student who reads this and is undergoing some sort of turmoil and flagging of spirit, please know that '*this too shall pass*'.

Anne Mollen, 2022

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
LIST OF FIGURES	xii
LIST OF TABLES.....	xiii
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	xv
1 Chapter One: Thesis Overview.....	1
1.1 Thesis Structure	1
1.2 Personal Motivation.....	3
1.3 Notes on Authorship	4
1.4 Introduction	5
1.5 Aims and Objectives.....	7
1.6 Publications	9
1.7 References	9
2 Chapter Two: Engagement, Telepresence, and Interactivity in Online Consumer Experience: Reconciling Scholastic and Managerial Perspectives.	11
2.1 A commentary on contribution.....	11
2.1.1 Introduction	11
2.1.2 Citation Analysis	12
2.1.3 Bibliographic analysis	16
2.1.4 Systematic Reviews.....	17
2.1.5 Chronological Exposition.....	17
2.1.6 Future Tense	22
2.1.7 Summary.....	23
2.1.8 References	24

2.2 Abstract.....	30
2.3 Introduction	31
2.4 Overview of Conceptual Framework	32
2.5 Stimulus Taxonomy.....	34
2.6 Perceived Interactivity	34
2.7 Telepresence	37
2.8 Engagement	38
2.8.1 Telepresence as an antecedent of Engagement.....	38
2.8.2 Defining Engagement.....	42
2.9 Discussion.....	46
2.9.1 Implications for theory and practice	46
2.9.2 Future Research	47
2.10 References	49
3 Chapter Three: Engagement: Metric or Meme?	54
3.1 Abstract.....	54
3.2 Introduction	56
3.3 Issue: the conceptual clarity and cohesion of customer engagement	60
3.3.1 The problem of consensus	61
3.4 Engagement scales: thematic analysis	63
3.4.1 Introduction of a new customer engagement scale.....	70
3.5 Issue: experientialism versus behaviouralism	72
3.5.1 Definition and Domain	72
3.5.2 Controversies	77
3.6 Issue: Context and The ‘one’ Scale	79

3.7 Summary.....	79
3.8 Hypothesis Development.....	80
3.8.1 Introduction to conceptual model constructs.....	81
3.9 Main Effects	83
3.10 Moderating Effects	86
3.11 Method.....	88
3.11.1 Survey Administration and Sampling	88
3.12 : Measures: main components	90
3.12.1 Operationalising Customer Engagement.....	90
3.12.2 Engagement Behavior	92
3.12.3 CEB@Site	93
3.12.4 Customer Knowledge Value, Customer Influencer Value, Social Networking, and Information Super Spreading.....	93
3.13 Customer Relationship Outcomes	96
3.14 Measures: Moderating Effects.....	100
3.15 Results: Model Validation.....	100
3.15.1 Common Method Bias.....	100
3.15.2 Study 1: The Measurement Model	100
3.15.3 Study 2: Structural Model Validation.....	108
3.16 Findings: Hypothesis Testing	112
3.16.1 The Relationship between CE and CEB@Site.....	112
3.16.2 The Relationship between CE and CEB@Site and Customer Relationship Outcomes.....	114
3.16.3 The Relationship between CEB@Site and Internet Activism.....	116
3.16.4 The Impact of Context.....	119

3.17 Discussion.....	122
3.17.1 Theoretical/Scholastic Contributions	123
3.17.2 Managerial Implications	124
3.17.3 Limitations and Future Research Directions	126
3.18 References	128
3.19 Addendum	141
3.19.1 Introduction	141
3.19.2 Orthodox Rationale	142
3.19.3 Fit for Purpose?	143
3.19.4 The pragmatist's (and the author's) approach.	146
3.20 References	148
4 Chapter 4: Customer Engagement, Advertising Receptivity and Influencers.....	151
4.1 Abstract.....	151
4.2 Introduction	153
4.3 Research Background.....	157
4.3.1 The Scholastic Perspective: What is Engagement?	157
4.3.2 The Practitioner Perspective: The Reliance on Algorithms	160
4.3.3 Advertising Outcomes	166
4.3.4 Context Matters	167
4.3.5 –The Impact of Content.....	170
4.3.6 Advertising receptivity and Propensity to ‘influence’	171
4.3.7 Summary and Hypothesis Development	172
4.4 Method.....	174
4.4.1 Survey Administration and Sampling	174

4.4.2 Measures:.....	175
4.5 Results: Data Analysis.....	179
4.5.1 Common Method Bias.....	179
4.5.2 Model Validation.....	179
4.6 Findings: Hypotheses Testing	182
4.6.1 The relationship between Customer Engagement and Advertising Receptivity.....	182
4.6.2 Perceived content quality (PCQ) and Advertising Receptivity	188
4.6.3 Respondent Advertising Receptivity and Propensity to respond to online advertisements and likelihood to ‘influence’	191
4.7 Discussion.....	197
4.7.1 Scholastic Contribution	197
4.7.2 Managerial Contribution	199
4.7.3 Limitations and Future Research.....	200
4.8 References	205
5 Chapter 5: Conclusion	214
5.1 Research and Practical Implications from The Individual Studies.....	214
5.2 Limitations.....	215
5.3 The Overall Implications of the Thesis	218
5.4 A Note To The Reader.....	220
5.5 References	222

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1-1: Research Rationale	7
Figure 1-2: Individual Study Objectives	8
Figure 2-1: Chronological lineage of Mollen and Wilson (2010) (LitMaps).....	12
Figure 2-2: Mollen and Wilson (2010) as seed paper; filter 'Customer and Engagement'. Node size indicates importance to the model.....	15
Figure 2-3: Mollen and Wilson (2010) citation connection to papers published in 2021 and 2022 (Research Rabbit).....	16
Figure 2-4: Bibliographic connection between Mollen and Wilson (2010) and Storbacka et al. (2016) (Inciteful).....	22
Figure 2-5: Conceptual Framework.....	33
Figure 3-1: CE Definitions: Thematic Frequency	70
Figure 3-2: Conceptual Model - Customer Engagement, CEB@Site, and their hypothesised relationships	81
Figure 3-3: Study 1: Measurement Model.....	102
Figure 3-4: CE Study 1: Higher Order Construct Model	104
Figure 3-5: Study 2: Structural Model with CE HOC	108
Figure 3-6: CEB@Site and Internet Activism.....	117
Figure 4-1: Conceptual Model of the relationship between CE and Advertising Receptivity at Site	173
Figure 4-2: Conceptual Model of the relationship between Perceived Content Quality and Advertising Receptivity at Site	173
Figure 4-3: Structural Model of CE (HOC) and Ad Receptivity at the website	179
Figure 4-4: PCQ and Advertising Receptivity	189
Figure 4-5: Means Plot: Advertising Receptivity @ Site.....	191

LIST OF TABLES

Table 2-1: Literature on Engagement and related constructs	40
Table 3-1: Most Cited CE Scale Papers, ranked by citations (Google Scholar)	65
Table 3-2: Thematic frequency identified in CE scale dimensions.....	69
Table 3-3: CEB Sources and Metrics, ranked by citations (Google Scholar)	75
Table 3-4: Demarcation of Endogenous Variables.....	83
Table 3-5: Study 1 and 2 Profiles	90
Table 3-6: Engagement Scale Four-Factor Solution	92
Table 3-7: CEB@Site Questions	93
Table 3-8: CEB@Site, Internet Activism: Indexes, Correlations, Odds Ratio	96
Table 3-9: Customer Relationship Outcomes: Scale Items, Coefficients, Reliability and Validity.....	97
Table 3-10: Reliability and Validity Summary for Study 1	103
Table 3-11: Study 1 Discriminant Validity (HTMT)	104
Table 3-12: Reliability and Validity, Study 1 HOC model	105
Table 3-13: HTMT Discriminant Validity, Study 1 HOC model.....	105
Table 3-14: AMOS GOF Criteria CE Scales.....	107
Table 3-15: Study 2: LOC Components Reliability and Validity	109
Table 3-16: Study 2 LOC Discriminant Validity (HTMT)	109
Table 3-17: Study 2 HOC model Construct Reliability and Validity.....	110
Table 3-18: Study 2 HOC model Discriminant Validity	110
Table 3-19: Study 2 HOC model Cross Loadings.....	110
Table 3-20: Study 2 Path Coefficients, Significance and Effect sizes	112
Table 3-21: Likelihood Ratio: Detractor vs. Promoter.....	114
Table 3-22: Relationship between CE and CEB@Site and endogenous constructs	116
Table 4-1: Papers related to Engagement And Advertising, ranked by citations (Google Scholar)	165

Table 4-2: Scale items: CE; Advertising Receptivity@Site; Perceived Content Quality	176
Table 4-3: Scales measuring Advertising Responsiveness, Customer Knowledge Value and Customer Influencer Value	178
Table 4-4: Measurement Model: Construct Reliability and Validity	180
Table 4-5: Measurement Model: Discriminant Validity	180
Table 4-6: Structural Model: Constructs Reliability and Validity	181
Table 4-7: Discriminant Validity (HTMT).....	181
Table 4-8: Path Coefficients Values, Significance and Effect Sizes	182
Table 4-9: MICOM Step 2.....	184
Table 4-10: MICOM Step 3.....	185
Table 4-11: Content Sites	188
Table 4-12: Social Media Sites.....	188
Table 4-13: Parenting Sites.....	188
Table 4-14: Advertising Receptivity Composite Mean.....	191
Table 4-15: Chi Square/Cross Tabs Analysis.....	195

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CE	Customer Engagement
CP	Cognitive Processing
TU	Temporal Utility
SC	Self-Congruence
SI	Social Identity
CEB@Site	Customer Engagement Behavior at Website
IR	Intention to Recommend
IA	Internet Activism
CRO	Customer Relationship Outcomes
CIV	Customer Influencer Value
CKV	Customer Knowledge Value
SN	Social Networking
ISS	Information Super Spreaders
NPS	Net Promoter Score
AdRecep	Advertising Receptivity
PCQ	Perceived Content Quality
SDL	Service Dominant Logic
VR	Virtual Reality

1 CHAPTER ONE: THESIS OVERVIEW

1.1 THESIS STRUCTURE

This thesis is produced in accordance with Cranfield's "*Paper-format*" published guidelines. As such, it comprises three studies: the first, a conceptual paper (published in the Journal of Business Research in 2010), and the second and third papers based on empirical work conducted in association with BSkyB. It also includes certain mandated chapters. The chapter structure is as follows:

CHAPTER 1: Thesis Overview

- Thesis Structure
- Introduction: This chapter sets out the epistemological problem to be interrogated and itemises how the three studies relate to this issue. The chapter concludes with a diagrammatic representation of how the disconnect between the scholastic and practitioner perspective regarding customer engagement has evolved over time.
- Aims and Objectives: This chapter details the research aim of this thesis and, in diagrammatic format, the individual research questions and objectives of each paper and the connections between them.
- Publications

CHAPTER 2: Conceptual Work

- "*Engagement, telepresence, and interactivity in online consumer experience: Reconciling scholastic and managerial perspectives*": this conceptual paper, published in 2010, is designed to reconcile scholastic scepticism and practitioner fervour about the engagement construct. There is a time gap between this first paper and the empirical papers (Chapters 3 and 4), which was due to personal circumstances, and which led to a number of years away from academic study. This has the benefit that the contribution of this first paper to the literature since can now begin to be described. A preamble to Chapter 2 (Section 2.1) therefore delineates the

contribution of this conceptual paper and aligns it with research on customer engagement conducted in those intervening years.

CHAPTER 3: Empirical Study

- “*Engagement: Metric or Meme*”: Over time practitioner and scholastic stances on the value and usefulness of engagement have reversed. Practitioners are neglecting customer engagement as functioning metric, albeit employing it as a ‘catch-all’ descriptor, while scholars are championing the construct as an essential metric of ROI. This empirical study is designed to challenge, and potentially refute, both scholastic and practitioner assumptions that impede practical implementation of the CE construct.

CHAPTER 4: Empirical Study

- “*Customer Engagement and Advertising Receptivity and Influencers*”: Ironically, and belatedly, practitioners will have to re-evaluate the utility of experiential metrics, given the impending abolition of third-party cookies. This paper assesses the value of customer engagement as an advertising metric applied across diverse media contexts and challenges the prevailing assumptions concerning experiential and behavioral metrics. We proffer amendments to extant media expenditure, relating to our evaluation of those judgement heuristics.

CHAPTER 5: Conclusion

- Research and Practical Implications from the Individual Studies: The theoretical and practical contributions from each of the studies are itemised in this section.
- The Overall Implications of the Thesis: The overall contribution of the three papers is examined, in concert with recommendations for future research and practical implementation.
- A Note to the Reader: The legacy of this work

Observations on the Thesis Structure

The reader should note that to reduce duplication and unnecessary prolixity, certain sections have been compressed. Paper 1 is included as published in *Journal of Business Research*, following several rounds of peer review. Papers 2 and 3, while written with a view to publication, are more extensive and detailed than would be warranted for journal inclusion. The expansiveness of the studies allows me to excise a ‘Glossary of Terms’, since there are detailed definitions of the concepts used in the individual papers. Equally, the ‘Aims and Objectives’ (Section 1.3) only includes the overarching aim of the entire oeuvre, leaving the granular details of the ‘aims and objectives’ to be amply covered in each individual work. The Conclusion (Chapter 5), rather than supplying a detailed *pro forma reiteration* of the contributions, future research, and limitations of the individual studies, provides a succinct guide to the contributions of the individual studies and additionally, addresses the wider implications of the corpus of work for scholars and practitioners alike.

1.2 PERSONAL MOTIVATION

I spent over 20 years in the advertising industry working in radio, TV, and newspapers. My career encompassed advertising sales, media research, commercial strategy and, finally, the directorship of a digital division of a national newspaper: [LinkedIn: Anne Mollen](#). When I transferred to academia, I was constantly amazed at the lack of discourse between the academic and practitioner worlds, in my opinion to the detriment of both. When I presented the first stage of this empirical research to a practitioner conference, I was challenged by certain audience members articulating the ‘Weigel view’ that experiential engagement was ‘meaningless’. I answered that one could only refute something authoritatively if one could define it – could anyone in the audience define engagement? No one put up their hand. This inability to define engagement was an indictment of the current practitioner view on the construct, but it was also an indictment of the scholastic world. By that time, there were a number of substantive definitions of engagement, none of which, seemingly, had been translated into practice. It was (and is) a failure to communicate writ large. To be fair to practitioners, they awarded me the prize for the best research that year and I was invited to present my research to a number of prestigious media companies (the BBC among them). In practice, nothing changed. By

the time, I conducted the second empirical phase of the research, my research aim had therefore pivoted. Yes, I wanted to write an engagement scale of some durability, but I also realised that I would have to reconcile that fundamental ideological fissure between the two worlds to have any hope of adoption of my scale (or the adoption of any other engagement scale for that matter). This attempt is now, as Shakespeare put it, “the two hours’ traffic of our stage”.

1.3 NOTES ON AUTHORSHIP

I conceived, designed, conducted the analysis, and drafted the papers myself. The first-person plural is used in papers 2 and 3 (Chapters 3 & 4) as I envisage publishing these studies with my supervisors. Their contribution has been the usual supervisory one of providing a sounding-board, providing guidance, and offering feedback at each stage of the process, from the overarching concept of each paper to its drafting. I am also very grateful to Professor Jan-Michael Becker who agreed to review the PLS-SEM analysis in the empirical papers. He identified some methodological issues that needed addressing, asked for further analysis in some areas, and made thoughtful suggestions to improve the reporting of the findings. The published conceptual paper (Chapter 2), reproduced verbatim, answered the questions that emerged from a systematic review of customer engagement literature. That systematic review was mandated as part of the Cranfield PhD course and was an audited milestone in that process. My supervisor and co-author of paper 1, Professor Hugh Wilson, provided feedback on my draft submission to the Journal of Business Research. He also conducted some minor editing, while I continued to own all the content and conduct all significant drafting. He also provided feedback on my draft response to reviewers in the R&R process with the aforementioned journal. Professor Emma Macdonald joined as co-supervisor following a change in Cranfield supervision requirements and after the JBR publication (based on the systematic review) had been published.

1.4 INTRODUCTION

*Achilles: What, are my deeds forgot?
 Ulysses: Time hath, my lord, a wallet at his back,
 Wherein he puts alms for oblivion, a great-siz'd monster of
 ingratitude. Those scraps are good deeds past, which are devour'd
 as fast as they are made, forgot as soon as done.*

Karl Popper: "all life is problem-solving"

Customer engagement as a metric has been, in Shakespeare's words, subject to "*envious and calumniating time*". In mass circulation in the marketing world in 2009 and, at the same time, subject to the burgeoning, tentative scrutiny of academia, within a decade it had mutated from a metric that was considered '*critical*' (included in the Marketing Science Institute's research priorities 2010-2012) to a construct in the practitioner environment that is, arguably, little more than an abstract label to be plastered on documentation to legitimise online or offline endeavours. Each of the three papers has a common theme, that of reconciling this epistemological schism between the scholastic world and the practitioner world.

The objective of the first paper (Mollen and Wilson 2010) was to reconcile the academic scepticism about the legitimacy of engagement as a construct (*was it merely a change in nomenclature without substance?*) with practitioners' enthusiastic adoption of it.

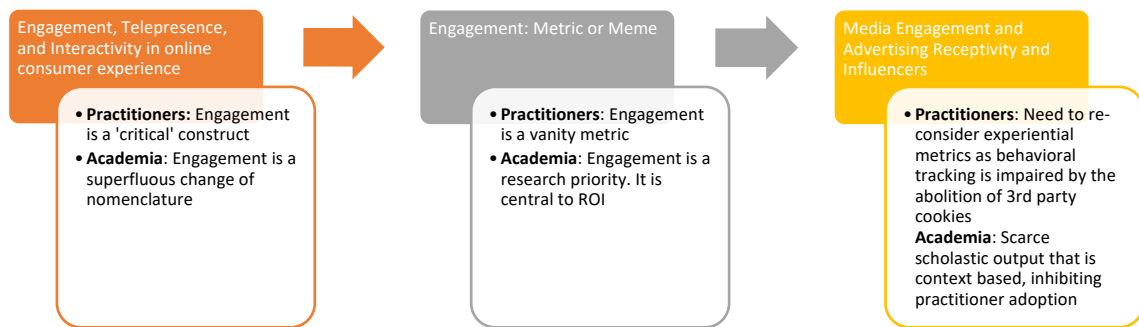
The second paper deals with the default position in 2021/2022: academic partiality—with customer engagement designated a key KPI (Marketing Science Institute, 2019), and considered a central contributor to value creation (An & Han, 2020; Beckers et al., 2018; Eldor, 2020; Storbacka, 2019)—met by practitioner neglect. With reference to the latter, while not exhaustive, a search of trade publications (ProQuest; EBSCO) found no evidence that an engagement scale, developed in academia, is currently used in the practitioner world. Practitioners, having abandoned the attempt to reach a consensus on a satisfactory definition for the phenomenon, retreated to the more tangible and reassuring (because more defensible in boardrooms) machine calculated '*behavioral footprints*' (views, clicks, follows, likes, shares, bounce rate, and time spent). The confected algorithmic composites, based on all or some of these, were then designated as 'Engagement Indices'. Specifically, what is identified by this author as "Engagement Behavior @ Site" (CEB@Site) (i.e., subscription, the contribution of opinions, the giving

of feedback and the forwarding of information found on the site), has become a practitioner ‘proxy’ for the experiential construct of ‘Engagement’. The second paper attempts to resolve these systemic issues and, by doing so, initiates a mechanism for reconciliation of scholastic and practitioner perspectives.

The third paper deals with the relationship between CE and advertising efficacy. It addresses the imminent disruption in the media ecosystem—the abolition of third-party cookies—that perforce will cause practitioners to re-evaluate the experiential CE metric. The elimination of third-party cookie data (behavioral data gleaned and parsed across disparate sites) will irrevocably change the way media buying is conducted and, specifically, the way ads are targeted. Publishers and media buyers will need to explore experiential alternatives (the New York Times’ “*Project Feels*” is an example of this) (Spangher, 2018). We build on a noteworthy but scarce academic contribution to make a case for customer engagement as a marker of advertising value. The interrogation of those findings allows us to challenge practitioner assumptions about the placement of media expenditure across different media platforms.

In sum, all three papers start with a specific problem that is rooted in the asynchronicity between academic and practitioner perspectives. They are designed to critique assumptions on both sides and to put forward an empirically validated rationale for reconciliation. The research rationale is visualised in Figure 1-1.

Figure 1-1: Research Rationale



1.5 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

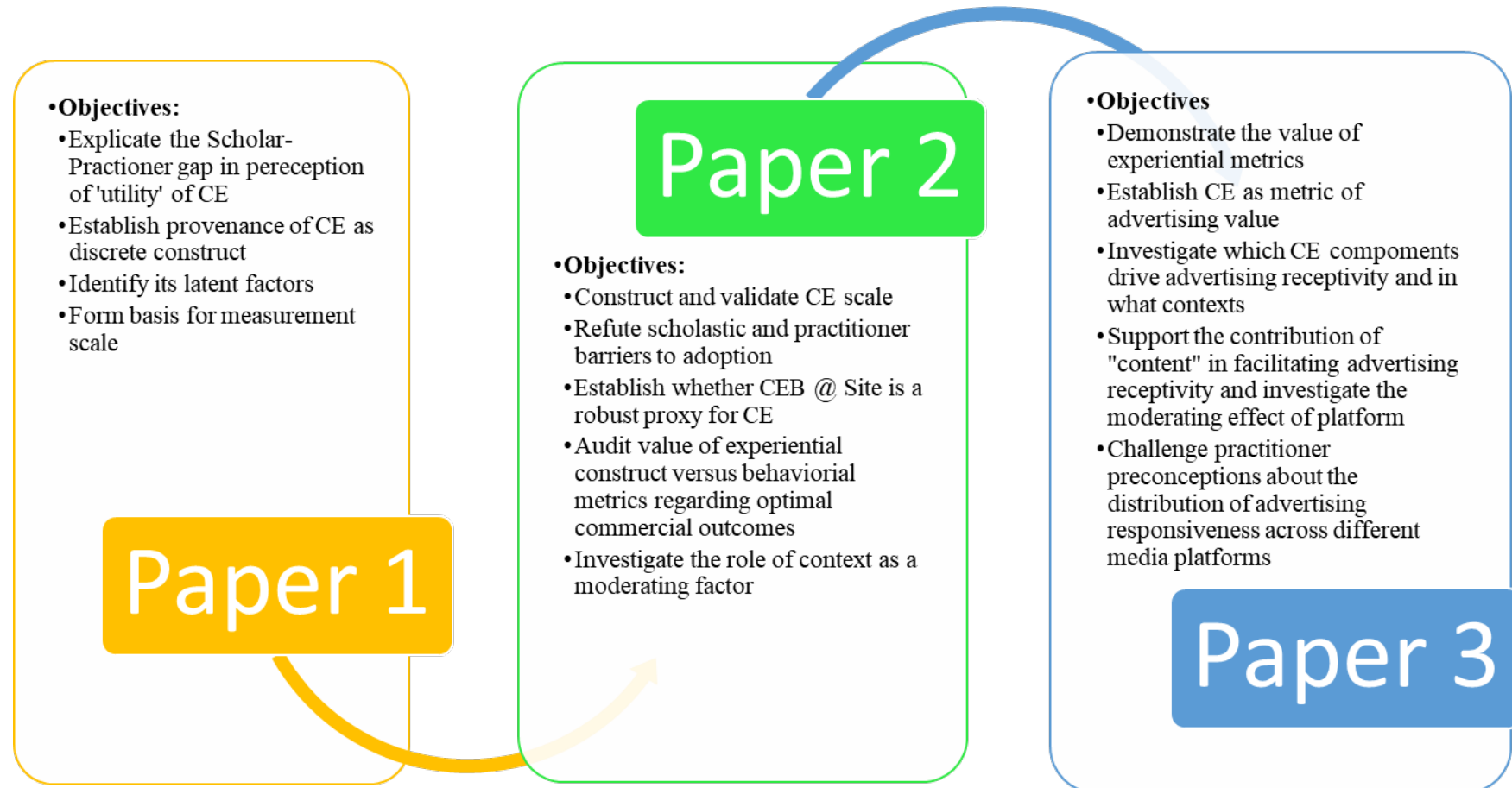
*"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone,
 "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."
 "The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so
 many different things."*

Lewis Carroll: Alice in Wonderland

The research aim of the papers that comprise this thesis has been to investigate the curious misalignment between scholastic and practitioner perspectives in the domain of customer engagement and, through conceptual and empirical analysis, achieve a reconciliation. This 'reconciliation', by challenging epistemological assumptions on both sides, is postulated to advance scholastic thought, to outline a framework for future research, and to offer a mechanic for practitioner implementation.

The aims and objectives of the two empirical papers, which also make discrete contributions, are shaped by the conjectures of the conceptual paper. The objectives of the second empirical paper, notably in the observation of the inherent frailty of behavioral metrics, are also influenced by the findings of the first empirical paper. This is diagrammatically represented in Figure 1-2.

Figure 1-2: Individual Study Objectives



1.6 PUBLICATIONS

1.6.1.1 Academic Publications

A Mollen, H Wilson (2010), Engagement, telepresence, and interactivity in online consumer experience: Reconciling scholastic and managerial perspectives.

Journal of Business Research 63 (9-10), 919-925. 1591 Google Scholar citations at 17 May 2022

A Mollen, HN Wilson, EK Macdonald (2016), Consumer Engagement: Metric or Mantra? Scale Development, Validation and Application. Marketing at the Confluence between Entertainment and Analytics, AMS World Marketing Conference, Paris, 815-816 (refereed abstract)

1.6.1.2 Trade Publications

Anne Mollen, Rebecca Rangeley (2012) “Engagement: Are we there yet?”

ADMAP: ISSN 0001-8295, ZDB-ID 10488297., p. 22-25

Award: AOP Research and Insight Project 2012 (Winner)

1.7 REFERENCES

An, M.-A., & Han, S.-L. (2020). Effects of experiential motivation and customer engagement on customer value creation: Analysis of psychological process in the experience-based retail environment. *Journal of Business Research*, 120, 389–397.

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2 CHAPTER TWO: ENGAGEMENT, TELEPRESENCE, AND INTERACTIVITY IN ONLINE CONSUMER EXPERIENCE: RECONCILING SCHOLASTIC AND MANAGERIAL PERSPECTIVES.

2.1 A COMMENTARY ON CONTRIBUTION

This section acts as a self-contained preamble to the conceptual paper (titled above). It is intended to identify and evaluate the contribution made by Mollen and Wilson (2010) to engagement research in the twelve years since it was published. In doing so, this further clarifies the background to the empirical papers that follow, complementing the specific focus contained within each of those empirical papers.

2.1.1 Introduction

In the time between the publication of Mollen and Wilson (2010) (Paper 1) and the completion of the empirical work contained in this thesis (over a decade), not only was there a complete reversal of the ideological polarity regarding customer engagement on behalf of practitioners and academics (Chapter 1: Thesis Overview, Figure 1-1) but also the number of articles on engagement grew exponentially and reflected “a growing complexity” (Rosado-Pinto & Correia, 2020).

This chapter serves as a preamble to the published Paper 1. It is designed to (a) more fully assess the contribution of this published work by anchoring it to research since its publication, and (b) to note on a top-level basis (since it is covered in more detail in the individual literature reviews for Papers 2 and 3) where the conceptual progression of customer engagement as a construct impinges on the empirical work in this thesis. While the longevity of Mollen and Wilson (2010) and its popularity within the academic canon are gratifying, this is also perplexing, because the paper eschews theory construction. Indeed, it is formulated within the constraints of the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S.O.R) ontology used for psychological research, and it had a relatively limited objective which was to establish the provenance and discreteness of the engagement construct at a time of academic scepticism and concomitant practitioner fervour and to reconcile these divergent stances. Of course, in the process, the paper did appear to solve certain obstacles to the intellectual adoption of the construct, and as

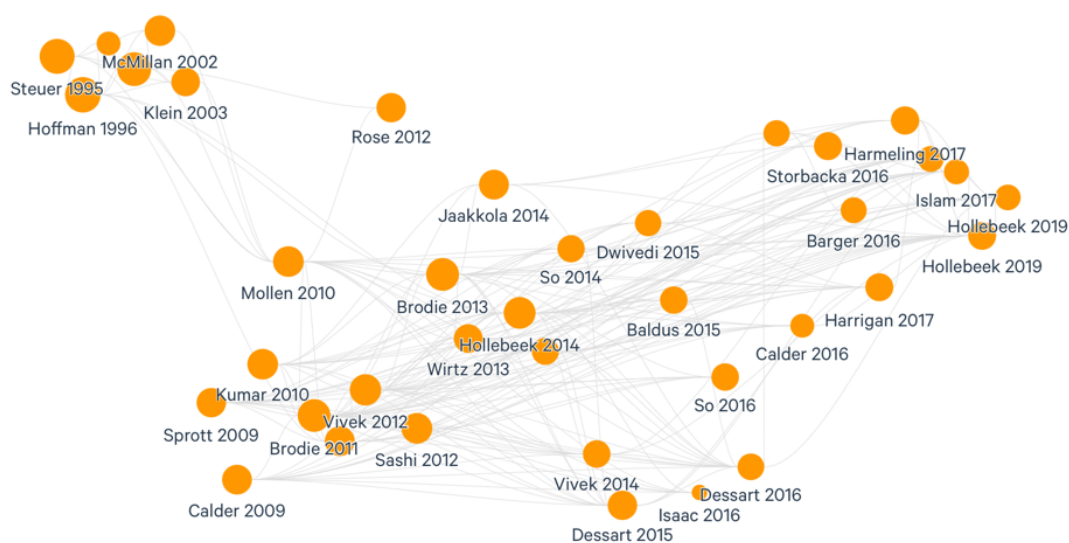
in the case of much conceptual work, there are unintended consequences. Over time, what seemed slight to the lead author at publication took on a greater import.

To this end, this section examines the literature to ascertain how the customer engagement/online engagement field has developed. By scrutinising this conceptual evolution we will then identify the contribution of the Mollen and Wilson (2010) paper and relate that to the empirical work in this thesis.

2.1.2 Citation Analysis

First, a brief overview of citations to Mollen and Wilson (2010), which informs the bibliographic analysis that follows. The citation performance of the Mollen and Wilson (2010) paper can be ascertained through several platforms. As of 12/11/2022, the paper had 1704 citations in Google Scholar, 760 (the 97th percentile) in Scopus, and 629 in Web of Science. It is the eighth-highest cited paper in consumer engagement (Scopus), and the ninth-highest cited paper in online engagement (Scopus). Graphical citation analysis is also probative. Figure 2-1 (LitMaps: <https://www.litmaps.com/>) shows the interconnection of this paper, on a chronological basis, with other published works within the customer engagement canon.

Figure 2-1: Chronological lineage of Mollen and Wilson (2010) (LitMaps)



The top left cluster shows the contribution of the early works, notably the influential Steuer (1992) paper on telepresence (Steuer, 1992) and the contribution of Hoffman and Novak papers on the construct of flow (Hoffman & Novak, 1996) to the Mollen and Wilson (2010) paper. The central cluster broadly depicts the initial works on conceptualization and the second phase of customer engagement research encompassing the operationalization of the construct (Jaakkola et al., 2019). The outer clusters (top right), in general, reflect a refinement of the customer engagement construct and emphasize its operation within Service-Dominant Logic parameters.

Figure 2-2 uses Inciteful software (<https://inciteful.xyz/>) to illustrate the connections of the Mollen and Wilson paper to other works in the canon by citation volume/Page Rank¹ (see relative node size), and the connections are then filtered by an algorithm which takes account of bibliographic coupling and co-citation². Bibliographic coupling infers semantic consilience; co-citation is more directly affected by time (co-citation patterns change, as the intellectual ‘zeitgeist’ changes) but has a stronger link to the “*notion of subject similarity and on the association or co-occurrence of ideas*” (Small, 1973, p. 268).

The strong linkage between the Mollen and Wilson (2010) paper and the Brodie et al. (2011) paper in Figure 2-2 is examined in greater detail in the Chronological Exposition section below. The map also provides the initial evidence to explain the longevity of the Mollen and Wilson (2010) work (and perhaps an example of the unintended consequences of publication). The main focus of the cluster of papers surrounding the Mollen and Wilson paper (2010) is the online environment. This deduction is made more explicit in the Research Rabbit (<https://www.researchrabbit.ai/>) diagram (Figure 2.3), illustrating the connection of our work to those papers published in 2021-2022, where the adjacent cluster to Mollen and Wilson (2010) examines the workings and implications of mobile apps and Virtual Reality.

¹ “The power of PageRank is that it also surfaces papers which may not have a ton of citations but that are cited by papers which do. In real world terms this means that it tends to show not just the most recent influential papers in a topic, but also the papers that influenced those papers”. Inciteful: <https://inciteful.xyz>

² Bibliographic coupling occurs when two works reference a common third work in their bibliographies. Co-citation is defined as the frequency with which two documents are cited together by other documents.

Semantic Scholar (<https://www.semanticscholar.org/>) furnishes additional corroborative evidence on the paper's impact, specifically on the online domain. Sixty-five academic studies are identified as being 'highly influenced' by the Mollen and Wilson work – an appellation reflecting the number of times it is cited in the work, as well as the location and context. In the last five years, the titles of these papers included the terms 'social media', 'virtual servicescape', 'immersive videos', 'brand communities', telepresence' and 'eWOM'. The Mollen and Wilson (2010) paper's elucidation of the interconnection between flow, telepresence, interactivity, and online engagement, (not the main thrust of the paper - merely a mechanism to delineate the domain of engagement) is used to support the hypotheses in these studies³.

³ For example: "*Interactivity corresponds to the notion of facilitating two-way communication necessary to have interaction between the focal engagement subject and object (Patterson et al., 2006) and characterized by the participant's sense of control in modifying the form and content of the mediated environment in real-time (Wu, 2006; Mollen and Wilson, 2010; Steuer, 1992) (Willems et al., 2019, p. 1993)*

A more explicit connection (albeit, not in the maps illustrated): "*the early work of Mollen and Wilson (2010) on the drivers and consequences of online engagement posited that interactivity is the main antecedent of telepresence, which in turn is considered to be an antecedent to online engagement*" (Algharabat, 2018, p. 5) or "*Mollen and Wilson (2010) demonstrated that consumers' experiential responses to environmental stimuli and websites constitute a tiered perceptual spectrum consisting of engagement, telepresence and interactivity*" (Fung et al., 2021, p. 3597).

Figure 2-2: Mollen and Wilson (2010) as seed paper; filter 'Customer and Engagement'. Node size indicates importance to the model

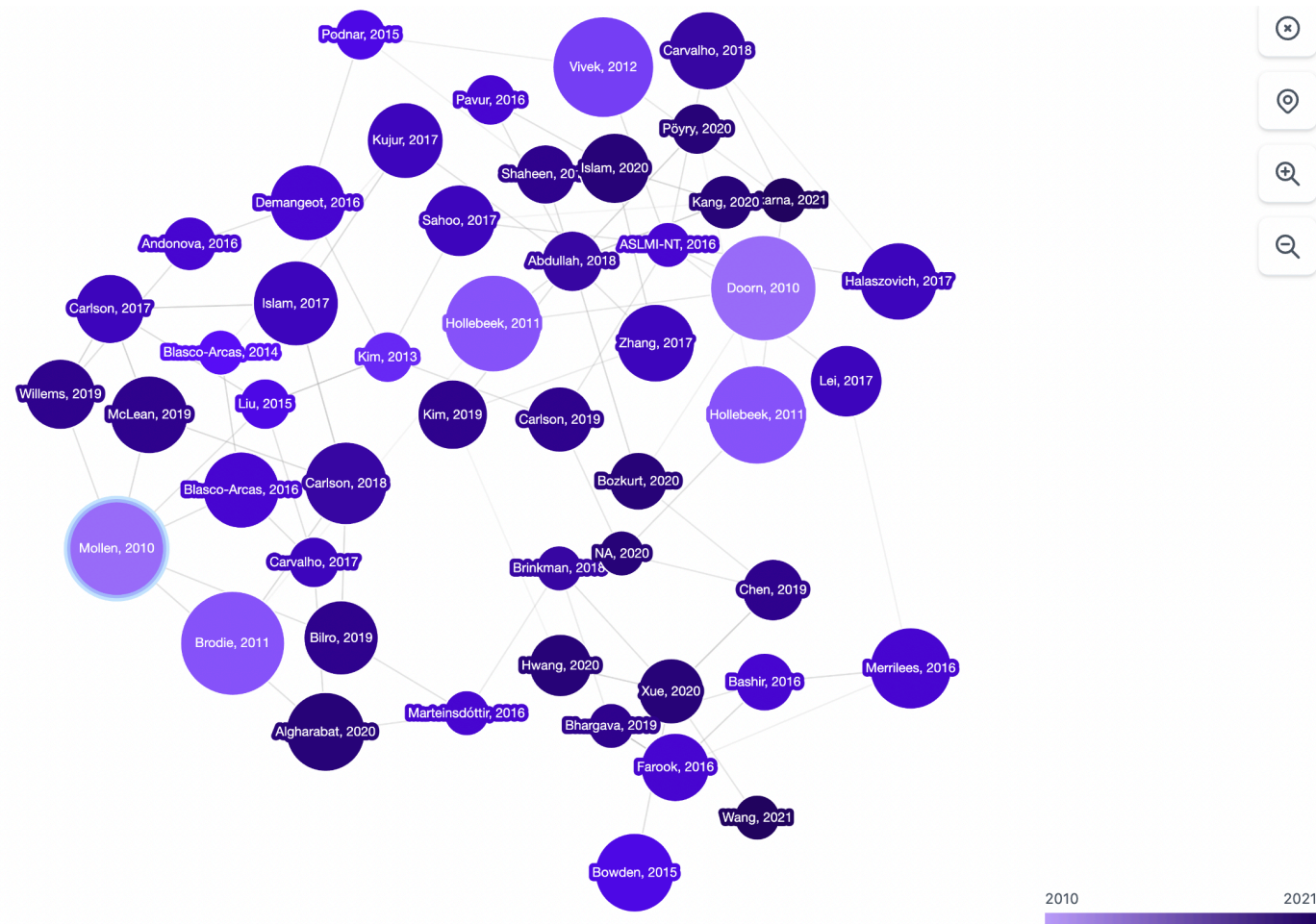
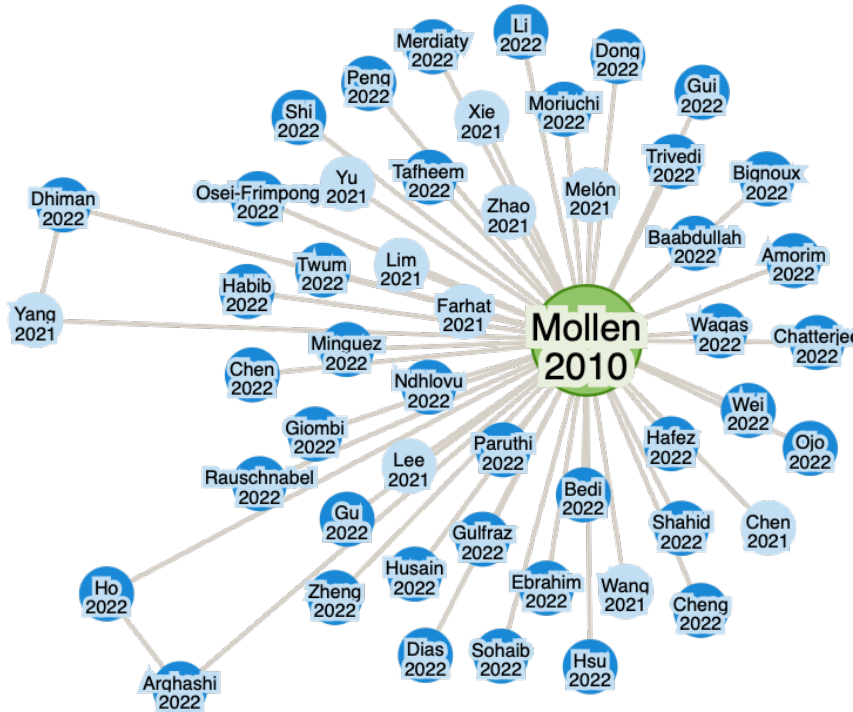


Figure 2-3: Mollen and Wilson (2010) citation connection to papers published in 2021 and 2022 (Research Rabbit)



2.1.3 Bibliographic analysis

The study of customer engagement has matured enough to support systematic reviews (Islam & Rahman, 2016; Lim et al., 2022; Ng et al., 2020; Rosado-Pinto & Correia, 2020), some of which are augmented by bibliographic analysis (Fung et al., 2021; Hollebeek et al., 2021; Srivastava & Sivaramakrishnan, 2021) and other works that adopt a chronological approach (within the confines of an overarching theory) to the development of the construct (Jaakkola et al., 2019). The systematic reviews and the bibliographic analytical works organize their offerings by clusters representing the contributory function of the scrutinized works. The chronological examination (Jaakkola et al., 2019) looks at the evolution of theory and, in particular, how customer engagement is construed as a mid-range theory (Brodie & Peters, 2020)⁴⁴ and through its interaction with the

⁴⁴ The definition of midrange theory is that it is context specific and “provides frameworks that can be used to undertake empirical observation and models to guide managerial practices” (Brodie & Peters, 2020, p. 416). “General theories (e.g., SDL) can be used to formulate propositions and hypotheses that are then

overarching theory of Service-Dominant Logic (SDL), and through an iterative process adds to the elaboration of the latter.

2.1.4 Systematic Reviews

We will examine how the Mollen and Wilson (2010) paper fits all these approaches. The systematic reviews and the bibliographic analyses cluster the CE papers according to their relative contribution within contexts (identified by links or citations): accordingly, the Mollen and Wilson (2010) paper is clustered under ‘online CE’ (Hollebeek et al., 2021), ‘other contexts’ (Srivastava & Sivaramakrishnan, 2021), ‘customer branding in the era of social media’ (So et al., 2020) and ‘consumer brand community engagement’ (Lim et al., 2022). Both Hollebeek et al. (2022) and Srivastava and Sivaramakrishnan (2022) acknowledge the impact of Mollen and Wilson (2010), the former cataloguing it as eighth in the top ten key articles (ranked by citation), the latter as the eighth most influential article, ranked by V.O.S. Viewer (a bibliographic analytical instrument). This grouping of works is designed more as a guide and resource for scholars rather than an evaluation of relative contribution to knowledge, albeit the nominal importance is measured by citation and link numbers.

2.1.5 Chronological Exposition

A chronological perspective allows a more interpretative approach. The chronological mechanic espoused by Jaakkola et al. (2019) starts with the early conceptual investigation into the construct around 2009, epitomized by the Bowden (2009) paper. Brodie et al. (2011) provides the first systematic categorization of these early works, citing Bowden (2009) as identifying customer engagement as a “psychological process” driving customer loyalty, with the Mollen and Wilson (2010) paper conceptualizing customer

associated with middle range theories. The propositions and hypotheses can next be used in empirical investigations. In the context of justification, empirical findings can be used to modify and verify the propositions and hypotheses associated with middle range theories, thus refining, and expanding the scope of the middle range theory. In turn the modified middle range theories can be used to verify and consolidate general theories and refine and expand their scope” (Brodie, Saren, et al., 2011, p. 88). In sum, the relationship between midrange theory and general theory is an epistemological virtuous circle.

engagement as a “psychological state” (Brodie, Hollebeek, et al., 2011, p. 2). The Brodie et al. (2011) paper acknowledged that these early works were designed to establish the domain of engagement but lacked any explicit linkage to theory, and it was this paper that proved seminal in its articulation of the link to SDL and relationship marketing – the latter conceived as “*the creation of extended or long-term relationships with a customer, instead of transactional relationships*” (Ng et al., 2020).

Concurrently, as the capacity (structural and technical) for engagement behavior exploded online, the Journal of Service Research (2010) published a special issue, several of which are cited in the empirical chapters of this thesis (Kumar et al., 2010; Libai, 2011; van Doorn et al., 2010), exploring how engagement behaviours affect the firm and conjecturing apposite customer management strategies. The special issue also provided what is generally conceived to be the most authoritative definition of customer engagement behaviour: “defined as a customer’s behavioural manifestations that have a brand or firm focus, (that go) beyond purchase resulting from motivational drivers” (van Doorn et al., 2010, p. 254). As Ng et al. observe, “*this conceptualization is often utilized by industry practitioners in measuring C.E.*” (Ng et al., 2020, p. 237), and the assumptions behind this stance are the subject of the empirical work featured in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

The next phase of CE research involved operationalizing the construct and locating it within a nomological network (Jaakkola et al., 2019). Several of the most cited measurement scales (experiential and behavioural) are itemized and scrutinized in Chapter 3 of this thesis. The scales in this development cohort are focused on individual responses, whether experiential or behavioural. The call for operationalizing the CE construct and devising its applicability for measurement across contexts is noted in the Mollen and Wilson (2010) article (also the one of the subjects covered in Chapter 3 of this thesis) and is cited in one paper (Vivek et al., 2014) and in two systematic reviews (Islam & Rahman, 2016; Srivastava & Sivaramakrishnan, 2021). During this period, c2010-2014, most of the influential definitions of customer engagement emerge, and the dimensions of the construct begin to crystallize. The Mollen and Wilson paper (2010)

contributes here: first in its definition of engagement⁵, which, though eschewed mainly in the recent customer engagement corpus of work, is cited in these early papers (Brodie, Hollebeek, et al., 2011; Brodie et al., 2013; Vivek et al., 2014) and in more recent papers that are concerned explicitly with online engagement (Dessart et al., 2015; Paruthi & Kaur, 2017). The paper also contributes to the categorization of dimensions (Brodie, Hollebeek, et al., 2011; Brodie et al., 2013; Hollebeek et al., 2014, 2019) and, specifically, concerning the cognitive component (Dessart et al., 2015). The most cited CE scales are tabulated in Chapter 3 of this thesis, and the ‘reframing’ of the scale dimensions, originating in the Mollen and Wilson conceptual paper (2010), and so modified to enhance practitioner adoption, is also covered in Chapter 3 of this thesis. Finally, one of the main objectives of the Mollen and Wilson paper (2010) was to establish the provenance of the CE construct and, in particular, to secure its recognition as a discrete construct. The rationale for this, notably the distinguishing of CE from the construct of ‘involvement’ and the identification of ‘motivation’ as a guiding characteristic, is cited in several papers (Brodie, Hollebeek, et al., 2011; Brodie et al., 2013; Hollebeek et al., 2019). Interestingly, while the original Mollen and Wilson conceptualization is subsumed under the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S.O.R) theoretical paradigm – CE conceptualized at the individual/personal level (Islam & Rahman, 2016; Mollen & Wilson, 2010), the characteristic of ‘motivation’ (Mollen & Wilson, 2010) is cited in support of the Service Dominant Logic (SDL) theory of CE, i.e. in the customer’s decision to invest in the focal operant (i.e., knowledge, skills) and operand (e.g., equipment) resources in brand interactions (Hollebeek et al., 2019).

The next conceptual leap drove the exploration of customer engagement as a mechanic for customer loyalty within the dyadic relationship of firm-customer (Kumar & Pansari, 2016; Pansari & Kumar, 2017). This development was seen as an attempt to “develop a midrange theory for customer management” (Jaakkola et al., 2019, p. 8). Such studies

⁵ Mollen and Wilson definition: “Online engagement is a cognitive and affective commitment to an active relationship with the brand as personified by the website or other computer-mediated entities designed to communicate brand value. It is characterized by the dimensions of dynamic and sustained cognitive processing and the satisfying of instrumental value (utility and relevance) and experiential value (emotional congruence with the narrative schema encountered in computer-mediated entities)” (Mollen & Wilson, 2010, p. 993)

have been subsumed under the nomenclature of ‘relationship marketing’ since they did not involve explicit SDL propositions or interrogate the broader effect of CE on the commercial ecosystem (Jaakkola et al., 2019).

Other authors then expanded the dyadic concept to explore the service ecosystem, and the link between CE and SDL was made explicit in terms of re-formulating CE propositions in terms of the SDL founding parameters (Hollebeek et al., 2019), with the interaction between operant and operand resources and co-created value becoming defining characteristics of the CE construct: “*CE reflects a customer’s motivationally driven, volitional investment of specific operant and operand resources into brand interactions in service systems*” (Hollebeek et al., 2019, p. 167). Interrogation of the relationship between CE behaviours and the co-creation of value added to knowledge by *classifying the critical behavioural mechanics* adding to corporate value (Dolan et al., 2016; Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014)

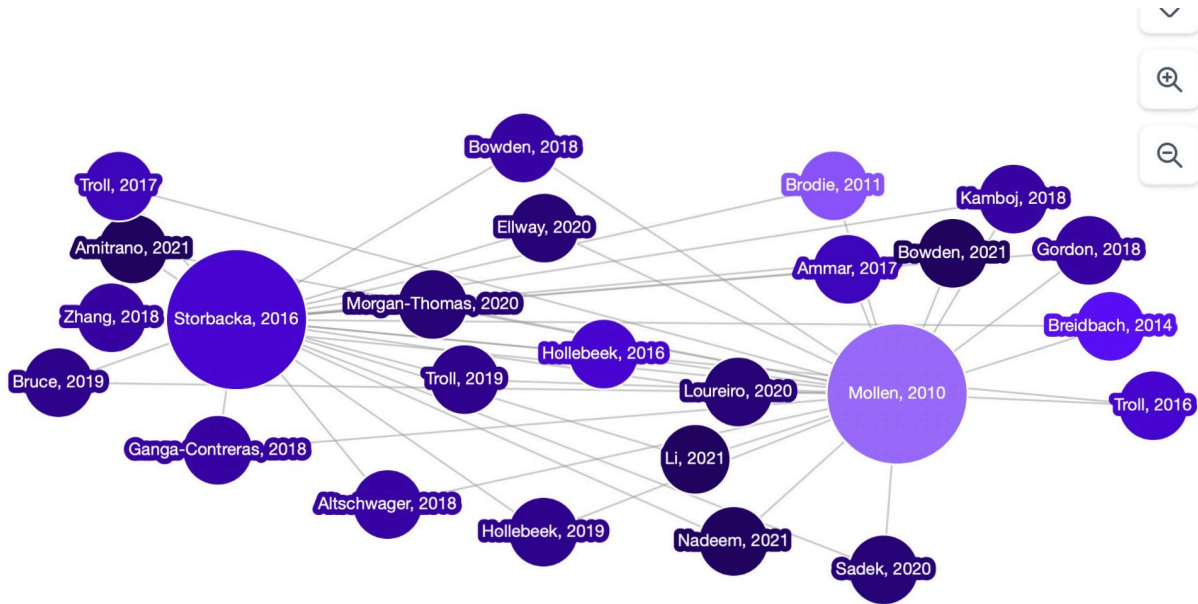
As the perception of CE as operating and co-creating value within a service ecosystem expanded, the concept of actor engagement developed, and the iterative loop between midrange and macro theory was acknowledged (Vargo & Lusch, 2017, p. 47). Actor engagement (AE) is defined as “*both the disposition of actors to engage and the activity of engaging in an interactive process of resource integration within the institutional context provided by a service ecosystem*” (Storbacka et al., 2016, p. 3009). This definition is echoed by Brodie et al. (2019) “*AE is a dynamic and iterative process, reflecting actors’ dispositions to invest resources in their interactions with other connected actors in a service system*”. (Brodie et al., 2019, p. 183). These definitions are further embellished to include non-human actors (technology) and collectives, as well as both exchange and non-exchange transactions (Storbacka, 2019; Storbacka et al., 2016). Clarifications are added to actor dispositions as the capacity and tendency to enter into the act of engaging and by doing so “*invest resources in interactions with the focal object, noting that the engagement disposition is specific to a current context*” (Sim et al., 2022, p. 1927), while resource contributions are described as “*an actor’s voluntary resource contributions thatgo beyond what is elementary to the exchange, and occur in interactions with a focal object and/or other actors.....an engaged actor is disposed to*

invest a broad range of resources – such as time, money, information, labor – with a focus on the focal engagement object (e.g. a product, brand), and these resource contributions occur through specific, interactive engagement behaviors” (Alexander et al., 2018, p. 336). Any direct contribution by the Mollen and Wilson (2010) paper to this conceptual evolution is difficult to elicit - there are certainly no citations in the papers cited in this section. However, the contribution of the Mollen and Wilson (2010) paper is evident in the academic works fuelling the development in this area, as shown in the bibliographic trajectory in Figure 2-4.

Also reassuringly, Li et al. (2019) note that: *“from the system and actor-network perspective, customer engagement is seen as a specific form of actor engagement”* and that *“insights from dyad-focused customer engagement literature remain relevant for our understanding of the nature and process of actor engagement”* (Li et al., 2018, p. 493). Thus, the reframing of the customer engagement construct, construed in the thesis as ‘the validation of identity’, could therefore operate under these parameters: a digital platform designed to generate customer engagement, via the process of ‘validation of identity’, would, when activated by an interaction, latch onto the innate ‘tendency’ of an actor (the innate neural correlates or, speculatively, in the case of a machine, the programmed receptors). This fissile exchange, when combined with structural modifiers (‘capacity’ of the actor: knowledge and/or time) and the moderators (structural, cultural, political etc.) afforded by the platform (ecosystem) or network (actor to actor), would determine the intensity and valence of the engagement response (Sim et al., 2022).

If we were to reduce this to an exchange transaction pertinent to this thesis: the empirical work, contained therein, presumes to offer a measure and, concomitantly, a better understanding of online engagement supply; future research encapsulating the actor disposition would offer a measure of potential demand within a complex system.

Figure 2-4: Bibliographic connection between Mollen and Wilson (2010) and Storbacka et al. (2016) (Inciteful)



2.1.6 Future Tense

Finally, the study of CE outside the marketing and even the commercial domain, using these network perspectives, ‘a Brownian soup of interaction between diverse actors’, is being explored in works on several topics: Covid19 (Azer et al., 2021; Azer & Alexander, 2022; Rather, 2021); medicine (Goyal et al., 2022); A.I. (Baabdullah et al., 2021); and even Brexit (Pich et al., 2018). The last four papers cite Mollen and Wilson (2010) referring to interactivity (Rather, 2021), online consumer experience (Goyal et al., 2022), customer engagement and A.I. (Baabdullah et al., 2021), and the distinction between experiential and behavioural dimensions (Pich et al., 2018). The Mollen and Wilson (2010) paper, with its grounding in individual psychology (S.O.R. theory) and customer experience in the digital environment, lends itself to more diverse attribution.

Conceptually, engagement in the marketing domain has largely moved on to clarify its role in the service ecosystem; however, the exegesis of the relationship between engagement construed as neural experience in a digital interface, and its contingent relationship to flow, telepresence, and interactivity, remains central to an understanding

of the mechanism of VR and its application. Ironically, the interrogation of flow, telepresence and interactivity was, in the authors' eyes, merely a mechanism to isolate, delineate and legitimize the domain of engagement. However, the accessibility of that analysis has meant that while the Mollen and Wilson (2010) paper continues to be acknowledged in the consumer engagement sphere, albeit its influence in the corpus of work viewed through the SDL/Network paradigmatic lens is more likely to be increasingly indirect, it remains enthusiastically and frequently cited in this academic arena – the interface between digital consumer experience and innovation (Gulfraz et al., 2022; Kang & Shao, 2023; Nikhashemi et al., 2021; Rauschnabel et al., 2022; Rodríguez-Ardura & Meseguer-Artola, 2018; Ye et al., 2019).

2.1.7 Summary

The Mollen and Wilson (2010) paper makes a direct contribution to knowledge in terms of its definition of online engagement (10% of articles (Google Scholar) citing Mollen and Wilson's (2010) paper quote the definition), its postulated identification of engagement dimensions and its argument for the discrete nature of the construct compared particularly with 'involvement'. The dispersal of its conceptual offering within the academic canon has been helped by the generous attribution afforded to it in the Brodie et al. (2011) and (2013) papers (Google Scholar Citations, as of 19/10/2022: 4003 and 3704, respectively).

Indirectly, its longevity has been preserved by the paper's links to highly cited (and influential) papers and prolific authors who have enlarged the field of study (e.g. the indirect link to the Actor Engagement field via influential authors contributing to this development).

The unintended consequences of the paper's foray into flow, telepresence and interactivity, and its clarification of how these phenomena relate to online engagement, has meant its continuing relevance to work in the App and Virtual Reality field.

Finally, in the chronological analysis of Section 2.1.5, we identified two specific emergent issues that are discussed in the empirical work of Papers 2 and 3: engagement

scale dimensions, and the relationship between the experiential engagement construct and engagement behaviour.

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2.2 ABSTRACT

We propose a conceptual framework that reconciles the practitioners' view of engagement as central to online best practice, and the scholarly view that tends to use other constructs to assess consumer experience. Building on research in e-learning as well as online marketing, we characterize the consumer experiential response to website and environmental stimuli as a dynamic, tiered perceptual spectrum which includes interactivity, telepresence, and engagement. We construe engagement as a cognitive and affective commitment to an active relationship with the brand as personified by the website, and we propose dimensions of this construct. We discuss how the constructs of flow and involvement are related to, but distinct from, the constructs within our conceptual framework. We offer suggestions for future empirical research into developing a scale for engagement and assessing its importance and utility.

Keywords: Engagement; telepresence; flow; interactivity; Internet; involvement

2.3 INTRODUCTION

Marketers consider engagement to be the definitive umbrella term for online mechanisms that deliver competitive advantage to those employing them and contribute to the creation of “loyalty beyond reason”. Practitioner definitions buttress this concept. The Advertising Research Foundation (Mesauskas, 2006) found that “*Engagement is turning on a prospect to a brand idea enhanced by the surrounding context*” and, more specifically, “*engagement is a prospect’s interaction with a marketing communication in a way that can be proven to be predictive of sales effects.*” The influential EConsultancy (2008) UK consumer engagement survey regards engagement to be the outcome of “*repeated interactions that strengthen the emotional, psychological, or physical investment a customer has in a brand*”.

The academic world is less sanguine about the presumption that there is a causal relationship between engagement and sales. While numerous practitioner conferences on the subject attest to its centrality to online marketers’ notion of best practice, the scholarly literature, until very recently, preferred to concentrate on the constructs of flow and interactivity, regarded as responsible “*for greater favourability towards the product and the website*” (Sicilia et al., 2005, p. 31). Recent literature (Heath, 2007; Marci, 2006; Wang, 2006) acknowledges the ARF definition but largely uses that definition as a starting point, and neglects the relationship of engagement to other historic constructs dealing with consumers’ online experience.

The semantic dissonance between the marketing and academic worlds is not mere pedantry. The online experience, where competitors are a mouse-click away, and peer-to-peer communication subjects brands to forensic scrutiny, has to be skilful enough to sway an empowered, informed, and increasingly sceptical consumer (Bart et al., 2005). One of the primary mechanisms for constraining the deleterious effect of cost transparency online (Sinha, 2000) is the brand website, or company sponsored website. These websites are designed to “*generate and reinforce positive brand and product messages, and have become a primary source of information for consumers whether they purchase on-or offline*” (Karson & Fisher, 2005, p. 3). Yet, there is a common view that such brand sites, for the most part deprived of the ‘cognitive lock-in’ (Murray & Haubl,

2002) that can arise from transactional and service delivery, have little other than engagement in their armoury. Accordingly, there is widespread practitioner acceptance that engagement is *the critical online process* by which brand equity is increased (Passikoff et al., 2007). Ninety percent of companies in the EConsultancy (2008) consumer engagement survey said that online customer engagement is either ‘*essential*’ or ‘*important*’ to their organisations. However, despite apparent corporate consensus, there has been little progress in the adoption of engagement as the most salient online metric. Many practitioners consider the ARF definition to be inoperable (Mesauskas 2006). From a scholarly perspective, the construct’s lack of linkage to flow, telepresence, and interactivity - constructs associated empirically with favourable attitudes to the brand and the website and with intention to purchase – impairs its claim of importance.

There is, then, a fault line between those practitioners who hold, a priori, that engagement is the ‘holy grail’ of online marketing, and scholars whose empirical work has tended to be focused elsewhere. The purpose of this article is to reconcile these perspectives. We establish a working definition of engagement as a discrete experiential property, independent of interactivity, flow, and telepresence. We present a conceptual framework that positions engagement along an experiential continuum, clarifying its relationship to interactivity, flow, and telepresence and to consumers’ attitudinal and behavioral responses. Furthermore, by conceptualizing its dimensions, we seek to take the first steps towards the establishment of measures for the construct.

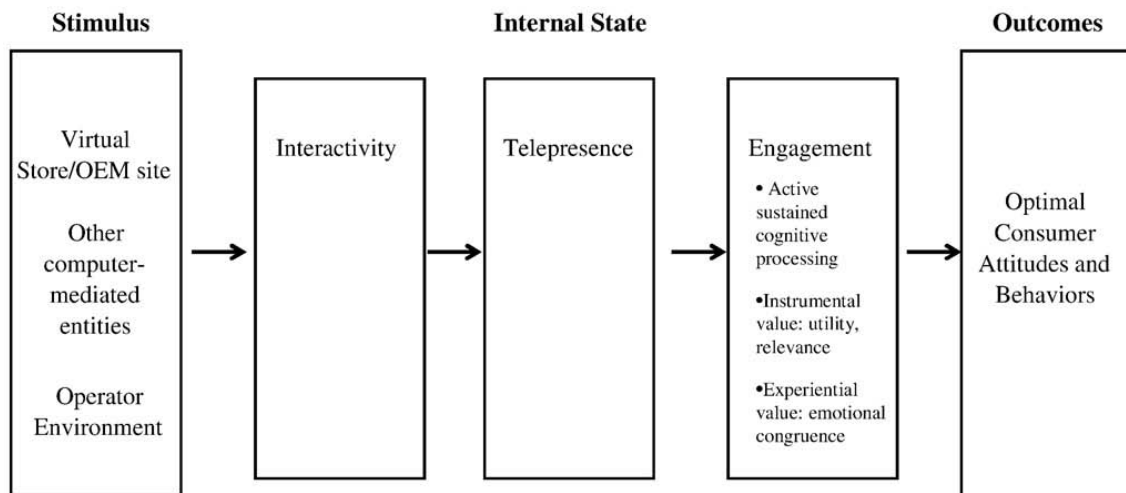
First, we outline our conceptual framework. Next, we discuss each stage of the consumer’s experiential transition, deriving propositions on the key relationships between constructs. Finally, we discuss implications for theory and practice.

2.4 OVERVIEW OF CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model from environmental psychology (Eroglu et al., 2003; Sautter et al., 2004) provides an integrative framework for synthesizing existing research on website experience. The S-O-R model views consumer experience online as consisting of three components. The first is the website - its infrastructure and embedded mechanical stimuli – and its ‘in situ’ environment. The second is the consumer’s internal state – their experiential response to stimuli. This

‘experience’ may be more than an interaction with the mechanical features of the website and the properties of the environment: it can be a “holistic” response (Petre, Minocha, and Roberts 2006), a “website brand experience” (Ha & Perks, 2005), or an appreciation of the “brand as personified by the website” (Chang *et al.*, 2003). The consumer’s extant psychographic state may also temper this experiential response (Bart et al. 2005). Finally, this ‘experiential brew’ generates ‘approach and avoidance’ brand attitudes and behaviors (Eroglu, Machleit, and Davis 2003; Sautter, Hyman, and Lukosius 2004). We will use this theoretical framework (Figure 2-5) to frame our examination of the nature and role of consumer engagement.

Figure 2-5: Conceptual Framework



We suggest that the consumer’s experiential response can be characterized as a dynamic, tiered perceptual spectrum, ranging from perceived interactivity to telepresence (cognitive immersion in and perceived mastery of the heuristics of the medium and website) and finally, to engagement, a cognitive and affective commitment to the brand as personified by the website or other computer-mediated entities, which we suggest is an antecedent of attitudes and behaviors conducive to purchase or future purchase. We will now review the literature pertinent to each model stage and derive associated propositions. A working definition of engagement emerges from the analysis.

2.5 STIMULUS TAXONOMY

Eroglu et al.'s (2003) study, using the S-O-R model, empirically validated that 'online atmospherics', defined as high (e.g., merchandise descriptions, price, terms of sale - critical to utilitarian objectives) and low (e.g., timesteps, animation, sounds - supporting hedonic goals) task relevant cues, affected consumers' internal states, and, consequently, shopping approach/avoidance behaviors. Sautter et al. (2004) added the "operator environment" and the specific properties of the online medium to the 'Stimulus' component of the S-O-R model: these properties were defined as vividness, interactivity, symbolism, and social elements. The experiential response to the operator environment of telepresence was incorporated into the 'internal states' component of the model (Sautter et al., 2004); we will return to the telepresence construct later. Sautter et al.'s (2004) refinement, by incorporating the interplay between the drivers embedded in the website and the properties of the operating environment, allows the introduction of the concept of tiered consumer response.

2.6 PERCEIVED INTERACTIVITY

There is no agreed definition of interactivity (Wu & Wu, 2006), though most definitions assert the primacy of communication, regarding the process as two-way and characterized by the participant's sense of control. Most sources cite Steuer's (1992) definition as a starting point: "the extent to which users can participate in modifying the form and content of the mediated environment in real time" (Steuer, 1992). The studies differ in the perspectives through which interactivity is viewed.

The structuralist or mechanistic approach views interactivity as the response to the structural properties of the online medium or website, "the hardwired opportunity of interactivity provided during an interaction" (Liu & Shrum, 2002, p. 55). Recent studies adopt a more explicitly experiential approach, arguing in favour of *perceived* interactivity (McMillan & Hwang, 2002), defined as "a psychological state experienced by a site user during his or her interaction with the website" (Wu & Wu, 2006, p. 91), since it implicitly takes account of the cognitive processing and involvement in the activity. This conjecture better explains the empirical findings, noted by McMillan and Hwang (2002) and Song and Zinkhan (2008), that there is no relationship between the provision of interactive

features embedded in a website and consumers' appreciation of interactivity and therefore, why, in certain cases, interactivity has a detrimental effect on consumer attitudes to websites, since it supports the notion that some consumers are resistant to levels of interactivity that make excessively onerous demands on cognitive processing (Liu & Shrum, 2009). A number of studies (McMillan & Hwang, 2002; Song & Zinkhan, 2008; Wu & Wu, 2006; Yadav & Varadarajan, 2005) reach a degree of consensus on the core dimensions of perceived interactivity: perceived user control; two-way communication; and perceived responsiveness.

Other empirical studies support interactivity's placement in the conceptual framework (Hopkins et al., 2004; L. R. Klein, 2003; Lecaillon-Thibon, 1970; Stepanski, 2005) by positioning it as an antecedent of another experiential construct, telepresence, itself defined by Steuer (1992) as "the experience of presence in an environment by means of communication medium". We will re-examine this definition later. These studies do not all explicitly draw the distinction between structural interactivity and perceived interactivity. However, the operationalization of the interactivity construct in these studies, which unites the ability to manipulate the environment (Steuer, 1992) with representational richness (Hopkins et al., 2004) and personalization through virtual model technology (Fiore et al. 2005), indicates that they are implicitly measuring experiential response and the concomitant cognitive processing. We hence adopt the following definition and offer our first propositions:

Perceived interactivity is an experiential phenomenon that occurs when a user interacts with a website or other computer-mediated communication entities. Perceived interactivity is the degree to which the user perceives that the interaction or communication is two-way, controllable, and responsive to their actions.

Proposition 1: Perceived interactivity is the product of an exposure to a dual environment, that of the online medium in which the website is located and its specific properties, and the mechanics and heuristics of the website itself.

Proposition 2: Perceived interactivity is an antecedent of telepresence.

We will next consider telepresence in more detail, beginning with its relationship with the notion of flow.

Early work on online experience tended to focus on flow. Hoffman and Novak (1996) adapted Csikszentmihalyi's theory of flow, "*the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing seems to matter*" (Siekpe, 2005, p. 3), to the computer mediated environment. They conceptualized flow as a "cognitive state experienced during navigation that is determined by (1) high levels of skill and control, (2) high levels of challenge, (3) focused attention and (4) is enhanced by interactivity and telepresence" (Novak et al., 2000, p. 22).

However, while there is a body of empirical work emphasizing the centrality of flow to the online experience (Novak et al., 2000; Rettie, 2001) and advocating a causal relationship between flow and consumer attitudes to the website and the brand and purchase intention (Huang, 2006; Mathwick & Rigdon, 2004; Richard & Chandra, 2005), others suggest that the relationship of flow to anything commercially consequential remains to be established (Finneran & Zhang, 2005; Zeithaml et al., 2002).

Both Koufaris (2002) and Siekpe (2005) qualify the case for the inclusion of flow in the model by noting the absence of conceptual standardization and the lack of consensus as to how flow is operationalized. While there is some phenomenological consensus as to what flow is "experientially" from a consumer's perspective (Koufaris, 2002; Pace, 2004; Rettie, 2001; Zwick & Dholakia, 2006), an empiricist reservation remains that the concept of flow is a tribute to scholastic artifice: a construct that can only be tested and evaluated in terms of other assumed contributory latent constructs. Attempts to solve this methodological conundrum have met with mixed results. Koufaris's study (2002), despite its advocacy of parsimony in the use of components of the construct as a solution, is only partially successful in demonstrating a significant relationship between flow variables and unplanned purchases and intention to return to the site and concludes by advising caution in the use of flow. Hausman and Siekpe (2009), using equal rigor in the selection of flow components, are able to uphold more forcefully the relationship between components of flow and commercially significant intentions.

2.7 TELEPRESENCE

Telepresence, which Steuer (1992) defines as “the experience of presence in an environment by means of communication medium”, appears to be less contentious. Hoffman and Novak (1996) illustrated empirically a relationship between telepresence and exploratory behavior. Li et al. (2002), Fiore et al. (2005) and Suh and Chang (2006) demonstrated that telepresence serves as an intermediate variable between such website properties as virtual reality, image interactivity technology and 3D product advertising on the one hand, and consumer attitudes and behaviors on the other. Telepresence, thus, leads to consumers perceiving that they are more informed about a product, and therefore feel more positively about it (Suh & Chang, 2006). It also has a positive impact on the strength of beliefs and the intensity of attitudes towards a product (L. R. Klein, 2003). Fiore et al. (2005) viewed telepresence as an immersive response whereby consumers perceive the artificial environment to provide the necessary cognitive and sensory input equivalent to that of the more concrete real environment: this process positively affects instrumental and experiential value which, in turn, influences attitude to product, purchase intent and site patronage.

The operationalization of telepresence is less cohesive than the collective findings. While all start with Steuer’s (1992) definition, the above empirical studies tend to adulterate the construct of telepresence with components associated with flow. Fiore et al. (2005) add the component of control, while Suh and Chang (2006) incorporate the dimensions of spatial presence (“being there”), “involvement and interest in the content of the displayed environment”, and verisimilitude (naturalness; belief in the environment). We note that by aligning “*involvement*” with “*interest in the content of the displayed environment*”, Suh and Chang (2006) are not employing “involvement” in the orthodox manner by implying interest in the brand and product category, but rather illustrating that the consumer displays focused attention or engrossment.

While there is justifiable concern that the relationship between flow and telepresence requires further investigation (Pace 2004) given the somewhat free interpretation of telepresence in the above studies, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that telepresence amplified by some components of flow (broadly speaking, this equates to the construct

of psychological immersion plus the constructs of control, skill and focused attention) does act as intermediate variable between website properties and consumer attitudes and behaviors. We synthesize these studies and incorporate evidence from computer studies literature (Slater, 1999; Witmer & Singer, 1998), which appears to take for granted the hybridization of certain flow and telepresence attributes, to formulate a definition of telepresence as follows:

Telepresence is defined as the psychological state of ‘being there’ in a computer-mediated environment, augmented by focused attention. It is characterized by cognitive and sensory arousal, control, and immersion (defined as perceiving oneself to be steeped in and interacting with an environment that sustains a continuous stream of stimuli and experiences).

A compelling, immersive experience associated with telepresence appears helpful for establishing a positive attitude to a product or vendor. However, the evidence also shows that the experience of telepresence is not of itself enough to generate a relationship with a brand sufficient to induce purchase intention. In the studies considered here, only Fiore et al. (2005) has established a direct relationship between telepresence and attitude towards an online retailer, willingness to purchase and willingness to patronize. In contrast, Suh, and Chang (2006) find no direct association between telepresence and purchase intention.

It is therefore reasonable to conjecture that telepresence might contribute to another experiential construct and that this construct, in turn, might directly influence optimal consumer attitudes and behaviors. Is there support for the notion that this construct is engagement?

2.8 ENGAGEMENT

2.8.1 Telepresence as an antecedent of Engagement

Some literature, already discussed, supports the view that there is, in addition to perceived interactivity and telepresence, a third experiential state. Shih (1998), Mathwick and Rigdon (2004) and Fiore et al. (2005) interpose an intermediate variable between visitor immersion in the heuristics of the website, whether that psychological state is construed

as flow or telepresence, and consumer attitudes and behavior. Shih defines that variable as *bricolage*, “the tinkering and manipulation of objects around one’s immediate environment to develop and assimilate ideas” (Shih, 1998, p. 660), the mechanism by which consumers manage the vast array of information online and optimize the search and retrieval process. For Mathwick and Rigdon (2004), the bridge between flow and consumer attitudes and behavior is “perceived play”, which has the two components enjoyment and escapism. Escapism is a state of psychological immersion, distinct from telepresence in that it represents “absorption in the online information search experience rather than in the perceived reality of virtual environments”. Escapism is therefore an active state of cognitive processing rather than just a sense of ‘being there’. Fiore et al. (2005) interpose instrumental and experiential value between telepresence and consumer attitudes. They define instrumental value as that which by the delivery of information assists goal-directed behavior, such as purchase decisions, and is acknowledged as such by the consumer, and experiential value as that which, during the consumption experience, offers “intrinsically satisfying pleasure to the senses, emotional satisfaction, mental play or amusement and fantasies”(Stepanski, 2005, p. 42).

These ‘intermediate’ constructs exhibit the dominant characteristics of “engagement” that are found in e-learning academic literature, marketing practitioner studies, and four papers (Heath, 2007; Marci, 2006; Rappaport, 2007; Wang, 2006) that appear to represent the first foray by marketing scholars into the engagement debate. These characteristics are active, sustained, cognitive processing, the attainment of relevance and utility, and emotional bonding, derived from pleasure and satisfaction. Table 2-1 expands on this research on engagement and closely related constructs to date.

Table 2-1: Literature on Engagement and related constructs

Construct	Definition	Dimensions	Context	Study
Bricolage	Bricolage: "the tinkering and manipulation of objects around one's immediate environment to develop and assimilate ideas"	Cognitive processing facilitating learning.	Consumer behavior online	Shih (1998)
Perceived Play	Highly positive experience delivering intrinsic value as escapism and enjoyment	Pleasure; active cognitive processing; psychological immersion in the information search process.	Flow	Mathwick and Rigdon (2004)
Instrumental and Experiential Value	Value is "an interactive, relativistic, preference experience". Instrumental value is the satisfying of goal-directed behavior through information delivery. Experiential value is the satisfying of the senses, emotional satisfaction, mental play or amusement, and fantasies	Utility/relevance; pleasure; satisfaction.	Interactivity	Fiore, Kim, and Lee (2005)
Engagement	The nexus of intrinsic knowledge and/or interest and external stimuli that promotes the initial interest in and desire to continue learning.	Involvement (intrinsic and extrinsically stimulated); learning (cognitive processing).	E-Learning	Jones (1998)
Engagement	Engagement theory encompasses the meaningful interaction (collaborative and communicative) which results in active learning.	Active cognitive processing; problem solving; reasoning; decision-making; evaluation.	E-Learning	Kearsley and Schneiderman (1999)
Engagement	"Engagement is what happens when we are able to give ourselves over to a representational action. It involves a kind of complicity"	Holistic involvement (suspension of disbelief); cognitive processing.	E-Learning	Herrington, Oliver, and Reeves (2003)
Engagement	No specific definition but engagement is central to cognitive categorization and comprehension	Interaction (motivated and strategic); complex, sustained cognitive effort; concentration; active learning.	E-Learning	Guthrie et al. (2004)

Construct	Definition	Dimensions	Context	Study
Engagement	Immersion in a work is the ideal affective experience; engagement is the cognitive patina by which immersed individuals make sense of a narrative.	Cognitive and affective dissonance leading to congruence with narrative schema.	Narrative and Hypertext	Douglas and Hargadon (2000,2001)
Engagement	ARF definition	Contextual relevance; utility; message involvement; emotional bonding.	Advertising	Wang (2006)
Engagement	Engagement centres on the "high relevance of brands to consumers and the development of an emotional connection between consumers and brands".	Relevance; utility; involvement; emotive brand-consumer contract.	Advertising	Rappaport (2007)
Engagement	The amount of subconscious feeling going on when an advertisement is being processed.	Behavioral: external measures e.g., eye tracking, facial recognition, skin conductivity. Measurement of cognitive and emotive power.	Advertising	Heath (2007)
Engagement	The combination of audience synchrony (attention) plus intensity (emotional impact)	Physiological (bio) responses	Neuro-marketing	Marci (2006)

Given this congruence of characteristics, it seems plausible that engagement can stand as an intermediate variable between telepresence and consumer attitudes and behavior. The e-learning literature, in which engagement is better established, supports this causal chain. These studies, while paying little attention to the niceties of distinction between flow and telepresence, are adamant that engagement is a separate, experiential state. They distinguish this state by identifying defining characteristics that are consonant with those sustaining bricolage (Shih 1998), perceived play (Mathwick 2005) and instrumental and experiential value (Fiore et al. 2005). So, Jones (1998) asserts, "When an individual is in flow, they lose themselves. When an individual is engaged in a CBLE (Computer based learning environment) they are *engaged* in the process of learning" (M. G. Jones, 1998, p. 211). The former state is passive, the latter state active and motivated, representing the employment of cognitive strategies to expedite comprehension. Guthrie et al. (2004) stress that engagement represents a psychological state that goes beyond mere task

fulfilment, and is characterized by involvement, being energized, being active, expending effort, and the full use of cognitive capability (Guthrie *et al.*, 2004). Kearsley and Schneiderman (1998) concur: engagement is an activity that involves “active cognitive processes ... problem-solving, reasoning, decision-making and evaluation” (Kearsley & Shneiderman, 1998). They assert that engagement differs from simple interactivity because it must include creative, purposeful activity. Herrington et al. (2003) view online e-learning experience as a two-stage process in which the suspension of disbelief (flow/immersion) is a necessary precursor of engagement. They use the analogy of the cinema: “once the viewer has accepted the fundamental basis for the simulated world in which he or she is immersed, *engagement* with the story or the message of the film is entirely feasible” (Herrington et al., 2003). For film, read brand.

There is, then, at least a *prima facie* case that:

Proposition 3: Telepresence is an antecedent of engagement.

For this proposition to be meaningful, we need a definition of engagement, to which we will now turn.

2.8.2 Defining Engagement

From a practitioner perspective, although there is an acknowledgement of the potency of engagement: “engagement trumps awareness”, (Rappaport 2007), and of its experiential status: “engagement happens inside the consumer not the medium” (S. Elliott, 2006), there is a clearer idea about what it *does* than what it *is*. The tension between a construct that is experientially defined but, to date, is only measured by practitioners via behavioral footprints that are assumed to be related, has not been resolved.

Although engagement remains an emergent rather than mature theme in academic literature, a number of extant definitions of the construct exist (see Table 2-1). For Rappaport (2007), engagement centres on “two key ideas: high relevance of brands to consumers and the development of an emotional connection between consumers and brands”(Rappaport, 2007, p. 138). For Douglas and Hargadon (2000), engagement is a “patina of cognitive activity” delivering an “extra-textual perspective” (Douglas & Hargadon, 2000). Heath (2007), in the advertising context, argues on the contrary for the

primacy of emotion, viewing engagement as a “subconscious emotional construct” expressed as “the amount of ‘feeling’ going on when an advertisement is processed”. He suggests that therefore the relationship between attention (defined as conscious thinking) and engagement is asymmetric and, in some instances, non-existent. Marci (2006) defines engagement in neuro-physiological terms as “the combination of audience synchrony (attention) plus intensity (emotional impact)”, where synchrony is defined as “the degree to which an audience’s physiological state uniformly changes when exposed to a media stimulus” and intensity is defined as “the cumulative strength of physiological response to a media stimulus” (Marci, 2006, p. 383).

While no definition has become the benchmark, there are three insistent themes. First, engagement is a mental state that is accompanied by active and sustained, even complex, cognitive processing (Douglas and Hargadon 2001, 2000; Guthrie et al. 2004; Herrington, Oliver, and Reeves 2003; Jones 1998; Kearsley and Shneiderman 1998; Marci 2006; Mathwick and Rigdon 2004; Shih 1998). Second, engagement is associated with the satisficing of utility and relevance (Fiore et al. 2005; Rappaport 2007; Wang 2006). Third, engagement involves emotional bonding or impact (Heath 2007; Marci 2006; Rappaport 2007; Wang 2006), emotional congruence (Douglas & Hargadon, 2000, 2001) and pleasure and satisfaction (Fiore et al. 2005; Mathwick and Rigdon 2004).

If we can begin to ascertain what engagement *is*, then we must also elucidate what engagement *is not*. Specifically, we should clarify the relationship of engagement to the construct of involvement. As our earlier discussion points out, ‘involvement’ as a component of telepresence is merely a synonym for focused attention or ‘engrossment’ in the website. However, as Table 2-1 indicates, ‘involvement’, in the more academically orthodox sense, is an important dimension of engagement. Indeed, the semantic blurring between involvement, *as it is conventionally operationalized in the sense of “importance and relevance to me”* (Bienstock & Stafford, 2006), and instrumental value (utility and relevance), which is directly associated with engagement (Rappaport 2007; Wang 2006), is the marker for the conceptual convergence between the e-learning and marketing fields dealing with engagement.

Nevertheless, there are three distinctions between engagement and involvement, which Thomson et al. (2005) define as “*a state of mental readiness that typically influences the allocation of cognitive resources to a consumption object, decision, or action*” (Thomson et al., 2005). The first is that consumer involvement hence requires a consumption object which is usually defined as a product category (Goldsmith & Emmert, 1991; Zaichkowsky, 1985) whereas, in our paper, the consumption object is the ‘brand personified by the website’. Second, engagement goes beyond involvement in encompassing an *active* relationship with the brand as personified by the website: the intention to act trumps the involvement construct’s more passive allocation of mental resource. Third, engagement requires more than the exercise of cognition: it requires the satisficing of experiential value as well as that of instrumental value - the latter is more commonly associated with involvement. A caveat is that some measures of involvement, despite Thomson et al.’s (2005) emphasis on the cognitive aspect, contain affective components (Zaichkowsky 1985). Yet there remains a substantive difference of degree: those measures remain more indicative of the pleasurably diverting rather than expressions of a *commitment to pursue an active relationship with a brand*.

Accordingly, we define online engagement as follows.

Online engagement is a cognitive and affective commitment to an active relationship with the brand as personified by the website or other computer-mediated entities designed to communicate brand value. It is characterized by the dimensions of dynamic and sustained cognitive processing and the satisficing of instrumental value (utility and relevance) and experiential value (emotional congruence with the narrative schema encountered in computer-mediated entities).

We will explain our use of the term ‘congruence’. Much of the e-learning work on immersion and engagement uses the lens of schema theory. Douglas and Hargadon (2001) define schemas as “the building blocks of information processing, a cognitive framework that determines what we know about the world, the objects it contains, the tasks we perform within it, even what we see” (Douglas & Hargadon, 2001, p. 154). Scripts are a sub-set of schemas: a scene within a schema, calling up a series of tasks and actions appropriate to the context. In the context of a brand narrative, we view the online

environment as a vast information store, wherein brands strive, through their arrangement and projection of information, to generate a dynamic, pleasurable state in consumers. This state, a prerequisite for successful imprinting, arises from cognitive access to a wide range of scripts and schemas, *both inherent in the brand communication and derived from the consumers' own cognitive and affective framework* (Douglas & Hargadon, 2001, p. 156). The resultant tension between internal and external scripts and schemas generates a pleasurable cognitive and affective dissonance, which in its drive to find utility and emotional congruence with the “whole” of the educational message or narrative or brand, disrupts the immersive, mechanical, experience.

We therefore believe that congruence is an inalienable part of the engagement process. While practitioners might prefer ‘emotional bonding’ to frame an enduring relationship between consumer and brand, we believe that congruence is more apt if one refers to a wide range of consumer products, from high to low product category involvement. It is possible to be ‘bonded’ with a Harley Davidson; that is less likely to be the case with a washing powder, although, in the latter case, the idea of emotional resonance, correspondence, or ‘congruence’ with the brand ethos can be valid and lasting.

We have mentioned that the frailty of the ARF definition has led to practitioners equating engagement with behavioral footprints. Many practitioners challenge this reliance on behavioral measures (generally based on time spent, pages called up and duration and recency of web site visits) as a retreat to an unsatisfactory comfort zone (Dykes, 2008). The scant empirical academic marketing literature on engagement has equally not resolved the issue of associating engagement with optimal consumer outcomes. Wang’s (2006) advertising study provides empirical validation of the relationship between engagement, initiated by contextual relevance, and consumer attitudes to brand communication, but limits measurement to a single item. Marci’s (2006) study shows empirically that context is a driver of engagement but restricts its scope to the measurement of engagement and its effects through the observation of physiological correlates.

There is, then, limited empirical support for a direct relationship between engagement and optimal consumer attitudes and behaviors. Yet, it is both plausible and consistent

with the available data that this relationship exists. Empirical investigation of this relationship should not only incorporate the development of a multi-item scale reflecting the construct's multidimensionality, but also consider triangulation with physiological and neural correlates (Fugate, 2008; Marci, 2006).

Hence:

Proposition 4: There is a relationship between online engagement and optimal consumer attitudes and behaviors.

2.9 DISCUSSION

2.9.1 Implications for theory and practice

Our paper responds to calls to investigate online “experiential intensity” (Demangeot & Broderick, 2006) and provides a template to complement structural and behavioral measures with experiential metrics that may offer a more efficient way of tracking consumer relationships with brands and allow marketers to devise more effective structural mechanisms for a durable emotional connection (du Plessis, 2007). We supplant a loose and operationally limited practitioner definition but, in doing so, we refute the assertion that engagement (as practitioners understand it) is simply a mistranslation of more familiar academic terms. Engagement is not a proxy for flow, telepresence, or interactivity; rather, it is a discrete construct, characterized by specific experiential components - a construct that can also be reconciled with extant academic work. This reconciliation arises partly from identifying lacunae in existing academic studies and partly through a synthesis of an eclectic body of literature that supports the adoption of a third experiential construct. We now have a theoretical bridge between the practitioner and scholastic worlds.

By enabling a common discourse, empirical investigations into experiential metrics and website structural mechanisms in a quest for improved emotional congruence between consumer and brand can now proceed in a manner that directly aligns with practitioner framing of the issue. Our framework also nudges the practitioner away from a default behaviouralist position, offering the prospect of an experiential toolkit to complement existing metrics, thereby enabling a more efficient and productive allocation of resource.

2.9.2 Future Research

We have argued that engagement is a sustainable intermediate variable between the website drivers of consumer experience and commercial desirable consumer attitudes and behaviors. Research is now needed into this proposition's ontological adequacy.

We must also acknowledge that our framework is only a 'best fit' conjecture. There is an inherent frailty in any structured approach to consumer experiential states (Zwick & Dholakia, 2006). The process by which perceived interactivity gives way to telepresence, which in turn gives way to engagement, is unlikely to be so comfortably linear; nor can one implicitly assume, as does our diagram (Figure 2.5), that the consumer is a 'tabula rasa' in relation to the website and/or brand. We can envisage at least three other potential scenarios:

(a) Online engagement can exist independently of telepresence. Online engagement, as we define it, must incorporate the satisfying of instrumental value (utility and relevance) and experiential value (emotional congruence). A website stimulus other than telepresence may generate that experiential state.

(b) The relationship between telepresence and engagement may have an element of reciprocity. If a consumer is highly involved with a brand or product category prior to the website encounter, whether due to engagement generated by a previous encounter or due to other contacts with the brand or product category, they may be pre-disposed to spend time on and interact with the site and by doing so contribute to telepresence.

(c) Telepresence may not automatically lead to engagement. This is, indeed, a corollary of our definitions, which however we point out for clarity: engagement will not occur, no matter how stimulating or immersive the website experience if the site fails to be relevant and of use to the consumer and hence to evoke some form of cognitive and affective commitment.

Suggested next steps for researchers include the development of an engagement scale to allow the testing of the conceptual framework and the associated propositions. It is incumbent on such a venture that it rigorously tests the assertion "engagement trumps

awareness” (Rappaport 2007) – another construct with well-established links to consumer choice (Macdonald & Sharp, 2000). Researchers may wish to investigate to what degree engagement can be moderated by factors such as the experiential quality and narrative drive of the website or other computer-mediated entity, the collaborative experience of peer to peer interaction (Schembri, 2009), and the individual’s own innate attitudinal and behavioral disposition. Given the evidence of the neuro-marketing field, which emphasizes the pre-eminence of emotion in decision-making and brand affiliation (du Plessis 2007), exploring the relationship and relative valence between cognitive and affective components of the engagement construct may also be fruitful.

We accept that our conceptual framework may raise as many questions as it answers, but we hope that by seeking to provide a conceptual and semantic bridge between different perspectives we have aided academic and practitioner collaboration in the development of viable measures for the engagement construct and in the assessment of its importance and utility.

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3 CHAPTER THREE: ENGAGEMENT: METRIC OR MEME?

3.1 ABSTRACT

Purpose: The reconciliation of scholastic and practitioner narratives with reference to the relative value of customer engagement (CE) and customer engagement behavior (CEB@Site) in a media website context. We provide the empirical justification for circumventing scholastic roadblocks (perceived by practitioners) and refuting practitioner objections (Adler, 2016; Elliott, 2018; Harris, 2020; Weigel, 2011) to the implementation of a customer engagement scale.

Methodology: Two self-report online surveys. The first survey conducts an ‘*in situ*’ investigation on BSkyB sites and associated sites. The second survey asks for recall about a site visit in order to competitively audit different media website platforms.

Findings: (1) CE is a positive, significant predictor of three optimal commercial outcomes—satisfaction, loyalty, and NPS; (2) CEB@Site is not a robust proxy for CE; (3) Media Context is a salient moderating factor in the measured relationships; (4) CE and CEB@Site exist in a symbiotic relationship, where each construct makes a significant discrete contribution to outcomes.

Research Contribution: (1) supplying evidence as to the scholastic consensus re the conceptualisation of CE; (2) ‘reframing’ the CE scale to enable measurement of diverse media platforms; (3) presenting the case for cognitive and affective measures as contributors to website success; (4) delineating of the relative impacts of CEB and CEB@Site.

Practical Implications: The study allows marketers to benchmark website performance on established commercial metrics, *pre and post launch*. The work sets down the axiom ‘*attention to CE will drive loyalty; attention to CEB@Site will drive future growth*’. The study also shows that while context is a moderating factor, it does not invalidate a psychometric metric and that measurement on a ‘*like for like*’ basis is possible.

Originality: To the authors’ knowledge, this is the first study to tackle practitioner neglect of CE as an experiential metric and the first study to calibrate the relative effects of CE and CEB@Site across diverse online media contexts.

Keywords: Customer engagement Customer engagement behavior, Internet activism, Loyalty, Satisfaction, Net Promoter Score, Content sites, Social media sites

3.2 INTRODUCTION

“Narratives are major vectors of rapid change in culture, in zeitgeist, and in economic behavior”. (Robert J. Shiller, Narrative Economics: How Stories Go Viral and Drive Major Economic Events)

“Memes: (discrete units of knowledge, gossip, jokes and so on) are to culture what genes are to life”. (Merriam-Webster)

We live in a ‘post-truth’ world of competing narratives. In the scholastic narrative, customer engagement is an important, possibly critical, marketing metric. The Marketing Science Institute (2016-2018) continues to regard customer engagement as a research priority. Scholars conjecture on the impact of customer engagement on commercial return, for example “*sales growth, cost reductions, brand referrals....and superior profitability*” (Hollebeek et al., 2014). As the customer engagement field has developed, a slender, though empirically substantive, corpus of work has also emerged to support those conjectures (Beckers et al., 2018; Calder et al., 2009, 2016; Leckie et al., 2016; Malthouse et al., 2016; So et al., 2016; Thakur, 2016). There are now several robust, heavily cited, customer engagement measurement scales and yet, there is no evidence in trade literature that practitioners are inclined to use them. Why?

There are several acknowledged impediments to widespread practitioner adoption, enshrined in the academic literature:

- i. **The apparent lack of conceptual clarity and intellectual cohesion in extant studies:** Certainly, Schultz and Peltier (2013) suggest that customer engagement remains an “*elusive construct and that researchers needed to define, conceptualise, and operationalise this measure of relationship strength*”. This is a view echoed by others (Hollebeek et al., 2014; So et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2017). Indeed, there appears to be a multiplicity of defined “engagements” that differ both in conceptualisation and in measurable dimensions.
- ii. **The scholastic bifurcation between ‘experientialists’ and ‘behaviouralists’:** Experientialists (Baldus et al., 2015; Brodie & Hollebeek, 2011; Dessart et al., 2016; Harrigan et al., 2017; Hollebeek et al., 2014; Mollen & Wilson, 2010a; Vivek et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2017) are described as those who conjecture that customer engagement as a metric should include mental components (cognitive and affective) and who may, or who may not, also include behavioural transactions or intent to

- transact. Behaviouralists (Bijmolt et al., 2010; Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014; Kumar et al., 2010; van Doorn et al., 2010) concur with van Doorn et al.'s 2010 definition that customer engagement behaviour (CEB) should “*go beyond transactions and may be specifically defined as a customer’s behavioural manifestations that have a brand or firm focus, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers*”. Obilo et al. (2021) go further, asserting that “*engagement consists solely of one dimension: the behavioral dimension*” and that the phenomenon (cognitive and affective components) transpires, ex post facto, as a result of the consumption process (Obilo et al., 2021)
- iii. **The issue of context:** Calder, Isaac, and Malthouse’s (2016) work persuasively upholds the notion that context in this domain is everything and questions the one-size-fits-all provenance of any standardized engagement scale. This has led to practitioner concern about the burgeoning multiplication of “*ad-hoc, domain specific scales*” (Böttger et al., 2017). One recent paper, alarmed by the ‘noise’ of variation generated by context and its deleterious effect on a common metric, declared that even genre groupings lacked validity: “*the general conclusion is that there is no such thing as ‘social media’*” (Voorveld et al., 2018, p. 52)
 - iv. **The representation of a latent construct as a meta-algorithmic confection of components:** Most extant engagement definitions, including the experientialist definitions, represent customer engagement by specifying what it gives rise to e.g., interactivity; connections with brand; an active relationship with the brand (Baldus et al., 2015; Mollen & Wilson, 2010b; Vivek et al., 2014); or, alternatively, how it manifests, e.g. ‘positively valenced brand-related cognitive, emotional and behavioral activity’; ‘affective, cognitive, behavioral manifestations’ (Dessart et al., 2016; Hollebeek et al., 2014). The latent concept of engagement itself is typically characterised by such vague words or phrases as “specific interactive experiences” or “intensity of participation” (Brodie et al., 2011; Vivek et al., 2014). If the practitioner world has difficulty articulating its essence, collectively, the academic world has elided the issue of what customer engagement ‘is’. Customer engagement does not yet speak plainly for ‘itself’.

It is hardly surprising that practitioners, confronted with the lack of domain clarity, the cloudy definitions, and the fragmented approach to the measurement of customer engagement, prefer to align with the safer, more defensible, behaviouralist stance. The marketing world may agree that there is a pre-requisite of emotional investment to enable customer engagement behaviour but regards as “*mere puffery*” (Weigel, 2011) any experiential constructs associated with this domain. The practitioner consensus can be summed up as: why bother with an experiential metric that is intermediate in its effect, indeterminate in its conceptualisation, and perhaps (since grounded in subjective, self-reported qualia) fundamentally immeasurable, when you have behavioral metrics with a direct contribution to the bottom line? (Adler, 2016; Elliott, 2018; Weigel, 2011)

Practitioner operationalisation of customer engagement encompasses (1) the slipshod: the ubiquitous usage of the term “engagement”, with no accompanying definition, as a handy meme to legitimise a marketing strategy or to embellish the provenance of a product or service; (2) the arcane: the proprietary algorithms of ‘programmatic buying’, where competitor sensitivity precludes transparency; and most tenaciously, (3) folk wisdom: behavioral measures, notably those based on time or footprint, that have an established legitimacy in traditional media and that have been carried over into the digital environment without much interrogation as to efficacy or relevance. This reliance on behavioral measures is further tainted by the assumption that such digital activity equates, for the most part, to approbation.

This situation warrants concern, as an opinion from Professor Vivek (Ng et al., 2020, p. 244) , worth extensively quoting, indicates: “*Ease of obtaining [behavioral] data has further diverted attention from the cognitive and emotional aspects of engagement, presenting the behavioural indicators (likes, brand page loyalty etc.) as synonymous to engagement. This attention to only one aspect of customer engagement is perhaps the reason that academic investigation has not succeeded much in informing business performance. Behavioural indicators of engagement may result from several other factors besides the cognitive and emotional investment made by the customer. There is much scope for inquiring into the nature of cognitive and emotional aspects of engagement, which can perhaps better explain its influence on business outcomes*”.

How do we address the barriers to adoption listed above? We do so by reconciling the intellectual schisms in the academic literature, allaying practitioner reservations about the

construct on this score, and by nudging practitioners towards a revaluation of experiential measures and an acknowledgement of the latent frailty of behavioral measures currently employed, through qualitative and quantitative analysis.

Our paper contributes to knowledge by:

- i. Clarifying the construct of engagement, through a textual analysis of extant work, and proffering a scale that aligns with this.
- ii. Challenging the specific barriers to practitioner adoption, as well as demonstrating the latent frailty of extant practitioner engagement measures.
- iii. Illustrating the erroneousness of assuming that behavioral metrics are a robust proxy for customer engagement.
- iv. Demonstrating that the experiential variant of customer engagement is a significant predictor of marketing outcomes in its own right.
- v. Revealing that context is an inconsistent confounding factor in the relationship between customer engagement and customer engagement behavior, and in the relationship between these two metrics and customer relationship outcomes but showing that provided like-for-like comparisons are employed, this does not preclude use of a single, overarching engagement scale.

In sum, we thereby offer a way forward towards the reconciliation of behavioral and experiential metrics and the regular employment of the latter.

Our paper is structured accordingly. First, we review the scholastic and practitioner literature on engagement scales, examining the conceptualisations of customer engagement articulated in this material. Using qualitative analysis, we demonstrate that the lack of clarity and consensus about the measure apprehended by practitioners is illusory, and we take the first steps towards re-defining the construct, moving away from the current mechanistic definitions. We then initiate a scale development process to encapsulate this. We test this scale, and attendant hypotheses, in two empirical studies in the context of media websites. Finally, we examine the scholastic and managerial implications of our findings and, via the recalibration of the relationship between customer engagement and customer engagement behavior, make the case that customer engagement is an important, empirically grounded metric, undeserving

of being represented by proprietary algorithms based on untested intuitive heuristics, or of being reduced to a catch-all meme to authenticate products and services.

We constrain our literature review primarily to (1) work that specifically covers the barriers to adoption and (2) the empirical work on customer engagement scales and customer engagement behavior metrics. We will also incorporate some notable conceptual papers and the findings of systematic reviews. The scale papers included are the most cited according to Harzing Publish or Perish (<https://harzing.com/resources/publish-or-perish>), cross-referenced with input from Google Scholar (Table 3-1).

The literature review allows exegesis and interrogation of practitioner barriers to adoption. The lacunae in that corpus of work furnishes the hypotheses of our empirical study.

3.3 ISSUE: THE CONCEPTUAL CLARITY AND COHESION OF CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT

In 2006, there was an attempt by the Advertising Research Foundation to define customer engagement as an experiential metric. The effort, “*Engagement is turning on a prospect to a brand idea enhanced by the surrounding context*”, was met with derision from scholars and practitioners alike. Since that time, various marketing experts have proffered explanations: “*the discovery and exchange of shared values and interests*”; “*it’s a like, view, comment or share*”; “*representing two-way communication between a brand and consumers*”; “*connectedness or creating a closer relationship with your audience*” and probably the most prescient, “*It depends*” (Abramovich, 2012). It is hardly surprising that practitioners retreated to the tried, trusted and observable. Thus, customer engagement in the practitioner world tends to be measured as a confection of behavioral and temporal footprints. These algorithms, particularly those in social media, are available online, albeit the specific weightings and detailed runes are not usually accessible. The metrics ranked in importance by marketers include “*av. Time on page + bounce rate + av. session duration + returning visitors + pages per session + new contacts/subscribers + exit rate + scroll depth + abandonment rate + no of shares + no of comments*” (Abbamonte, 2019). Thus, what can be measured becomes *de facto* the measurement.

In the scholastic world, while the field of study has matured enough to support a number of admirable and comprehensive systematic reviews (Islam & Rahman, 2016; Kunz et al., 2017;

Ng et al., 2020; Rosado-Pinto & Correia, 2020; So et al., 2020), all are agreed that the conceptualisation of customer engagement to date is problematic. All, however, have also rigorously stratified the dimensions of engagement, itemised the overarching theories under which the concept is subsumed, and explored the issues still to be resolved. Yet, this systematic categorisation, aligned with the data contained in Table 3-1, throws up an interesting observation and in our view, a limiting factor. While we may jibe at practitioner obfuscation of customer engagement, customised in arcane and inaccessible algorithms, the operationalisation of scholastic customer engagement depends on similar formulaic principles (usually: cognitive dimensions + affective dimensions + behavioral dimensions). It is a mechanical artifice: an interpretation of best fit, not a representation of subjective qualia. It tells us what customer engagement does; it does not tell us what it ‘is’⁶.

If, as Karl Popper has articulated, all life is “problem solving” (K. Popper, 2013), then we start by reviewing extant literature and its perspective on the barriers to practitioner adoption.

3.3.1 The problem of consensus

Engagement as a descriptor of a psychological state is hardly a new construct (Mollen & Wilson, 2010b). Rather, from 2009 onwards, in response to the liberties afforded by the emergence of the internet as a facilitator and mediator in the customer-corporate relationship, that descriptor metamorphosed into a metric. Engagement became the measure and the mechanism that could account for the empowered consumer. That empowerment created by the breach in the quasi-monopoly of customer-firm interaction via the profusion of choice afforded by the internet, and the contemporaneous reduction of information asymmetry (Brodie et al., 2011; Mollen & Wilson, 2010b; Morrongiello et al., 2017; Rasool et al., 2020). The

⁶ This statement is predicated on a philosophical stance. The scholastic definitions of CE are confections of the manifestations of engagements (indeed Dessart et al. 2016 directly describe the CE components as ‘manifestations’). The Oxford dictionary definition of ‘manifestation’ is the action of showing something, or a symptom. In philosophy, manifestation can be defined as “an effect of a disposition being activated” (McKittrick, 2010, p. 73) This is in my view characterises extant scholastic definitions of CE: the components of CE are effects (the activation of CE) and thus epitomise what CE does. It is not the same as representation – ‘what is stands for’ (APA Dictionary of Psychology, <https://dictionary.apa.org/representation>) i.e., what CE ‘is’ in terms of subjective mental apprehension (qualia).

customer was (and is) no longer a passive recipient of offerings but one who actively solicits these offerings and is a potential co-creator of them (Brodie et al., 2011; Vivek et al., 2014). The social media phenomenon has further refined this, with the emergence of the consumer as an actor in a complex network of relationships, capable of functioning as a collective lobby. That lobby can act as a tribal force, driven by the eddies of opinion in an almost Brownian motion of intended and unintended consequences, and has become a market force in its own right (Figenschou & Fredheim, 2020). Consumption is no longer an individual preserve but is very often driven and validated by the group. Furthermore, firms deflect the groundswell of this collective opinion, irrespective of purchase, at their commercial peril.

Is it correct that the conceptualisation of customer engagement is problematic or is the articulation of lack of consensus rather a reflection of an almost pro-forma starting point in the scholastic tradition of journal submission?

Prima facie, practitioner apprehension on this score looks justified. In one systematic review twenty-seven definitions of customer engagement were extracted from 173 articles (Hao, 2020); in another (Ng et al., 2020) some “15 explicit definitions from highly ranked (*A* on ABCD ranking*) or highly cited (*> 100 citations*) papers” are identified. All these definitions encompass a multiplicity of dimensions - from the typical three or four scale dimensions to the Baldus et al. (2015) scale that incorporates eleven dimensions. However, de facto, there is an overarching acknowledgement (despite the minutiae of different measurement scales) that customer engagement is a multi-dimensional construct – composed of cognitive, emotional and/or behavioural dimensions – with later research incorporating a social dimension into the mix.

Furthermore, while accepting that no single definition of customer engagement has been recognised as ‘*primus inter pares*’ (Ng et al., 2020), our review of the literature suggests that the definition of experiential customer engagement put forward in the Brodie et al. (2011) paper, manages to be the most comprehensive and, probably, the most extensively quoted: “*Customer engagement (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. It occurs under a specific set of context dependent conditions generating differing CE levels; and exists as a dynamic, iterative process within service relationships that*

cocreate value. CE plays a central role in a nomological network governing service relationships in which other relational concepts (e.g., involvement, loyalty) are antecedents and/or consequences in iterative CE processes. It is a multidimensional concept subject to a context- and/or stakeholder-specific expression of relevant cognitive, emotional and/or behavioral dimensions” (Brodie et al., 2011, p. 9)

At a macro level (despite the experientialist/behaviouralist schism, which we will address later) there does appear to be some degree of concordance about the engagement domain and the rules and constraints that operate within the domain.

We must also observe (and this forms part of our rationale for the introduction of yet another engagement scale) that while the Brodie et al. (2011) definition sets out an algorithmic mechanism underpinning the measurement of customer engagement, locating the phenomenon within a set of antecedents and consequences, it does not tell us what customer engagement is. A “psychological state” remains an undefined descriptor. This definition, and others featured in Table 3-1, which mostly tend to be variants of the Brodie et al. (2011) definition, are mechanistic conceits, delineating a script not a representational state. We aim to introduce a measurement scale that represents what CE is, without nullifying the operative complexity and constraints delineated in the extant definitions.

To do that, we must examine the most cited Engagement scales (excluding those scales that are specifically, and solely, measuring customer engagement behavior, which are scrutinised in a separate section). Again, at a micro level, while there appears to be “*a lack of consensus on the scales to measure the construct, the different contexts where the concept is applied, and the different actors involved*” (Rosado-Pinto & Correia, 2020) , we suggest that this discord is also less intractable than initially surmised.

3.4 ENGAGEMENT SCALES: THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis is the mechanism “*for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set*” (Braun & Clarke, 2012) .While there are multiple approaches to the methodology, we used semantic analysis as a technique within an inductive approach (coding and theme development directed by the content of the data) (Braun & Clarke, 2012). We used twelve Engagement Scale papers; five are identified as

highly cited in Google Scholar, according to Harzing Publish or Perish, and we have also included some more recent papers to ensure a contemporaneous input. We employed NVivo 12 (word frequency and text search) to encode identified themes and terminology, derived from “*the obvious or semantic meanings in the data*”, or (an assessment of) “*the latent meanings, the assumptions and ideas that lie behind what is explicitly stated*” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 58). The CE scale papers in the analysis are set in out in Table 3.1 and the themes identified, and frequency of use of those themes, in the CE definitions and in the CE scale dimensions are illustrated in Figure 3-1 and Table 3-2, respectively.

The scale dimensions created by the authors were a starting point and some were clearly identifiable as overarching themes: enthusiasm (Dessart et al., 2016; So et al., 2014) attention (Dessart et al., 2016; Hollebeek et al., 2014; Mirbagheri & Najmi, 2019; Paruthi & Kaur, 2017; Vivek et al., 2014), absorption (Dessart et al., 2016; Dwivedi et al., 2016; So et al., 2014), self-congruence with brand (France et al., 2016; Hollebeek et al., 2014; So et al., 2014; Sprott et al., 2009) and social connection (Paruthi & Kaur, 2017; Vivek et al., 2014). Despite the linguistic prolixity used in the scales, all the remaining dimensions and their associated terminology fold into the themes illustrated in Table 3.2. There is one outlier, “*Utilitarian rewards*”, incorporated in the Baldus et al. (2015) paper referring to financial payment for brand community participation. In sum, despite different contexts (brand community, tourism brands, FMCG brands), there appears to be a high degree of semantic consilience between the leading and the most recent engagement scales and their associated engagement definitions (Table 3-2 & Figure 3-1). That there is a reasonable degree of concord about how to measure engagement is also supported by a number of recent papers that adopt the extant scales: the Hollebeek et al. 2014 scale (Harrigan et al., 2017; Oliveira & Fernandes, 2020; Tarute et al., 2017) and the Solemn and Pedersen (2016) scale (Hinson et al., 2019). This is equally true of those papers that include the social connection dimension created by Vivek et al. (2014), notably the Paruthi and Kaur (2017) paper.

We therefore suggest the first practitioner barrier to adoption based on the perception that there is little conceptual agreement as to both the definition and calibration (in terms of dimensions) of customer engagement is not evidentially supported.

Table 3-1: Most Cited CE Scale Papers, ranked by citations (Google Scholar)

Year	Author	Journal	Citations	Engagement Definition	Context	Dimensions	Metrics
2014	Hollebeek et al.	Journal of Interactive Marketing	2716	A consumer's positively valenced brand-related cognitive, emotional, and behavioral activity during or related to focal consumer/brand interactions	Social Media: LinkedIn Brand	Cognitive Processing, Affection, Activation	CP (Thinking/Learning) AFFEC (Positive, Happy, Feel Good) ACTIV (Time using, usual usage)
2009	Sprott et al.	Journal of Marketing	1074	Defined as 'consumers' tendencies to include important brands as part of their self-concept...this generalized individual difference is called "brand engagement in self-concept" (BESC)	Survey well-known brands	Brand engagement with self	Personal bond with Brand; Part of Self-definition, Self-Affirmation and Validation
2014	Baldus et al.	Journal of Business Research	657	Online brand community engagement is the compelling, intrinsic motivations to continue interacting with an online brand community	Online Brand Communities	Brand Influence, Brand Passion, Connecting, Helping, Like-minded discussion, Rewards (Hedonic and Utilitarian), Seeking Assistance, Self-expression, up to date Information, Validation	BI (Influence/improve Brand); BP (Passionate participation); CONNECT (Connected to Brand, Connected to Consumers); HELP (Help others, Answer questions, educate others); DISCUSS (Conversation, sharing opinions); REWARDS HED (like, fun, entertaining) REWARDS UT (Monetary gain); ASSIST (Receive help/answers); EXPRESS (Be myself, share interests/beliefs) INFO (Kept informed; leading edge); VALID (Feel good about myself; Self affirmation)

CHAPTER 3: ENGAGEMENT: METRIC OR MEME?

Year	Author	Journal	Citations	Engagement Definition	Context	Dimensions	Metrics
2014	So et al.	Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research.	700	A multidimensional concept subject to a context- and/or stakeholder-specific expression of relevant cognitive, emotional and/or behavioral dimensions (Brodie et al, 2011)	Survey: tourism brands	Enthusiasm (or vigour), Attention, Absorption, Interaction, and Identification.	Enthusiasm (Thinks about, feels passionately about); Attention (Concentration, Learning, Attention) Absorption (Time flies, immersion); Interaction (Participation, Community involvement, Interaction, Exchange ideas; Id (Identifies with brand)
2014	Vivek et al.	Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice	712	CE goes beyond purchase and is the level of the customer's (or potential customer's) interactions and connections with the brand or firm's offerings or activities, often involving others in the social network created around the brand/offering/activity	Apple Products/Retail	Conscious Attention, Enthused Participation, Social Connection	CA (attention, learning) EP (spend time. Passion) SC (love brand when being part of community/with friends)
2016	Dessart et al.	Journal of Marketing Management	504	The state that reflects consumers' individual dispositions toward engagement foci, which are context specific. Engagement is expressed through varying levels of affective, cognitive, and behavioural manifestations that go beyond exchange situations	Online Brand Communities (Facebook)	Enthusiasm, Enjoyment, Attention, Absorption, Sharing, Learning, Endorsing	ENTH (Enthusiastic, Interested); ENJ (Pleasure, Happy) ATTENT (Think, spend time) ABS (Time flies, carried away); SHAR (share ideas content, help) LEARN (ask questions, seek help) ENDORS (Promote/defend brand, say positive things)
2015	Dwivedi	Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services	473	Defined consumer brand engagement as consumers' positive, fulfilling, brand-use-related state of mind that is characterized by vigour, dedication, and absorption	Survey: mobile phone users	Vigour, Dedication, Absorption	VIG (Energy, Passion), DED (Enthusiastic, Proud, Inspired) ABS (Carried away, Time flies, forget myself)

CHAPTER 3: ENGAGEMENT: METRIC OR MEME?

Year	Author	Journal	Citations	Engagement Definition	Context	Dimensions	Metrics
2018	O'Brien et al.	International Journal of Human Computer Studies	454	User engagement (UE) is a quality of user experience characterized by the depth of an actor's cognitive, temporal, affective and behavioural investment when interacting with a digital system	Survey online shoppers (book retailer)	Aesthetic appeal, Focused Attention, Perceived Usability, Reward	AETH (Attractive, Appealing), FA (Absorption, immersion, Lost track of time), PU (Control, reverse items - frustration, taxing, demanding) Reward (Success, Recommend, Involvement, Fun)
2016	France et al.	Journal of Brand Management	234	Uses Hollebeek et al (2014)	Survey: Brand usage as a customer	Cognitive Processing, Affection (combined)	Engrossed, Passionate, Focused, Absorbed, Dedicated, Belonging to (Brand)
2016	Solem and Pedersen	Journal of Internet Marketing and Advertising	55	CBE is a result of customers' involvement, efforts, and resource integration in co-production processes.	Insurance Firm/Brand Facebook users	Physical, Emotional, Cognitive	PHYS (Support, Active, Perform well), EMOT (Enthusiasm, Energetic, Positivity), COG (Focused, Attention, Absorption)

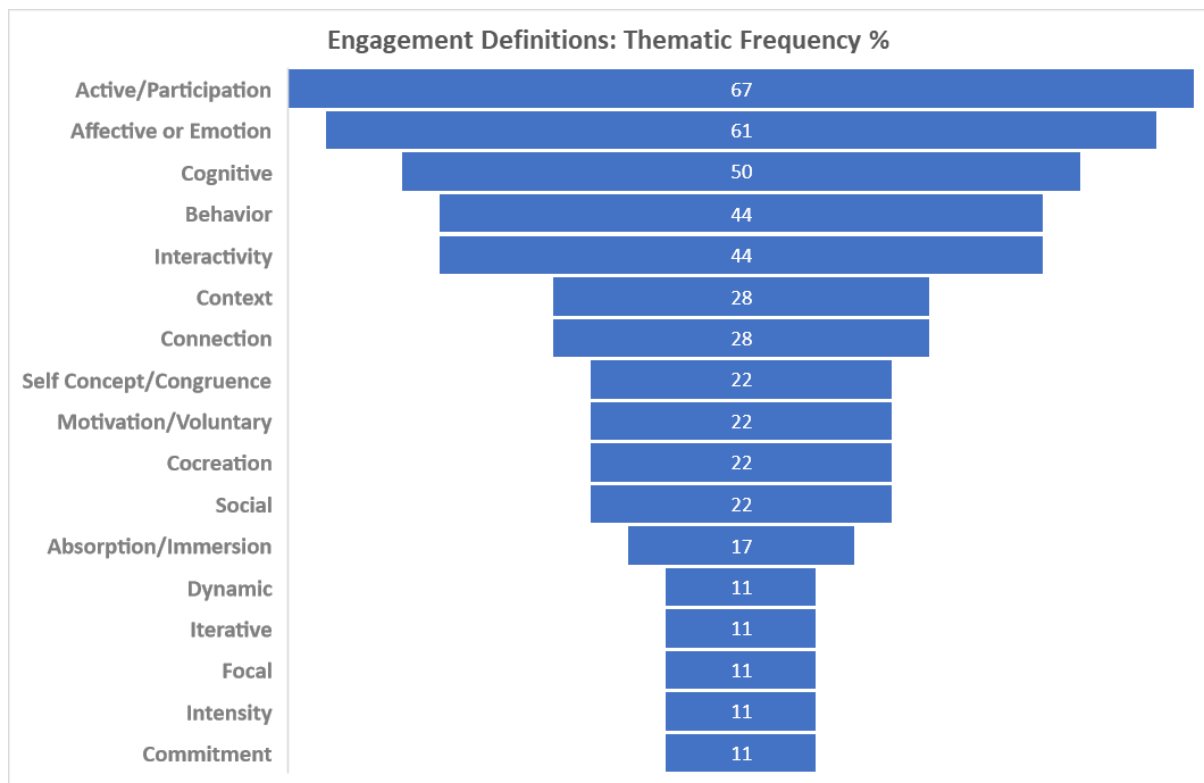
CHAPTER 3: ENGAGEMENT: METRIC OR MEME?

2019	Mirbagheri and Najmi	Psychology and Marketing	41	Consumers' engagement with a SMAC is defined here as the consumers' level of attention to the campaign, their level of interest in and enjoyment of the campaign, and their level of participation in the campaign	5 Social Media campaigns on Instagram (Food processing, Travel, Financial Services, Online Marketplace, Oral Care	Cognitive (Attention), Affective (Interest and Enjoyment), Behavioral (Participation)	ATT (Occupied, absorbed), AFF (Fun, Interesting, Enjoyable, Exciting), BE (Like to comment, like to share, like to 'like')
2017	Paruthi and Kaur	Journal of Internet Commerce	40	Online engagement as consumers' psychological state of mind and intensity of their awareness, affection, participation, and connection with the brand. This engagement is characterized by a consumer's specific interactive experiences with the brand	Brands on Facebook's Fan Pages	Conscious Attention, Affection, Enthused Participation, Social Connection	CA (attention, like to know more, learning, keep up with), AFFEC (Happy, Pleasurable Satisfied) EP (spend time. Passion) SC (love brand /enjoy using more when being part of community/with friends)

Table 3-2: Thematic frequency identified in CE scale dimensions

Theme	Operant terminology	Scale papers (12)
Cognitive Processing/ Attention	Think, attention, interest, focus, learn, information, questions, ideas	8
Absorption	Carried away, spend time, time, time flies, difficult to detach, usually use, absorbed. Forget, lost myself, lost track, involvement, nothing can distract, immerse	8
Enjoyment	enrich, entertaining, like, positive, happy, fun, Satisfaction, emotional, proud, rewarding, treat, engaging, pleasure, fun, pleasing	7
Enthusiasm	Energy, enthusiasm, passion, excitement, heavily into, dedication	7
Self-Congruence	Defined by brand, reflects self, affirmation of self, feel good about self, allows me to be myself, can identify with, personal connection with, sense of belonging, gives me meaning or purpose, see myself in brand, self-image, feel better about myself, suits me, see myself in brand	6
Social	Influence, answers, community, like-minded, interacting, discuss, share, conversations, knowledge, views, promote, opinions, views, exchange ideas, participate	4

Figure 3-1: CE Definitions: Thematic Frequency



3.4.1 Introduction of a new customer engagement scale

Given the discernible trend in recent scholastic output to repurpose extant scales, we should address at this point why we introduce a new scale into a congested field. Are existing scales flawed, and/or does our intervention offer a different perspective?

The methodology used to evaluate scales is usually to re-run the analysis and compare the statistical performance of the individual scales against established indices. One recent paper (Ferreira et al., 2020) did this using the most highly cited customer engagement scales. The conclusion of that paper was that Dessart et al.'s reduced scale was "*the most recommendable in general terms, even though it is outperformed by Hollebeek et al.'s (2014) scale in reliability*" (Ferreira et al., 2020, p. 501). However, since the reduced scale was an edited version by the paper's authors of Dessart et al.'s 2016 scale, one might observe that this judgment could be construed as somewhat tendentious. In conclusion, the paper also somewhat equivocated as to the ultimate choice, which the authors' conjectured might be mediated by context or focal object, and therefore left that decision to an "*assumed better informed*" researcher.

If statistical comparisons do not indicate serious weaknesses in current engagement scales, albeit there are variations in reliability, dimensions, and discriminant validity (Ferreira et al., 2020), why introduce a new measurement instrument? Our justification is a refinement of the conceptualisation of customer engagement. Historically, customer engagement has been seen as an aggregation of cognitive, affective, and behavioral components that are incorporated quasi-algorithmically into dimensions containing pertinent variables. Jones et al. (2018) put forward a reasonable criticism of this practice: “*there is a tendency for researchers to define constructs using their measures (i.e., manifestations of the construct) rather than their conceptual meaning*” (Jones et al., 2018, p. 871). Thus, the conceptualisations that follow from this are both descriptive and prescriptive within those constraints. However, they do not tell us what engagement “is” beyond these formulas. This is a question posed by the Obilo et al. (2021) paper that had the “*lofty goal of determining what the engagement concept is and what it is not*” (Obilo et al., 2021, p. 641). If we cannot provide this clarity, then practitioners are confronted essentially with competing algorithms: one set (the behavioral set) that is transparent, and therefore easily defensible, the other (experiential) remaining opaque at best.

Our scale looks at customer engagement holistically. We conceptualise experiential customer engagement (positively valenced) as the actualisation of self, engendered through the validation of self or selves that is mediated through interaction with a focal object. ‘Selves’, in our conceptualisation, and resultant scale, comprise the thinking self, the emotional self, the self-congruent self and the social self. The focal object in this empirical work is the media brand website. Beneath this overarching conceptualisation lie the cognitive, and affective dimensions that are familiar, and with which our scale is consilient. The relationship between this experiential construct and customer engagement behavior is scrutinised in later sections. We pay tribute to the work done by Sprott et al. (2009) that raised the issue of self-congruence with the brand as an inherent token of identity (Sprott et al., 2009) and the work of Baldus et al. (2015) that actually includes ‘*validation of self*’ (Baldus et al., 2015) as a dimension in their engagement scale. This also feeds into and is supported by Li et al.’s (2018) conceptualisation of negative engagement that is characterised by “*psychological states and process (including emotions, cognitions, and behaviours), and is triggered by perceived threats to self*” (Liu et al., 2018, p. 493). This paper also affirms our rationale that psychological disposition, which our scale encapsulates, remains the driving force “*proposing that the*

valence of actor engagement [positive or negative] resides in the actors' psychological dispositions rather than in their engagement behaviours or engagement object per se. For example, WOM is a behavioural manifestation of engagement" (Liu et al., 2018).

Our scale also aligns epistemologically with the identity school of behavioural economics espoused by Akerlof and Kranton (2010): *"When we examine people's decisions from the perspective of their identities and social norms, we get new answers to many different economic questions. Who people are and how they think of themselves is key to the decisions that they make. We call this approach identity economics"* (Akerlof & Kranton, 2010; Economist, 2010).

We can thus construe customer engagement in (a) a manner that does not invalidate extant definitions (notably the Brodie et al. (2011) definition) and (b) in a form that articulates its mental representation rather than formulates, mechanistically, the activations of the disposition (manifestations) that translate into measures, and which may, or may not, also include the behavioural consequences of that disposition.

Thus, formally: *Customer engagement is a psychological disposition, characterised by the actualisation of self(ves). An actualisation, the product of internally encoded thoughts, emotions, or beliefs, which is externally expressed and mediated through the validation of self(ves) or identity(ies) that occur(s) as a result of interaction with a focal object.*

We have excluded scales that specifically measure customer engagement behaviour from this specific analysis, but there also seems to be a degree of thematic concordance in the measurement of this phenomenon. We examine this in the next section.

3.5 ISSUE: EXPERIENTIALISM VERSUS BEHAVIOURALISM

3.5.1 Definition and Domain

The most perspicuous and, indeed, the most parsimonious definition of customer engagement behaviour (CEB) is that of van Doorn et al. 2010, (p. 253) who define customer engagement behaviours as *"the customer's behavioural manifestations toward a brand or firm, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers"*. Pansari and Kumar (2017) augmented that definition: they conceptualised customer engagement behaviour as the product of a satisfied and emotional relationship with a firm or brand, generated by experiences with the former, and

resulting in direct (purchase) and indirect contributions (customer referrals, feedback, and influence) adding value to the firm/brand. Beckers et al (2017, p. 367) cite examples of contribution to firm value as “*writing a review on TripAdvisor, commenting on a company’s Facebook page, participating in a brand community, or recommending a product to a fellow customer*”.

The Van Doorn et al (2010) definition captures what CEB is; the Jaakkola and Alexander (2014) definition captures its contribution: “*the customer provision of resources during non-transactional joint value processes that occur in interaction with the focal firm and/or other stakeholders, thereby affecting their respective value processes and outcomes*” (Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014, p. 254). The indirect contribution by customers, signalled by Pansari and Kumar (2017), is operationalized by ‘augmenting behavior’ (posting comment; suggesting ideas for products), ‘co-developing behavior’ (giving product ideas; participating in tests), ‘influencing behavior’ (WOM, advocacy) and ‘mobilizing behavior’ (co-opting others to assist the firm) (Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014)

Other papers have created a typology of CEB in social media, overlaying the categorisation of outcomes with the degree of customer cognitive investment in the activity, from passive to active. These activities in order of intensity are consumption, contribution and creation (Dolan et al., 2016, 2019; Schivinski et al., 2016; Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016). “Creation” is viewed by Dolan et al. (2019) and Schivinski et al. (2016) as the strongest level of active engagement behavior in social media communities, characterized by positive comments, encapsulated in all types of formats (reviews, posting pictures, videos, graphics) across all types of social media platforms. All three ‘C’s of CEB are defined by interaction with a focal object.

Customer engagement and customer engagement behavior are seen scholastically as conceptually distinct. Each phenomenon has specific metrics. The metrics associated with CEB are shown in Table 3-3: papers are ranked by their citation numbers (Google Scholar). These CEB measures are discussed with reference to our approach in Section 3.12.3.

There are substantial studies conceptually and empirically (Bijmolt et al., 2010; Kumar et al., 2010; Kumar & Pansari, 2016) investigating CEB and linking it to improved firm and brand performance (Beckers et al., 2018; Carlson et al., 2018; Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014; Kumar

& Pansari, 2016). It is unsurprising for reasons that we have already adduced that such metrics, along with user volume, remain the key metrics among practitioners for determining valuation and advertising dollars.

Table 3-3: CEB Sources and Metrics, ranked by citations (Google Scholar)

Year	Author(s)	Journal	Citations	Definition	Context	Metrics
2014	Jaakkola and Alexander	Journal of Service Research	1349	"The customer provision of resources during non-transactional, joint value processes that occur in interaction with the focal firm and/or other stakeholders, thereby affecting their respective value processes and outcomes"	Qualitative interviews (case study) Adopters of Railway Stations	Augmenting Behavior (contribution to company); Co-developing Behavior (problem solving, new development); Influencing Behavior (recommendations, blogging, WOM); Mobilising Behavior
2016	Schivinski et al.	Journal of Advertising Research	487	"a set of online activities on the part of the consumer that are related to a brand, and which vary in the levels of interaction and engagement with the consumption, contribution, and creation of media content"	Brand followers in different social media channels	Consumption (read posts, watch pictures, follow blogs, follow brands); Contribution (comment, like); Creation (initiate posts and videos, write reviews)
2019	Hughes et al	Journal of Marketing	385	"Social media interactions with sponsored influencer content"	Modelling Sponsor Blogging pages and Twitter and Followers	Facebook post likes; Blog Post comments
2018	Carlson et al.	Journal of Services Marketing	273	Van Doorn et al. (2010)	Social Media	Collaboration (share/help/provide help); Feedback intentions (to the brand)

Year	Author	Journal	Citations	Definition	Context	Metrics
2019	Dolan et al.	European Journal of Marketing	266	“a customer’s behavioral manifestations that have a social media focus beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers”	Facebook posts derived from the social media pages of 12 Australian wine brands	Creating (positive comments on post, blogs, videos, pictures); Contributing (liking & sharing brand related
2018	Roy et al.	Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services	189	Van Doorn et al. (2010) & Verleye et al. (2016)	Mobile Phone & Retail Banking users	WOM; Customers helping Company (Feedback); Customers helping Customers (teaching/helping/explaini
2018	Gong	Journal of Services Marketing	114	Van Doorn et al. (2010)	Online Brand Communities	Purchase Intention; Commitment; WOM; Feedback to brand

3.5.2 Controversies

There are two major issues in the estimation of the utility of CE. We have considered the first: practitioner and, to a lesser extent, scholastic wariness about the experiential measurement of CE (Ng et al., 2020; Obilo et al., 2021). We now turn to the second: the scarcity of empirical studies investigating the relationship between CE and CEB and by implication assessing their relative value.

One locus of practitioner distrust of experiential measures is that their measurement is costly (requiring survey techniques) and takes time. Furthermore, such metrics are couched and defined in the slipperiness of language and therefore more vulnerable to the vagaries of interpretation and refutation. The mind, *per se*, remains an essentially impenetrable vessel, with little consensus as to measurement norms i.e. whether behavioral or experiential measures are better at representing mental process (Dang et al., 2020; Haefel & Howard, 2010). Furthermore, in the case of customer engagement such norms may also be confounded by context, so that no one scale, or measure is generalisable (Calder et al., 2016, p. 16). In contrast, behavioral measures are identifiable, they “stand for something” (*res ipsa loquitur*), they are capable of being parsed and audited mechanistically, they are presumed objective, and, by inference, they are easily defensible in a boardroom.

There are also scholastic reservations: at the most extreme lies the Obilo et al (2021) paper. It reasonably asks whether an experiential measure is redundant or inappropriate. The paper critiques existing measures on the grounds of discriminant validity weakness and postulates that the only true measure of customer engagement is a “*series of non-transactional consumers’ behaviours displayed because of their interest in and commitment to brands*” (Obilo et al., 2021, p. 8). Their advocacy of a strictly restrictive behaviouralist stance is predicated on the assertion that consumer brand engagement is “*not distinct from other well-established constructs*” (Obilo et al., 2021, p. 1) and is therefore essentially tainted. This argument is weakened by a number of factors : (1) the authors’ own acknowledgement that their rejection of experientialist measures on the grounds of discriminant validity is heavily refuted by others and (2) the careful delineation of the CE domain, establishing its provenance, enshrined in the conceptual papers of Mollen and Wilson (2010) and Brodie et al. (2011) specifically addressed, and answered in the affirmative, the question of whether CE was a distinct construct from other extant measures. Beyond these epistemological caveats, more

fundamentally, it is metaphysically fallacious. If you are a physicalist or neuroscientist with regard to physical causes, there is a general consensus that mental states instantiate behavior: “*the possibility of human agency evidently requires that our mental stateshave causal effects in the physical world*” (Kim, 2000, p. 31). Therefore, if engagement behaviour exists, then there must be a neural correlate of engagement (*if CE then CEB and the counter-factual if not CE, then not CEB*). We will avoid the murky issue of mental causality and simply, pace Kim (2000), allow that transfer from the cognitive to the behavioral, whether by supervenience (Kim, 2000), grounding (Kroedel & Schulz, 2016; Searle, 2000a, 2000b) or ‘tropes’ (Robb, 1997) . We contend, and the experimental evidence supports this (Sheeran & Webb, 2016; Webb & Sheeran, 2006), that you cannot subscribe to the notion of deliberative intentionality (posting a positive brand message on blog is one action that is cited in the van Doorn et al. 2010 paper) without a ‘*causally efficacious*’ mental state. We are not zombies and, while we may quibble about measurement validity, the existence of the experiential phenomenon of customer engagement cannot be thus dismissed.

In fact, the relationship between CE and CEB is poorly addressed in the extant customer engagement scales, both in terms of measurement and existentially. While six of the twelve scales we have focused on (Baldus et al., 2015; Dessart et al., 2016; Hollebeek et al., 2014; Mirbargheri & Najmi, 2019; Paruthi & Kaur, 2017; Solem & Pedersen, 2016) incorporate a behavioral component, the wording of that component conflates attitudes and behaviors (frequently “*like to do something*” and “*I often do something*” is part of the same behavioral dimension) thus compromising the metric. Only the Hollebeek et al. (2014) paper and the Solem and Pedersen (2016) paper entertain the idea that CE drives CEB, and the former rejects that model on the grounds of inferior fit to a dataset.

Finally, while there are a number of recent non-scale development papers on the relationship between CE and CEB that stress the positive relationship between the two phenomena (An & Han, 2020; Barari et al., 2021; de Oliveira Santini et al., 2020; Yen et al., 2020), none to the authors’ knowledge audits that relationship or quantifies individually the relationship to customer outcomes and value.

3.6 ISSUE: CONTEXT AND THE 'ONE' SCALE

Probably the most influential of papers on the issue of context and “one-size-fits-all” measurement is that of Calder, Isaac, and Malthouse (2016) who, defining engagement as the sum of “*qualitatively rich experiences*”, advocate that any true measure must capture engagement using context-specific metrics (Calder et al., 2016, p. 52). Indeed, Hollebeek et al. (2019) note that there is now a plethora of engagement scales across a number of environments, from brand communities to tourism to nursing homes to transportation, each encompassing a “*unique set of engagement dimensions*” (Hollebeek et al., 2019, p. 4)

Most engagement scale papers circumvent this troublesome issue: the majority are sited in one context, predominantly the social media environment. We would argue, in accordance with the stance adopted by Vivek et al (2014), that since we are measuring the experiential response to context, not the context itself, and since – in the light of our clarification of the definition of engagement - this measurement framework is composed of certain fundamental axes concerning the validation of self (the thinking, feeling, identity and social self), the experiential scale is transferable across contexts. What will be context dependent, as Hollebeek et al. (2019) point out, is the intensity and valence of that response (Behnam et al., 2021). We evaluate this statement in our study. Any competitive audit of engagement performance must therefore perforce be gauged on a like-for-like basis, comparing experiential response to/interaction with focal objects (such as brand websites) within a common context. This is a familiar technique in the marketing arena and should not prove a barrier to adoption of engagement metrics.

3.7 SUMMARY

Our review of extant scholastic and practitioner thinking allows for the following conjectures:

- i. Conceptual differences as to the domain and dimensions of customer engagement are largely chimeric and should not specifically prove a barrier to practitioner use.
- ii. We propose that our refinement of the customer engagement definition, and the scale that emerges from that refinement, is concordant with extant scholastic parameters but adds a clarity (replacing a mechanistic offering with an essentialist alternative), a platform-eclectic applicability, and an ease of cognitive retrieval (useful for

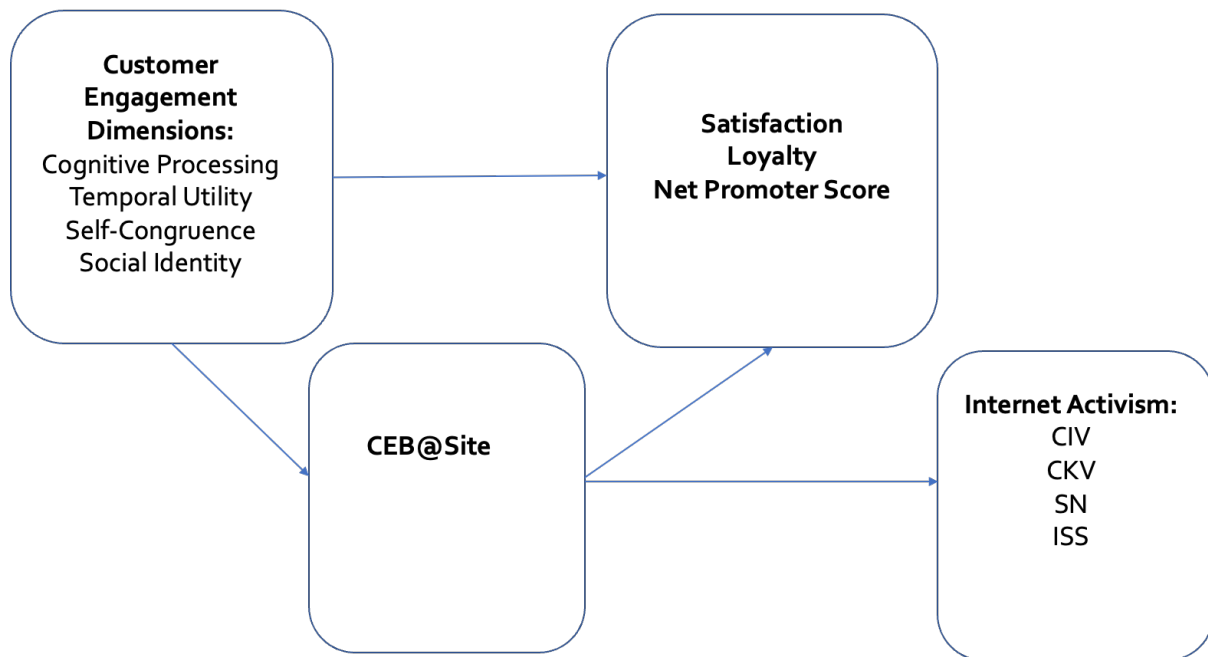
practitioner adoption) to the construct. We test the utility of our scale in our empirical work.

- iii. There is seemingly little dispute as to how CEB is defined and measured. However, there has been little scholastic investigation to date as to the relationship between CE and CEB and the relative importance of either phenomenon regarding optimal customer relationship outcomes. Without this, by default, CE experiential metrics will continue to be disregarded by practitioners. Our study addresses this.
- iv. Context is a salient issue affecting measurement. We address its impact in our study. While our study confines itself to the online environment, we test our scale against different media contexts: content sites, forums/discussion sites and different social platforms (Facebook; Twitter).

3.8 HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

See Figure 3-2 for our conceptual model. We employ the definition of CE derived above [Section 3.4.1] and Van Doorn et al.'s definition of CEB to underpin our research. If we are to nudge practitioners towards utilising customer engagement experiential metrics, we must answer the following research questions and their attendant hypotheses.

Figure 3-2: Conceptual Model - Customer Engagement, CEB@Site, and their hypothesised relationships



Conceptual Model - Customer Engagement, CEB@Site, and their hypothesised relationships

Notes: CEB = Customer engagement behavior@ Site, CIV= Customer Influencer Value, CKV= Customer Knowledge Value, SN = Social Networking, ISS = Information Super Spreading

3.8.1 Introduction to conceptual model constructs

The conceptualisation of customer engagement dimensions Cognitive Processing (CP), Temporal Utility (TU), Self-Congruence (SC), Social Identity (SI) is addressed in Paper 1, and the generation of the individual items representing these latent components is explained in Section 3.12.1.

The two behavioral constructs in the model (CEB@Site, IA), and the behavioral intention construct (Net Promoter Score) are conceptually and metrologically discrete (see Table 3-4).

CEB@Site is conceptualised as an adaptation of the existing van Doorn et al. (2010): “*the customer’s behavioural manifestations toward a website, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers*”. The spectrum of behavior, captured in our study, is directed only at the focal website, and concerns specific interactions with that site.

By contrast, Internet Activism (IA), which incorporates the constructs Customer Influencer Value [CIV], Customer Knowledge Value [CKV], Social Networking [SN], Information Super

Spreading [ISS], , is defined as “*the propensity, beyond behavioural response to a focal object, to make an online contribution that is platform eclectic for the purposes of self-expression, with an intent to effect change*”. The metric captures a tendency to participate in specific activist behaviors online, *irrespective* of platform or focal site.

Net Promoter Score is an extant measure, considered by many practitioners to be the ‘gold standard’ in predicting customer advocacy and loyalty (Bain & Company, 2011). This metric captures customer intention to recommend in response to their experience at a focal object (in this study, a website). It is thus rooted in an experiential response (with a projected behavioral intention) to a specific stimulus⁷.

There is thus no semantic overlap between the items measuring CEB@Site and Internet Activism (IA) or Net Promoter Score (NPS). There is a degree of semantic correspondence, in terms of questions relating to advocacy, between the measurement of IA and NPS; however, the former audits a pattern of online commercial behavior, unrelated to a specific focal object: “*which of the following have you done online in the last month?*”; the latter audits advocacy of a specific site as focal object that is imputed to predict future behavior: “*on a scale of 1-10, where 0 means ‘Not at all likely’ and 10 means ‘Very likely’, how likely would you be to recommend the [SITE] to a friend or colleague?*” (Base: All respondents who visit site). The CEB@Site and IA items are detailed in Tables 3-7 and 3-8.

⁷ See Section 3.13 for a more detailed exposition of the construct’s limitations and the rationale for its use.

Table 3-4: Demarcation of Endogenous Variables

Construct Profile	CEB@Site	Internet Activism	NPS
Interaction with specific focal object	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Yes</i>
Platform	<i>[Named] Site</i>	<i>Platform Agnostic</i>	<i>[Named] Site</i>
Metric	<i>Itemised behavior</i>	<i>Behavioral Pattern over time</i>	<i>Singular Behavioral Intention</i>

A detailed exposition and rationale of the relationships exhibited in the conceptual model is found in the research questions and hypotheses section (3.9) below.

3.9 MAIN EFFECTS

RQ1: Is CEB@Site, as a substantial number of practitioners assert, a robust proxy for CE?

To answer the above question, we need to determine the relationship between CE and CEB@Site. Is there a positive relationship between CE and CEB@Site and, if there is, is it of sufficient amplitude to warrant construing CEB@Site as a proxy for CE? Our thesis is that while there is positive relationship between the two metrics, the relationship is complex, and that while our construal of CE is that of a positive experiential metric, mere behavioral activity at site does not necessarily indicate approval of, or advocacy of, the focal brand (Ng et al., 2020; So et al., 2014).

H1(a) There is a positive relationship between CE and CEB@Site.

H1(b) CEB@Site is a robust proxy for CE.

RQ2: Independent of any association between them, do both CE and CEB@Site have a positive, significant relationship with certain optimal customer relationship outcomes? Which of the above metrics is a better predictor of these outcomes?

There are number of seminal papers interrogating the relationship between CE (Calder et al., 2009; Malthouse et al., 2016) and, separately, CEB (Beckers et al., 2018; Carlson et al., 2018; Pansari & Kumar, 2017) with customer relationship outcomes. To the authors' knowledge, there is none interrogating a comparison between CE and CEB@Site in terms of effect on customer relationships, nor any that investigate their relationship to Net Promoter Score (Reichheld, 2003): the latter metric considered by many blue-chip companies to be the gold standard in measuring customer experience and, by implication, customer advocacy and retention (Bain, n.d.).

H2(a) CE is positively related to customer relationship outcomes (CRO): Satisfaction, Loyalty, and NPS.

H2(b) CEB@Site is positively related to customer relationship outcomes (CRO): Satisfaction, Loyalty, and NPS.

There is an assumption in the media-buying community that the mere existence of CEB@Site adds value. For Social Media sites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter), such engagement behavior represents the primary function of the platform. For Content sites, (e.g., The Times, Sky Sports) where the opportunity to participate in CEB@Site is constrained by the individual site, the issue of its value is more problematic. The intensity of such behaviour at a content site is commonly used as a currency to measure the success of the site (digital activity being assumed to be a signal of approbation). We challenge in our empirical work whether this observable amplitude of behaviour does represent engagement – even positive engagement, and whether such a proposition should in large part determine advertising dollars, as is currently the case.

H2(c) CE is a superior predictor of the above outcomes compared to CEB@Site, even after controlling for CEB@Site.

RQ3: What is the value of CEB@Site if, in answer to RQ1, CEB@Site is not a robust proxy for CE?

The intuition we explore in answer to this question is that customers who engage behaviourally *at a focal website* may indicate those customers who tend to engage behaviourally *online in general*—and such customers would be of particular interest to a brand owner. We use the term

Internet Activism for specific commercial behaviour and peer to peer interaction exhibited by customers *across online sites in general*. We derive a formal definition below. We consider four categories of such online behaviour, as shown in the following hypothesis.

H3: CEB@Site is positively associated with four aspects of Internet Activism: (a) Customer Influencer Value, (b) Customer Knowledge Value, (c) Social Networking and (d) Information Super Spreading.

The first two variables represent those behaviors that may make a ‘marketing’ contribution to brands or sites about which they are enacted, whether these behaviours are directed at a specific site or posted at a forum (Kumar et al., 2010). Specifically, customer influencer value we define as “*customers’ influence on other acquired customers as well as on prospects (e.g., WOM activity that persuades and converts prospects to customers, minimizes buyer remorse to reduce defections, encourages increased share-of-wallet of existing customers)*” (Kumar et al., 2010, p. 299). Customer knowledge value is defined as “*behavior via feedback provided to the firm for ideas for innovations and improvements and contributing to knowledge development*” (Kumar et al., 2010, p. 299). It is almost tautological that these categories of internet activism will add value in the commercial sector—since they are designed to nudge the object of the interaction into action (whether remedial or generating innovation). However, note that our interest is in the extent to which the customer displays these behaviours online *in general*, and not *with respect to the focal site* which is the subject of the CEB@Site variable, as well as the other variables in the conceptual model.

Social Networking behaviour is defined as behaviour whose principal focus is peer-to-peer interaction (Zaglia, 2013). This may include for example communication, relationship building, sharing, and discussion of ideas (Zaglia, 2013).

The final category of internet activism tested includes those online behaviours conducted by individuals motivated by self-expression with a desire to effect change. Such customers may be founders of brand or social communities; or, to use a contemporary analogy, they are ‘*information super-spreaders*’: they write articles, blogs, or create videos, and they do so with an agenda to effect change (Kudeshia & Kumar, 2017; Lou & Yuan, 2019).

All these behaviours can be subsumed under the umbrella of “*activism*” and such activities range from those with the motivation of commercial change or those with the design of ‘social contagion’ to effect other types of change (e.g., institutional, societal, or political). Internet Activism (IA) can be defined thus: *the propensity, beyond behavioural response to a focal object, to make an online contribution that is platform eclectic for the purposes of self-expression, with an intent to effect change.*

3.10 MODERATING EFFECTS

We have already alluded to the importance of context in evaluating customer engagement in Section 3.6. The issue investigated is not whether context matters⁸ - Calder, Isaac, and Malthouse (2016) is compelling in its thesis. Rather the question is whether context *per se* impinges on the hypothesised relationships above, and how engagement scores can be audited under these conditions, and, indeed, following on from the latter, whether a single customer engagement scale will suffice.

Apart from the Calder, Isaac and Malthouse (2016) study, there is scant empirical work comparing the impact of different contexts on customer engagement or customer engagement behavior – most studies site their empirical investigations in one context: “there is an urgent need in the service literature to integrate these varying conceptualizations to account more fully for the influence of context and experience on customer engagement” (Chandler & Lusch, 2015, p. 9).

However, there are some recent empirical works comparing engagement effects across different service contexts (Fernandes & Esteves, 2016; Naumann et al., 2020), product versus service contexts (Behnam et al., 2021) and diverse web platforms (Voorveld et al., 2018). The findings of the above studies suggest that context matters: (1) mean propensity to engage scores differ - *“In the high involvement service (health care), customers exhibit higher propensity to engage and show more favorable behaviors, when compared with the low involvement service*

⁸ While not explicitly defined in the Calder, Isaac, and Malthouse (2016) paper, context-specific experiences are those customer experiences that differ according to the category type of entity generating them e.g., domains, product categories, brands. In our study, Site Genre is defined as a categorisation based on the salient distinguishing feature of the media website. This feature may be editorial content (e.g., news or sports) or a technical platform that affords peer to peer interaction and the creation of communities of followers (e.g., social media)

(*retailing*)” (Fernandes & Esteves, 2016, p. 135); (2) negative CE is highly context specific, while positive CE is consistent across the contexts studied (Naumann et al., 2020); (3) CE’s function as an important driver of ‘customer satisfaction, trust, and commitment’ is more pronounced in the service setting compared to a product context (Behnam et al., 2021); and (4) digital engagement and advertising are highly dependent on platform, with each platform creating a unique profile (Voorveld et al., 2018). Thus, there is a high probability that context will moderate the relationships studied in this thesis. However, given that relationship between CE and CEB@Site and the contingent relationship with Customer Relationship Outcomes are both novel and exploratory, the literature to date does not contribute beyond a *prima facie* indication that such moderation might exist and might be significantly influential.

In our study, the primary contextual demarcation is between Content Sites and Social Media⁹ as this represents the fault line in advertising revenue, which is still the predominant mechanism used to generate online funding and profit.

H4(a) Context (Site Genre) moderates the CE→CEB@Site relationship. Specifically, we expect that CE→CEB@Site [Social] > CE→CEB@Site [Content]. Given that for Social Media Sites, the facilitation of on-site behaviour is presumed to be the *sine qua non* reason for customers using such platforms, whereas CEB@Site is not usually construed as the primary reason for Content Site patronage, one would expect experiential engagement in the former case to drive engagement behaviours to a greater extent than the latter—an argument extending that of Fernandes & Esteves (2016).

H4(b) Context moderates the CE→CRO (customer relationship outcomes) relationship. Here we conjecture that there will be significant differences in overall CE Scores, due to differences in the saliency of the latent CE dimensions; notably, CE in Social Media sites, compared to Content Sites, may be more driven by Social Identity than by other dimensions. This, in turn, may affect the CE→CRO relationship, in a similar manner to Behnam et al.’s (2021) finding of a moderating effect of context between product and service contexts.

⁹ We define content sites as *those sites that primarily convey narrative editorial, where interaction is between media brand and site visitors*. We define social media sites as *those where content is self-generated, and interaction is generally peer to peer*.

H4(c) Context moderates the CEB@Site->CRO relationship. If H4(a) is supported (that is, if context moderates the impact of CE on customer relationship outcomes), then we would expect context to also moderate the impact of CEB@Site on relationship outcomes, provided CEB@Site is a robust proxy for CE, which as we have discussed is widely assumed (see particularly sections 3.5.2 and 3.9 above). If, however, the proxy status of CEB@Site is less than robust, then any contextual variances in the CEB@Site->CRO relationship may rather be dependent on the latent heterogeneity within CEB@Site: that is, the degree to which the behavioural construct represents approbation of the focal site. In particular, there may be misalignment between the CE dimensions driving customer relationship outcomes and those driving CEB@Site.

3.11 METHOD

3.11.1 Survey Administration and Sampling

We conducted two research studies. The first was designed to interrogate and validate our engagement scale; the second was conducted to benchmark that scale and other hypothesised related measures across a wider range of media websites.

For Study 1, a market research firm, Survey Interactive, administered the survey process. An online survey was conducted in-situ, as a pop-up on visitor entry, on fourteen websites, owned by BSkyB or under its management. Respondents were incentivised through being entered into prize draw to win Amazon Gift Vouchers. The immediacy of the survey mechanism was designed to collect measures without problems associated with memory loss and recall (Baxendale et al., 2015).

Study 2, administered by the same market research firm, used a combination of online BSkyB website sampling and the standing panel of BSkyB respondents, to whom questionnaires were emailed, to estimate the model across a wider range of websites. All respondents were asked about sites that they had visited in the last month. They were then asked to revisit one site in their own time and to fill in an online survey “*right after one of your normal visits to that site, so that your impressions are fresh in your mind*”. Those websites with an inadequate sample of respondents were discarded. The final website pool comprised twenty-four websites with a total sample of 3030.

Both studies collected standard demographic and socio-economic data, as well as responses to the measures incorporated in the measurement model (Study 1- Figure 3-3) and full structural model (Study 2-Figure 3-5).

Table 3-5 illustrates the socio-demographic profile of both studies, The socio-demographic breakdown in both studies was similar (preponderantly ABC1: 72% Study 1, 73% Study 2, and Male: 67% Study1, 62% Study 2). The main disparity between the studies was respondent age. In Study 1, under 44-year-olds constituted 87% of the sample; in Study 2, they represented 44% of the sample. The most probable contributor to the age disparity was the inclusion in Study 2 of Sky TV panel respondents. Both studies broadly align in terms of social class with the 2020 UK internet universe (67% ABC1, Source: Ofcom), while the older bias of Study 2 aligns it with the 2020 UK users age distribution (under 44-year-olds represent 49% of the 2020 UK internet universe, Source: ONS). There is an overall male bias, probably explained by the high proportion of respondents emanating from Sports Sites (Study 1, 45%) and News and Sports sites (Study 2, 55%). This remains, in terms of general application of the findings, a limiting factor in both studies.

In both studies, in addition to the randomisation of question item order¹⁰, different scale formats (Likert (1-5), Dichotomous, Multiple Response) were employed to counter Common Method Bias¹¹.

¹⁰ Our protocol designed to minimise common method bias is described in detail in the methodology section

Table 3-5: Study 1 and 2 Profiles

	Study 1		Study 2	
	N=12,125	%	N=3030	%
Under 18	2780	22.9%	4	0.1%
18-24	2424	20.0%	59	1.9%
25-34	2972	24.5%	462	15.2%
35-44	2326	19.2%	806	26.6%
45-54	1623	13.4%	784	25.9%
55-64		0.0%	617	20.4%
65+		0.0%	298	9.8%
Total	12125		3030	
Female	3980	32.8%	1139	37.6%
Male	8145	67.2%	1891	62.4%
ABC1	8718	71.9%	2220	73.3%
C2DE	3407	28.1%	810	26.7%
Sports	5564	45.9%	719	23.7%
Entertainment	4991	41.2%	561	18.5%
Parenting	1570	12.9%	203	6.7%
News	-		935	30.9%
Social	-		344	11.4%
Aggregators	-		268	8.8%

3.12 : MEASURES: MAIN COMPONENTS

3.12.1 Operationalising Customer Engagement

We developed a scale for customer engagement in line with established procedures (Churchill, 1979; Gerbing & Anderson, 1988). The rationale for introduction of a new scale is explained in Section 3.4.1.

Sixty engagement items were drafted. They were derived from the conceptualisation articulated by Mollen and Wilson (2010) (Paper 1 and Chapter 2 in this thesis) and used the studies, that

work identified through a systematic review, for details and potential wording. At this stage, the scale was grouped into five dimensions: Cognitive Processing, Utility, Hedonic Reward, Self-Congruence and Social Identity. The first four were derived from Mollen and Wilson paper (2010). Social Identity was added due to its identification in subsequent engagement research, as listed in Tables 3-1 and 3.2 above, and due to its consistency with the revised definition of engagement given earlier (Section 3.4.1). This tally was reduced to forty-nine items by an expert panel of three academics, three practitioners and the research company implementing the survey work, who assessed the items for face validity.

Using data from Study 1, Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was performed on these forty-nine items, using the PCA method of extraction. We used the Direct Oblimin method as it is recommended for psychological constructs, which are likely to be correlated with one another (Kline, 2014). Examination of the scree plot, and the variance explained, suggested a four-factor solution as the most parsimonious and interpretable option.

For practitioner utility, the scale was reduced to 15 items. Cross loading was eliminated by setting the minimum loading at .40, with the highest factor loadings determining the final choice. The four factors are interpreted as Cognitive Processing, Temporal Utility (reflecting a compression of hedonic and utilitarian reward), Self-Congruence, and Social Identity. The first three factors contain four items; the Social Identity factor contains three items (see Table 3-6). The total variance explained by this solution was 72%. We assessed the internal reliability of each of the dimensions, as prompted by the PCA analysis of the 15-item scale by calculating a Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability for each dimension. All values exceeded the threshold. The full 15-point customer engagement scale attained an Alpha of .933.

Table 3-6: Engagement Scale Four-Factor Solution

	ENGAGEMENT SCALE	SC	TU	CP	SI
Self-Congruence	The website reflects my values	0.812			
	The website has integrity	0.812			
	If the website was a person, he/she would understand me	0.776			
	I can identify with the website	0.676			
Temporal Utility	I find the website very useful		-0.896		
	The website gives me what I want		-0.886		
	Using the website is a positive experience		-0.752		
	The website is enjoyable		-0.74		
Cognitive Processing	The website always has the capacity to surprise me			-0.814	
	The website stimulates my imagination			-0.767	
	I find the website intriguing			-0.767	
	Time flies when I am on the website			-0.711	
Social Identity	I want to socialise on the website				0.873
	When I am on the website, I feel part of a community				0.699
	My opinions are welcome on the website				0.486

Notes: Question: As a result of your experience with the site, to what extent do you agree with the following statements? (Likert Scale 1-5) SC = Self-Congruence; TU = Temporal Utility; CP = Cognitive Processing; SI= Social Identity

3.12.2 Engagement Behavior

The survey includes measures for the behaviour-related variables in our conceptual model: CEB@Site and the four categories of internet activism. The extant papers, specifically measuring the CEB@Site and internet activism, bifurcate into those using Likert scales, where the construct items are descriptive of behavior (Roy et al., 2018; Schivinski et al., 2016) or postulate intention to act (Carlson et al., 2018), and those papers that register action by volume, or by interaction/non-interaction via a dichotomous Yes/No response for each of a range of engagement behaviours (Dolan et al., 2019; Hughes et al., 2019), where the models used are based on regression techniques (multivariate, binary logistic or probit). Our approach falls into the second category: we measured both CEB@Site and the internet activism categories using a multiple response mechanism, and converted the responses to an index, characterised by composite thematic components, to facilitate incorporation into the modelling software (PLS-SEM). The items measuring CEB@Site and Social Networking and Information Super Spreading were composed by the authors, and crosschecked by a practitioner panel from BSkyB, and by analysts from the digital research company that implemented the studies. The items measuring Customer Knowledge Value and Customer Influencer Value were adapted

from the metrics for customer engagement value components in the Kumar et al. (2010) conceptual paper (Kumar et al., 2010, p. 303).

3.12.3 CEB@Site

The first variable captures customer engagement behavior at the specific site (CEB@Site) visited by each respondent. The CEB@Site measure corresponds to the definition postulated by van Doorn et al. (2010) quoted earlier. The individual items represent the four behavioural opportunities usually offered by media brand websites. These behavioural conduits facilitate response towards the content hosted by the site, or reaction to some extraneous catalyst, and subsequent usage of the site as an accessible host for the expression of that reaction (see Table 3-7). A check of the items for completeness and face validity was conducted with practitioners.

Table 3-7: CEB@Site Questions

ENGAGEMENT BEHAVIOUR AT SITE (CEB@Site)
Which of the following (on this site) have you done before?
Select all that apply
Subscribed to communications to the site
Contributed opinions to the site
Given feedback to the site
Forward articles found on the site to friends or colleagues
None of the above

To eliminate bias, we did not ask about whether the motivation for the interaction was laudatory or critical. All four positive measures signal a desire by the respondent to make the relationship between customer and website more overt and to initiate a conversation that is open to peer review.

3.12.4 Customer Knowledge Value, Customer Influencer Value, Social Networking, and Information Super Spreading

The mechanic of measurement for these four Internet Activism variables is referenced in Section 3.12.2. All items are tabulated in Table 3-8. The questions were coded in a multiple response format with items for each variable are coded as 1 ('Yes') or 0 ('No'). The responses

were then summed using the count procedure in SPSS to form an index for each of the four variables.

Table 3-8 is deciphered as follows:

- All respondents were asked “Which of the following have you done online in the last month? Select all that apply”.
- YesCEB@Site%: The percentage of respondents who reported at least one CEB@Site behaviour and who said “Yes” to this internet activism behaviour
- %All Respondents = Percentage of all respondents who said ‘Yes’ to this Internet Activism behaviour
- Index = “YesCEB@Site%” column divided by “%All Respondents” column (indexed around 100)
- P = significance test of the Pearson correlation between YesCEB@Site and this item
- Odds Ratio = the likelihood of those respondents categorised as ‘YesCEB@Site’ versus those who did not participate in CEB@Site to enact this specific item of internet activism

Customer Knowledge Value	Yes CEB@Site %	% All Respondents	Index	P	OR
Made suggestions for NPD via company website or social media	9.6	5.4	177.78	<.001	2.273
Made recommendations for product or service improvement via company website or social media	17.4	9.4	185.11	<.001	2.585
Gave feedback to a company on a specific product or service issue	46.9	36.5	128.49	<.001	1.701
Customer Influencer Value	Yes CEB@Site %	% All Respondents	Index	P	OR
Re-tweeted news about a product or service	19.9	10.3	193.2	<.001	2.8
Shared mentions about a product or service on social media	30.7	16.3	188.3	<.001	2.976
Posted a rating or review of a brand/product	44.4	32.3	137.5	<.001	1.908
Formed a brand community	1.4	0.6	233.3	<.05	3.937
Posted responses/joined in discussions in a brand community	20.6	10.6	194.3	<.001	2.848
Social Networking	Yes CEB@Site %	% All Respondents	Index	P	OR
Published and regularly updated a social networking profile	41.2	29.3	140.6	<.001	1.939
Posted responses/comments with a community or group on a social networking site	47.1	29.7	158.6	<.001	2.566
Formed a community or group on a social networking site	7.6	3.4	223.5	<.001	3.262
Information Super Spreading	Yes CEB@Site %	% All Respondents	Index	P	OR
Written my own blog	10.3	5	206	<.001	2.932
Published a web page	7.8	4.3	181.4	<.001	2.319

Information Super Spreading	Yes CEB@Site %	% All Respondents	Index	P	OR
Written an article or story for online publication	6.9	3.6	191.7	<.001	2.512
Created and uploaded a video/podcast/app/widget	12.8	6.9	185.5	<.001	2.494
Tweeted	38.2	23.8	160.5	<.001	2.388
Re-tweeted things of interest	31.3	17.7	176.8	<.001	2.67

Table 3-8: CEB@Site, Internet Activism: Indexes, Correlations, Odds Ratio

3.13 CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP OUTCOMES

All measures for customer relationship outcomes, measured on a 5-point Likert Scale, anchored by Strongly Agree and Strongly Disagree, were taken or adapted from established scales – Satisfaction (Fassnacht & Kase, 2007; Flavián et al., 2006) and Loyalty (Anderson & Srinivasan, 2003; Rundle-Thiele, 2005; Zeithaml et al., 1996). Details of the Satisfaction and Loyalty scale items are below.

Table 3-9: Customer Relationship Outcomes: Scale Items, Coefficients, Reliability and Validity

Construct	Outer Coefficients	α	CR	AVE
Satisfaction		0.891	0.92	0.697
The site has relevant content that appeals to my needs	0.75			
I regard the site as highly competent in its category	0.848			
I am satisfied with my experience on the site	0.865			
The site meets my expectations	0.858			
I am satisfied with the performance of the site	0.849			
Loyalty		0.814	0.87	0.573
It's like having a friend in the way they can recommend, or they can flag things up that are relevant to my life	0.732			
It offers more than other sites of the same genre	0.767			
If I could not access this site, another site in this category would not be an acceptable alternative	0.703			
I consider this site to the first choice in this category	0.787			
I say positive things about the site to other people	0.791			

The Net Promoter Score (Reichheld 2003) was measured using the designated question (“On a scale of 1-10, where 0 means ‘Not at all likely’ and 10 means ‘Very likely’, how likely would you be to recommend the site to a friend or colleague?”). It is appropriate that the rationale for employing Net Promoter Score in this study, given its controversy, should be examined and the metric's limitations acknowledged.

At least two-thirds of the Fortune 1000 use the Net Promoter Score, including most or all of the financial service companies, airlines, telecom companies, retailers, and others (Colvin, 2020). Yet the scholastic view of NPS traditionally has been unfavourable - little more than 'snake oil' (Sharp, 2008) - to the point of advocating abandonment.

There are two major substantive criticisms:

- (1) There is a conceptual and methodological flaw in the mechanic stemming from the tripartite categorisation of the responses. First, the statistical compressing involved in collapsing an 11-point scale into three categories reduces the response variability and, by inference, a loss of statistical information and measurement precision. Second, the cut-off points for the classification of responses into 'Promoters', 'Passives' and 'Detractors' are deemed arbitrary (Grisaffe, 2007). Lewis and Mehmet (2020), investigating the alignment of consumer brand sentiment with NPS response, suggested that "while at an overall level, the NPS captures the sentiment participants feel toward a brand" (Lewis & Mehmet, 2020, p. 15), the boundaries between the classes of response need re-calibrating. Finally, the omission of the 'Passive' group in any calculation eliminates parts of the sample and skews the NPS calculation: "it involves computations that allow several very different scenarios to produce the same net promoter score" (Grisaffe, 2007, p. 47).
- (2) Lack of superior predictive validity: The original analysis had significant methodological flaws (a) cross-sectional rather than longitudinal data, (b) correlations that do not provide evidence of causation and (c) the use of historical sales data as a questionable proxy for future sales growth (Baehre, O'Dwyer, O'Malley, & Lee, 2022; Grisaffe, 2007). Replication studies were unable to validate Reichheld's (2003) mechanic. van Doorn et al. (2013) and other studies could not affirm that NPS was superior to any other extant prediction metrics: "the predictive capability of customer metrics, such as NPS, for future sales growth or gross margin is limited. The customer metrics included in this study perform equally well in predicting current company performance" (Baehre, O'Dwyer, O'Malley, & Lee, 2022; Baehre, O'Dwyer, O'Malley, & Story, 2022; van Doorn et al., 2013, p. 317). As Bendle et al. (2019) put

it: "if increasing NPS does not drive increased revenue growth, then why is it the one number you need to know to grow?" (Bendle et al., 2019, p. 224).

Yet, despite the probity of these replication studies, it is an inescapable fact that the corporate world values and uses NPS extensively. Therefore, if the tenacity of this metric is not due to some variant of 'group think', one might suspect that NPS delivers commercial insight and return. Fortuitously, after an interregnum of some years, two articles published this year have provided supporting empirical evidence to that effect (Baehre, O'Dwyer, O'Malley, & Lee, 2022; Baehre, O'Dwyer, O'Malley, & Story, 2022). These papers qualify the scholastic rehabilitation of NPS by finding that 'likelihood to recommend' (the two top box scores from a 0-10 scale i.e. '10' and '9-10') outperforms all other measures, including the NPS metric, and that the 'Passive' and 'Detractor' groupings are immaterial to the predictive process (Baehre, O'Dwyer, O'Malley, & Story, 2022). However, they also concede that *"under the right conditions, NPS predicts future sales growth, supporting existing managerial behavior"* (Baehre, O'Dwyer, O'Malley, & Lee, 2022, p. 81). Baehre et al. (2022), accepting that *"managers will continue to use NPS"*, advocate that NPS should *"remain part of the academic research agenda" so that academics and practitioners can conduct meaningful discourse about this "important metric"* (Baehre, O'Dwyer, O'Malley, & Lee, 2022, p. 81; Bendle et al., 2019).

One may conjecture that it is not that the conceptual and methodological criticisms of Reichheld's mechanism are necessarily inoperative - though some are¹² - but that the passage of time, specifically the emergence of a digital ecosystem with its associated 'butterfly' effect, has made the construct of 'recommendation' more important and a better predictor of commercial performance, offsetting the conceptual and statistical flaws¹³.

The original rationale for using this metric, irrespective of its known flaws, was that the primary objective of the empirical work was to persuade practitioners that experiential customer engagement was a measure worthy of consideration: *ergo*, it was imperative to demonstrate

¹² Baehre, O'Dwyer, O'Malley and Storey (2022) find (1) that Reichheld's (2003) cut-off points for groupings are effective and (2) metrics which show an average do not outperform metrics that collapse responses. They do support the claim that elimination of the Passive grouping impairs precision.

¹³ The importance of 'likelihood to recommend' as the most effective predictor of future sales growth appears to substantiate this (Baehre, O'Dwyer, O'Malley, & Story, 2022).

that there is a significant relationship between CE and a metric that is considered by the corporate world to be central to commercial robustness. Serendipitously, recent empirical work has allowed an academic contribution - in that the relationship between CE and NPS should now be of scholastic interest and worthy of further investigation.

3.14 MEASURES: MODERATING EFFECTS

In Study 2 we used different content sites (Aggregators (portals), News, Sports, Entertainment and Parenting/Family Sites) and two social media platforms to explore the intensity and dimensional response of CE across different contexts, and to examine whether the hypothesised relationship outcomes were also affected by the latter.

3.15 RESULTS: MODEL VALIDATION

3.15.1 Common Method Bias

We addressed common method bias in both studies in the form of a two-step verification. The results indicated that common method bias is unlikely to be a serious issue. Harman's (1976) single-factor test revealed that the first factor accounted for less than 50% of the total variance (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986). As this test has lost some credence of late (Fuller et al., 2016; Gorrell et al., 2011; Kock, 2015), we also use the Kock's (2015) full collinearity test, which tests both lateral and vertical collinearity and which, in combination with other tests of robustness, is deemed to be successful in detecting common method bias (CMB). The VIF values of all the latent variables in both models are less than 3 and therefore CMB is not considered to be a critical issue.

3.15.2 Study 1: The Measurement Model

The measurement model for the customer engagement scale was validated by two SEM methods: PLS-SEM (using Smart PLS 3 software) and covariance-based SEM – the latter specifically used to audit the scale's key validation metrics against extant scales (Ferreira et al., 2020). We employed the CCA (confirmatory composite analysis) process in PLS-SEM to validate the measurement model. We selected PLS-SEM as the primary modelling approach as it is considered well suited for exploratory research and for assessing predictive relevance: its *“greater statistical power means that PLS-SEM is more likely to identify relationships as significant when they are indeed present in the population”* (Hair et al., 2019, p. 7).

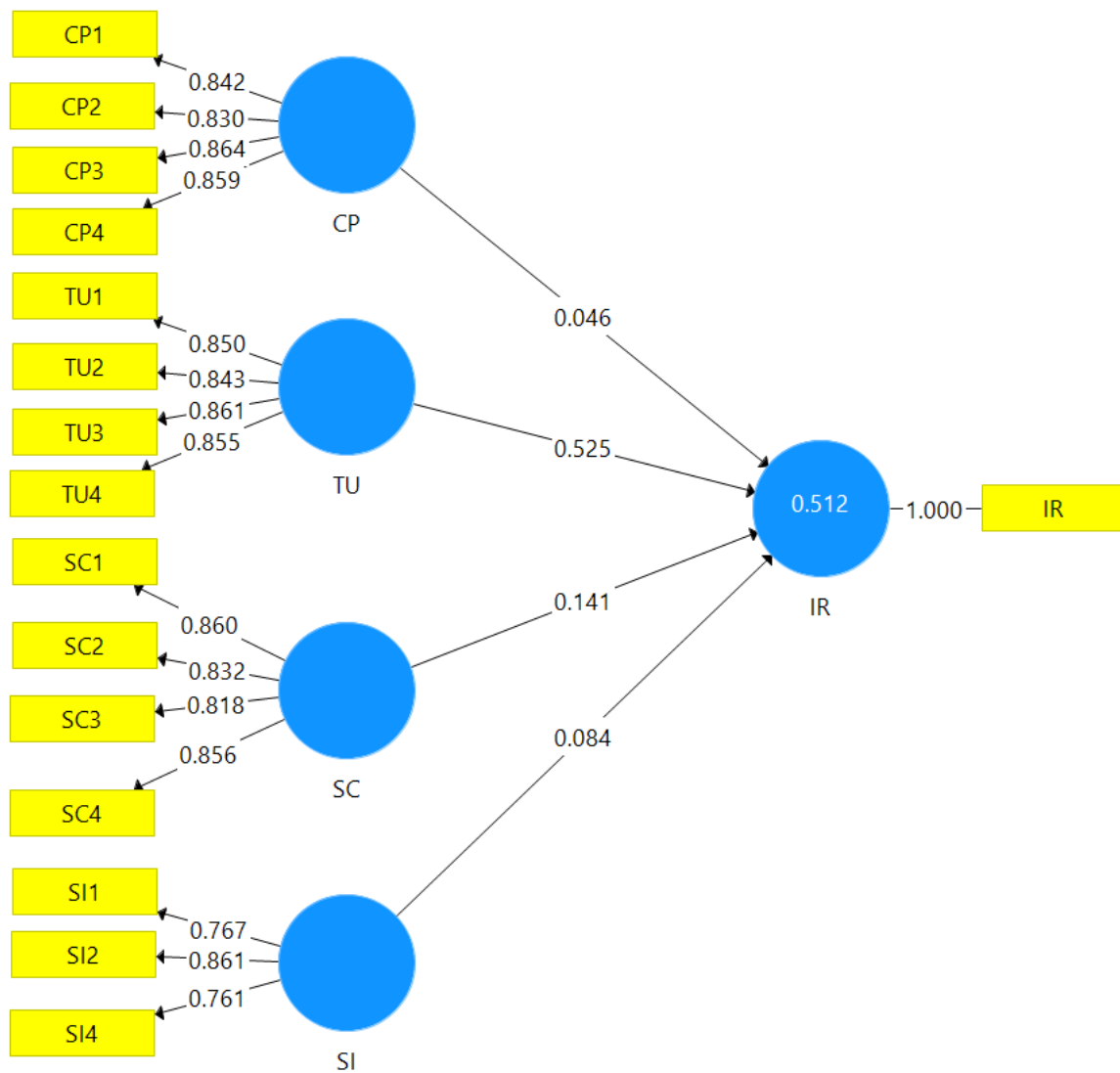
Structurally, PLS-SEM is non-parametric and works well with non-normal distributions and complex models, applicable to this study which includes composite variables (dichotomous variables which are transformed into count variables with a single indicator) and one other variable (NPS) with a single indicator. However, it should be acknowledged that the use of PLS-SEM is the subject of some dispute within the academic field¹⁴, and we elaborate further on this in addendum section (Section 3-19) at the end of Chapter 3.

A random sample of 50% of respondents from Study 1 was selected for this analysis (N=6012). We examined the 4-factor reflective measurement model (in line with the reflective-reflective approach used by Hollebeek et al. (2014)), using the one item “intent to recommend” from the Loyalty scale as an endogenous item to ground the model.

The commonly advocated tests and associated rules of thumb for evaluating reflective measurement models in PLS-SEM (Hair et al., 2020) are (1) Indicator significance and reliability (outer loadings > 0.70); (2) Internal consistency reliability = >.0.7 (Cronbach’s Alpha and Composite Reliability); (3) Convergent Validity (AVE >0.50); (4) Discriminant Validity, represented by the HTMT criterion (including a confidence interval); (5) Nomological Validity; and (6) Predictive Validity.

¹⁴ The author triangulated certain findings using CB-SEM and SPSS

Figure 3-3: Study 1: Measurement Model



Notes: CP = Cognitive Processing; TU = Temporal Utility; SC = Social Congruence; SI= Social Identity; IR= Intent to Recommend

All outer loadings exceed 0.708 and are significant for a two tailed test at the 5% level (Hair et al., 2020). The detailed validation results are shown in Tables 3-10 and 3-11.

Table 3-10: Reliability and Validity Summary for Study 1

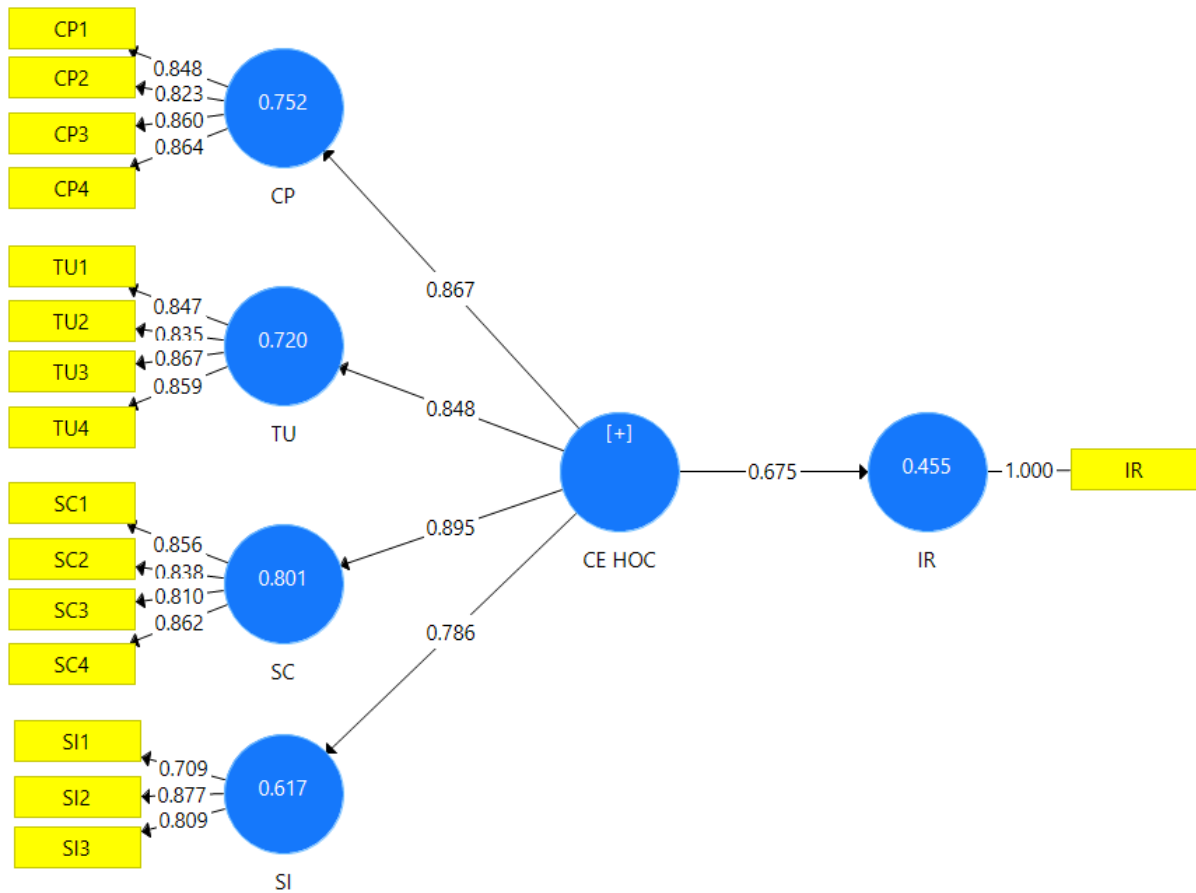
Latent Variable	Loadings	AVE	CR	α
	>70	>50	0.60-0.90	0.60-0.90
Cognitive Processing		0.72	0.91	0.87
CP1	0.84			
CP2	0.83			
CP3	0.86			
CP4	0.86			
Self-Congruence		0.71	0.91	0.86
SC1	0.86			
SC2	0.83			
SC3	0.82			
SC4	0.86			
Social Identity		0.64	0.84	0.72
SI1	0.77			
SI2	0.86			
SI3	0.76			
Temporal Utility		0.73	0.91	0.87
TU1	0.85			
TU2	0.84			
TU3	0.86			
TU4	0.86			

Discriminant validity is established using the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) criterion (<0.85) (Hair et al., 2020).

Table 3-11: Study 1 Discriminant Validity (HTMT)

	CP	SC	SI	TU
CP				
SC	0.789 [0.77-0.81]			
SI	0.796 [0.78-0.82]	0.818 [0.80-0.84]		
TU	0.698 [0.68-0.72]	0.784 [0.77-0.80]	0.663 [0.64-0.70]	

Figure 3-4: CE Study 1: Higher Order Construct Model



HOC = Higher Order Construct; CP = Cognitive Processing; TU = Temporal Utility; SC = Social Congruence; SI = Social Identity; IR = Intent to Recommend

To test nomological validity, we reconfigured the model using the repeated indicators approach, construing customer engagement as a higher-order construct, comprising reflective first and second order constructs. The lower order components all exhibited satisfactory levels

of convergent validity and internal consistency reliability (Table 3-12) (Sarstedt et al., 2019). Discriminant Validity for the lower order component was also established, see Table 3-13, because all HTMT values are below the conservative threshold of 0.85 and the confidence intervals do not include 1 (Hair et al., 2017). All the model paths are significant and while this is a somewhat rudimentary model, compared to Study 2, it is consistent with the hypothesis that CE is a significant positive predictor of optimal customer relationship outcomes, with the CE → IR path exhibiting an r^2 value of 0.455, with the f^2 effect size >0.35 (0.84) indicating a large effect. Finally, we used, in line with Hair et al.'s (2020) protocol, the blindfolding algorithm to ascertain the Q^2 predictive value. All the Q^2 values were larger than zero, indicating the model has good predictive relevance (Sarstedt et al., 2019), with the CE → IR path exhibiting a large predictive effect ($Q^2 = 0.452$).

Table 3-12: Reliability and Validity, Study 1 HOC model

	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
CP	0.87	0.91	0.72
SC	0.86	0.91	0.71
SI	0.72	0.84	0.64
TU	0.87	0.91	0.73

Table 3-13: HTMT Discriminant Validity, Study 1 HOC model

	CP	IR	SC	SI	TU
CP					
IR	0.55 [0.53-0.57]				
SC	0.79 [0.77-0.81]	0.63 [0.61-0.65]			
SI	0.80 [0.78-0.82]	0.56 [0.54-0.58]	0.82 [0.80-0.84]		
TU	0.70 [0.68-0.72]	0.74 [0.72-0.76]	0.78 [0.77-0.80]	0.67 [0.64-0.69]	

However, to subject the measurement model to conservative scrutiny, AMOS goodness of fit criteria are also supplied (Table 3-14). By doing so, we allow comparisons to be made with

extant scales. The validity criteria were produced by splitting the sample (1) with the full sample and (2) with a reduced sample, aligned with contemporaneous papers on engagement scale development.

The scales used for comparison are the most highly cited (Harzing, Publish & Perish) in the engagement domain. While the focus of this paper is exploratory and predictive, the introduction of a new measurement instrument demands comparability with extant, robust scales. Acknowledgements are made to Fereirra et al. (2020) for their work on Engagement Scale comparisons. While stringent comparisons between scales are invalid, since the Fereirra et al (2020) work used one sample (an online survey using the Facebook platform) to reinterrogate some of the scales in Table 3-14, while our scale and those of Baldus et al. (2015), Harrigan et al. (2017), Schivinski et al. (2016) and So et al. (2016) featured heterogenous sampling, if Goodness of Fit criteria are standard benchmarks, then we have some indication that the scale featured in our paper falls within acceptable measurement bounds of rigour and validation for CE scales.

We have therefore considered the reliability and validity of the construct measures and evidenced their suitability for inclusion in path analysis (Hair et al., 2017). We now turn to Study 2 to interrogate the scale and audit the customer engagement metric, in accordance with the hypotheses outlined in Section 3.8.

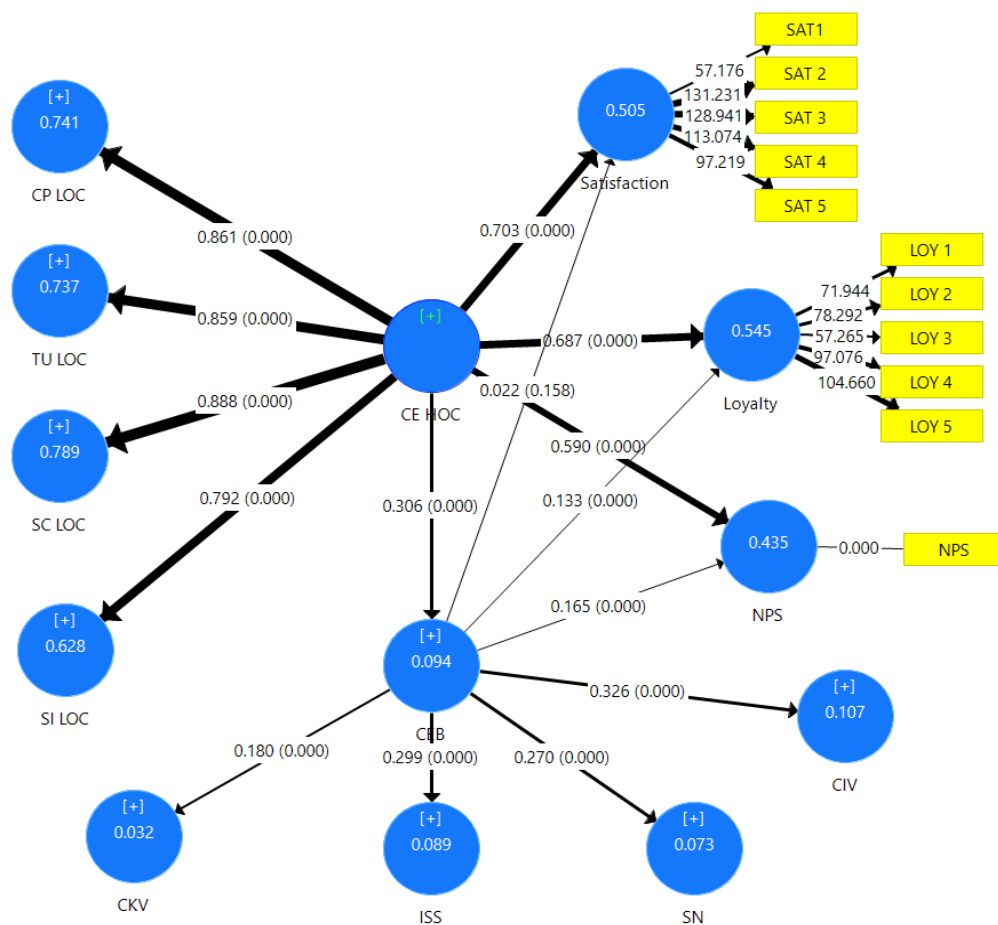
Table 3-14: AMOS GOF Criteria CE Scales

Scale	This paper	This paper	Baldus et al (2015)	Dessart et al (2016)	Harrigan et al (2017)	Hollebeek et al (2014)	Schivinski et al (2016)	So et al (2016)
	N=608	N=12,125	N=620	N=448	N=195	N=554	N=1126	N=496
χ^2	233.4 (p=0.000)	2619.234 (p=0.000)	1153	326.10 (p=0.000)	172.101 (p=0.000)	97.994 (p=0.000)	557.47	2376.89
<i>df</i>	84	84	440	*	82	32	115	887
GFI	0.952	0.97	*	*	0.89	0.968	*	*
TLI	0.961	0.97	*	0.96	*	*	*	0.94
CFI	0.969	0.976	0.94	0.97	0.965	0.984	0.95	0.95
RMSEA	0.054	0.05	0.06	0.06	0.075	0.061	0.05	0.58
SRMR	0.0385	0.033	0.05	*	*	0.0278	0.06	0.0629
			<i>*Short form scale</i>		<i>*Adjusted So et al (2016 scale)</i>			

3.15.3 Study 2: Structural Model Validation

We followed the disjoint two-stage approach to validate the reflective-reflective higher order construct in Study 2 (Sarstedt et al., 2019). We first assessed the validity of the lower order components. All the lower order components satisfied the relevant thresholds of internal consistency, convergent validity, and discriminant validity (Tables 3-15 & 3-16), except for the Temporal Utility and Self-Congruence relationship. While that relationship does marginally exceed the conservative threshold of >0.85 , it does pass more the liberal limit of 0.90 for conceptually similar constructs (95%CL [0.795-0.875]) (Hair et al., 2021).

Figure 3-5: Study 2: Structural Model with CE HOC



Notes: CP LOC= Cognitive Processing, Lower Order Construct; TU LOC = Temporal Utility, Lower Order Construct; SC LOC=Self-Congruence, Lower Order Construct; SI LOC = Social Identity, Lower Order Construct; CE HOC = Customer engagement, Higher Order Construct; NPS = Net Promoter Score; CKV = Customer Knowledge Value; CIV =Customer Influencer Value; ISS = Information Super Spreading; SN= Social Networking.

Table 3-15: Study 2: LOC Components Reliability and Validity

	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
CP	0.80	0.87	0.63
SC	0.84	0.89	0.68
SI	0.71	0.84	0.63
TU	0.85	0.90	0.69

Table 3-16: Study 2 LOC Discriminant Validity (HTMT)

	CP	SC	SI	TU
CP				
SC	0.80 [0.78-0.83]			
SI	0.81 [0.77-0.84]	0.77 [0.74-0.80]		
TU	0.79 [0.76-0.81]	0.87 [0.85-0.88]	0.65 [0.61-0.68]	

Using the protocol outlined in Sarstedt et al. (2019), we then reconfigured the model (Figure 3-5), creating a new dataset that added the latent variable scores of the constructs of CP, TU, SC, and SI and then repeated a similar analysis to that of the repeated indicators approach. All relevant validity criteria were supported (Tables 3-17, 3-18).

It should be noted that the Loyalty construct registers exactly at the HTMT conservative cut-off of 0.85 (Table 3-18). A cut-off of 0.90 is allowable for conceptually similar constructs and/or if both constructs in question are reflective: *“if the HTMT value is below 0.90, discriminant validity has been established between two reflective constructs”* (<https://www.smartpls.com/documentation/algorithms-and-techniques/discriminant-validity-assessment/>). The HTMT score can be reduced to 0.812 if one of the loyalty indicators, which potentially overlaps in phraseology with SI indicator in the CE scale, is removed. For journal publication, that indicator could be removed without damage to the central thesis; however, the view of Henseler et al. (2015) is that there is only a marginal difference in sensitivity between the two cut-off rates (HTMT.85 has an average sensitivity rate of 99.9% compared to HTMT.90 which registers 99.45%) and both HTMT selections *“detect discriminant validity*

issues reliably” (Henseler et al., 2015, p. 124). Additionally, Henseler et al (2015) point out that “*none of the HTMT criteria indicates discriminant validity issues for inter-construct correlations of 0.70 or less*¹⁵” (Henseler et al., 2015, p. 129).

Table 3-17: Study 2 HOC model Construct Reliability and Validity

	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
CE HOC	0.872	0.913	0.724
Loyalty	0.814	0.87	0.573
Satisfaction	0.891	0.92	0.697

Table 3-18: Study 2 HOC model Discriminant Validity

	CE HOC	CEB	Loyalty	NPS
CE HOC				
CEB	0.33 [0.30-0.37]			
Loyalty	0.85 [0.82-0.88]	0.37 [0.34-0.41]		
NPS	0.68 [0.65-0.71]	0.35 [0.32-0.37]	0.77 [0.75-0.79]	
Satisfaction	0.80 [0.76-0.83]	0.25 [0.22-0.28]	0.81 [0.79-0.83]	0.69 [0.66-0.72]

Table 3-19: Study 2 HOC model Cross Loadings

	CEB@Site	Loyalty	NPS	Satisfaction
LV scores - Cognitive Processing	0.27	0.65	0.53	0.56
LV scores - Self-Congruence	0.23	0.62	0.56	0.65
LV scores - Social Identity	0.34	0.58	0.47	0.43
LV scores - Temporal Utility	0.22	0.63	0.61	0.76

Finally, we address the structural model in Study 2 (Figure 3-5) by evaluating it against the protocol for PLS-SEM (Benitez et al., 2020; Hair et al., 2020; Sarstedt et al., 2019) . First, the model is assessed for collinearity: all the VHF values are below 5. All the path coefficients are

¹⁵ The inter-item correlation Satisfaction-Temporal Utility does exceed 0.7: however, the HTMT cut-off falls within the conservative limit.

significant ($p < 0.001$), except CEB→Satisfaction, which will be discussed in the Findings/Hypotheses testing section. All the r^2 values are considered moderate by more orthodox criteria, although we adhere to Sarstedt and Mooi's (2014) view that the better '*rule of thumb*' in marketing research (given the general muddying occasioned by causal heterogeneity, including the unknown unknowns of psychological constructs) allows for 0.50, 0.30 and 0.10 to be considered substantial, moderate, and weak (Sarstedt & Mooi, 2014). Under these criteria, the CE Higher Order Construct (HOC) accounts for 50% of the variance of Satisfaction, 44% of the variance of NPS and 55% of the variance of Loyalty, which can be considered a substantial effect, while only 9% of the variance of CEB@Site is accounted for by CE HOC (Figure 3-5). The relationships between CEB and CKV, SN and ISS are of minimal (albeit significant) effect. The relationship between CEB and CIV can be construed of significant but 'weak' effect.

The f^2 effect explains the likely effect on an endogenous construct if an exogenous construct were removed from the equation. The effect sizes for all the CE HOC relationships with the endogenous customer relationship outcome variables are large ($f^2 > 0.35$). The effect size of the relationship CE HOC→CEB is small ($f^2 = 0.102$) and the effect sizes of all the CEB relationships with related behavioral constructs are also small ($f^2 < 0.15$) (Hair et al., 2019).

The predictive relevance of all the relationships is also assessed using the blindfolding procedure to obtain the Stone-Geisser Q^2 criterion (Hair et al., 2019). All the Q^2 values for the endogenous constructs were greater than zero, indicating the model's predictive accuracy. All the endogenous constructs associated with CE HOC showed a large predictive relevance; all the endogenous constructs related to CEB showed only a small predictive relevance (Hair et al., 2019). All the values cited are represented in Table 3-20.

Table 3-20: Study 2 Path Coefficients, Significance and Effect sizes

	β Values	T Statistics	P Values	95% CL		f^2	Q^2
CE HOC -> Loyalty	0.687	43.771	<0.001	0.656	0.716	0.94	0.304
CE HOC -> Satisfaction	0.703	38.855	<0.001	0.665	0.738	0.905	0.348
CE HOC -> NPS	0.59	35.913	<0.001	0.557	0.621	0.558	0.431
CEB -> CIV	0.326	17.243	<0.001	0.289	0.363	0.119	0.106
CE HOC -> CEB	0.306	17.136	<0.001	0.272	0.342	0.104	0.093
CEB -> ISS	0.299	15.17	<0.001	0.26	0.336	0.098	0.087
CEB -> SN	0.27	14.595	<0.001	0.233	0.306	0.079	0.072
CEB -> NPS	0.165	10.977	<0.001	0.135	0.194	0.044	
CEB -> CKV	0.18	9.105	<0.001	0.141	0.219	0.033	0.032
CEB -> Loyalty	0.133	8.905	<0.001	0.103	0.161	0.035	
CEB -> Satisfaction	0.022	1.412	0.158	-0.008	0.053	0.001	

3.16 FINDINGS: HYPOTHESIS TESTING

3.16.1 The Relationship between CE and CEB@Site

We first consider Hypothesis 1. There is a positive significant relationship [Bootstrapping, 5000 subsamples] between CE and CEB@Site ($\beta = 0.304$, $t = 17.091$, $p < 0.001$). However, the relationship is considered weak ($r^2 = 0.0904$, $f^2 = 0.104$). Since, as Judea Pearl points out "*the Regression slope is completely agnostic as to cause and effect*" (Pearl & Mackenzie, 2018), we may infer that CEB@Site only weakly explains customer engagement, the experiential state, and is not the robust proxy for engagement identified by practitioners. Thus **H1(a)** is supported and **H1(b)** is not supported.

We shed further light on **H1(b)** and the weak relationship between CE and CEB@Site through exploratory analysis. If customer engagement is acknowledged to be the experiential representation of substantive cognitive and emotional investment in the focal brand at a point in time (So et al., 2014), then CEB@Site by definition (van Doorn et al., 2010) is the behavioural expression of that investment and is considered to add value to the focal brand (Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014; Pansari & Kumar, 2017). Therefore, two further questions emerge: (1) how representative is the phenomenon of CEB@Site of all visitors to the site? And (2) can we determine any heterogeneity of response within that phenomenon that might indicate a conflict with this 'adding value'?

Descriptive analysis shows that only 55% of those respondents across all sites participate in any CEB site activity. Moreover, only 22.6% participate in 2 or more activities—reminiscent

of the suggestion that those who engage actively with a brand are more akin to a focus group than representative of the overall customer base (Libai, 2011). While it can be supported (**H1a**) that the higher the engagement score, the greater the probability of enacting CEB@Site, these numbers suggest that the motivations of CEB@Site participants may only partially align with all site visitors. The literature gives some indication of this: multiple motivations may drive CEB@Site (Beckers et al., 2018), and these motivations may not encompass any degree of ‘commitment’ or ‘favour’—a pre-requisite for CE (Brodie et al., 2011; Mollen & Wilson, 2010b)—but may stem from less worthy impulses such as “*grandstanding*”, where the focal site is merely a convenient platform for self-aggrandisement (Florenthal, 2019).

We did not evaluate negative engagement, but we can test for heterogeneity of response to the focal site by conducting a Chi-Square analysis between CEB@Site and the Net Promoter Score. The Net Promoter Score classifies customers into Promoters (Score 9-10), Passives (Score 7-8) and Detractors (Score 0-6). “*Promoters are loyal customers who will keep buying and refer others fuelling growth, Passives are satisfied but unenthusiastic customers who are vulnerable to competitive offerings and Detractors are unhappy customers who can damage your brand and impede growth through negative word of mouth*” (Nice/Satmetrix, n.d.).

The relationship between CEB@Site and NPS is positive and significant (χ^2 (1, N=3030) = 230.31, p,0.001, phi=.276). Looking at Table 3-21, the findings are illustrative: while there is a higher probability of CEB@Site participants (those who engage in at least one behaviour) being promoters (36.7% for those engaging in CEB vs. 26.4% for all respondents, Index 139), a substantial remnant (24.5%) are Detractors, who, far from ‘adding value’ to the brand are, in fact, potentially *inimical* to the focal site’s interests. If we then compare CEB@Site participants to experientially engaged customers, we find that a more modest 13% of those with customer engagement scores above the mean register as Detractors, as do a more modest still 6.8% of those who are in the top quartile of engagement scores. Extrapolating from this, we can state that CEB@Site respondents are 1.9 times more likely (24.5/13.1) than engagement respondents above the CE mean, and 3.6 times (24.5/6.8) more likely than those with a CE score in the top quartile, to be Detractors. These figures suggest that the problem of animus is at least part of the reason why CEB@Site is a poor proxy for customer engagement and, indeed, why CEB@Site is a poorer predictor than customer engagement of other relationship outcomes, too, as we will turn to below.

Table 3-21: Likelihood Ratio: Detractor vs. Promoter

Construct	Promoters	Index vs. All	Detractors	Index vs. All	Passives	Index vs. All
CEB@Site (Yes)	36.7	139	24.5	66	38.8	107
CE(>Mean)	45.3	172	13.1	35	41.6	115
CE Top 25%	63.5	241	6.8	18	29.8	82
ALL	26.4	100	37.3	100	36.3	100

Table Notes: CEB@Site (Yes): Respondents who said 'Yes' to at least 1 CEB@Site activity, CE(>Mean) = CE Score above the mean for the entire dataset, CE (Top 25%) = The top 25% of CE Scores for the entire dataset, All = All respondents in the dataset.

All Constructs cross-tabbed against NPS: CEB@Site (yes) (χ^2 (2, N=3030) =319.67, $p<0.001$), Cramer's V =.325); CE (>mean) (χ^2 (2, N=3030) =923.73, $p<0.001$) Cramer's V = .552); CE (Top 25%) (χ^2 (2, N=3030) =759.15, $p<0.001$) Cramer's V = .501).

In sum, mere participation at the site cannot be deemed as robust evidence of customer engagement. Without detailed parsing of behavioral activity, through semantic analysis or AI filters, such activity may indeed be ambivalent towards, if not opposed to, the focal brand: *“the truly engaged customer must have an enduring psychological connection with the brand in addition to behavioral participation. Participation in CE activities does not guarantee a truly engaged customer”* (Bruneau et al., 2018; So et al., 2014, p. 307). Practitioner reliance on the CEB@Site metric as a robust proxy for the experiential state of engagement as a *“rule of thumb”* (Ng et al., 2020) is an assumptive fallacy. **H1(b)** can be refuted.

3.16.2 The Relationship between CE and CEB@Site and Customer Relationship Outcomes.

The relationship between CE and the customer relationship metrics (Loyalty, Satisfaction and NPS), taking into account the r^2 and f^2 amplitude ($f^2 > 0.35$) (Table 3-22) , can be considered of 'substantial' effect (Hair et al., 2019; Sarstedt et al., 2019). Using the standardised path coefficients and the f^2 metrics (marginally in excess of that designated small [$>0.02<0.15$]) the relationship of CEB@Site with the same customer outcome metrics can be considered weak in comparison to the experiential metric, and in the instance of 'Satisfaction', the relationship is not significant (Table 3-22).

Therefore, **H2(a)** **H2(b)** and **H2(c)** can be supported. As an additional exploratory analysis, we ask: does CEB@Site mediate the relationship between CE on the one hand and Loyalty, Satisfaction and NPS on the other? We conducted the bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 samples (Nitzl et al., 2016).

Table 3-22: Relationship between CE and CEB@Site and endogenous constructs

Path	β	T	p	r ²	CL		f ²
CE HOC -> Loyalty	0.687	44.07	<0.001	0.545	0.509	0.58	0.94
CE HOC -> Satisfaction	0.703	39.094	<0.001	0.505	0.462	0.546	0.905
CE HOC -> NPS	0.59	36.102	<0.001	0.435	0.403	0.467	0.558
CE HOC -> CEB	0.306	17.551	<0.001	0.094	0.073	0.115	0.104
CEB -> NPS	0.165	10.994	<0.001		0.136	0.194	0.044
CEB -> Loyalty	0.133	8.613	<0.001		0.103	0.164	0.035
CEB -> Satisfaction	0.022	1.392	0.164		-0.009	0.054	0.044
CE HOC -> CEB -> Loyalty	0.041	8.524	<0.001		0.032	0.05	
CE HOC -> CEB -> NPS	0.051	10.533	<0.001		0.041	0.06	
CE HOC -> CEB -> Satisfaction	0.007	1.441	0.15		-0.003	0.016	

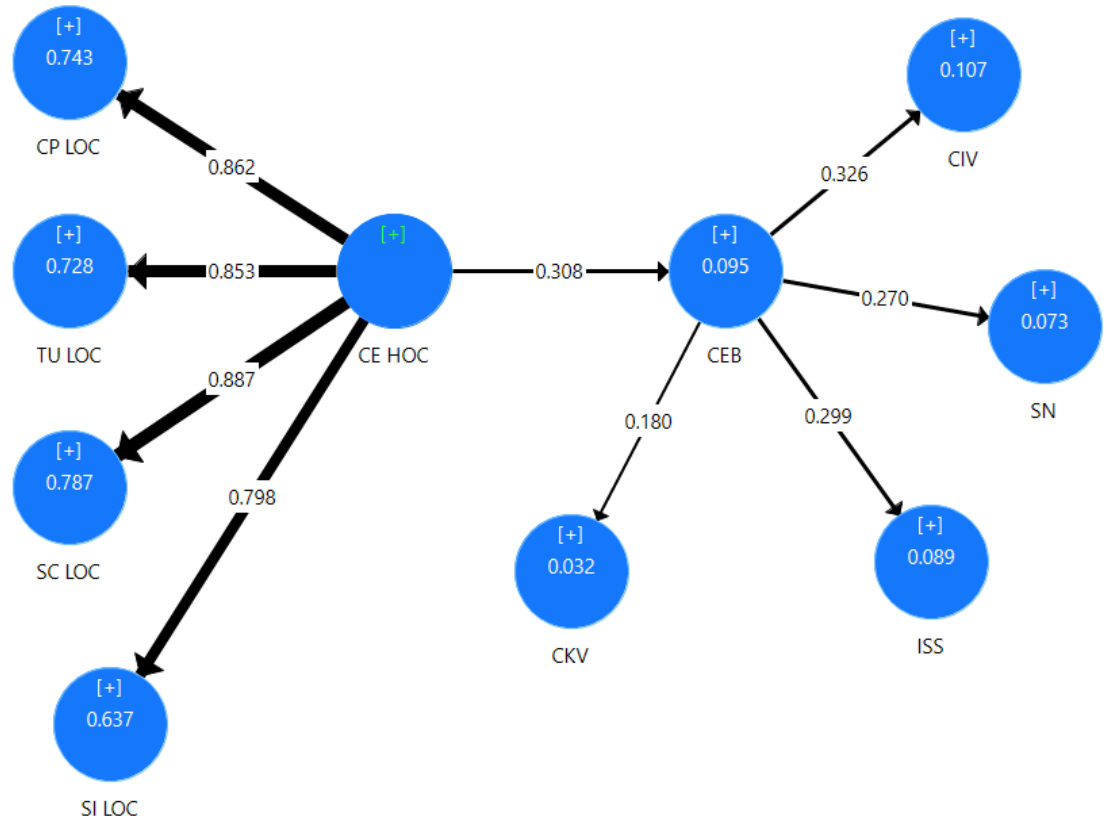
The bootstrapping analysis, since both the direct and indirect paths are significant for two of the three outcome variables, suggest that while CEB@Site partially mediates these relationships, the f^2 contribution of CEB@Site suggests a minor role (Table 3-22). Furthermore, the direct path and indirect path to Satisfaction from CEB@Site are not significant. The finding is anomalous in that one would expect ‘Satisfaction’ to co-exist with ‘Loyalty’; it is also construed as precursor of ‘Loyalty’. We may conjecture the following explanations for the inferior performance of CEB@Site regarding the above outcomes and the non-significance of its relationship with ‘Satisfaction’: (1) the aforementioned heterogeneity of consumers in their motivations for customer engagement behaviours, and (2) the confounding effect of context, specifically Site Genre (to be addressed below).

3.16.3 The Relationship between CEB@Site and Internet Activism

We have seen that CEB@Site as a behavioral indicator of optimal relationship outcomes of current users of the sampled sites is adjudged inferior to the experiential metric of CE – *amplitude does not always equal approbation*. However, we may also conjecture that the variable has a singular, possibly critical value, in terms of brand health and sustainability due to its association with behaviors with the specific ambition of influencing and creating change **H3 (a/b/c/d)** e.g., diffusing brand knowledge, influencing customers, changing opinions through online creative innovation, and participating in and establishing social network communities (Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014; Kumar et al., 2010). We next therefore investigate the relationship between CEB@Site and the four categories of internet activism

We simplified the model to reduce statistical noise (Figure 3-6).

Figure 3-6: CEB@Site and Internet Activism



:

The bootstrapping findings (5000 subsamples) show that CEB@Site has a positive significant relationship with CIV ($\beta=0.326$, $t=17.828$, $p<0.001$), CKV ($\beta=0.18$, $t=9.322$, $p<0.001$), ISS ($\beta=0.299$, $t=15.279$, $p<0.001$) and SN ($\beta=0.27$, $t=14.426$, $p<0.001$). **H3 (a/b/c/d)** can be supported.

There is a caveat: while the relationship between CEB@Site and these categories of internet activism is positive and significant, is it meaningful? The r^2 values can be construed, according to established benchmarks, as 'weak' (CIV $r^2 = 0.107$, CKV $r^2 = 0.032$, ISS $r^2 = 0.089$, SN $r^2 = 0.073$), while the f^2 values register a small effect (CIV $f^2 = 0.119$, CKV $f^2 = 0.033$, ISS $f^2 = 0.098$, SN $f^2 = 0.079$). We would argue in this specific context that the seeming marginality of the above relationships is misleading. We put forward three arguments to support this view:

- i. The paucity of evidence in this area (the motivation of customer engagement behavior), means that this measurement of strength is “*meaningless in the absence of a frame of reference*” – a ‘*compared to what*’ moment (Funder & Ozer, 2019).
- ii. The complex psychological motivations for CIV, CKV, ISS and SN will comprise the logically deduced psychological ‘knowns’ but also the ‘irrational’ and the ‘unknowns’. In the prediction of stock returns (analogous in its complexity), “*an r^2 value of 0.10 is considered satisfactory*” (Hair et al., 2021, p. 195).
- iii. Perhaps, most tellingly, the ‘butterfly effect’ of social media and other internet platforms means that a single individual contribution can have an exponential effect (Reputation Affairs, n.d.): “*every brand can have its own “Tahrir Square or WikiLeaks moment. Any ill-thought-through commercial promotion in Thailand or Peru can come back and bite you in the UK or Australia”* (Martin Riley, ex-CMO of Pernod Ricard).

Moreover, SEM models support top-level theory construction and validation but, by design, will miss specific but sometimes crucial statistical details. We again perform exploratory analysis to explore this relationship between CEB@Site and Internet Activism further. We use the Chi-Square analysis to highlight the relative contribution of those respondents who say “yes” to any CEB@Site activity compared with all respondents. Those respondents who said yes to at least *one* CEB activity at Site and at least *one* CKV, CIV, SN and ISS activity are 15%, 26%, 23%, and 29% more likely to perform such activities than ‘All Respondents’ ($p < 0.001$).

If we interrogate further specific questions that highlight the propensity to influence and/or change online opinion, respondents who said “yes” to an CEB activity were 86% more likely than ‘All Respondents’ to set an agenda/promote their view using their creativity (create a video, app, widget, or podcast) and were 85% more likely than ‘All Respondents’ to interact with companies (make recommendations for product or service improvement via company website or social media) (Table 3-8). All calculations are significant ($p < 0.001$). These few respondents (those who engage behaviourally at the focal web site and who participate in activist behaviour) have the capability to set in motion an intellectual and commercial tsunami: “*Even a single bad review lurking silently on Glassdoor, or a few tweets or Facebook posts by*

a disgruntled customer with a small following, can show up in a search and cause prospects (or prospective employees) to think twice about doing business with you (Amendola, 2019). Such influence has been quantified: “*nearly a quarter of FMCG companies suffered a \$100,000-\$250,000 loss from a negative influencer experience*”. However, the same report found that the global average contribution of a “*best influencer experience was \$813,262*” (Plansky, 2020)

The implications of the above findings are stark: use customer engagement scores to calibrate the current health of the focal brand; monitor and nurture those who participate in CEB@Site to defend current performance and ensure future success.

3.16.4 The Impact of Context

The seminal paper by Calder, Isaac, and Malhouse (2016) on the relationship between customer engagement and context appropriately scrutinised whether “a one size fits all” engagement measure was appropriate.

To investigate this further we: (a) used the structural divide that characterises digital advertising and bifurcated the dataset into 2 site types (Content/Publisher Sites $n=2483$, – those embodying principally narrative editorial, covering a wide range of interests: news, entertainment, sport, and Social Sites $n=547$, where content is largely self-generated and the platform is used for social interaction, information gathering and activism) to enable broad based comparison of valence of outcomes; and (b) also partitioned the data into more granular site genre groups (Parenting ($n=203$), Sports ($n=719$), News ($n=935$), Entertainment ($n=561$), Aggregators ($n=286$), and Social ($n=344$) to isolate any moderating genre outliers.

3.16.4.1 The Experiential construct (CE) and Context

We used the bootstrapping procedure (5000 subsamples) to test for significance in the CE→CEB relationship across different site genres. We found that the relationship between CE and CEB is significant across all six site genres itemised above. As inferred in Section 3.10 we then used the PLS MGA approach to investigate whether, regarding the CE→CEB relationship, there are significant differences between the two broader site types (content/publisher sites and social sites). We found that there was no significant moderation of site type ($p=0.161$) in the CE→CEB relationship. Thus **H4(a)** is not supported.

In terms of CE→CRO relationships, we employed the same analysis and found that across the six individual site genres, these relationships were all significant. Similarly, using the PLS MGA algorithm, we established that no significant differences in these relationships were found between the broad ‘Content Site’ and ‘Social Site’ contexts. Thus, **H4(b)** is not supported. However, we acknowledge that this not an experimental study to investigate the impact of context, and that samples across genres are unequal in size reflecting visitation propensities which may distort these findings.

3.16.4.2 CEB@Site and Context

CEB@Site appears, however, to be a dynamic and volatile phenomenon that is affected by context. We ascertained in our investigation of the structural model that the relationship between CEB and Satisfaction is not significant. We have adduced several possible explanations for this: (1) respondents exhibiting customer engagement behaviours are heterogenous including ambivalence, even hostility, towards the focal sites. However, this explanation is somewhat occluded by the finding that CEB→Loyalty path and CEB→NPS are significant; (2) the dimensions of customer engagement may affect customer relationship outcomes differently - what drives Satisfaction may not drive CEB@Site and therefore there may be a misalignment between the impulses driving these phenomena; and (3) these findings may be confounded by context i.e., different site genres.

We used Poisson regression (as CEB@Site is a count variable) and Linear regression in SPSS to evaluate the effects of the individual dimensions of CE on CEB@Site and CE on Satisfaction, respectively. The Poisson regression revealed that CP ($p<0.001$), TU ($p=0.31$) and SI ($p<0.001$) were significant predictors of CEB, while SC was not a significant predictor ($p=.122$). The most important predictor of CEB was SI ($\beta=.446$, $SE=.0350$, $p<0.001$). The incidence rate ratio indicates that for every 1+ unit increase in SI, the incidence rate of CEB increased by a factor of 1.56 ($\text{Exp}(B)$) or 56%. However, a linear regression analysis reveals that the significant predictors of Satisfaction are CP, TU, and SC ($p<0.001$), while SI is not significant. This disconnect between the principal ‘driver’ of CEB (Social Identity) and the drivers of ‘Satisfaction’, where Social Identity is non-significant, may explain why the relationship CEB→Satisfaction is not significant.

Context, in these circumstances, is also revealed to be a confounding factor. While there was no significant difference in the CEB@Site → CRO relationships between Content and Social Media Sites, there was volatility in the intra Site Genre groupings. We established (Bootstrapping, 5000 subsamples) that while the path CEB@Site → Satisfaction was significant for News and Social sites, it was non-significant for the other site genres (Aggregators, Entertainment, Parenting, Sports). In terms of CEB@Site → Loyalty and CEB → NPS, the results are not uniform. For two of site genres (Aggregators and Entertainment) the path CEB → Loyalty is not significant. The path CEB@Site → NPS is significant across all Site Genres. As the path CEB@Site → NPS was significant across all site genres, we tested whether that any differences in the path coefficient, as result of broader different site types, was meaningful. We found there was no significant difference in the path coefficients of CEB@Site → NPS between Content/Publisher Sites and Social Site contexts ($p=0.268$). Therefore **H4(c)** is partially supported.

We have speculated about the possible reasons for the contextual variation in our formulation of hypothesis **H4(c)**. Certainly with regard to the CEB@ Site → Satisfaction relationship, we find that, using linear regression (SPSS), the CE dimension Social Identity is not a significant driver of satisfaction for Aggregators, Parents, Entertainment and Sports Sites. Since we have already ascertained that Social Identity is a primary driver of CEB@Site, this may explain why the relationship is not significant in these site genres. Equally, the non-significance of the CEB@Site → Loyalty path in the Aggregator and Entertainment sites may be explained by the finding that both these site groups have the highest number of passive/detractor respondents in those who participated in customer engagement behaviour, compared with the other site genres. We should, however, reiterate that this is not an experimental study, and sample sizes of both the macro groupings (Content/Social) and micro groupings (individual site genres) are unequal, rendering tentative the parsing of any conclusion as to the mechanism of contextual variation.

Within the above methodological caveats, our findings suggest that, in terms of context, there are fundamental differences between the CE and CEB@Site constructs. We had conjectured that our CE scale, which measures the neurological embedding of response to the focal brand, not the response to the specifics of context itself, in terms that incorporate the fundamental psychological axes that underpin the validation of ‘self’ (the ‘thinking’, ‘visceral/emotive’,

‘moral/ethical and ‘social’ self), would be transferable across contexts. While this assertion would be qualified by the likelihood that the intensity and valence of that response (notably in terms of the dimensions of CE) would be context-specific (Hollebeek et al., 2019; Vivek et al., 2014), our overall proposition that (a) the CE→CEB@Site relationship continues to be significant but relatively weak and that (b) CE is a strong predictor of Customer Relationship Outcomes across the major online platforms/genres holds. There is no equivalent empirical affirmation for CEB@Site. Context appears to partially moderate that metric and its contingent relationships. Thus CEB@Site is not only an inferior predictor but also an inconsistent predictor of customer outcomes.

3.17 DISCUSSION

The academic world has always been convinced of the ‘contribution’ of customer engagement (the Marketing Science Institute has acknowledged it for some time as a key research priority) while the practitioner world has mostly employed the construct not as metric but as a ‘meme’ to legitimise and promote its various offline and online endeavours. The authors’ objectives have been to reframe the debate and by doing so bridge the epistemological schisms, either intra-academic or academic vs. practitioner that have impeded widespread adoption, and by doing so reform current method and practice.

We have shown that the barriers to practitioner adoption can be effectively challenged. Thus, to the charge that there can be no metric where there is no epistemological clarity, we have shown that there is a reasonable measure of scholastic consensus and cohesion as to definition of customer engagement and its constituents – the Brodie et al (2011) definition providing a comprehensive and durable definition, articulating what CE comprises and does, and our definition proffering the first steps towards encompassing what CE ‘is’. The results of our empirical study reveal that the default Practitioner “rule of thumb” for assessing engagement at a website, the volume of behavioral footprints at that site is flawed: it is not a robust proxy for CE, it is inferior in terms of prediction of customer retention (amplitude does not equal approbation), and it is not a stable metric due to the moderating effect of context. Conversely, the experiential construct is a reliable and statistically strong and stable predictor of desirable commercial outcomes. Whatever, the inconveniences of quantitative assessment by manual design and intervention, compared to automated website visit analysis, an experiential

construct that is capable of predicting c50% of the variance of desirable commercial outcomes should not be neglected.

3.17.1 Theoretical/Scholastic Contributions

We contribute to scholastic knowledge by:

- i. Conducting a semantic analysis that demonstrates that the pro-forma perception of customer engagement as an inchoate construct is not supported and that there is a considerable degree of scholastic consensus as to its conceptualisation and constituent dimensions. The ‘behaviouralist’ objections to the construct on these grounds are therefore not justified
- ii. Creating a measurement instrument that is compatible with extant conceptualisations of customer engagement, is comparable statistically with established scales, but exemplifies a reframing of the phenomenon as an ‘*identity heuristic*’. This view aligns with the current thought leadership on economic consumer behavior (Akerlof & Kranton, 2010; Akerlof, 2017) and socio-political attitudes and behavior (Klein, 2021). As the latter observes, “*we form and fold identities constantly ...it is impossible to speak seriously about how we engage with one another without discussing how our identities shape that engagement.in today’s media sphere, where the explosion of choice has made it possible to get the political media you really want, it’s expressed itself in polarized media that attaches to political identity, conflict, and celebrity*” (Klein, 2021). Customer engagement is thus a form of *confirmation bias* – the websites that we visit, the brands we consume, in an age of anxiety and information overload, are designed to reassure us – the website algorithms that entice us and socialise us into communities, convert “*interests into identities*”(Klein, 2021).
- iii. This ‘re-framing’ of CE also allows epistemological continuity with the conceptualisations of negative engagement - where the counterpart of ‘validation of self’ is ‘dissonance directed at self’. ‘Negative engagement’ is therefore not just defined as a collection of thoughts, emotions and behaviours that may or may not be the obverse of the positive thoughts and emotions and behaviors captured in published engagement scales (which, in itself, is a methodological dilemma), but “*a*

series of mental states and an iterative psychological process, which is catalysed by perceived threats (or a perceived or reconstructed threat) to self" (Juric et al., 2015, p. 285). The lower the engagement score, the greater discomfort to the idea of "self" and presumably the grater animus to the source of that discomfort.

- iv. We have made a robust case for the value of the experiential construct, challenging the behavioral replacement conviction espoused by some scholars. We have also shown that customer engagement (as conceived in our paper) is distinct from customer engagement behaviour, and that the two phenomena persist in a symbiotic relationship, with each making a distinct and valuable contribution to audience and commercial success. Finally, we fulfil Professor Vivek's request (Ng et al., 2020, p. 244) to demonstrate that cognitive and affective customer engagement measures make an important contribution to website success across all site genres
- v. We have made the first steps towards interrogating where context substantively affects the measurement of customer engagement and where it is of peripheral effect. By shifting the locus of our sampling away from Social Media and Brand Community sites (the more usual backdrop to customer engagement studies in the online field), where such platforms "*are often presented as synonymous to customer engagement*" (Ng et al., 2020), to disparate digital entities, we found that the experiential measure's contingent relationships are consistent across contexts, while customer engagement behavior @ Site as a measure is volatile and considerably moderated by context.

3.17.2 Managerial Implications

The main objective of this paper is to 'nudge' practitioners into reevaluating the experiential measure of customer engagement.

First, we have done this by:

- i. Refuting the barriers to adoption of an experiential customer engagement scale.
- ii. Demonstrating that customer engagement is positive, significant predictor of optimal commercial outcomes: if websites wish to create or sustain success, they need to calibrate engagement scores and benchmark them competitively.

- Additionally, mirroring our methodology, site owners can also establish a competitive engagement score/profile - pre-launch. Site Owners do not have to wait for Google Analytics to interpret the viability of their venture post-launch.
- iii. Showing that CEB@Site is not a robust proxy for CE: the magnitude of responses, as we have demonstrated, may harbour a heterogeneity of attitudes towards the site, a percentage of which will be indifferent to negative, perhaps hostile. However, CEB@Site is an important metric, notably in relationship to other behavioural measures of proven commercial value and in its association with activist behaviour, a potential progenitor of change. As data from third party cookies is eliminated, Site Owners need to employ data mining, semantic analysis, and AI techniques to investigate these CEB@Site respondents - not only are they a potential source of revenue for sites (direct selling, indirect data monetarisation etc), they are potentially powerful emissaries for the sites. Attention to CE will drive loyalty; attention to CEB@Site will drive future growth.
 - iv. Investigating the issue of context. Context is a salient moderating factor – not invalidating relationships but effecting their strength – Social Sites unsurprisingly show the closest relationship between CE and CEB@Site. Context also affects the CE mean score and the mean scores across dimensions. We have demonstrated that this should not be an impediment to Practitioner adoption, subject to ‘*like for like*’ comparison.
 - v. Finally, the marginal cost associated with measuring the experiential construct (essentially survey methodology) will be reduced with the abandonment of the third-party cookie (2022), which effectively means that the automated extrinsic “available” data capture to site owners is over. Website owners/publishers will need to focus on how best to advantage their site using their own data (and/or create their own media-eco system to enlarge that supply, in concert with other publishers) and how to monetise it. At this point, there will be a greater incentive for publishers to survey site visitors, with a concomitant rise in demand from media organisations for access to site proprietary data. The issue of ‘cost-effectiveness’ of such techniques, a real barrier to practitioner adoption, will be less salient.

3.17.3 Limitations and Future Research Directions

Our study has methodological limitations. First, we measured CE on a 5-point Likert scale and since respondents will rarely award the top score, the mean engagement score reflects a compression in value, and while our mean score is comparable with other studies, if the CE score is used as a performance benchmark, measurement on a more elongated scale (7/10 point) should be preferred to achieve a more granular response. Secondly, both studies represent convenience sampling (with the caveat that both sample sizes were large with a broad socio-demographic range) with the attendant frailty with regard to study generalisation. Finally, because respondents ‘chose’ the site of interest to report on in Study 2, there is a bias towards CE (57% are regular visitors, visiting at least once a day) and perforce, the different site genre ‘buckets’ are unequal and the major demarcation in respondent volume between ‘content’ and ‘social’ sites is substantially biased towards the former. We must therefore conclude that our findings on the impact of context should be regarded as tentative and the effect of context awaits a more rigorous experimental approach.

We contend that the abolition of third-party cookies will drive further exploration of the value of experiential measures in the digital domain. The evidence emerging from the New York Times “Project Feels” initiative suggests that targeting by engagement with content (the latter evoking a specific emotional response, identified via proprietary algorithms calculated with in-house data) improves advertising response exponentially: ads placed under these conditions *“have generated as much as 80 percent more impressions than regular behavioral targeting. The average lift is 40 percent”* (Edmonds, 2019). As Chris Wexler, SVP and executive director of media and analytics at Cramer-Krasselt put it; *“It’s an exciting frontier because we’re looking for people who are open to our message, and emotional state is a key part of it. Demographics based targeting is better than no targeting. Behavior-based is better than demographics. If you put it in order of importance, mood is above behavioral”* (Moses, 2018). Our scale can be used to calibrate the competitive engagement performance of a website, and unlike behavioral targeting, this can be done pre-launch. The scale can be also used potentially to parse the relative strength of customer response to content by engagement dimensions – an advertisement that appeals “cognitively” might be placed on an article that expresses a relatively high score on the cognitive processing dimension.

The above are tactical utilisations. However, customer engagement may also have a strategic value. The polarisation of digital media (filtered through engagement) can as Ezra Klein (2021) observes be weaponised for malign effect, but it is not immutable: such tribalisation is not impervious to change. One can, through the harnessing of this very potent experiential phenomenon, nudge attitudes and behavior towards the betterment of humanity. In the words of Professor Edward Malthouse “*CE could have a role in solving many global/humanitarian problems*”(Ng et al., 2020). It is a consoling thought in these ‘interesting’ times.

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3.19 ADDENDUM

Being a statistician means never having to say you're certain (Anon)

"... as far as the propositions of mathematics refer to reality, they are not certain; and as far as they are certain, they do not refer to reality."

Albert Einstein: Geometry and Experience, Lecture before the Prussian Academy of Sciences, January 27, 1921

"We absolutely must leave room for doubt or there is no progress and no learning ... People search for certainty. But there is no certainty".

Richard Feynman: From the lecture "What is and What Should be the Role of Scientific Culture in Modern Society", given at the Galileo Symposium in Italy, 1964.

3.19.1 Introduction

The growth of PLS-SEM as a modelling approach has been dramatic. A systematic review of its usage has demonstrated growth across diverse disciplines and journals (Sarstedt, Hair, et al., 2022) and itemized the reasons for its application. However, more profoundly, given that the incorporated statistics reveal that 76.95% of studies used PLS-SEM to assess reflective measurement models, this article also illustrates that the traditional measurement shibboleth that reflective models are better suited to CB SEM methodology has been widely abrogated in practice. Inevitably, this has fomented a backlash, not least from academics suspecting that the ease or plasticity of the PLS-SEM software was more instrumental in guiding the decision to adopt, than a consideration of the appropriate methodological parameters. This increasingly acrimonious debate reached an apotheosis in the two Cadogan and Lee papers (2022), which managed to combine some, not underserved, unearthing of the frailties of PLS-SEM measurement with an unusual degree of vituperation - equating CB SEM adherence with the adoption of scientific realism (a belief in the truth or the approximation of truth) and PLS-SEM with constructive empiricism, the latter viewed as some kind of scientific whimsy. Constructive empiricism in these works (Cadogan & Lee, 2022b, 2022a) is considered as some form of 'deconstructionism' where the quest to elicit truth is regarded as subservient to a theory generated by the researcher, repurposed in a model that is purported to merely 'work' - until it doesn't, as it is subject to a form of epistemological Darwinism (Pessimistic Induction)¹⁶.

¹⁶ Pessimistic induction is predicated on the assertion that most successful theories have turned out to be false. This claim is then utilised in the argument that our current best theories are probably false (Mizrahi, 2013).

The responsibility of the author is to disentangle the current dispute to a limited degree in order to (a) to rationalize the choices made in this thesis and (b) to acknowledge the methodological limitations made by those choices.

3.19.2 Orthodox Rationale

The conventional reasons for using PLS-SEM in preference to CB-SEM are (1) small sample size, (2) non-normal data, (3) theory development and exploratory research, (4) high model complexity and (5) formative measures (Hair et al., 2021; Sarstedt, Hair, et al., 2022; Usakli & Gurkan, 2018).

In response to criticism (Evermann & Rönkkö, 2021), which adherents of the PLS-SEM methodology have acknowledged, some of the above reasons have been qualified (Rigdon, 2016; Sarstedt, Hair Jr, et al., 2022). While PLS-SEM performs well when the sample size is small, adherents note that all small samples compromise statistical stability (Sarstedt, Hair Jr, et al., 2022). Researchers are advised before embarking on modelling to *"rely on power analyses that consider the model structure, the anticipated significance level and the expected effect sizes"* (Hair et al., 2019, p. 5). While Rigdon (2016) and Sarstedt et al.(2022) argue that PLS-SEM also does *not* offer a *'substantial advantage'* over CB-SEM in its treatment of non-normal data, this is disputed by Hair et al. (2017) *"CB-SEM assumes normality of data distributions, which is seldom met in social sciences research"* (Hair et al., 2017, p. 119)¹⁷. Supporters of PLS-SEM also emphasize that PLS-SEM is not subject to any constraints in this respect: *"PLS-SEM is non-parametric and ...works well with non-normal distributions"*(Hair et al., 2017, p. 119). Furthermore, PLS-SEM is justifiably preferred when variables are single-item or have a low number (two) of indicators – there are no identification or convergence issues (Usakli & Gurkan, 2018). Equally, PLS-SEM is designed to cope with composite (index) indicators.

The dominant reason for using PLS-SEM, voiced by adherents, is that of theory development and exploratory research. CB-SEM, with its tight parameters on model identification and convergence (producing standardized estimates of model fit), is most suitable for theory confirmation; while PLS-SEM, with its capacity for model complexity, in terms of volume (many constructs, indicators, and model relationships and analysis (higher order constructs, data heterogeneity, prediction algorithms) (Hair et al., 2021) is better suited for exploratory

¹⁷ See also (Astrachan et al., 2014; Rigdon, 2016; Usakli & Gurkan, 2018)

work . As Hair et al. (2019) explicate, *"using PLS-SEM, researchers benefit from the method's high degree of statistical power compared to CB-SEM. This characteristic holds even when estimating common factor model data as assumed by CB-SEM. Greater statistical power means that PLS-SEM is more likely to identify relationships as significant when they are indeed present in the population"* (Hair et al., 2019, p. 7) . The use of PLS-SEM is seen as *"a dialogue between the investigator and the computer"*. *"Tentative improvements of the model—such as the introduction of a new latent variable, an indicator, or an inner relation, or the omission of such an element—are tested for predictive relevance"* (Hair et al., 2019, p. 5)

At this point, we should ask why the controversy exists, given that CB-SEM and PLS-SEM measure different things with different objectives. We turn to the Cadogan and Lee papers (2022) and other critics to answer this.

3.19.3 Fit for Purpose?

3.19.3.1 Deconstruction

If we elide the issue of whether proponents of CB-SEM are scientific realists, and those advocating PLS-SEM are constructive empiricists,¹⁸ then the primary criticism of PLS-SEM is a more fundamental one – that of validity. While there is a tentative consensus that PLS-SEM is the most appropriate method for formative constructs (Hair & Sarstedt, 2019) its utility and rigour with regard to reflective models, usually analyzed with CB-SEM, has been the subject of ferocious debate (Cadogan & Lee, 2022b, 2022a; Evermann & Rönkkö, 2021; Rigdon, 2016; Rigdon et al., 2017; Rigdon, 2022; Rigdon & Sarstedt, 2022; Rigdon et al., 2019; Rönkkö et al., 2016; Russon & Stol, 2022; Petter, 2018).

The main (and potentially the most devastating) argument put forward by Cadogan and Lee (2022) is that PLS-SEM has no 'truth' status. Their reasoning is as follows: factor-based SEM (e.g. CB-SEM) represents the conceptual constructs as common factors that explain the covariance between their associated indicators, taking into account measurement error. For

¹⁸ The author aligns with Rigdon (2022) in this respect - that the bifurcation of the debate about the validity of PLS SEM as a methodology into a "Manichean" conflict, between scientific realism and constructive empiricism *"describing them as if they were two opposites battling for the soul of SEM"*, is absurd (Rigdon, 2022). Its argument that adoption of one or other of the methodologies implies either a realist or anti-realist stance imputes motivation, and that, in itself, is a logical fallacy (*"attacking the motives"* fallacy – a variant of the ad-hominem tactic). It also taints and obscures what should be a reasoned debate about statistical appropriateness.

example, in this thesis, the common factor 'Cognitive Processing' is explained by the observable indicators CP 1, 2,3, and 4 and is equivalent to the conceptual construct 'Cognitive Processing' [CP]. There is a demonstrable causal chain between the unobservable conceptual construct and the observable indicators, which "is the variance in the observable measures of detection" and thus the process has 'truth value' (Cadogan & Lee, 2022b). In contrast, PLS-SEM combines the indicators in a linear weighted iteration to form composite variables that act as representative proxies for the conceptual constructs (i.e. Cognitive Processing) (Sarstedt et al., 2016). To Cadogan and Lee (2022), that process introduces a 'validity gap' between the conceptual construct and its indicators: *"without an explanation of how the unobservable [CP construct] is causally related to the composite, [one cannot] substantiate the claim that variance in the composite [CP composite], PLS's version of conceptual [CP], is somewhat similar to the actual variance in unobservable property [CP] that is hypothesized to exist"* (Cadogan & Lee, 2022a). They cite Henseler (2017), ironically a proponent of PLS-SEM, to corroborate their statement that composites breach the causality 'rule': *"the relationships between the indicators and the construct are not cause-effect relationships but [are] rather a prescription of how the ingredients should be arranged to form a new entity"* (Henseler, 2017, p. 180) . This violation of causality via 'emergent' variables is further compounded by the admitted inability of the methodology to produce a model fit, which means that there is no objective confirmation or refutation of the propositions examined in the model.

Cadogan and Lee (2022) summarise with two propositions that fundamentally delegitimize PLS-SEM, reducing it to the empirical equivalent of the ancient Roman practice of divination by dissecting sheep entrails. They are: *"(1) PLS's composites have no hypothetical causal contact with conceptual variables, and thus (2) analysis based on PLS composites can have no truth value (cannot be either true or false) with respect to representing or describing some existent property"* (Cadogan & Lee, 2022a).

3.19.3.2 Refutation

The refutation of such coruscating criticism, according to one PLS-SEM defender signifying the abandonment of reasoned debate on the issue (Rigdon, 2022), centres on several empirical observations itemized below.

3.19.3.2.1 All measures are imprecise

As Sarstedt (2016) puts it, "*constructs do not represent conceptual variables perfectly since any concept and any construct definition has some degree of ambiguity associated with it. In addition, constructs stem from data and therefore share the data idiosyncrasies*" (Sarstedt et al., 2016, p. 4000). There is imprecision baked into the common factor method due to factor indeterminacy¹⁹. Since the causal chain is not without compromise, the common factor may also be construed as a proxy– and as Rigdon (2016) observes, "*whether a particular proxy is affected by error to a greater or a lesser degree must be an empirical question, but there seems no basis for arguing that factor proxies will have any overall advantage over composite proxies*" (Rigdon, 2016, p. 604).

3.19.3.2.2 Model Fit is just... Model Fit

The purpose of CB-SEM is the confirmation of theory aided by greater statistical stringency and by model fit; the algorithms of PLS-SEM are inappropriate for the standardized model fit measures (Hair et al., 2019). However, the rationale for the application of PLS-SEM is its contribution to exploration and prediction, i.e. "*only the successful combination of explanation and prediction [which] gives rise to the practical relevance of causal explanations*" (Hair et al., 2019). Moreover, the epistemological frailties of model fit are well-known (1) CB SEM model fit measures how well the model fits *one* data set (Petter, 2018) – datasets in social science, irrespective of sample size, tend notoriously to be convenience samples (as in this thesis) with their attendant limitations; and (2) compounded by the impurity of the sample, causal modelling, per se, is only viable as a consequence of accepting two statistical 'fictions' that of (a) accepting that the model has 'sufficiency,' i.e. there are no unobserved confounding variables and (b) accepting that the model has 'faithfulness' viz "*our ability to make inferences about the absence of a causal relationship between two variables in the face of the absence of a particular statistical relationship between those two variables*" (Ryan et al., 2022, p. 6).

To avoid this *a priori* judgment of CB-SEM - good, PLS-SEM – bad "*less reliable than simple summed scales*" (Evermann & Rönkkö, 2021), the most sensible approach appears to recognize

¹⁹ Common factors are subject to factor score indeterminacy. This means that a common factor is partly arbitrary – there is no one best value to assign to an indeterminate common factor for a certain case, but rather an infinity of different values that may all be equally consistent (or inconsistent) with a given model and dataset.

that the optimal way *"to distinguish between competing measurement models would be to test the causal relations among items and between construct and item via intervention"* (Rhemtulla et al., 2020, p. 6). In effect, this requires testing causality via practical implementation²⁰ in field experiments, or at least randomized laboratory equivalents. Such an approach is not without difficulties – feasibility (opportunity and expense) and the reluctance of academic journals to run replication studies. What is undoubtedly advisable is the approach taken by Rigdon (2022,) which is to replace the error-centric process to quantification and replace it with 'uncertainty' : *"an uncertainty-centric approach would ..enable social science researchers to properly account for the uncertainty because of 'researcher degrees of freedom', where researchers manipulate data and model to obtain a desired result [and] model selection uncertainty where researchers put forward only one model after having weighed a range of models based on their fit statistics and parameter values"* (Rigdon, 2022). This paradigm would replace the unseemly squabble over the specifics of 'error' related to a particular methodology with an intellectual consensus that all measurement is uncertain and a commitment to developing better tools to reduce that uncertainty.

3.19.4 The pragmatist's (and the author's) approach.

George Box: "All models are wrong, but some are useful"

The author's rationale for using PLS-SEM in this thesis can be justified because (1) epistemologically, it is undoubtedly an exploratory work – auditing the relationship between CEB@Site and CE, to the author's knowledge, has not been previously attempted; and (2) methodologically, the model is complex and includes composite variables (indices) with single indicators.

Beyond the somewhat pro-forma, though legitimate, rationale for applying PLS-SEM, the author also employs an eclectic statistical approach as a method of triangulation to confirm and explore the empirical findings. Where stringent confirmation (model fit to the data) is imperative, specifically with regard to scale development and validation (Evermann & Rönkkö, 2021), CB-SEM (AMOS) is applied [table 3-14]. The relationship between CE and CEB@Site is further interrogated, and the inferences from the structural model are supported by using

²⁰ Head-to-head simulations to compare models have provided inconsistent results.

Chi-Square analysis (SPSS) [table 3-21]. These initiatives follow Rigdon's (2022) dictate that our responsibility is to reduce uncertainty.

Thus, the pragmatic approach (Bokulich & Parker, 2021; Veit, 2020) is to assume that all models should be treated with caution: *"many of our current best theories contain representations which, if understood literally, are inaccurate in many ways"* and *"yet these representations are central to our understanding of the subject matter of these theories"* (Frigg & Nguyen, 2021, p. 2431). Cognitive success does not equate to 'truth'.

We have at best, partial truth, and the remedy for this is to accept that *"for almost any aspect x of phenomenon y, scientists require multiple models to achieve scientific goal z"* (Veit, 2020, p. 105). Cadogan and Lee (2022) and Rigdon (2022) may argue which methodology is closer to 'truth' value, but the solution lies not in the parsing of statistical specifics, but in the representation (and future testability) of the 'truth value' of the final model. Indeed Popper would argue that the demarcation between science and pseudo-science is the testability of that model, the openness to refutation: *"A theory which is not refutable by any conceivable event is non-scientific. Irrefutability is not a virtue of a theory (as people often think) but a vice. Every genuine test of a theory is an attempt to falsify it, or refute it"* (K. Popper, 2014, p. 36).

For the researcher to distil this into practice and to reduce epistemological risk, they must employ (a) a rigorous adoption of the methodological guidelines²¹ and (b) triangulate, using different methodologies, with particular attention to findings which are exploratory.

The empirical findings in Chapters 3 and 4 will be successful and approach 'truth' value, *if, and only if*, they are rigorously tested by scholars and practitioners alike, employing, according to Veit's (2020) precepts, a diversity of methodologies and models.

²¹ We should address, in passing, the use of consistent [PLSc] that has been recommended by some experts for reflective models. We adopt the view expressed in Hair and Alamer's (2022) *"PLSc is subject to issues that have been noted for CB-SEM including inaccurate results in certain configurations and is arguably unsuitable for out-of-sample prediction purposes"*. (Hair & Alamer, 2022, p. 100027).

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4 CHAPTER 4: CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT, ADVERTISING RECEPTIVITY AND INFLUENCERS

4.1 ABSTRACT

Purpose: Against a background of the imminent disruptive effect, notably on behavioural metrics, of the abolition of third-party cookies, the purpose of this study is: (1) To investigate the relationship between customer engagement (CE) and advertising receptivity, and the moderating impact of diverse media contexts; (2) To assess the effectiveness of contextual targeting; (3) To examine whether advertising receptive respondents have a propensity both to respond to online advertising *per se* and to act as ‘micro-influencers’ and whether context in this instance is a moderating factor.

Methodology: A self-report online survey (N=3030) where respondents were asked for recall about a site visit, in order to comparatively audit different media contexts.

Findings: The study provides empirical support for customer engagement as a marker of advertising value; it also provides support for the merit of contextual targeting. The study establishes that drivers of advertising receptivity by CE dimension differ across contexts. Context is found to be instrumental in terms of website patronage of advertising receptive respondents who are also responsive to online advertising campaigns and have a propensity to act as ‘micro-influencers’.

Research Contribution: Provides: (1) A case for the utility of experiential metrics in establishing advertising value; (2) Further validation of the CE scale as an effective measure across diverse contexts; (3) Support for the re-evaluation of advertising receptivity as a metric of value; (4) An audit of the relative worth (in advertising terms) of Content, Social Media and Hybrid (Content, Social and Advocacy) sites; (5) Empirical evidence for contextual targeting and for the need for advertisement ‘*framing*’ in terms of placement and creative strategy, and (6) A rationale to challenge assumptions about the website distribution of micro-influencers and advertising responders,

Practical Implications: Interrogates several practitioner operating assumptions concerning media expenditure, i.e. (1) the preference for social media placement; (2) the aversion to

“difficult to measure” experiential metrics; (3) the underestimation of consumer resistance to advertising, and (4) the belief that all advertising impressions are equal.

Originality: To the authors’ knowledge, the first paper to compare content, social media, and hybrid sites in terms of advertising receptiveness and the implications thereof.

Keywords: Customer engagement, Advertising receptivity, Perceived content quality, Customer Knowledge Value, Customer Influencer Value, Third-party cookies, Programmatic buying, Contextual Targeting.

4.2 INTRODUCTION

“We must move from numbers keeping score to numbers that drive better actions” – David Walmsley

It is a ‘*truth*’ universally acknowledged by practitioners that experiential engagement at a website leads to a greater response to the advertising placed at that website (IAB, 2015). Unfortunately, it is a ‘*truth*’ for which there is limited empirical evidence. Mostly this is a consequence of the emergence and now dominance of ‘programmatic buying’ (accounting for a projected 81% of total ad spend in 2022) (Statistica, 2021a). Programmatic buying is real-time media buying based on an algorithmic interpretation of behavioral footprints (i.e., first party/third party cookie-based data combined with historic data from third party databases). It facilitates geo-targeting, contextual targeting, socio-demographic targeting, re-targeting (the same ad viewed by one individual across different websites) and cross-device targeting – all placements refined by real-time adjustment according to the campaign objectives. The effect of cookie-based tracking is that it is estimated that 90% of an individual’s web-browsing history is known by more than 90 companies, and more than 600 companies have access to 50% of that same individual’s web-browsing history (Sweeney & Zawislak, 2021). Experiential measures are therefore immaterial to this process.

The effect of the planned abolition of third-party cookies in 2024 is thus likely be seismic: an experimental study conducted by Google comparing a programmatic campaign with a control campaign of ads contextually placed resulted in a 52% drop in publisher²² revenue (due to differences in bid price). Advertisers will also be impacted by the change. The contribution of the ‘cookie’ to prediction of purchase is substantive (Aziz & Telang, 2016): by targeting users pre-disposed to purchase, i.e., those with “*high baseline purchase probability*”, advertisements that generally do not have a statistically significant impact on purchase probabilities of consumers, can increase their purchase probability by up to 2.7 percentage points (Aziz & Telang, 2016).

The media behemoths (Google, Facebook) and larger publishers (e.g. New York Times) that possess or have access to large customer databases will be less affected by this change and

²² ‘Publishers’ are defined as media organisations that publish content on the web for financial return and are recognised by all stakeholders (audience, the media buying community, shareholders) for doing so.

there is already some suggestion of advertiser drift to these companies for this reason. (Sweeney & Zawislak, 2021).

Small to medium-sized web publishers/owners reliant on programmatic income without the financial resource to build up proprietary databases or to acquire the standard third-party industry databases (Nielsen, etc) will need to rely on alternatives, such as Google's Privacy Sandbox (a dependency that sustains the weaker partner but ultimately also contributes to the grossly asymmetric balance of power in this space) or to promulgate other metrics to demonstrate advertising efficacy. The New York Times, presciently anticipating this change, developed '*Project Feels*', emotion-based targeting based on proprietary data, which apparently has "*generated as much as 80 percent more impressions than regular behavioral targeting. The average lift is 40 percent*" (Edmonds, 2019). The New York Times affirmed that "*articles that were top in emotional categories, such as love, sadness, and fear, performed significantly better than articles that were not. We saw significant differentiation between articles tagged with emotions, showing that readers' emotional response to articles is useful for predicting advertising engagement*" (Spangher, 2018).

Behavioral metrics will continue to be central to post-campaign assessment. Examples are clicks, hovers, taps, swipes, video plays, shares, interaction rate and social analytics such as WOM, information, brand post reading, brand post interaction, likes, follows, shares, and recommends; the IAB provides a comprehensive taxonomy (IAB 2014). However, prediction-based targeting is projected to shift to contextual targeting and a combination of first- and third-party industry/brand data.

A Digiday and Connatix survey of 100 publishers, brands and agencies indicated that 53% of advertisers plan to increase their 2021 contextual budget up to 50% and 12% plan to increase spending by over 50% of current levels (Digital Media Research 2021). Indeed, preliminary results from other publishers, using less sophisticated contextual methods²³, suggest that the apocalyptic warning sounded by Google might be somewhat overblown. An audit conducted

²³ Contextual advertising is the practice of placing an advertisement on a web page based on the specific content of that page. The most basic variant consists of simply aligning the content of the ad with the editorial content. The more complex forms eschew simple alignment and may position the ad so that its content mirrors the emotional resonance of the host editorial, using a combination of first party and third-party trade data to secure that synchronisation.

by online publishers revealed that they managed to score “11% improvement in performance metrics from first-party segments²⁴ compared to use of third-party cookies” (Digital Media Research, 2021).

A McKinsey study found that while premium publishers²⁵ can leverage their brand reputation and have the financial resources to create first party databases, and to employ AI mechanisms to exploit them, most non-premium publishers have been sustained by ad targeting through third-party cookies for over 80% of their ad revenue (Digital Media Research, 2021). It is also a question of scale as well as inherent resource, as Adweek opined: “*given the Times’ output of about 2,000 articles every day, advertisers don’t have trouble finding a story that theoretically makes readers feel the emotion that they’re looking to target. However, this could be a barrier for a smaller publisher with fewer stories published each day*”(Adweek, 2019).

So, can a premium publisher’s experience, such as New York Times’ allegedly potent formula of contextual targeting, enhanced by the neurological embedding derived from that context supporting a specific emotional stimulus (i.e., context + emotion + first party and media industry third-party data), be replicated by other publishers?

We conjecture that other publishers can replicate the New York Times “effect” by: (1) using the construct of customer engagement as an index of publisher value in terms of consumers’ propensity to respond to the *platform*, which then affects response to advertising on the site and (2) using *specific content selection* to frame advertising and boost response. In terms of the latter, the evidence (industry/scholastic) suggests that this mechanic is effective (see Section 4.3.5 – The Impact of Content) and is certainly considered by the marketing industry as an important element to counteract the deleterious effects of a cookie-free/or lite digital ecosystem (Mckinsey & Company, 2022).

²⁴ Clarification of “first party segments” = first party data gleaned from visitors to the website

²⁵ Premium publishers are axiomatically the leading publishers in their field. They may be large publishers i.e., able to deliver a mass or quality readership but the category will also include smaller publishers who are leaders in their niche market. The defining characteristic of a premium publisher is the ability to extract maximum return from their provision of advertising space by virtue of their inability to be substituted by competitor media entities.

The purpose of this paper is therefore to conjecture and interrogate a number of research questions from this disruptive change:

- i. Given the relatively imminent loss to practitioners of access to third-party behavioral data, can customer engagement with a media platform and its hypothesised relationship with advertising receptivity and the latter's known association with purchase intention (Kilger & Romer, 2007) be used as an indicator of advertising value? This may also be specifically useful for content sites (defined below) as the established behavioral metrics of digital engagement (tweets, likes, shares, comments) are usually not available in the content site repertoire
- ii. With the hypothesised resurgence of contextual targeting in marketing practice, can we empirically demonstrate that content has a significant positive association with advertising receptivity?
- iii. How important is context as moderating factor in the above relationships? Is context so grossly distortive of the qualitative experience of media platforms (Voorveld *et al.*, 2018), that in turn advertising outcomes are singularly affected and the relationship between site genre and predictive commercial performance rendered inoperable?
- iv. By profiling respondents who answered the questions on ad receptivity, can we instigate a revaluation of platform, notably reduce the bias towards social media, in terms of advertising placement?

The empirical study was conducted with BSkyB in 2012 and covers six site genres and three higher order genres that constitute the foundation of our analyses. We define content sites as *those sites that primarily convey narrative editorial, where interaction is between media brand and site visitors*. We define social sites as *those where content is self-generated, and interaction is generally peer to peer* and we define hybrid sites as *a mixture of editorial content, designed to provide guidance, and online community with peer-to-peer interaction*, where parenting sites is an example of the latter category. The study is the first, to the authors' knowledge, to cover customer engagement with a wide range of popular online media environments. The research also incorporates a new customer engagement scale that re-conceptualises engagement (see Paper 2) and uses that re-conceptualisation of customer engagement as an '*identity heuristic*' to explain its capacity to drive advertising and promotional value.

4.3 RESEARCH BACKGROUND

We confine our interrogation of the literature to the most highly cited empirical customer engagement and media engagement papers, and specifically the latter's effect on advertising outcomes, in order to tabulate engagement definitions and scale dimensions (Harzing Publish or Perish; Google Scholar). We also tabulate and compare advertising metrics (advertising engagement, advertising receptivity, advertising value, advertising acceptance) derived from scholastic papers and practitioner trade body documentation (principally, IAB UK reports). The opinion relating to the abolition of third-party cookies, and the conceived implications for marketers and advertisers, is principally derived from consultancy documents and trade journals.

4.3.1 The Scholastic Perspective: What is Engagement?

"The medium is the message" –Marshall McLuhan, 1964

Given the imprimatur of the Marketing Science Institute (2014) concerning the centrality of the construct customer engagement to optimal commercial outcomes (Brodie et al., 2013; Harrigan et al., 2020; Hollebeek et al., 2014), it is surprising that the definition of customer engagement apparently remains contentious in academic circles (Barger et al., 2016; Obilo et al., 2021). Concomitantly, marketing practitioners' attitude to the construct has moved from repudiation of the ARF definition (*"media engagement is turning on a prospect to a brand idea enhanced by the surrounding context"* – ARF, 2006), to derision (*"Engagement fashionable but Bankrupt"* (Weigel, 2011) to using it, *de facto*, as a fashionable and indiscriminate application to legitimise marketing practice – a mere incantation of effect – 'meme'.

Yet, it is a contention of the authors that these scholastic differences are largely *chimeric*, and that practitioner aversion, some of which is based on the perception that there is a lack of scholastic coherence, should be robustly challenged. Paper 2 in this series provides qualitative evidence that there is a substantive degree of consensus regarding the definitions and dimensions of customer engagement. There is also general acknowledgement that the most comprehensive definition (and certainly one of the most cited) is that of Brodie et al. (2011) *"Customer engagement (CE) is a psychological state that occurs by virtue of interactive, co-creative customer experiences with a focal agent/object (e.g., a brand) ... under a specific set*

of context dependent conditions ... and exists as a dynamic, iterative process in which other relational concepts... are antecedents and/or consequences. It is a multidimensional concept subject to a context- and/or stakeholder-specific expression of relevant cognitive, emotional and/or behavioral dimensions”.

The engagement scales (Hollebeek et al., 2014; So et al., 2016; Vivek et al., 2014) that emerged from this maelstrom of academic conceptual debate appear to be the ones most adopted by the academic empirical work in this domain. However, both the engagement definition, cited above, and the extant scales tell us what engagement ‘*does*’ rather than what it ‘*is*’²⁶. They are a quasi-algorithmic confection of measures representing qualia. The scale that we have created (Paper 2) aligns with extant definitions and dimensions and is comparable in terms of validation benchmarks, but functions as an ‘identity heuristic’ by using the dimensions to represent different manifestations of self: *the thinking self, the emotional self, the identity/self-congruent self, and the social self*. Thus, we define customer engagement as *a psychological disposition, characterised by the actualisation of self(ves). An actualisation, the product of internally encoded thoughts, emotions, or beliefs, externally expressed and mediated through the validation of self(ves) or identity(ies), that occur(s) as a result of interaction with a focal object.*

This realisation of customer engagement does much to explain why the construct is such a potent phenomenon: that which is tied up with one’s own identity is most jealously prized and guarded, and that which reinforces the sense of self is most tenaciously embedded. The interweaving of engagement and sense of self has been explored in a recent empirical paper about banking and has been shown to be directly related to customer advocacy, which is, in turn, related to financial performance: “*customer engagement means customers are more profitable, as they internalize and “feel” the brand more and are thus likely to become brand ambassadors*” (Moliner et al., 2018, p. 395). It also explains why, given the neurological embedding associated with this construct, there is a direct positive relationship with advertising outcomes (Calder et al., 2009, 2018; Malthouse et al., 2016; Malthouse & Calder, 2018). In challenging that self, as David Foster Wallace put it, “*It did what all ads are supposed to do: create an anxiety, relievable by purchase*”.

²⁶ For a more detailed discussion and epistemological justification of this approach see Paper 2

As a construct, media engagement, as opposed to customer engagement at the website, remains an outlier. It is construed by Calder et al. (2016) as a collection of experiences derived from interaction with a media platform and realised as *“a multilevel, multidimensional construct that emerges from the thoughts and feelings about one or more rich experiences involved in reaching a personal goal” - exemplified by interaction, transportation (immersion), discovery, identity, civic orientation*” (Calder et al., 2016, p. 40), and the scale associated with this definition is bifurcated between the personal and the social specific responses. The construct of media engagement, conceived by Calder et al. (2009), seems divorced from the detailed rigour of later definitions epitomised by Brodie et al. (2011) and the later calibrations of experiential customer engagement that do coalesce towards some form of standardisation in terms of contributing latent factors. Nevertheless, the Calder et al. (2009) paper is rightly the benchmark in exploring relationship of engagement to advertising effectiveness, with the scale overlapping enough conceptually with later engagement scales to suggest that its conclusions can be replicated with other customer engagement measurement instruments. The Calder et al. paper (2009) provided empirical support for the relationship between customer/consumer engagement and advertising effectiveness. Voorveld et al. (2018) acknowledge this and add to this legacy by (a) constructing an experiential measurement instrument and (b) testing the ‘disruptive’ effect of context - to the extent that the paper postulates that there is no such thing as “social media”.

In terms of contexts explored, while Calder et al. (2009) covered offline and online media, most recent papers cover social media, perhaps precisely because that is where the bulk of advertising spend is diverted: Facebook—reaching 85% of UK users—and Instagram together account for 40-50% of advertising expenditure in the UK (Competition and Markets Authority, 2019). Thus, most of the engagement metrics in the academic literature relating to advertising, given the dominance of social media, are behavioral (such as likes, tweets, shares, and comments). The experiential metrics featured in scholastic work, and very much seen as peripheral in the practitioner world, tend to be formulated as specific contextual responses to the media platform/website. A typology of the papers on this subject is set out in tabular form (Table 4-1).

As our measurement instrument is not a collection of responses to the rich experiences encountered at a website (Calder et al., 2009) but rather an interaction with a media platform

that engenders the ‘validation of self’, mediated through the self-same rich experiences, our independent variable is termed customer engagement rather than media engagement, consistent with our earlier definition.

Our first research question, then, is:

Research Question 1: What is the relationship between Customer Engagement and Advertising Receptivity at the website?

4.3.2 The Practitioner Perspective: The Reliance on Algorithms

“Running stupid algorithms on faster and faster machines just gives you the wrong answer more quickly”. Stuart Russell, The Reith Lectures, 2021

In order to illustrate the impact of the elimination of third-party cookies, we need to address the practitioner measures of engagement. These are itemised in the IAB consultancy document (2014), and they acknowledge the tripartite dimensions of customer engagement identified by scholars (cognitive, emotional, and behavioral).

The practitioner experiential measures of ‘advertising engagement’, as designated by the IAB, are merely the repackaged standard survey metrics of campaign evaluation (campaign recall, ad recall, brand recall, brand message recall, brand favourability, purchase intent); the behavioral metrics are those first party and third party cookie data collected by web/ad servers (clicks, hovers, shares, video plays, ‘searched for more information’ - visited brand website after seeing an ad for brand) and ‘social analytics’ tracking data (read post, liked, followed, shares, recommends), which can also be embellished by image and sentiment analysis.

User profiles are also fleshed out by other server data: geo-location, sessions by channel (where your visitors come from), dwell time, pages views page views per session and bounce rate (signalling disengagement). The ‘Page views per session’ indicator is frequently used as a proxy for engagement: *“An increase in pages per session is often a clear indicator that your website visitors are more engaged and are looking to explore more of your content”* (Bonini, 2020).

Third party cookies enable behavioral tracking across websites (e.g., which video on YouTube did the user watch before they arrived on the brand site or clicked an ad on a publisher’s site?).

This data allows a profile to be created and the user to be classified to belonging to a particular segment and also facilitates re-targeting (the ability to follow the user on different websites with an ad specifically targeted to that profile or that recent purchase or near-purchase).

All this information, including the goods your visitors purchased, or the shopping carts they abandoned, is then ‘rolled up’, parsed with AI, to produce a profile and a predictive analytic schema to enable sophisticated targeting at a time of ‘propensity to buy’. There is evidence that targeting these prospects, who have a high baseline probability to buy, and who are open to ads, can increase their purchase probability by 2.7 percentage points (Aziz & Telang, 2016)²⁷. Eliminating this capability, according to McKinsey, will cost the publishing industry \$10 billion dollars in lost revenue as (1) brands redirect their advertising to those platforms that have already own voluminous amounts of first party data (Google, Facebook, Amazon) and (2) media buying in the absence of these predictive analytics, and in the absence of frequency capping, (engineered by third party cookies), will fall back on the conservative mechanisms of Cost per click/Cost per action resulting a loss of revenue for publishers (Brodherson et al., 2021).

However, there remains a degree of cynicism about these apocalyptic claims as: (1) cookie blocking/cleaning is well established - Safari and Firefox, the world’s second and third most popular web browsers, already block third-party cookies by default to protect users’ privacy; (2) the profusion of ‘bots’, according to a report by Google, means that 56% of digital ads are not seen by a human being (Kantrowitz, 2014), with implied considerable tainting of the ‘predictive’ data; and (3) while there is evidence that cookie generated predictive analytics add some value, the overall consensus is far more equivocal and suggests that the value added is more peripheral than fundamental (Rivero, 2021). Programmatic ad buying, fuelled by third party cookies, may well deliver only the illusion of scientific rigor.

The trade journals demonstrate a high consensus as to future strategy in response to the anticipated demise of third party cookies: (1) an exhortation to publishers to develop (if they

²⁷ The logistic regression equation that best predicted purchase probability of a specific product or service was browser + ad exposure today (impressions) +past clicks/purchases + product pages visited last 30 days +ad impressions last 30 days +numbers of advertiser visits + past purchases from advertiser +number of items in shopping cart and not purchased last 30 days. (Aziz and Telang 2016)

have not already) a walled garden of rich data, through subscription and consent, about their users; (2) the creation of data alliances across publishers (e.g. Ozone in the UK), advertisers, and ad tech suppliers to create richer data profiles than gleaned from first party input, in order to furnish the development of high value private marketplaces (PMP) – marketplaces that can emulate the personal and individual data repositories accrued by search engines and social media; (3) the exhortation to use and expand contextual targeting – not merely using keywords or the ‘sentiment’ of content but using the congruity of the media brand and the media platform to prime advertising response; and (4) the resurrection of experimental measures – not merely how sticky is your site in terms of ‘dwell time’ or ‘page views’ but what is the degree of attachment (an engagement index) and how does that drive advertising effectiveness (Araujo et al., 2020).

In fact, the new media planning and buying is beginning to look remarkably like the old media, with an ad efficacy *buy* determined by reach, exposures, and frequency metrics, supplemented by first party data, interweaved with consumer data from third party industry sources, and combined with the brand halo of the host media brand/publisher (media brand-advertiser fit) and the specific attributes/mechanics of the platform.

The projected inability to *see* online conversion or shopping cart behavior combined with increasing documentation on the inherent frailty of some (mostly social media) behavioral metrics - “*there is tangible value from positive comments and little if any value derived from Likes*” (Halloran & Lutz, 2021, p. 92) means that the contribution of the media brand and the platform on which it is hosted needs to be re-explored. As Voorveld et al. (2018) put it: “*First and foremost, advertisers should plan and evaluate their digital media expenditures not only on such quantitative metrics as the numbers of likes, comments, views, or followers; eyeballs continue to matter, but, as this study argues, as a stand-alone metric they are a solid proxy for neither engagement nor advertising effectiveness*” (Voorveld et al., 2018, p. 51)

The relationship between engagement, advertising outcomes and the moderating effect of context will now supply the remainder of our research questions and will be examined in greater detail in the following section

Year	Author(s)	Journal	Citations	Definition	Context	Thesis	CE Dimensions	CE Metrics	Ad Metrics	Findings
2009	Calder, Malthouse, and Schaedel	Journal of Interactive Marketing	1354	Engagement comes from experiencing a website in a certain way	Media Websites (11) News, Special Interest, Local	When Consumers are highly engaged with a site, they can be more responsive to advertising	Stimulation & Inspiration; Social Facilitation; Temporal; Self-esteem and Civic Mindedness, Enjoyment, Utilitarian, socialising, Community	Experiential: Personal (how the website affects them)/Social/Interaction (experiences specific to the website)	(1) Attitude to ad (2) How likely to click on ad	Both types of engagement are associated with advertising effectiveness
2018	Voorveld et al	Journal of Advertising	625	Media Engagement is the sum of specific media experiences,	Social Media (8 Social Media platforms)	Engagement with social media platforms drives advertising engagement and subsequently advertising evaluation. These relationships are highly context specific	Negative to content, Negative to Platform, Entertainment, Pastime, Stimulation, Identification, Practical Use, Social Interaction, Innovation, Topicality, Empowerment.	Construed as an experiential response to specific offerings: analogous to "Social Interaction experiences" in Calder et al (2009) paper	Exposure to advertising "message from brand, company, organisation". Social Media Advertising Engagement: 16 items from Media Engagement: Entertainment, Negative emotion re Platform, Pastime, Stimulation, Identification, Practical Use, Social Interaction, Topicality Advertising Evaluation: (1) likeable and (2) relevant	"No such thing a social media". No relationship between Engagement and Ad evaluation (except Facebook). Relationship between SM Engagement and SM ad engagement differs by platform Significant relationship between ad engagement ad evaluation across all platforms, dimensions differ by platform. experience,

Year	Author(s)	Journal	Citations	Definition	Context	Thesis	CE Dimensions	CE Metrics	Ad Metrics	Findings
2016	Yang et al	Journal of Marketing Management	181	Brand engagement is the customers' behavioural manifestation towards a brand – beyond purchase – resulting from motivational drivers, which is captured through the interactive behaviours between consumers and brands	Facebook & Google Analytics: Apparel brand data	Social Media efforts by brands influence search advertising effectiveness	– affiliation, conversation, and responsiveness.	Affiliation is the daily increase in the number of fans for an official brand page on Facebook. Conversation is the number of individual Facebook users who initially talk about the apparel brand on their own Facebook page each day. Responsiveness is the total number of likes comments and shares posted by the brand on the brand's Facebook page	Click through rate, Conversion Rate	All measures of social media engagement influence click and conversion rate (search engine advertising effectiveness) The effects of ad rank are also moderated by social media engagement
2007	Kilger & Romer	Journal of Advertising Research	114	Defined by dimensions	Television, Magazines, Internet	Media Engagement leads to Advertising Engagement, which leads to purchase likelihood.	Inspirational, Trustworthy, Life enhancing, Social Involvement, Personal Timeout	Experiential: Related to specific experiences on the media platform	Advertising Receptivity: Open, Interesting, Relevant. Likelihood to purchase	Positive relationship between Media Engagement and Advertising Receptivity and Likelihood to purchase. Demographic factors have minimal effect.

Year	Author(s)	Journal	Citations	Definition	Context	Thesis	CE Dimensions	CE Metrics	Ad Metrics	Findings
2016	Linwan Wu	Journal of Interactive Advertising	82	Uses the Calder and Malthouse definition: It is “the sum of the motivational experiences consumers have with the media product” (Calder and Malthouse 2008, p. 5)	Social Media (Mobile Apps)	Media Engagement and the perceived value and acceptance of advertising in Mobile Social Networks	Adapted from Calder, Malthouse, and Schaedel (2009)	Related to real time usage gives me something to talk about; part of routine, provides with information, use in discussion with others, always check	Advertising Acceptance and Perceived Value. Measures: Advertising value: valuable, useful, important. Advertising Acceptance: feel positive about, willing to receive, acceptance of ads now and in future,	MSM engagement positively significantly related to advertising value but not advertising acceptance. Advertising value influences advertising acceptance.
2016	Lin et al	International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management	53	Uses Yang (2016) “the consumers’ behavioral manifestation toward a brand—beyond purchase—resulting from motivational drivers, which is captured through the interactive behaviors between consumers and brands”.	Weibo (social media)	Brand engagement leads to increased advertising click-throughs and conversions	Engagement: Behavioral metrics	Brand engagement measured by posts about the brand and shares about the brand on Weibo users’ own pages and likes and comments on the Hotels brand web page.	Click through rate, Conversion Rate	Brand engagement exerts positive and significant effects on the performance of online display advertising.

Table 4-1: Papers related to Engagement And Advertising, ranked by citations (Google Scholar)

4.3.3 Advertising Outcomes

"Nobody reads ads. People read what interests them, and sometimes it's an ad." - Howard Luck Gossage, 1960s

The most highly cited papers (see Table 4-1) addressing the relationship between engagement and advertising effectiveness, constrained by lack of access to click through and conversion data, are perforce limited (mostly) to experiential measures. There is, however, no consensus as to the experiential constructs representing engagement or advertising outcomes or measures within constructs, employed. Behavioral measures of advertising effectiveness do appear to be standardised (likes, shares, comments, recommends) with the caveat that these are most applicable to social media platforms.

This paper, like that of Voorveld et al. (2018), captures responses to advertising in its entirety in the specific moment. However, we differ from the latter paper in that our study covers heterogenous platforms, and presumably (*albeit we did not test this as we were also not privy to specific advertising information; advertisements were only encountered by respondents*) differing ad formats and campaigns. As we could not derive a standardised score from evaluating outcomes based on responses to 'unknown' advertising properties, we therefore used measures reflecting 'advertising receptivity at site' based on the work of Kilger and Romer (2007). 'Advertising Receptivity' (AdRecep), defined as a measure of "respondent engagement to advertising within the context of a media vehicle" (Kilger & Romer, 2007, p. 315), is a neglected but key metric. Kilger and Romer (2007) had demonstrated empirically that it is commensurate with purchase intention. Furthermore, its measurement of *openness to commercial messaging* has gained an urgency and increasing relevance in a digital environment where 40% of UK consumers and 26% of global consumers *actively ignore* social posts or ads from brands (Hobbs, 2016). A predisposition that reflects a spectrum of attitudes from, at least, indifference to, at worst, animus: "*The Advertising Industry Has a Problem: People Hate Ads*" (New York Times, 2019).

Industry representatives, such as the IAB, complemented by certain scholastic opinion pieces, are increasingly insistent that the relationship to conversions of certain behavioral indices of advertising effectiveness, such as 'click-throughs' and 'likes', is based on an assumptive fallacy (Content Marketing Institute, 2020; IAB, 2019; John et al., 2017; WARC, 2019a). Most

recent opinion is that what matters is *context* and *consumer mindset* (WARC, 2017, 2019b). Indeed, a recent IAB survey (2019) revealed that 56% of digital video viewers are open to, and prefer, contextual ads. Yet if the mind is an 'impenetrable' vessel, how does one predict mood and, by implication, advertising receptiveness (WARC, 2017)? Our response to that conundrum is our postulate (P1) that customer engagement @ site serves as a proxy for 'mood' or mindset and is a predictor for advertising receptivity. We also postulate that this relationship will be moderated by context and by content. We now turn to the literature on these issues and formulate further postulates.

4.3.4 Context Matters

"The Difference Between Content and Content Marketing Is the Destination" – Digital Marketing Nostrum

It is generally undisputed, mainly due to the work of Calder, Isaac, and Malthouse (2016), that context is a significant moderator of engagement. That paper also argues persuasively for *context-specific metrics* for the customer engagement construct (Calder et al., 2016, p. 52). The Voorveld et al. (2018) paper acknowledges its debt to the Calder et al (2016) work, by empirically demonstrating that media engagement leads to advertising engagement, which in turn leads to advertising evaluation, and that this process is grossly affected by context. Voorveld et al.'s (2018) observe: "...for example, advertising on Twitter needs to give consumers useful and up-to-date information that they expect to find there and failing to meet these experience expectations can have negative consequences for advertising evaluations" (Voorveld et al., 2018, p. 52). Such distortion, relating to the contingency of platform, allows the authors to confidently affirm that there is no such thing as social media, that "*social media as an umbrella term does not accurately fit the various platforms' differences detailed in this study and therefore has no real managerial value*" (Voorveld et al., 2018, p. 51).

We accept that each social media vehicle is a 'basket' of unique qualitatively rich experiences – it is no more than *the essence of competitive advantage* in terms of consumer adherence and advertiser selection. However, we would also contend that such context specific metrics are tautological in nature – if you measure media platforms in terms of specific contextual responses, then your findings will be that each media vehicle is a '*silo*' of these responses and intra-contextual measurement is impossible. However, from a practitioner perspective, such

niceties are generally ignored by the computer algorithms of media buying: a ‘share’ from Twitter may be qualitatively driven by different impulses from that of a Facebook ‘share’ (and Voorveld et al (2018) demonstrate this empirically) and may reflect a different intensity of engagement, but in terms of media buying practice, *a share de facto is a share*. The essence of media buying practice is ‘inter-contextual’. For this reason, experiential metrics, such as customer engagement and advertising engagement, as conceived by Voorveld et al (2018), are presumed to languish in ‘context specificity’, and are therefore dismissed in favour of behavioral metrics that are unequivocal ‘ticks’ on a web or ad server, and are equally (and probably erroneously, given the evidence above) presumed to be comparable across platforms.

If we are to demonstrate that customer engagement can be employed as a predictor of advertising value, then we must generate a scale circumvents this constraint. We do this by, following on from Vivek et al (2014), measuring the cognitive/experiential response to context in terms of the *validation of self*²⁸ and not the specific response to the details of context itself.

We also challenge the assertion in the Voorveld et al (2018) paper that the social media appellation is misconceived. In our view, the paper’s findings do not decouple such media entities from the *umbrella genus* of social media (where *the platform is the content*, and that content is mostly user generated and peer to peer disseminated). This distinction is important, since the major fault line is terms of consumer provision of information/entertainment/social identity, and in terms of distribution of media expenditure, is not *intra* social media sites but *inter* social media sites and content sites (i.e., sites where content/editorial is provided, very often with a specific ideological or cultural focus or interest, and the content is the principal draw for visitors).

Content sites have suffered in terms of advertising revenue split versus social media (Competition and Markets Authority, 2019) due to:

- i. The vast reach of social media sites (Facebook covers 85% UK users)
- ii. The understandable practitioner penchant for what is assumed to be the more robust behavioral indices of advertising effectiveness (because more accessible, tangible

²⁸ See our previous paper “Engagement: Metric or Meme” for a full discussion of the provenance and validation of our scale.

and therefore more defensible in any boardroom) that are found on social media (likes, comments, shares, recommends) – the various frailties of those metrics, notwithstanding (Content Marketing Institute, 2020; DM News, 2014; Halloran & Lutz, 2021; John et al., 2017)

- iii. The lack of advertising restrictions on brand placements on social media sites compared with conventional sites, and the ability within those brand placements to interact with existing and prospective customers (86% of women use social media for purchasing advice) (Digital Marketing Institute, 2021).
- iv. Social media sites hosting influencers and customers visiting influencers to find out information about brands (49% of global consumers depend on influencer recommendations) (Digital Marketing Institute, 2021).

One might deduce from the evidence above that the case is closed in terms of commercial media attribution in favour of social media. It is undeniably a commercial resource of influence, yet it is also the least trusted of mediums: *“social media – which captures \$84bn worth of global ad budgets – was ranked as the least trusted advertising medium worldwide, with just 25% of the global sample saying they trust these types of ads”* (YouGovAmerica, 2021). In the UK *“70% of people in the UK said they ‘don’t trust’ a lot of what they see on social platforms, including posts from brands”* (The Drum, 2020). One of the contributions of this paper is therefore to evaluate and compare content and social media sites in terms of advertising receptivity and to potentially re-set media buyers’ expectations of both genres. The other context evaluated is that of single issue, advocacy forum sites (in our study, Parenting Sites). This genre can be construed as a hybrid of narrative content, supplied, or organised by an editorial team, and peer to peer contribution. While these sites, in terms of audience reach, do not affect the major advertising fracture line, their participants, as will be demonstrated, show high level of advertising receptivity. In summary, then, we ask:

Research Question 2: Is the relationship between CE and Advertising Receptivity@Site is moderated by Context (Site Genres)?

4.3.5 –The Impact of Content

“We need to understand that people buy based on emotion and justify with logic which means that emotional, contextual, and conversational commerce is the future for advertising”. Steffen Svartberg, CEO, Cava

The content embedded in a website, to distinguish it from other types of content such as Native advertising, or Digital Content Marketing (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019), is defined as *material on the website, designed to generate consumption, and/or stimulate dissemination and to engender attachment. It is generated either by the users of the website (social media) or by the website itself (editorial) as a provision for users or by a mixture of both. It may host advertising but remains independent of it.* It is considered to be a structural driver of customer engagement at the website (Garett et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2018; Y. Li & Xie, 2020).

We have alluded (Section 4.2) to the disruptive effect of the abolition of third-party cookies. A report by McKinsey (April 2022) suggested three advertiser strategies in response: (1) investment in first party data; (2) partnerships to deliver second party data; and (3) contextual targeting (McKinsey & Company, 2022). Certainly publishers and media owners have signalled their intent as to the last strategy, with 52% of the former and 67% of the latter planning to use contextual targeting as means of monetising their audience.

Contextual targeting relies on aligning content with the positioning and objectives of a specific advertiser, compared to behavioral targeting where advertisements are placed in order to optimise response irrespective of surrounding context or content (Dentsu, 2020). Contextual placement can be enhanced by visitor session data (first party cookie data e.g., geo- location), AI textual optimisation (topical, semantic, sentiment and visual parsing) and the interweaving of third-party industry data (gender, age, education, income etc). Both scholastic work (Liu-Thompkins, 2019; Stipp, 2018) and industry surveys (IAB, 2020, 2021) suggest that website visitors are positively disposed towards contextual advertising (more likely to look at the advertisement, more likely to try the advertised brand, more likely to be receptive to new brands so placed etc). Indeed biometric sensor analysis (brain electrical activity, skin galvanic response, eye tracking) indicates that contextual ads, compared with non-contextual ads, demonstrate 43% more neural engagement, are 2.2 times more memorable and drive greater purchase intent (Dentsu, 2020). Contextual targeting, notably in the work done by The New York Times, is also shown to rival, and in some cases surpass, the cost effectiveness of

behavioral targeting (Spangher, 2018). Scholastic research supports practitioner findings, the relationship of content, whether user-generated (Lee et al., 2018) or editorial-site generated (Valletti & Veiga, 2021), is positively significantly associated with advertising effectiveness. Our third research question, then, is:

Research Question 3: Is there a relationship between perceived website content quality and advertising receptivity @Site, and is that relationship is moderated by Site Context?

4.3.6 Advertising receptivity and Propensity to ‘influence’

Although we asked respondents about their general propensity to respond to advertising campaigns online and about their propensity for influencing others about commercial brands, we could not test (since we were dealing with recalled experiences on multiple sites with multiple advertising campaigns) to acceptable experimental standards their responsiveness to campaigns on these sites. However, we can speculate that those respondents who score above the mean on advertising receptivity at the site, are likely to be *commercially sensitized* and will favour influencer activities. Why is this important? It is important because influencer marketing is considered to be (and there is a contemporaneous debate as to whether this should be construed as *more* important) as important as orthodox digital advertising formats in terms of marketing effectiveness. One practitioner survey estimated the ROI of influencer marketing to be eleven times higher than all other digital media channels (Carmody, 2016).

An influencer is defined as one who has the “*power to affect the purchasing decisions of others because of his or her authority, knowledge, position, or relationship with his or her audience*”(Geyser, 2016). Influencers have a following in a distinct niche, according to interest/topic and/or platform. The global influencer marketing market size has more than doubled since 2019. In 2021, the market was valued at a record 13.8 billion U.S. dollars (Statista, 2021). Concomitant with that rise in investment, the marketplace of influencers has now matured to the point that there is an established typology (six categories) from ‘micro influencers’ <15,000 followers to mega influencers > 1m followers, and ‘influencer platforms’ to enable ‘buys’ and trading (some 240+ agencies entering the market in the past year (Geyser, 2016). Scholastic interrogation of this field currently remains sparse, albeit with some interesting contributions: papers synthesising current knowledge (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Rosengren & Campbell, 2021) and notably the Park et al. paper (2021), which posits that

micro-influencers, because perceived as more *authentic* by consumers, are more persuasive than mega-influencers (Park et al., 2021), with the caveat of moderation depending on whether the brand endorsed is categorised as hedonic or utilitarian.

We conjecture that those respondents who are more likely to be receptive to advertising @ site are also predisposed to convert in terms of clicks and purchases in response to online advertising campaigns and to act as *influencers*, though not necessarily in a formal capacity.

Research Question 4: Are respondents who are receptive to advertising @ site more likely to be responsive to online advertising campaigns per se in the form of click-throughs and purchases?

Research Question 5: Are these same respondents are more likely to be informal ‘influencers’ – endorsing advertised brands and posting ratings and reviews on products or services?

4.3.7 Summary and Hypothesis Development

The impending abolition of third-party cookies has led to a re-evaluation of experiential metrics and contextual targeting and to the need, in order to maximise commercial return, to explore how these developments are affected by site genres. The above review of current scholastic and practitioner research allows us to generate the following conceptual models and contingent hypotheses.

We examine the CE → AdReceptivity@Site relationship separately from the Perceived Content Quality → AdReceptivity@Site relationship (as illustrated in the two separate conceptual models of Figure 4-1 and 4-2). This is because CE and PCQ overlap in the phenomena they measure. CE is the representation of the experiential response (CP+TU+SC+SI =customer engagement) to the site *in toto*; PCQ is the cognitive and affective response to a specific structural provision of the website²⁹. Thus, response to PCQ is therefore to some extent implicit in the CE scale. Indeed, there is degree of semantic affinity in the scale items (See Table 4-2): some items could perhaps be subsumed, if decoupled from a specific structural driver, under

²⁹ PCQ is therefore not a mechanistic assessment of the effectiveness of content provision – the emphasis is on subjective user response not the supply, in accordance with marketing literature on perceived quality.

‘Temporal Utility’ and ‘Self-congruence’. We can also see this statistically as this translates into a high degree of correlative association ($r=.731$, $N=3030$, $p<.001$) and if we combine both constructs into a linear regression model with AdRecep as the dependent variable, PCQ makes only a modest contribution ($r^2=+0.16$) with CE as the main predictor. We therefore examine the impact of PCQ on AdRecep specifically, with the aim of better understanding the role of contextual targeting, and we leave further work on the relationship between these constructs to further research.

Figure 4-1: Conceptual Model of the relationship between CE and Advertising Receptivity at Site

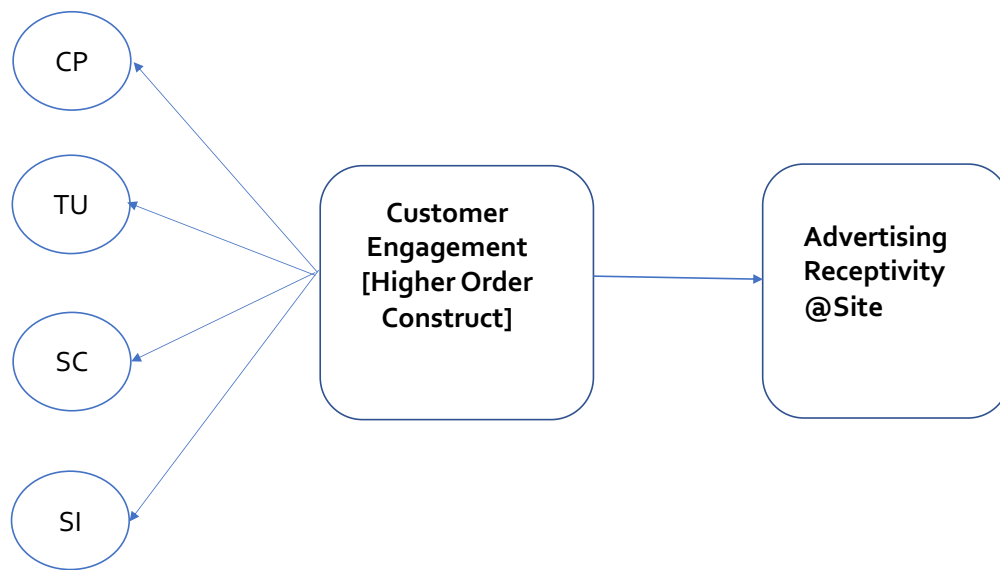
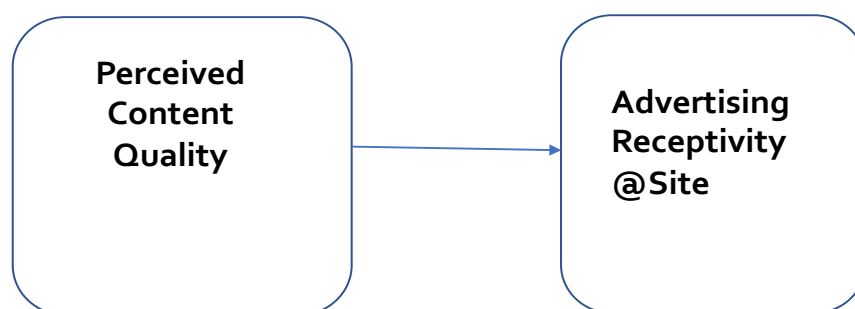


Figure 4-2: Conceptual Model of the relationship between Perceived Content Quality and Advertising Receptivity at Site



A distillation of the research questions cited in the literature review leads to the following hypotheses relating to Figure 4-1 (H1) and 4-2 (H2):

H1(a): There is a positive relationship between customer engagement (CE) and Advertising Receptivity (AdRecep) at Site

H1(b): The relationship CE→AdRecep is moderated by site context.

H1(c): The relationship between AdRecep and the components of CE is contingent on site context.

H2(a): There is a positive relationship between Perceived Content Quality (PCQ) and AdRecep.

H2(b): The relationship PCQ→AdRecep is moderated by site context

We also conduct analyses, further to Figures 4-1 and 4-2, to explore Research Questions 4 and 5, and specifically to evaluate the following hypothesis:

H3: Respondents who are receptive to advertising @ site are also more likely to (a) respond to online advertising campaigns *per se*; (b) provide commercial value to companies through knowledge transfer (CKV); and (c) act as *influencers* with regard to brands, products, or services (CIV).

4.4 METHOD

4.4.1 Survey Administration and Sampling

The self-report online survey was conducted in 2012 and used a combination of BSKyB website sampling and BSKyB panel respondents to test responses across a wider range of websites. All respondents were asked about sites that they had visited in the last month. They were then asked to revisit one site in their own time and to fill in an online survey right after that visit to at least simulate immediacy. Those websites with an inadequate sample of respondents were discarded. The final website pool ultimately comprised twenty-four websites with a sample population of 3030. The websites were grouped into six genres: News, Sports, Entertainment, Aggregators (Portals), Parenting and Social Media.

The sample was up-market (73% ABC1) and was biased towards men (62%) with 44% of respondents under 44 years old. The sample broadly aligns with the social class breakdown

representation in the UK (67% ABC1, Source: Ofcom) and with the UK age distribution (49% of the UK internet universe are under 44, Source: ONS, 2020). The overall male bias is explained by 55% of respondents emanating from News and Sports sites and this remains, in terms of general application of the findings, a limiting factor.

The questions were randomised in terms of question order, and different scale formats (Likert (1-5), Dichotomous, Multiple Response) to counter Common Method Bias³⁰.

4.4.2 Measures:

4.4.2.1 Main Components

Customer engagement (CE) at the website is operationalised using the Mollen et al. (2010) scale (Paper 2). We use the Kilger and Romer (2007) scale to evaluate advertising receptivity at site. The single statement used in that paper is partitioned into three items. The above items are measured using 5-point Likert scales from ‘Strongly Disagree’ to ‘Strongly Agree’. Respondent assessment of website content *Perceived Content Quality* is measured by six items also using a Likert 5-point scale. These components (PCQ) are informed by practitioner custom and are also underpinned by scale dimensions featured in a recent scholastic paper assessing website content (Thielsch & Hirschfeld, 2021). All measurement items are represented in Table 4-2.

³⁰ See Section 4.5.1 which discuss the mechanics of minimising CMB.

Table 4-2: Scale items: CE; Advertising Receptivity@Site; Perceived Content Quality

Main Measures	Loading	α	CR	AVE
Engagement (CE)				
Cognitive Processing		0.80	0.87	0.62
The site stimulates my imagination	0.817**			
Time flies when I am on the site	0.737**			
I find the site intriguing	0.811**			
The site always has the capacity to surprise me	0.79**			
Temporal Utility		0.85	0.90	0.69
The site is enjoyable	0.815**			
I find the site very useful	0.822**			
The site gives me what I want	0.827**			
Using the site is a positive experience	0.859**			
Self-Congruence		0.85	0.90	0.69
The site reflects my values	0.855**			
The site has integrity	0.8**			
I can identify with the site	0.829**			
If the site was a person, he/she would understand me	0.831**			
Social Identity		0.70	0.84	0.63
I want to socialise on the site	0.804**			
When I am on the site, I feel part of a community	0.847**			
My opinions are welcome on the site	0.722**			

Main Measures	Loading	α	CR	AVE
Advertising Receptivity (AdRecep)		0.84	0.90	0.76
I am open to advertising on the site	0.833**			
I find ads on the site interesting	0.89**			
The ads on the site are relevant to me	0.883**			
Perceived Content Quality (PCQ)		0.86	0.90	0.59
I trust the editorial on the site	0.734**			
The topics that are important to me are covered in one place	0.761**			
The site always has the latest information on topics that are important to me	0.789**			
It's like having a friend in the way they can recommend or flag things up that are relevant to my life (i.e., they have relevant timely articles)	0.738**			
The site has relevant content that appeals to my needs	0.784**			
The content reflects my own passion on this subject	0.802**			
**p<0.001				
α = Cronbach's Alpha, CR = Composite Reliability, AVE = Average Variance Extracted				

4.4.2.2 Other Outcome Variables

These items were used to interrogate H3 i.e., whether respondents who are advertising receptive at the focal site, are more likely to be generally advertising responsive to online campaigns, and whether they are also more likely to function as *commercial interventionists*, building value for a company through knowledge transfer, and/or to act as *micro-influencers*.

The author composed the advertising responsiveness questions, in line with standard advertising industry research benchmarks and practitioner custom for this category. The items measuring Customer Knowledge Value and Customer Influencer Value are adapted from the metrics in the Kumar et, (2010) paper. These items were measured as multiple response variables (Table 4-3).

Table 4-3: Scales measuring Advertising Responsiveness, Customer Knowledge Value and Customer Influencer Value

Which of the following have you ever done as a result of an online advertisement that you have seen? Select all that apply
Advertising Responsiveness
Clicked on an ad
Talked to a friend or family member about an ad
Recommended an advertised brand to someone
Bought an advertised brand or product
Which of the following have you done online in the last month? Select all that apply?
Customer Knowledge Value
Made suggestions for new product development via a company website or social media
Made recommendations for product or service improvement via a company web site or social media
Gave feedback to a company on a specific product / service issue
Customer Influencer Value
Shared mentions about a product / service on social media
Posted a rating or review of a brand / product
Posted a rating or review of a brand / product
Posted responses / joined in discussions in a brand community
Retweeted news about a product or service

4.4.2.3 Moderating Effects

Site genres as delineated in Section 3.1 are used as moderating variables in the hypothesised relationships. Moderation is measured as the difference in relationship significance and intensity by a higher order classification of difference: Content/Publisher Sites (exemplified by those embodying principally narrative editorial, covering a wide range of interests) versus Social Media Sites (exemplified as driven by largely self-generated content, where the platform is used for social interaction, information gathering and activism). This higher order bifurcation of site genres reflects the major division of advertising revenues.

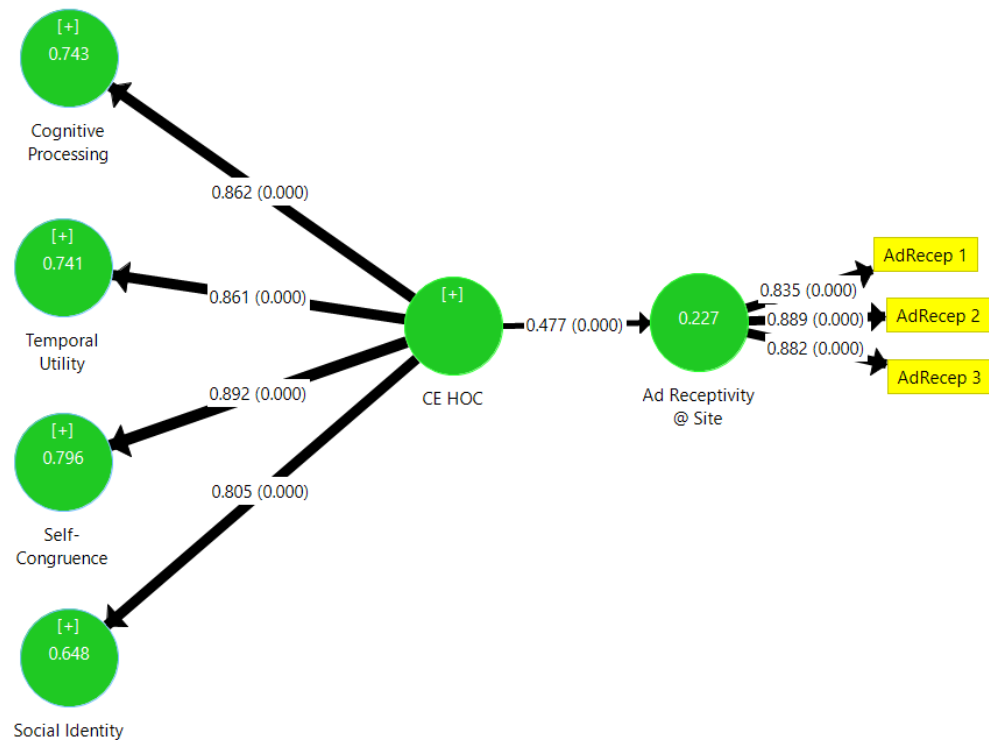
4.5 RESULTS: DATA ANALYSIS

4.5.1 Common Method Bias

All self-reported data is vulnerable to Common Method Bias (Chi et al., 2021). We addressed this issue, procedurally during the sampling, and statistically, using prescribed techniques. The Harman's single-factor test (the first factor accounting for less than 50% of the total variance) and Kock's full collinearity test (Kock, 2015), with all the VIF values of the latent variables in the model registering less than 3, suggested that common method variance is unlikely to be a critical threat to the results.

4.5.2 Model Validation

Figure 4-3: Structural Model of CE (HOC) and Ad Receptivity at the website



We used Smart PLS3 software to assess the models used in testing our hypotheses. We chose the PLS-SEM methodology in part due to its statistical flexibility (Hair et al., 2019; Harrigan et al., 2020) and also because it is considered most apposite for exploratory, predictive studies (Hair et al., 2019). The main model used in this study construes customer engagement as a Higher Order Construct, comprising reflective first and second order constructs. We used the

repeated indicator approach to establish the model and evaluated the measurement model, prior to that of the structural model (Hair et al., 2019). The robustness of the measurement model's first order reflective variables was examined in line with confirmatory composite analysis protocol (Hair et al., 2019, 2020)). All the reflective indicator loadings were greater than 0.708, with composite reliability and AVE in excess of the recommended cut-off values, 0.70 and 0.50 respectively (Hair et al., 2021).

Table 4-4: Measurement Model: Construct Reliability and Validity

	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Cognitive Processing	0.80	0.87	0.62
Self-Congruence	0.85	0.90	0.69
Social Identity	0.70	0.83	0.63
Temporal Utility	0.85	0.90	0.69

Discriminant validity is confirmed via the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) as advised by Hair et al (2019). All scores are satisfactorily below the threshold value of 0.85, with the exception of Temporal Utility (0.865) which is below the more liberal 0.90 threshold for conceptually related constructs (Hair et al., 2019).

Table 4-5: Measurement Model: Discriminant Validity

	Cognitive Processing	Self-Congruence	Social Identity	Temporal Utility
Cognitive Processing				
Self-Congruence	0.81 [0.79-0.84]			
Social Identity	0.80 [0.77-0.83]	0.80 [0.77-0.83]		
Temporal Utility	0.807 [0.78-0.83]	0.87 [0.85-0.88]	0.68 [0.64-0.71]	

We then evaluated the structural model (Figure 4-3), using the two-stage protocol outlined in the Sarstedt et al paper (2019), adding the latent variable scores of customer engagement

dimensions to the dataset and then repeating and satisfying the standard reliability and validity criteria.

Table 4-6: Structural Model: Constructs Reliability and Validity

	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Ad Receptivity @ Site	0.838	0.902	0.755
CE HOC	0.877	0.916	0.732

Table 4-7: Discriminant Validity (HTMT)

	Ad Receptivity @ Site
Ad Receptivity @ Site	
CE HOC	0.555 [0.51-0.59]

As per protocol for validating structural models (Benitez et al., 2020; Hair et al., 2020; Sarstedt et al., 2019), we scrutinised the constructs for collinearity, the path-coefficient estimates and their significance, the r^2 value of the endogenous constructs, the f^2 effect size and the predictive accuracy of the model (Q^2 value). Hair et al (2019) urge extreme caution with other measures of model fit (such as SRMR), whereas Benitez et al (2020) consider that this metric should now be seriously considered. We include this metric simply as additional information about the model.

The structural model passes the collinearity test, with all VHF values below 5. All the path coefficients are significant, with 23% of the variance of Advertising Receptivity explained by the model. The f^2 effect size = 0.29 (medium effect) (Hair et al., 2020). The Q^2 value for the endogenous construct were above zero, indicating the model's predictive relevance. With acknowledged methodological caveats, the SRMR indicator was below the threshold of 0.080 (0.074) indicating an acceptable fit to the data. These findings are incorporated in Table 4-8.

Table 4-8: Path Coefficients Values, Significance and Effect Sizes

	β values	T Statistics	P Values	CL 95%		f²	Q²
CE HOC -> Ad Receptivity @ Site	0.48	26.03	<0.001	0.44	0.51	0.29	0.17

4.6 FINDINGS: HYPOTHESES TESTING

4.6.1 The relationship between Customer Engagement and Advertising Receptivity

There is a positive significant relationship (Bootstrapping, 5000 subsamples) between customer engagement and advertising receptivity ($\beta = 0.477$, $t = 26.026$, $p < 0.001$). Thus, **H1(a)** is supported. CE explains 22.7% of the variance of Advertising Receptivity ($r^2 = 0.227$) with an f^2 score indicating that the effect size of CE on Advertising Receptivity is considered “medium” (Hair et al., 2020). Under more orthodox criteria (Hair et al., 2019), an r^2 score of 0.227 might be considered ‘weak’, and, even under the revisions for marketing constructs proposed by Sarstedt and Mooi (2014), the score would only approach a moderate effect (moderate = 0.30, weak = 0.10) (Sarstedt & Mooi, 2014). There is empirical scholastic support for challenging this assessment, notably in the Gignac and Szodari paper (2016), which suggests that the normative guidelines, in the behaviorial and cognitive sciences, should be revised to 0.10 (small), 0.20 (medium) and 0.30 (large) (Gignac & Szodorai, 2016). We further adduce that in the context where generally 42.7% of global internet users employ ad blockers (Richmeyer, 2021), and 1.2% click on ads (Statistica, 2021b), the relationship between customer engagement and advertising receptivity should be considered substantive (of moderate to large effect) and noteworthy.

We now investigate whether relationship is moderated by site context – in our study, the *higher order* site genres, Content (N=2483), Social Media (N=344) and Parenting sites (N=203). We do this by a two-stage process, using first the MICOM procedure to calculate invariances, followed by the PLS-MGA algorithm to evaluate the moderating effect. *Configural invariance* is established, since the measurement model is the same for all groups. Step 2 establishes ‘*Compositional invariance*’, since the permutation p values are greater than 0.05, indicating that the correlation values are not significantly different from 1 (Table 4-9).

Step 3 tests whether full or partial measurement invariance is attained. The results below (Table 4-10) indicate that partial measurement invariance is established.

Table 4-9: MICOM Step 2

Parents vs Social		Original Correlation	Correlation Permutation Mean	5.00%	Permutation p-Values
	Ad Receptivity @ Site	1	0.999	0.998	0.903
	CE HOC	1	1	1	0.737
Parents vs Content		Original Correlation	Correlation Permutation Mean	5.00%	Permutation p-Values
	Ad Receptivity @ Site	1	0.999	0.998	0.955
	CE HOC	1	1	1	0.539
Content vs Social		Original Correlation	Correlation Permutation Mean	5.00%	Permutation p-Values
	Ad Receptivity @ Site	1	0.999	0.998	0.944
	CE HOC	1	1	1	0.164

Table 4-10: MICOM Step 3

Parents vs Social		Mean - Original Difference	Mean - Permutation Mean Difference	2.50%	97.50%	Permutation p-Values	Variance - Original Difference	Variance - Permutation Mean Difference	2.50%	97.50%	Permutation p-Values
	Ad Receptivity @ Site	0.819	0.001	-0.17	0.18		-0.026	0.001	-0.26	0.234	0.819
	CE HOC	0.71	0.001	-0.17	0.172		0.303	0.004	-0.31	0.312	0.056
Parents vs Content		Mean - Original Difference	Mean - Permutation Mean Difference	2.50%	97.50%	Permutation p-Values	Variance - Original Difference	Variance - Permutation Mean Difference	2.50%	97.50%	Permutation p-Values
	Ad Receptivity @ Site	0.788	-0.001	-0.15	0.146		0.07	-0.012	-0.24	0.191	0.496
	CE HOC	0.727	-0.002	-0.15	0.153		0.258	-0.007	-0.29	0.257	0.062
Content vs Social		Mean - Original Difference	Mean - Permutation Mean Difference	2.50%	97.50%	Permutation p-Values	Variance - Original Difference	Variance - Permutation Mean Difference	2.50%	97.50%	Permutation p-Values
	Ad Receptivity @ Site	0.12	0.002	-0.11	0.117	0.033	-0.099	0.006	-0.15	0.181	0.218
	CE HOC	0.033	0.001	-0.11	0.122	0.549	0.051	0.005	-0.21	0.214	0.631

Partial measurement invariance allows us to proceed with the MGA analysis. This analysis reveals that there are no significant differences in the relationship CE → Advertising Receptivity between three higher order genres (Content vs. Social Media, $p = 0.22$, Content vs. Parenting, $p = 0.304$, Social Media vs. Parenting, $p = 0.110$). This finding is of note, since as observed by Voorveld et al. (2018), and also supported by our paper 2 in this series, the behavioral activity at websites, notably at Social Media/Community sites, is often construed, erroneously, as indicative of greater customer engagement and therefore, by implication, greater advertising receptivity. Thus **H1(b)** is not supported.

Reconfiguring the model, eliminating CE as a higher order construct, we now look at whether the latent factors/components of customer engagement in relationship to Advertising Receptivity are contingent on site context and the implications, if any, of those findings. We use the Bootstrapping procedure (5000 subsamples) and segment the dataset into data groups to determine whether there are any significant differences in the configuration of the CE drivers of Advertising Receptivity, and we use the MGA procedure to isolate whether there are any significant differences in the strengths of the individual path coefficients of those drivers in relation to Advertising Receptivity. The significant configurations of the CE components are different for all three Site Genres (Tables 4-11, 4-12, and 4-13). There are validated differences, employing the MGA procedure, between the three site genres in terms of the most important components of CE driving Advertising Receptivity. While there is no significant difference in terms of explanation of variance, there is a significant difference in the strength of path coefficients driving Ad Receptivity between Content and Social media sites (Self-Congruence $\beta_{diff} = -0.278$, $p = <.001$; Social Identity $\beta_{diff} = 0.036$, $p = <.001$) and in the Social Identity driver, between Social Media Sites and Parenting Sites ($\beta_{diff} = -0.261$, $p = 0.035$). Therefore **H1(c)** is supported.

The granular findings, regarding Content and Social Media Sites are, in fact, counter intuitive. The most significant driver (CE component) of Advertising Receptivity for Content Sites is *Social Identity*, followed by *Self Congruence* and *Cognitive Processing* with *Temporal Utility* not significant, and for Social Media Sites the significant driver is *Self-Congruence* – all other drivers are not significant. How can this be interpreted?

Our conjecture is as follows: first, for both Content and Social Media site genres the response to advertising is visceral and emotive (Heath, 2009) and therefore the *utility* of the site is less central. For content sites, the importance of social identity seems counter-intrusive, given the limited mechanisms to express ‘social belonging’ on these sites. Yet the increasing polarisation of society, presciently analysed by Ezra Klein (2021), is reflected in the increasing *tribalisation* of content sites – the way to survive in the digital era is to reflect ones’ audience rather than challenge them (E. Klein, 2021). Attachment to content sites is also rooted in a feeling of shared values (Self-Congruence). Finally, cognitive processing is also a significant driver in content sites: the two variables with the highest path coefficients ($\beta = 0.819$, “The site stimulates my imagination” and $\beta = 0.814$, “I find the site intriguing”) are indicative of *narrative transportation* – a phenomenon documented to be associated with *receptivity to messaging and a decrease in counter-arguing* and, by implication, an openness to advertising and which, in turn, is associated with advertising effectiveness (Brechman & Purvis, 2015). Thus, advertising sited in Content Sites needs to be aligned not only with the objective metrics of site profiling (socio-demographic metrics) but also with the ‘psychometric’ properties of the site (*the sense of tribe*) and the narrative drive/feel of the editorial content (Edmonds, 2019). For Social Media Sites, it appears that mechanism of social interaction is taken for granted as it is the central *modus operandi* of site. Rather, what matters for advertising responsiveness is that that advertising placed on the platform should reflect in *design, look, and feel* the values of that platform and/or embody a message that ‘emotionally validates’ the participants.

With Parenting Sites, the results align with expectations. The significant CE components are *Cognitive Processing* and *Social Identity*. These sites are both community and advocacy focused and supply information and guidance for parents. Advertising on these sites, perforce, to elicit receptiveness, needs to be congruent with the subject matter, reflect that sense of communal/collegial experience, and be considered of help to participants in the forum.

Table 4-11: Content Sites

	β	T Statistics	P Values
Social Identity -> Ad receptivity	0.253	8.814	<0.001
Cognitive Processing -> Ad receptivity	0.173	5.581	<0.001
Self-Congruence -> Ad receptivity	0.183	5.319	<0.001
Temporal Utility -> Ad receptivity	-0.058	1.897	0.058

Table 4-12: Social Media Sites

	β	T Statistics	P Values
Self-Congruence -> Ad receptivity	0.461	8.814	<0.001
Cognitive Processing -> Ad receptivity	0.103	1.528	0.126
Temporal Utility -> Ad receptivity	-0.094	1.334	0.182
Social Identity -> Ad receptivity	-0.017	0.235	0.814

Table 4-13: Parenting Sites

	β	T Statistics	P Values
Cognitive Processing -> Ad receptivity	0.236	2.593	0.01
Social Identity -> Ad receptivity	0.244	2.431	0.015
Self-Congruence -> Ad receptivity	0.242	1.926	0.054
Temporal Utility -> Ad receptivity	-0.105	0.65	0.516

4.6.2 Perceived content quality (PCQ) and Advertising Receptivity

The model under investigation is depicted in Figure 4-4. Perceived content quality is not included in the main model – it is examined separately as it acts as confounder of the measurement model (incorporation would mean that the measure is counted twice, as the response to the website interface, which includes content, is inherent in the CE scale). Rather, it is used to test the singular value of contextual targeting.

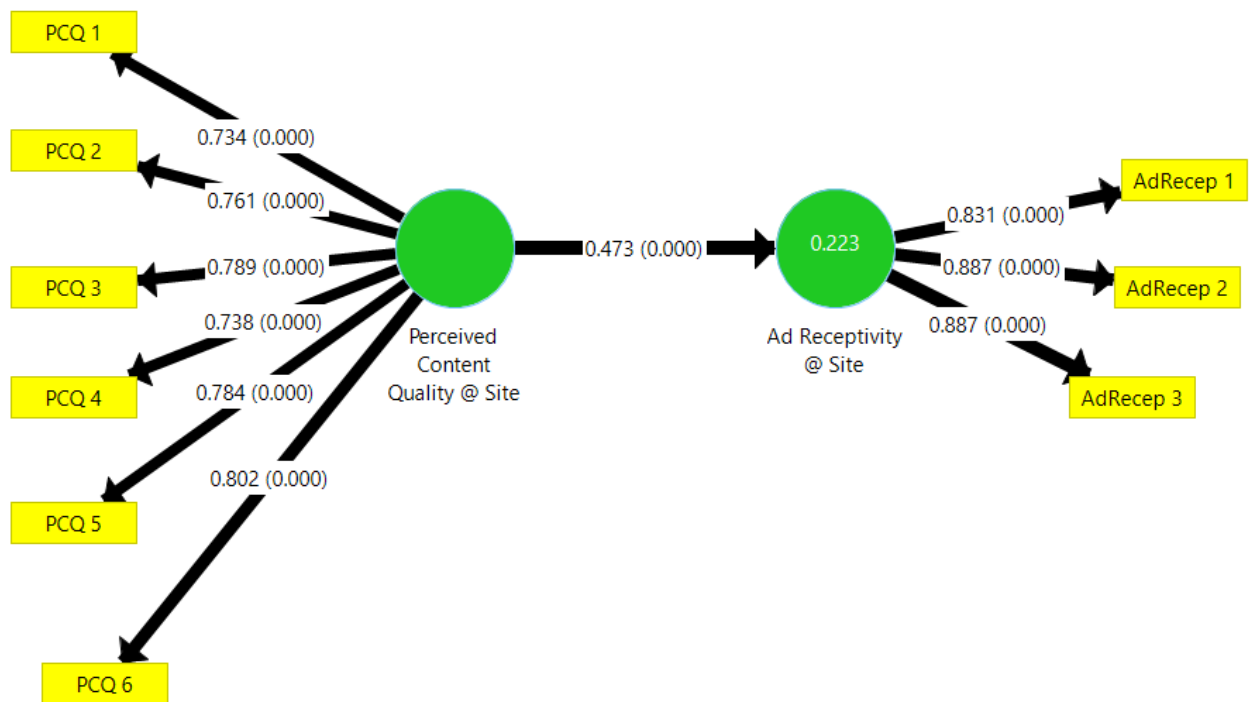


Figure 4-4: PCQ and Advertising Receptivity

For the new construct PCQ, all outer indicator loadings are >0.708 and significant, all internal consistency benchmarks are met ($\alpha=0.861$, Composite Reliability = 0.896) and the AVE metric is >0.50 (AVE=0.590). Discriminant Validity, under the preferred HTMT criterion, (Hair et al., 2020, 2021) is <0.85 . All VIF values are <3 .

There is a positive significant relationship between PCQ and Advertising Receptivity ($\beta=0.473$, $t=23.236$, $p<0.001$). Therefore **H2(a)** is supported. For reasons already adduced in Section 4.6.1, the r^2 metric/explanation of variance ($r^2=0.223$) in this context is construed to be of a moderate/large effect, with an f^2 measure of 0.287 (indicating a moderate contribution) and Q^2 value greater than zero, indicating predictive relevance. This provides additional supporting evidence, given that content has a *priming* and *halo* effect with regard to advertising (Stipp, 2018), for the value of contextual targeting.

Our specific and new contribution is to establish whether site context moderates this relationship, notably to ascertain the relative contribution of editorial content versus user/peer to peer content (**H2(b)**). Further to the MICOM analysis, having established partial invariance, the MGA analysis reveals that there is no significant difference, in terms of significant

difference in path coefficient ($p=0.714$), or in the r^2 metric ($p=0.687$), in the relationship between PCQ and Advertising Receptivity @ Site in Content sites compared with Social Media Sites. Therefore, the assumption that the content on social media may be more credible because *peer-supplied*, or more deeply cognitively embedded because more likely to be *forwarded* or *shared* on social media (Barger et al., 2016), does not translate to be predictive of greater advertising receptivity.

However, Parenting Sites (i.e., single use/community/advocacy sites) remain an exception to this inference. There are significant differences in the relationship $PCQ \rightarrow AdRecep$ and in the explanation of variance of Advertising Receptivity between Content and Parenting Sites ($\beta_{diff} = -0.124$, $p = 0.018$, $r^2 = -0.124$, $p = 0.018$) and between Social Media and Parenting Sites ($\beta_{diff} = -0.143$, $p = 0.029$, $r^2 = -0.144$, $p = 0.031$). Thus **H2(b)** is partially supported.

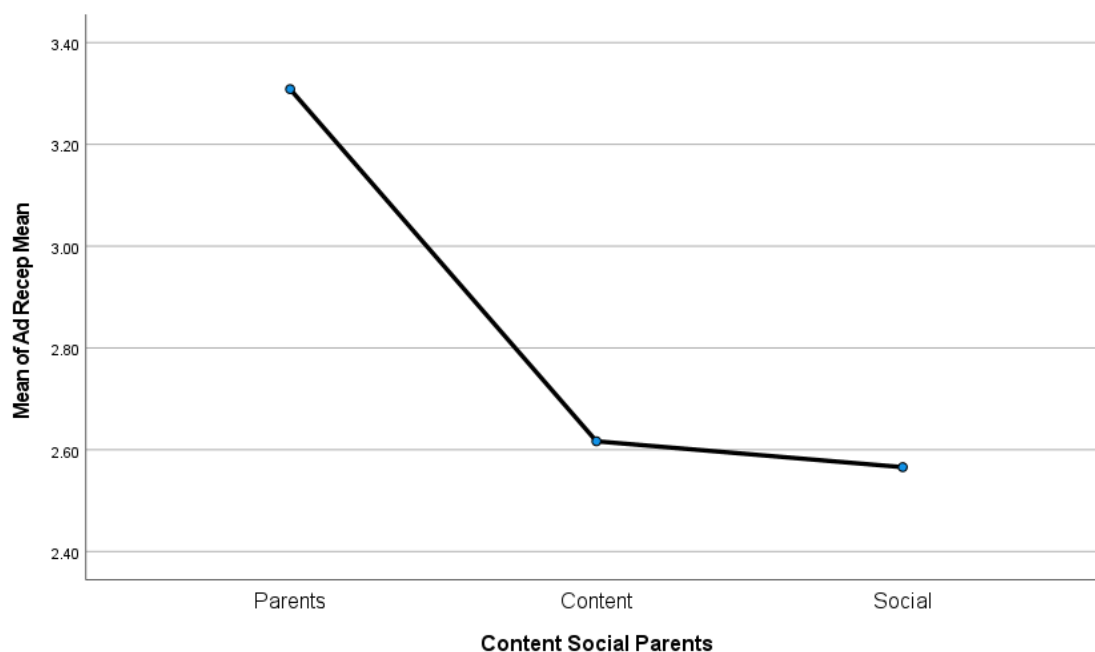
One might conjecture that there is a specific, intense relationship between content and participation in single issue advocacy/community sites [50.2% of users of Parenting Sites in our dataset are categorised as ‘promoters’ according to the Net Promoter Scale, compared with 23.5% of Content Site users and 33.4% for Social Media Sites ($\chi^2 (4, n = 3030) = 89.27$, $p < 0.001$)], and that therefore the *narrative priming effect*, mentioned above, is further intensified in these sites and, as a consequence, augments advertising receptivity. The PLS-SEM statistics for Parenting Sites, for the model in Figure 4-4, affirm this ($\beta = 0.575$, $t = 12.673$, $p < 0.001$, $r^2 = 0.331$) with an f^2 score of 0.473 indicating a large contribution of the independent variable to the endogenous construct. A one-way ANOVA procedure indicates that, irrespective of the predictive relationships involving customer engagement and perceived content quality, respondents who visit Parenting websites are more likely to be *advertising receptive* at the site (they are open per se but also because they find the ads on site interesting and relevant to them) than their counterparts at Content or Social Media sites, with significant differences in the composite mean ($F(2, 3027) = 63.911$, $p = .021$) (Table 4-14, Figure 4-5)

Indeed, just to quantify that finding, some 45% of respondents at Parenting Sites are “*open to advertising at the site*”, compared to 22% at Content Sites and 29% at Social Media Sites ($\chi^2 (2, n = 2675) = 58.88$, $p < 0.001$).

Table 4-14: Advertising Receptivity Composite Mean

Sites by Genre	N	Mean	Std Dev.	Std. Err	95% CL [LL, UL]
Parents	203	3.31	0.83	0.06	[3.19, 3.42]
Content	2483	2.62	0.86	0.02	[2.58, 2.65]
Social	344	2.57	0.85	0.05	[2.48, 2.66]

Figure 4-5: Means Plot: Advertising Receptivity @ Site



4.6.3 Respondent Advertising Receptivity and Propensity to respond to online advertisements and likelihood to 'influence'

There is a dearth of empirical scholastic evidence comparing the *head-to-head effectiveness* of influencer marketing and more orthodox advertising campaigns, although there are a number of trade articles, in favour of the former, exploring this issue (Digital Prospects, 2022; Fertik, 2020; Formost, 2019). Moreover, the trend of direct investment in influencer marketing and social media (where influencers, consumers searching for information about brands, and brands collide) appears to validate the media industry's judgement (Geyser, 2022; Mediakix, 2019;

Mintel, 2021) that influencer marketing is more effective than the conventional advertising route.

We conjectured that those respondents who are advertising receptive might be generally more responsive to digital advertising campaigns, *per se*, and might also be *commercially sensitive* i.e., be more likely to influence others about advertised brands, transfer valuable knowledge to a company, or to generally act as *micro-influencers* (**H3a/ H3b/H3c**).

To profile these respondents, we used two-step cluster analysis, followed by a K-means analysis. As the dataset was relatively large (N=3030), we used the 2-Step Cluster technique for a preliminary identification of the cluster strata, followed by a K-means cluster procedure (Sarstedt & Mooi, 2014). Both the 2-Step and the K-means analysis indicated that the three-cluster solution is the most parsimonious. The clusters are grouped into [**AI**] *Advertising Insensitive* respondents (N=869, 28% of respondents, $\bar{\chi} = 1.7499$, $\bar{\chi}$ Index vs All = 67), [**MAR**] *Moderately Advertising Receptive* (N= 1359, 45% of respondents, $\bar{\chi} = 2.9156$, $\bar{\chi}$ Index vs All =110) and [**HAR**] *Highly Advertising Receptive* N= 447, 15 % of respondents $\bar{\chi} = 3.8695$, $\bar{\chi}$ Index vs All =146). The clustering separation is confirmed by a one-way ANOVA procedure ($F(2, 2672) = 4921.82$, $p < 0.001$).

We then profiled the three clusters against the variables measuring commercial propensity (*Advertising Response to online campaigns*, and *Commercial Internet Activism* {CKV and CIV}). We selected respondents who had said “Yes” to these scale items (Table 4-3) and used Chi-Square analysis to probe for significant associations.

In terms of advertising responsiveness, (*ever done in response to an online advertising campaign that respondents had seen*), 73% of HAR respondents and 61% of MAR respondents had clicked on an ad, $\chi^2(2, n = 2675) = 129.95$, $p < 0.001$. Indexed against all respondents, HAR respondents and MAR respondents were 1.25 and 1.07 times more likely to have done so, respectively. 52% of HAR respondents and 37% of MAR respondents had bought an advertised brand or product as a result of seeing an online advertising campaign, $\chi^2(2, n = 2675) = 92.00$, $p < 0.001$ – with HAR respondents 1.44 and MAR respondents 1.04 times more likely than all respondents to have done so respectively.

Both respondent HAR and MAR clusters also had significant associations ($p < 0.001$) with '*recommending an advertised brand to someone*' (39% HAR, 21% MAR) or '*talking to a friend or family member about an advertised brand*' (43% HAR, 31% MAR).

Thus, respondents who are *receptive* to online advertising at a website can also be considered to be more *responsive* to online advertising and more likely to diffuse information about an advertised brand in response to an advertising campaign. Therefore **H3(a)** is supported.

However, with regard to commercial internet activism (Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014; Kumar et al., 2010) which incorporate the two sub-groups of associated behaviours (Customer Knowledge value [CKV] and Customer Influencer Value [CIV]), there are significant differences between HAR and MAR respondents (Table 4-15).

For the CKV contribution, only HAR respondents showed a significant association with two of the three CKV statements and, indexed against all respondents, showed a greater propensity to enact such behaviours i.e., to be more *directly interventional* in adding value to a company (Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014; Kumar et al., 2010). Thus, **H3b** is partially supported

However, for the CIV contribution, both HAR and MAR respondents showed a significant association with such behaviours and a greater propensity to participate in *micro - influencing* than all respondents in the dataset. Therefore, **H3c** is supported.

In terms of the impact of context, the distribution of such respondents across platforms is unremarkable with combined HAR and MAR respondents representing 88% of Parenting Sites, 66% of Content Sites and 61% of Social Media. However, the distribution of those who are highly advertising receptive, HAR, (admittedly a minority of all respondents) is *asymmetric* with 42% of Parenting Site users falling into this category, compared with 14.9% of Content Site users and 12.8% of Social Media site users, ($p < 0.001$).

We may conjecture that those use such sites are more receptive to advertising and to commercial internet activism (some sort of psychological typing). It may also be likely that users of Parenting Sites are more likely to trust the content, regard it as useful and relevant, and that ads on these sites, given the selectivity of placement, are more likely to be congruent with the themes and ethos of the site, which, given the significant association between

advertising receptivity and advertising responsiveness in respondents, in turn not only affects responsiveness to ads on those sites but also favourably influences pre-disposition to respond to online advertising *per se*. In turn, that lack of highly advertising receptive respondents on Content and Social Media Sites may well reflect the greater incongruity between ad placement and subject matter on Content and Social Sites due to the greater use of impression led programmatic buying on those sites (Fou, 2021)³¹.

In sum, customer engagement is not only a marker of advertising value, but it is also a marker, acting as a predictor of advertising receptivity, of those respondents who are advertising responsive, who create commercial value through feedback to companies, and who also act as *micro-influencers*.

³¹ Indeed, there is some empirical support that the liberal distribution of impressions across large numbers of websites, independent of context, shows a demonstratable lack of ROI. A recent Forbes article opined “When Chase reduced their programmatic reach from 400,000 sites showing its ads to 5,000 sites (a 99% decrease), they saw NO CHANGE in business outcomes ... the article concluded “If you are buying large numbers of low-cost ad impressions from programmatic channels, you’re likely getting ripped off instead of doing digital marketing”.

Table 4-15: Chi Square/Cross Tabs Analysis

<i>% Within</i>				
Customer Knowledge Value	Advertising Averse	Highly Advertising Receptive	Moderately Advertising Receptive	SIG
Made suggestions for new product development via a company website or social media [YES]	4%	9%	5%	p=0.001*
Index against All Respondents	75	167	94	
Made recommendations for product or service improvement via a company web site or social media [YES]	8%	8%	13%	p=0.033*
Index against All Respondents	87	134	97	
Gave feedback to a company on a specific product / service issue	–	–	–	Not Sig
Customer Influencer Value				
Shared mentions about a product / service on social media	13%	25%	18%	

Index against All Respondents	72	144	103	p<0.001**
Posted a rating or review of a brand / product	28%	36%	33%	
Index against All Respondents	88	112	104	p=0.006**
Posted responses / joined in discussions in a brand community				
Index against All Respondents	81	134	101	p=0.006**
Retweeted news about a product or service	–	–	–	Not Sig

Table Notes: * Significant for HAR respondents only; ** Significant for both HAR and MAR respondents

4.7 DISCUSSION

The background to this paper is the need for both the scholastic world and the practitioner world to adapt to a media environment devoid of third-party cookies. Without access to third party behavioral data, and the derived inferences construed about consumers' propensity and activity in response to different moderators (e.g. time of day, regularity of visits, geo-locations), details about shopping carts (identifying 'the consideration cycle' or even the 'purchase window') and conversions (from click-through to purchase), it is incumbent on scholars to reassess, conceptually and empirically, experiential markers of advertising value and to translate this into practice. This article makes a theoretical and managerial *prima facie* contribution to the resolution of this issue.

4.7.1 Scholastic Contribution

The finding that CE is positively significantly related to Advertising receptivity, given the notable work (Calder et al., 2009; Voorveld et al., 2018) in this field, is not an unexpected outcome. However, the granular implications of our findings do result in a number of novel contributions to this scholastic field:

- i. The Measurement Instrument: The intermittent nature, and by implication the lack of epistemological continuity, of scholastic contribution in this field has led to research 'silos' – work that is characterised by the great disparity of measurement constructs employed. Furthermore, where CE has been used, it is configured to be context specific. We address the 'silo' issue by employing a customer engagement scale that is comparable in its constituent latent factors, and in its statistical benchmarks to extant customer engagement scales, thereby introducing some measure of standardisation. We also conceived the primary measurement instrument not as an experiential response to specific contexts but as a mechanism for auditing the *validation of self*. This does not preclude a 'unique experience' at the website but allows us to make generalizable conclusions across a range of content media and social media websites (six lower order genres, distilled into three higher order genres).
- ii. The revision of advertising effectiveness: The construct of 'Advertising Receptivity', as devised by Kilger and Romer (2007), is an established metric (with a proven

correlation to purchase intention) has been somewhat neglected in recent years. However, its use in our study is extremely apposite, given the increasing aversion of consumers to orthodox advertising (New York Times, 2019). The verification of a relationship between CE and Ad Receptivity thereby provides an experiential indicator of value.

- iii. The exploration of the impact of ‘Context’: We are the first, to the authors’ knowledge, to directly compare content, social media sites and forum/advocacy sites (Parenting) in terms of the relationship between customer engagement and advertising receptivity and between customer engagement and perceived content quality. Our finding that Content sites are non-inferior to Social Media sites (i.e., not significantly different) in terms of the above relationships, is at least a *prima facie* step in addressing misconceptions that underpin media expenditure decisions in favour of the latter. Furthermore, our finding that hybrid sites are outliers in terms of advertising receptivity and responsiveness suggests that brands, despite the more limited reach of such sites, and the inherent potential reputational risk (however slight) in associating with advocacy sites, should consider greater utilisation.
- iv. The interrogation of the relationship between customer engagement drivers and advertisement *framing*: Where context does moderate the customer engagement → advertising receptivity relationship is in the differing intensity and significance of CE components towards Advertising Receptivity. Therefore, ads on content sites need to reflect the sense of “tribe”; whereas ads on social media sites should reflect that is all about ‘me’ i.e., they need to exemplify relevance, invoke a ‘personalised message’, should defer to the values and ethos of the platform, and ensure respect for ‘me’ in terms of transparency with reference to commercial messaging – the latter is frequently disguised in social media. The drivers of advertising receptivity in Parenting Sites (cognitive processing and social identity) reflect their founding principles of such sites: education and guidance within a dedicated and focused community. The creative and media strategy needs to be configured accordingly.
- v. The assessment of the contribution of contextual targeting: We provide an objective corollary to The New York Times’ research that contextual targeting is effective. Furthermore, the combination of findings on advertising ‘framing’ and content

‘priming’ allows us to assert that effective congruence is involves not just aligning ads with the content or subject matter, or with the ‘mood’ of that content (with reference to The New York Times research) but with the *motivations* of the users for selecting such sites. We therefore support the most recent industry thinking challenging the ‘scatter-gun’, impression-led approach of programmatic advertising. As Nick Ashley (Head of Tesco’s Media and Campaign Planning) observed “*the emphasis on ‘audience buying’ that often goes hand-in-hand with programmatic is leading brands to neglect consumer context. Contextual factors such as mindset and environment can influence purchase decisions as much, if not more than brand loyalty or audience segment. This means brand advertisers must prioritise context in the targeting process*” (WARC, 2019b).

- vi. The examining of the relationship between ‘Advertising Receptivity’ and ‘Advertising Responsiveness’ and ‘Micro-Influencers’: While Social Media is considered the epicentre of Influencers in terms of the facility to ‘set out their stall’ – micro influencers also migrate elsewhere. We used cluster analysis to demonstrate that respondents who are highly and moderately ‘*advertising receptive*’ at the web site are also *responsive* to online advertising campaigns and have a *propensity to influence* others about brands. Perhaps, unsurprisingly, such individuals (in essence, commercial advocates) cluster in hybrid advocacy sites. That result should prompt brands to reevaluate the commercial utility of such sites.

4.7.2 Managerial Contribution

The aim of all the papers in this thesis is to challenge operating assumptions.

In this study we have challenged:

- i. The preference, in terms of media expenditure, for social media: There is a practitioner belief that advertising placement on social media is more effective than that on content sites. Social media in 2022 is projected to represent 33% of digital ad expenditure, an increase of 17% year on year (Beveridge, 2022; Zenith, 2021), yet it remains the least trusted of all advertising mediums on or offline (YouGovAmerica, 2021). Our study shows that there is no significant difference between content and social media sites in terms of receptiveness to advertising messages and that sites where users are intensely attached to the sites (forum/advocacy sites), with high CE scores and high NPS scores,

are extremely receptive and responsive to advertising messages, significantly in excess of both content and social media site users.

- ii. The reluctance to employ experiential metrics. While our study makes no direct comparison between behavioral and experiential markers, the frailty of the former is well documented in the scholastic and trade literature. The imminent demise of third-party cookies makes the employment of robust experiential markers of advertising value, as part of a first party data tool set, even if used in a supplementary manner, imperative.
- iii. The underestimation of consumer resistance to ads: Measurements of advertising effectiveness that are rooted in traditional mechanisms for campaign assessment (recall of ad and brand, pre and post attitude to ad and brand) erroneously assume that ads will be ‘viewed’. However, globally, only 59.5% of display advertising will be viewed, under the criteria set out by the IAB (EMarketer, 2020). Therefore, the inclination to be receptive to advertising messages, and the modification of that inclination by the response to a specific platform, needs to be factored into the assessment of media selection, in addition to the traditional pre- and post- campaign metrics.
- iv. The assertion that all impressions are equal: One of the fundamental propositions of programmatic advertising is that placement according to behavioral propensity and traditional socio-demographics is sufficient – *an opportunity to see is just that - ‘an opportunity to see’*, irrespective of the qualitative experience of context and content. Our study supports the position of scholars (Shehu et al., 2021; Voorveld et al., 2018), and media owners, that effective ad placement is also a matter of content and context and the interaction with both content and context of “state of mind” represented by (1) engagement with the website, (2) the predisposition to accept commercial messages, (3) the degree of narrative ‘priming’ experienced, and (4) the extent of cognitive embedding of the interplay of environment and message.

4.7.3 Limitations and Future Research

4.7.3.1 Limitations

There are methodological limitations, beyond those associated with self-report data, to this research. The dataset is a convenience sample, albeit relatively large and commensurate with

age and social class profile of the UK, with implications for the generalisability of our conclusions. Our analysis of the impact of context may well be affected by the overrepresentation of content sites in our sample. Our measurement of the engagement construct may also be vitiated by the fact that we did not have access to competitor websites and therefore the construct was shaped by ‘recall’ rather than a visceral response to an ‘in situ’ online survey. The response is likely to be biased towards engagement as 57% of respondents are regular visitors (daily) to their site of choice. The 5-point Likert scale used is likely to have compressed response (since most users will rarely give a ‘5’ score) and a more elongated scale (7 or 10 point) would have improved the granular findings and comparisons. Finally, unlike the second paper in the series, there may be an element of temporal erosion in the conclusions of research: (1) advertising receptivity and responsiveness has been steady declining – while we suggest the validity of the relationships will still hold, the strength of those relationships may well have weakened; (2) most of the content website visited by respondents (since they are leading websites) still exist and are thriving, however the social media environment has changed and while Facebook and Twitter are included in the survey, Tik Tok, Instagram, Pinterest (successful hubs of influencers and brands) were new or were not available as choices at the time of sampling; and (3) the emergence of new advertising formats – we did not stratify our advertising questions with regard to advertising properties. Changes in advertising format, notably, the increasing popularity of video ads, may well affect receptiveness to advertising messages, irrespective of platform.

4.7.3.2 Future Research

This study has provided some prime facie clues to some of the ideological fault lines surrounding online advertising effectiveness, which require further research.

First, since ours was an exploratory study, further research could draw together the disparate conclusions in an experimentally designed replication. This might involve a pool of randomly sampled respondents representing an appropriate universe, with advertisements *in ‘situ’* allowing an evaluation of online advertising effectiveness, across equally weighted diverse contexts and platforms, comparing conjectured experiential and behavioral predictors of advertising in receptivity and responsiveness. We should also add, in terms of media context, that our findings on hybrid sites are now very apposite given the emergence of ‘narrow-cast’

social media start-ups (“Vertical Social Networks”) focused on enthusiasts/advocates for a selective interest e.g. <https://www.strava.com/> (cyclists) and <https://fishbrain.com/> (anglers). Respondents should also consist of two groups: a control group and a group that consists of pre-screened respondents who are in a ‘purchase/consideration window’ for the advertised brands.

Second, a proposed refutation of the *“belief that well-branded, broadly distributed wallpaper is all that is required”* (Weigel, 2017) where marketing is aimed at data points not people, by conducting a more elaborate investigation of contextual targeting and its relation to advertising effectiveness.

We should, however, add a caveat to our results concerning perceived content quality and advertising receptivity in terms of future research. While our study supports both scholastic and practitioners’ findings that content (and emotional congruence with that content) is associated with advertising receptiveness, we cannot substantiate the claim, in the absence of the absence of head-to-head studies, that contextual targeting is superior to behavioural targeting. The postponement to 2024 of Google’s prohibition on their third-party cookies demonstrates a reluctance to relinquish the information provided by cookies. Equally, we should note the absence, to date, of viable behavioral alternatives that provide sufficient marketing data (technology substitutes designed to track anonymised but segmented behavioral cohorts (e.g. Google Topics)) and that are acknowledged as workable or, at least, acceptable to regulatory authorities.

Yet contextual targeting has evolved significantly: it is not just matter of congruency between ad and content - ‘alignment with topic’. The New York Times combines AI (contextual multi-arm bandits³²) and first-party data to align ads with articles (singly or in combination) that provoke specific emotions (and exclude those emotions that are seemingly less desirable to the brand), that contain specific topics considered likely to go viral, and/or may stimulate certain

³² Multi-arm bandits are defined as algorithms that operate within a fixed limited set of resources, which are allocated between competing (alternative) choices in a way that maximizes their expected gain. That choice, allocation of resource, is then informed over time by iterative learning. In the New York Time’s application “contextual bandits learn over time how people engage with particular articles. They then recommend articles that they predict will garner higher engagement from readers. The *contextual* part means that these bandits can use additional information to get a better estimate of how engaging an article might be to a particular reader”(Anna Coenen, 2019).

actions (such as ‘go on an outing’). Thus, content is no longer a resonant background to the brand message but a positive stimulant infusing that same communication.

The New York Times attests to the success of this approach: “{it} made as much revenue from its five contextual-based products in the first half of 2020 as it did through all of 2019. Also in the first half of this year, The Times traded roughly the same number of impressions through contextual targeting than through audience-based targeting, up from about 15% from the year prior” (Asim, 2021).

The invocation of such an arcane phenomenon as Artificial Intelligence (AI), in the form of sophisticated, iterative algorithms matching content provision to consumers, does not, in the absence of a field experiment, legitimise the superiority of contextual targeting over its behavioural alternative. *It is a solution borne of expediency.* However, one might reasonably conjecture that such targeted psychological priming might support advertising effectiveness.

We could envisage a study, in concert with a publisher, that incorporates our findings, with a design that evaluates advertising congruence with subject matter, with emotions conjured by the material encountered, and with the innate motivations for the consumption of that material.

Third, the link between advertising and conversions via third party cookies has led to an emphasis on short-term ROI. Yet what matters is the *visceral* connection with brands and people, measured by customer engagement (exemplifying “validation of self”), generated in response to a focal stimulus - whether website or products or advertisements. Brands that persist in “*the empire of the mind*” are those “*develop and support distinctive brand assets build memory structures that last longer and decay slower, meaning that these brands can spend less subsequently to reinstate awareness levels. By making brands more mentally available for longer, distinctive brand assets make recall and subsequent purchase more likely*” (Ebiquity, 2020). Therefore, customer engagement as a metric, given its calibration of cognitive and affective resonance, should be explored with regard not only to advertising effectiveness but also to long-term brand building.

Fourth, there are now several trade articles proposing the theory that ‘influencers’ are more important than conventional advertising: 49% of consumers now depend on influencer recommendations, with “*micro-influencers delivering 60% better engagement, on average,*

and are 6.7x more cost-effective, and result in 22.2% higher conversion rates” (Digital Marketing Institute, 2021). These beguiling statistics obfuscate the nature and objective of advertising which is *“the creation of value through the building of brands through the power of ideas”* (Campaign UK, 2015). To hold that ‘influencers’ are more important is to commit the essential epistemological fallacy of assuming that the mechanism of communication and stimulus to action can operate without the prerequisite of an innate ‘shared’ mental conceit of ‘brand’ between influencer and those influenced. A conceit constructed *not* by the influencer but by the power of ideas, transmitted through advertising. Influencer marketing and advertising are symbiotic, the former actually contingent on the latter. Their respective contributions need to be researched.

Finally, as a collective, we have all been dazzled by ‘pseudo -science’: *“the immediate feedback loop of all things digital, [we] “look for evidence of buzz. We count the views, likes, shares, +Is, pins, comments, tweets, retweets, downloads, links, follows, clicks, and buys. And then we move on to the next bright shiny thing”* (Weigel, 2014). We have done this without challenging any of the assumptions behind this adherence, – without comprehension, that all these (subsumed into mechanistic algorithms) represent the ‘left brain hemisphere’, the ‘rational’ or at least deliberative self, while the right brain hemisphere, *“the emotional cortex”* where brands are built and sustained, is neglected (Weigel, 2019). We have conflated ‘immediacy’ with ‘sustainability’. The metric of customer engagement, the calibration of mental resonance bound up with the affirmation of identity (whether in response to brand, website, or advertisement) has a key role in this necessary reset – there is work to be done.

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5 CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

5.1 RESEARCH AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FROM THE INDIVIDUAL STUDIES

Paper 1 has become an accepted part of the general discourse about how CE is conceptualised and defined. Its contribution is analysed in detail in Section 2.1. To summarise its contribution, Mollen and Wilson's (2010) definition of online engagement has proved influential. In particular, the paper's postulated categorisation of the dimensions of engagement and its conceptualisation of engagement as a discrete construct, distinct from involvement, are specifically cited and often quoted by authors in the customer engagement field. The longevity of the paper's contribution has been helped by (1) attribution in highly regarded scholastic work, (2) citation by authors who have extended the engagement field of study, and (3) by its utilisation in work conducted in the online field across diverse domains (notably apps and virtual reality) - incorporation that is informed by its conceptualisation and interrogation of the relationship between flow, telepresence, interactivity.

Paper 2 challenges scholastic and practitioner barriers to the widespread implementation of the experiential construct in marketing practice. The findings demonstrate that cognitive and affective metrics make a significant contribution to predicting website success, and that behavioral metrics are not a reliable substitute for the former. The study provides a scale that can be used across contexts (a moderating factor) to establish an engagement index pre-launch (to estimate success) and post-launch to assess competitive performance, without reliance on behavioral metrics (whose ontological frailty has long been delineated by scholars, and which will be impaired after third party cookie deletion). We also demonstrate the utility of CEB@Site in its positive, significant relationship to commercially optimal internet activism. We distil all our findings into an axiom to enable marketers to use the CE metric to audit and benchmark website effectiveness and to sustain current audiences and, further, to use the CEB@Site measure to drive growth.

Paper 3 makes the case for CE as an advertising metric of value. It audits the impact of context and suggests apposite media and creative strategies. The findings allow us to challenge current practitioner media deployment and urge a re-evaluation of the current predilection for social

media investment over competitive platforms. We also question and posit in terms of future research: media placement by ‘*impression*’, the relative contribution of ‘influencers’ versus orthodox advertising, and the need to realign priorities from investment in short term ROI to long term brand building in the ‘*empire of the mind*’.

Overall Contribution: To the author’s knowledge this is the first study to demonstrate the application of a universal CE scale across diverse media properties. It is the first study to benchmark the performance of CE and CEB@Site in their relationship to commercial outcomes and to demonstrate the unique properties of both. The relationship between CE and advertising effectiveness has been explored in the literature; however, Paper 3 is the first to directly compare Content, Community/Advocacy and Social Media sites. It is also the first to investigate the relationship between respondents who are receptive to advertising and the propensity to ‘micro-influence’ and, in doing so, to challenge practitioner preconceptions about media placement.

5.2 LIMITATIONS

Some specific methodological limitations of the two empirical studies are itemised in Sections 3.17.3 and 4.7.3.1 respectively. Limitations regarding Net Promoter Score are discussed in Section 3.1.3, while some limitations regarding PLS-SEM are discussed in the addendum to Chapter 3. The effects of temporal erosion on the results of the second empirical study are covered in Chapter 4, Section 4.7.3.1, as this work is deemed the more sensitive to structural and behavioural changes in this field.

Beyond these specific limitations of each empirical work, both studies are subject to the depredations of the time lag that occurred between the commissioning of the research and the formal rendition of the results in this thesis. It is therefore appropriate that we need to elucidate what we conjecture will hold and what might be of concern.

Broadly, all the potential study limitations occasioned by the passage of time, in effect the violation of ‘stationarity’ (Kakihara, 2003) (the principle of invariance under time shift), fall within three major categories (Willson, 1981): (1) population (demographics); (2) personological (experiential response and respondent behaviour); and (3) ecological (the

dramatic rise of social media and its impact on the digital ecosystem). We examine these limitations in some detail below.

- I. **Demographics:** the samples are convenience samples, with the attendant limitations, and are therefore not representative of the total online population at any one time. However, Study 2, as we point out in Section 3.11.3.1 and Table 3-5, is moderately representative of the current online population due to the inclusion of Sky TV viewers (who are generally older) in the sampling; this is an unexpected advantage. Nonetheless, clearly a current representative sample may differ.
- II. **Websites:** Social media are underrepresented in both studies. Facebook and Twitter are included in the survey; however, at the time of sampling Tim Tok, Instagram, and Pinterest (repositories of brands and influencers) were either extremely new or were not available as choices. Therefore, the sample of Social Media sites is limited, and this might affect the durability of some of the findings related to this genre. Furthermore, at the time of sampling, social media, certainly Twitter, tended to be the preserve of early adopters. This means that Social Media respondents are both under-represented in our study, compared with contemporary participation (e.g. Study 2 respondents: Social Media 11.4%; UK universe 2022, active Social Media users 84%), and the ‘early adopter’ status might, inevitably, bias response. We cannot project to what extent these sampling limitations would affect the central hypotheses³³. Whether such sampling differences might affect the analytical hypotheses, notably the findings on moderation by site genre, is difficult to assess. Replication studies would be of benefit here.
- III. **Respondent Behaviour:** Respondent behaviour is constrained by (a) structural availability and (b) behavioural disposition - an innate disposition, modified by societal and cultural norms. CEB@Site (and its measurement) was (and is) constrained by the degree to which content sites allowed feedback from their audience. At the time of sampling, response to content sites was restrictive³⁴ and this was reflected in the measurement instrument items.

³³ All empirical work is subject to the frailty of data collection, which is itself bounded by among other things, time and place (Lucas, 2003).

³⁴ The author can anecdotally verify that this was primarily due to legal concerns at the time: potential liability for libel, combined with the fact that the operating jurisdiction was obviously not confined to the UK.

Currently content sites, for reasons enunciated in this thesis, encourage such response, and offer more varied ways, structurally, to respond. Secondly in terms of behavioural disposition, online response has become a social and cultural phenomenon, as indicated for example in the concept of the “Twitter storm”. What can be construed from this is that CEB@Site or Internet Activism, in 2022, is likely to be more widespread in adoption, more intense, and more polarising³⁵. It should be noted that the CEB@Site and Internet Activism measurement items employed in our study continue to maintain face validity; however, they would ideally, no doubt, be embellished by other items, given the liberalisation that has since occurred (both structurally and technically). We might conjecture, given that our measurement items remain plausible, albeit arguably limited, that the significance of the central relationships would be unaffected, perhaps with the changes in behavioral disposition affecting the intensity of such relationships. However, social sciences are somewhat dismal with regard to prophecy, so such conjectures await verification from replication studies.

- IV. Measurement Instrument: We conjecture that our customer engagement scale is less affected by temporal distortion. Chapter 3 illustrates in detail that the customer engagement scale featured in this thesis aligns thematically, semantically and in categorisation of dimensions with extant customer engagement scales, including those most recently published. Our scale is different in its reframing of customer engagement as a validation of identity (Section 3.4.1). This, ironically, makes it somewhat contemporaneous (culturally and socially) in its alignment with behavioural economics and cultural and social polarisation (Akerlof & Kranton, 2000; Klein, 2021). This thesis does not subscribe to the view that there are immutable ‘laws of human nature’, axioms of neural response that are impervious to the vicissitudes of temporal change, but it does assume that there are fundamental impulses such as self-validation that persist irrespective of societal and cultural change³⁶, though they may be viewed through different paradigmatic lenses (Freud & Strachey, 1964; Kahneman, 2011; Maslow, A H, 1943).

³⁵ See the references in the thesis to Ezra Klein’s views on this, notably in Section 3.17.1.

³⁶ Throughout history, there are many examples of confirmation bias, which is contingent on the desire to bolster the fragility of identity/self-esteem: “*For it is a habit of humanity to entrust to careless hope what they long for,*

In mitigation of this breach of stationarity, we might adduce the argument put forward by Lucas (2003) that ‘true’ external validity is unattainable, there will always be data limitations, that *“no methodological procedures-including strict sampling techniques or highly realistic settings-can lead to an increase in external validity”* (Lucas, 2003, p. 250), so the problem needs to be re-addressed as a theoretical, rather than methodological, issue. In effect, as long as any study can *“accurately reflect the conditions and concepts of the theory under test”* (Lucas, 2003, p. 250), then the resultant theory, extrapolated from the empirical findings, can be tested and re-tested and, as an academic community, we can approach generalisability of these findings³⁷.

5.3 THE OVERALL IMPLICATIONS OF THE THESIS

The overarching theme in this collection of papers has been the reconciliation of scholastic and practitioner perspectives regarding customer engagement. We can also extrapolate a mechanic for future learning and policy to resolve similar scholastic – practitioner ‘disconnects’:

i. More Correspondence:

There needs to be a greater incidence of discourse; practitioners need access to repositories of academic research and academics to the major centres of practitioner research (e.g., Nielsen, Kanter etc). Every ideological divide is rooted in assumptions, the product of System 2’s unconscious ‘pattern thinking’ and then System 1 applying a patina of rationalisation (Freud & Strachey, 1964; Kahneman, 2011; Maslow, A H, 1943). To effect change we need to understand the operating scholastic and practitioner assumptions, and that requires access to contemporary knowledge on both sides

In practice, this might also involve more cross-fertilisation at conferences: practitioners demonstrating their research at academic conferences and vice versa. Graduate students should be encouraged to publish in trade, as well as academic, journals. If the scholastic imprimatur

and to use sovereign reason to thrust aside what they do not fancy” (The History of the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides)

³⁷ This is analogous to Karl Popper’s view of, and solution to, the problem of induction (Popper, 2002)

is thought leadership with a view to changing practice, we need to plan a systematic incursion into the practitioner domain.

ii. More Meeting of Minds:

However, ‘discourse’, *per se*, is futile without a common understanding of what the words or constructs central to the ‘disconnect’ mean. To do this, on the scholastic side, we need to understand whether multiple scholastic definitions of a construct are the consequence of epistemological disagreement, or simply the ‘pro-forma’ requirement of academic method. If the latter applies, it should be challenged.

Practitioners, too, should be challenged on their cavalier approach to constructs. The failure to supply a rigorous definition of ‘engagement’, and a reluctance or inability, through lack of access, to take account of academic knowledge on the subject, has meant the metric is either derided or used as a ubiquitous, meaningless ‘label’. Our work has not been just to challenge that disuse or flagrant profligacy (every tech start-up seems to use the ‘E’ word in its pitch deck) but because we hope that we have shown that it is a measure of some value and a metric, in Professor Edward Malthouse’s (Ng et al., 2020) words, with the potential to ‘do good’.

iii. More Challenging of Heuristics:

The scholastic ‘protocol of conceptualisation’ is a poor conduit for transmission to practitioners. The understandable need for rigour means that the scholastic definitions of constructs are frequently constructed as a confection of components (Jones et al., 2018). They are formulated in this way so that the foundation logic is transparent and, in keeping with the best academic tradition, open to refutation. However, this very often leads to conceptualisations that are prolix and otiose - certainly from a practitioner perspective. At this point, we could be accused of hypocrisy, given that our definition of CE shows a degree of verbosity, but it can and should be reduced to a ‘*validation of self*’ and, in doing so, we hope it will encourage practitioners to adopt it as a metric. In the scholastic world, “the perfect is the enemy of progress” – something less epistemologically defensible, but more accessible, might be better. The van Doorn et al. definition of Engagement Behavior (2010) should be the benchmark for all of us.

On the practitioner side, one is very aware of how intuitive heuristics (frequently fallible and dangerously erroneous) drive policy – such as the view on CEB, where behavioural ‘amplitude’ is presumed to equate to ‘approbation’. As such metrics are registered ‘objectively’ (on computer) they become the *de facto* measurement. They are not couched in the slipperiness of language, and therefore, despite their intrinsic inadequacy, they pass at the highest level - no one in the boardroom can argue with a computer print-out. This defensive conservatism as an operating policy is an example of the ‘*Nobody ever got fired for buying IBM*’ or for ‘*hiring McKinsey*’ precept – still alive and kicking and subject of a recent (and in the author’s view) deserved scolding from Forbes (Jones et al., 2018) and Atlantic Magazine (Markovits, 2020). It takes a tectonic upheaval to change this culture. In terms of the re-evaluation of global outsourcing of manufacture – it is Covid; in terms of the re-evaluation of experiential metrics in the online environment, it is the abolition of third-party cookies, less harmful to society, but equally seismic in its effects.

5.4 A NOTE TO THE READER

*“The regular meaning of words changed to fit the state of affairs. Insane risk was now bravery for an ally; careful forethought was cowardice”.
Thucydides' description of what civil war (stasis) did to the Greek cities in the course of the Peloponnesian war.*

*“From Alice in Wonderland to Nineteen Eighty-Four and until the last Trump, the appropriation of language is the declared bedrock of authoritarianism”.
Tom Stoppard (The Times, 2022)*

We live in a time of plague and war – to be writing about the meaning of a marketing construct now seems hubristic folly. Yet, if the work has value, it is in its demonstration that meanings matter and that the quest for meaning entails a respect for civil discourse, and an implicit repudiation of dogmatism (and in the wider world, the tyranny associated with it). If I have an intellectual hero in all my endeavours, it is Karl Popper – champion of refutation. Albeit he was reputedly less generous when faced with his own critics - the brandishing of a hot poker in the argument between Wittgenstein and Popper suggests that the clash of ‘meanings’ sometimes has a more visceral than intellectual resolution!

Know too that this work, however slight, will be subject to the attrition of time, but if you, the reader, come away with a renewed vigour to challenge orthodoxy, then I have done my job.

*"That which we are, we are: One equal temper of heroic hearts. Made weak
by time and fate, yet strong in mind.
To strive to seek, to find and not to yield".
"Ulysses", Alfred, Lord Tennyson.*

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