

Engaging the Consumer Through Branded Smartphone Applications: A Study of Self-Congruency and Customer Brand Engagement.

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Abstract

Recent development in mobile technology provides marketers with the opportunity to further connect with customers. The aim of this research is to examine the influence of brand-self fit on customer brand engagement, thus provide a better understanding of how consumers are influenced by branded smartphone applications. Relevant literature on brand-self fit and customer brand engagement is reviewed to build a conceptual framework describing the role of smartphone branded applications upon which propositions are developed.

Keywords: customer brand engagement, brand-self fit, self-congruity theory

Introduction

In recent years there has been rapid growth in the adoption of smartphones; as such smartphone applications have attracted increasing attention as a marketing communications platform for engaging consumers (Kim, Lin, & Sung, 2013). Smartphones provide marketers with the opportunity to develop branded applications that will create a unique content rich experience between consumers and a brand, thus engaging consumers more effectively. Currently smartphone devices have a central role in the mobile communications landscape, and growth in market share is predicted to be strong throughout the next five years (Gelenbe et al., 2013).

Existing research shows that marketers are beginning to create brand communication through branded smartphone applications (Kim et al., 2013) and as such, the manner in which consumers engage and identify with a brand through branded applications is a major concern to marketers. There is a plethora of business press but limited academic literature in the area of smartphone applications that could provide marketers with direction as to how to utilise apps to increase engagement. Despite substantial attention being paid to smartphone applications, empirical research of branded applications is still limited (Kim et al., 2013). To date, customer brand engagement has been examined in the literature through online brand communities, and digital platforms (Calder, Malthouse, & Schädel, 2009). However, the way in which consumers associate themselves with brands has yet to be studied within an application context. It is therefore imperative that research be conducted in this context, to assist markers in developing meaningful and engaging communication to consumers.

This research aims to propose a new conceptual framework that depicts how interacting with brands through a new platform will affect levels of engagement, and the extent to which brand personality transfer will occur. A brief literature review of customer brand engagement and brand-self fit theory is reviewed. In this paper, the significance of research will be discussed. The objectives, contributions to academia and practice, and key concepts will be outlined. This conceptual paper makes an important contribution in forging links between customer brand engagement and brand-self fit, consumers' self-concept, and brand personality.

Literature Review

Customer Brand Engagement

Customer brand engagement is the total level of a customer's cognitive, emotional, and behavioural activities as a result of brand interactions. It is the level of an individual customer's motivational, brand related, and context dependent state of mind (Hollebeek, 2011). Within marketing literature, consumer engagement has been largely developed from related disciplines such as psychology and social sciences (Brodie, Hollebeek, Jurić, & Ilić, 2011). It draws from the service dominant logic and relationship marketing theories and is based on the assumption that value is co-created through interactive experience. Specific consumer behaviours are manifestations of interactive, value co-creative experiences with organisations (Brodie et al., 2011). Moreover, interactivity between the consumer and a brand is considered not only a distinct concept, but is viewed as an antecedent required for engagement to occur. Co-created value is defined as the perceived level of value created in the mind of the consumer through interactions with the brand. Similarly, customer brand experience is conceptually related engagement to be momentary yet to have strong personal meaning which may illicit cognitive or behavioural responses (Hollebeek, 2011).

Mollen and Wilson (2010) argued that engagement is the outcome of continual interaction between the consumer and the brand that reinforces the emotional, psychological, or physical commitment to the brand. Furthermore, manifestations of engagement are described in the literature as a dynamic concept that may vary from short-term, highly volatile, to long-term, relatively stable processes. In addition, levels of engagement are likely to vary across engagement contexts (Brodie et al., 2011). Closely related to brand loyalty (Bowden, 2009), engagement describes the strength of the relationship between a consumer and a brand.

The conceptual foundations and dimensionality of engagement has been an issue within marketing literature. Though definitions of engagement largely reflect cognitive, emotional, and/or behavioural dimensionality (Bowden, 2009; Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek, 2011), the expression of cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions varies across subjects and contexts. It is suggested that engagement is the emotional congruence with the brand schema encountered in an online environment. However, the development of self-concept and brand engagement has been explored in literature through the degree of relevance to which consumers incorporate brands into their lives. Engagement and the self-concept is defined as the individual difference of a consumer's propensity to include important brands as part of how they view themselves (Spratt, Czellar, & Spangenberg, 2009). Recently in literature, the proposition of a multidimensional construct of engagement encompassing cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions has been accepted (Bowden, 2009; Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek, 2011; Vivek, Beatty, & Morgan, 2012).

Within the digital context, connectivity between brands and consumers is fast approaching an ubiquitous "anytime and anyplace" norm (Montgomery & Chester, 2009). For example, online brand communities facilitate. Consumer connecting and identifying with the brand (Sicilia & Palazón, 2008), increase the rate and intensity of customer engagement. As well as provide increased flexibility for customer-brand interactions through the customer's control over the level of interaction (Sawhney, Verona, & Prandelli, 2005). The proposition of possessions as part of the extended self has been explored in literature relating to self-concept

(Belk, 1988). The increasingly participatory nature of digital media can act as an antecedent to engagement (Montgomery & Chester, 2009).

In addition, theoretical links can be drawn between customer brand engagement and research into the Internet. Mobile marketing activity conducted through a ubiquitous network to which consumers are constantly connected using a personal mobile device (Kaplan, 2012). Bauer (2005) indicated in their work in the field of digital media that attributes of mobile marketing include personalization, ubiquity, interactivity and localization. Ubiquity and interactivity can be seen as closely associated with involvement, which is an engagement antecedent. Branded smartphone applications act as a channel of marketing communication, having recently been defined in literature as software downloadable to a mobile device which prominently displays a brand identity, often via the name of the app, and the appearance of a brand logo or icon throughout the user experience (Kim et al., 2013). Branded smartphone applications aim to provide consumers with content-rich experiences to lead to further overall engagement with the brand. The following section analyses the construct of self-concept, leading to the discussion of self-congruity and brand personality.

Self-Congruity Theory

The self-concept is an individual's schema set, or cognitive generalisations about the self derived from past experience and memory (Markus, 1977) and forms the theoretical grounding for self-congruity theory. It is used by an individual to facilitate the processing of self-related information from social experiences. The self-concept has been shown to be descriptive of an individual's personality. Whether products perceived as symbols were organised into congruent relationships with the self-concept has been examined in consumer behaviour literature, and the results indicated that a stronger ideal self influenced the consumer's decision when selecting brands (Dolich, 1969; Sirgy, 1982). The influence of self-concept on consumer behaviour has been defined by self-congruity theory (Sirgy, 1986) as a consumers behaviour determined, in part, by the congruence resulting from a psychological comparison involving the product-user image and the consumer's self-concept.

Self-congruity theory therefore represents the match between a consumer's self-concept and the user image of a given brand. Furthermore, the inclusion of brands as part of the self is acknowledged as the basis for which consumers construct their associations with brands (Belk, 1988; Liu, Sprott, & Spangenberg, 2012; Sprott et al., 2009). Theoretically, self-congruity theory could be used to explain some elements of customer brand engagement. Sprott et al. (2009) conceptualised a construct that shows brand engagement and self-concept positively affects various brand related attitudes and behaviours. For example, the consumer attitude of brand loyalty is stronger for consumers with heightened brand engagement and self-concept. Brand loyalty through this concept influences purchase behaviour and preference towards branded products. Furthermore, consumer identity has been identified as a customer based antecedent to customer brand engagement through the concept of self-enhancement (Van Doorn et al., 2010).

Self-concept has been conceptualised as a malleable-self, being dynamic and capable of change (Campbell, 1990; Liu et al., 2012; Markus & Wurf, 1987). Self-concept has been constructed as having more than one component. A dual construct of self-concept, the actual self-concept and the ideal self-concept, has been argued for in literature (Belch, 1978; Dolich, 1969; Ross, 1971). Empirical studies by Dolich (1969) and Ross (1971), suggests ideal-self more closely explains brand preference than the actual self. Similarly, research suggest that self congruity motivates consumers to process information and heightens involvement with

the brand, and has been shown to have paramount importance in predicting brand loyalty (Kressmann et al., 2006). In the following section brand personality is analysed, leading to a discussion of its significance to self-congruity theory.

Personality Based Congruence

Brand personality is defined as the set of human characteristics associated with a brand, and is conceptualised as consisting of five dimensions; sincerity, excitement, competent, sophisticated, and rugged (Aaker, 1997). Brand personality has been established in self-congruity theory within the literature (Aggarwal & McGill, 2012; Malär, Krohmer, Hoyer, & Nyffenegger, 2011). Furthermore, better alignment between the intended brand personality and realised brand personality has been positively associated in customer brand engagement antecedents including brand loyalty and involvement (Kressmann et al., 2006). The symbolic use of brands is made possible by consumers attaching human personality traits, and using brands to express, affirm or enhance their self-concept (Aaker, 1997; Park & John, 2010). Similarly, empirical literature suggests that brand personalities rubbed off on consumers when using a product (Park & John, 2010; Ross, 1971). In addition, anthropomorphised brands had extended influence on consumers outside of the brand context, positively affecting lifestyle and decision making by reducing risk and complexity (Aggarwal & McGill, 2012).

Towards a New Conceptualisation of Brand-Self Fit on Customer Brand Engagement

The role of self-concept on customer brand engagement can be seen through the influence of brand-self fit on attitudinal and behavioural consequences leading to engagement (Brodie et al., 2011). Brand associations are used to construct an individual's self-concept and as a meaning of communicating one's self to others (Moore & Homer, 2008). While a consumer's positive experience with a brand may forge a meaningful and personal connection to the brand, such that the brand itself becomes more closely associated with the consumer's self-concept (Moore & Homer, 2008). Brand-self fit is strongly related to brand attitude and strength of attitude (Moore & Homer, 2008), similarly customer brand engagement can be a powerful reinforcing factor for brand preferences and consumer's social identity through the ideal-self (Van Doorn et al., 2010). Literature further indicates the idea of consumers viewing themselves as a brand through customer brand engagement by allowing the individual expression of one's preferred contextual self (Hollebeek, 2011).

Despite general agreement surrounding the positive affect between self-concept and brand engagement, the underlying assumption within this relationship is that consumers will vary in their propensity to possess brand related schemas (Belk, 1988; Sprott et al., 2009). Markus (1977) established in literature that the self-schema can guide an individual's behaviour through the notion of the self-concept. Similarly, brand-schema has been investigated as a potential moderator of consumption behaviour and overall brand engagement (Liu et al., 2012; Markus, 1977). Literature suggests that brand-self fit heightens consumer brand satisfaction and loyalty through the process of functional congruity and product involvement (Kressmann et al., 2006), therefore acting as a variable influencing various customer brand engagement antecedents and consequences.

Conceptual Framework

Following the review of literature, the following conceptual framework in Figure 1 and propositions have been developed. The framework suggests that the ideal self will be congruent with the brand personality of the brand that is embedded in a smartphone application. This congruence will result in a behavioural action of 'using' the application,

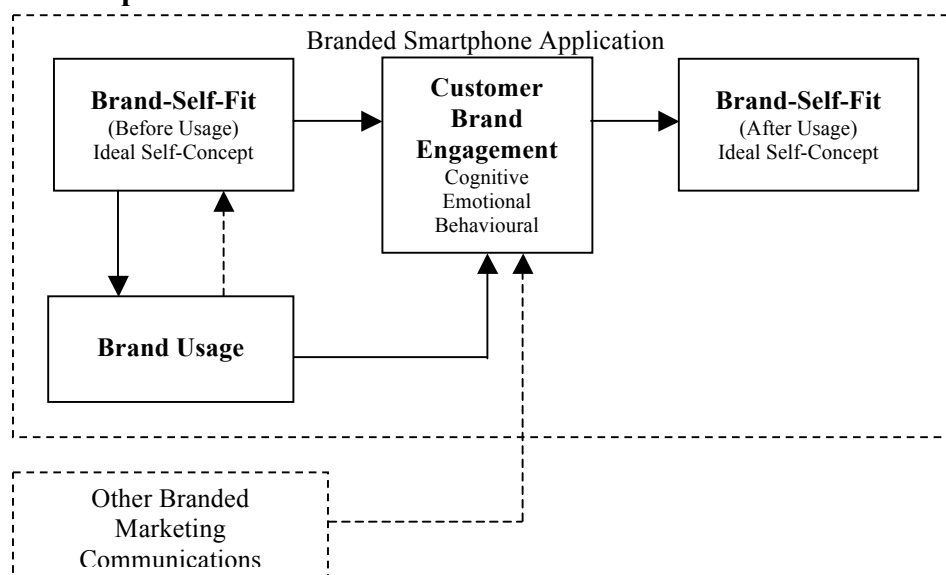
which will positively influence engagement. That is, the brand-self fit between a consumer and the brand will have a positive influence on overall customer brand engagement. The framework also suggests a cyclical link, increase in engagement, will result in the consumers' ideal self-becoming more congruent with the brand's personality. Based on attributes associated with mobile marketing, such as ubiquity and connectivity, it is proposed that overall customer brand engagement will be higher for branded smartphone applications than for other branded communications. This gives rise to the following testable propositions.

P₁: Strong initial brand-self-fit results in higher levels of engagement.

P₂: Post brand-self-fit is stronger than ex ante brand-self-fit due to usage and increase in customer brand engagement.

P₃: Overall customer brand engagement will be higher for branded smartphone applications than for other branded marketing communications.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



Contributions of Research

Customer brand engagement as a concept has not been extensively empirically tested. Current empirical exploration of customer brand engagement has resulted in limited predictive power and understanding of antecedents. To date, customer brand engagement has been examined in literature through online communities and digital platforms; however, there exists very little exploration of engagement within a mobile context. Thus, this paper proposes a framework that will examine customer brand engagement within branded smartphone applications. Finally, self-concept has been examined within literature in relation to purchase intention and brand preference. Literature suggests that self-congruity heightens consumer involvement and loyalty with a brand. There is an apparent gap within the literature in investigating the influence of self-congruency and customer brand engagement. Consumers' self-concept has been examined in relation to brand personality and various antecedents and consequences of engagement. This paper proposes to investigate the relationship between self-concept and brand personality's influence on customer brand engagement within smartphone branded applications. The proposed framework has implications for both marketing practice and theory. The research offers to explain engagement through the notion of self-concept. Moreover the research extends existing theory to the new context of smartphone application usage. Finally, this will aid marketers in developing meaningful brand communications and overall digital strategies for brands. An empirical investigation of this framework in future

research could yield valuable insights for understanding the mechanisms underlying the engaging role of branded smartphone applications.

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ANZMAC 2013 HERDC Information

For those of us in the ERA cycle, the following information is provided to assist in the submission of your 2013 ANZMAC papers to your research office for ERA classification

ANZMAC is an E1 conference (with the exclusion of those papers where the authors only submitted an abstract). It has been peer reviewed in a double blind peer review process, and meets the [ERA requirements for a refereed conference paper](#).

- that the conference paper meets the ERA definition of research (section 3.1);
 - research is defined as the creation of new knowledge and/or the use of existing knowledge in a new and creative way so as to generate new concepts, methodologies and understandings.
- that the conference paper has been made publicly available by the publication having an ISSN or ISBN;
 - ISBN: 978-0-646-56330-5
- that the peer review process meets the standard specified in section 5.4.8.7;
 - *an acceptable peer review process is one that involves an assessment or review, before publication, of the research output in its entirety by independent, qualified experts. Independent in this context means independent of the author*
 - All ANZMAC papers are subject to double blind peer review, and Track Chair review prior to publication. This exceeds the minimum requirements
- that the conference paper has been published in full (i.e. **not an abstract**); and
- that the conference paper has not been submitted to ERA 2012 in any other citable form (e.g. a journal article).

For confirmation, [ERA 2012 Submission Guidelines](#), have the following requirements

5.4.8.7. Conference Publications—Full Paper Refereed

Institutions are required to submit information on all eligible peer reviewed conference publications for each year of the research outputs reference period.

Eligibility Criteria for all Conference Publications

A conference publication must be submitted provided that it meets the following criteria (in addition to the criteria outlined in 5.4.1):

- (a) be published in full. The publication may appear in a number of different formats, e.g. a volume of proceedings, a special edition of a journal, a normal issue of a journal, a book or a monograph, CD- or DVD-ROM or [conference or organisational website](#);
 - Proceedings were available on CD, and through the ANZMAC [organisational](#)

[website](#);

- (b) be peer reviewed. For ERA purposes, an acceptable peer review process is one that involves an assessment or review, before publication, of the research output in its entirety by independent, qualified experts. Independent in this context means independent of the author.
 - As noted above, and in the [Call for Papers](#), ANZMAC is peer reviewed conference.
- (c) be presented at a conference, workshop or seminar of **national or international significance**.
 - Evidence of the national and/or international participation in the conference needs to be illustrated. In 2012, ANZMAC attracted delegates from all Australian States, New Zealand, England, Indonesia, Europe and America.

To assist delegates in providing sufficient information to their research offices to meet the HERDC reporting requirements, ANZMAC has provided the following information (which will be repeated on the Conference Proceedings Page when that is live)

5.4.8.8. Summary of Data Requirements for Conference Publications—Full Paper Refereed

The following table summarises the information that institutions are required to submit for each conference publication

- Title 1 of 1 – Australia New Zealand Marketing Academy Conference 2013
- Subtitle: Proceedings
- ISBN: 978-0-646-56330-5
- Format: CD-ROM, website
- Publication Date: 12/2013
- Recommended Retail Price: \$0.00
- Number Of Pages: 4000
- Height By Width: 297 x 210
- Illustrations Included: Black and White
- Contributor: Rod Brodie
- Contributor Role: Editor
- Subject: Business and Economics

Based on the ANU HERDC data collection profile, the following information is also provided

- Year*: 2013
- Conference name*: Australian and New Zealand Marketing Academy Conference
- Location: Adelaide Hilton, Adelaide, South Australia
- Date of conference: 1-4 December
- Title of conference publication: Australia New Zealand Marketing Academy Conference 2013
- Editor: Rod Brodie
- Publisher* The University of Auckland Business School, University of Auckland

- Place of publication: The University of Auckland Business School, University of Auckland
- ISBN: 978-0-646-56330-5
- URL: <http://anzmac.org/conference/2013/>
- Edition: 1
- Number of pages: 1505
- ERA Conference ID: 42520

After the jump, there's a selection of additional information regarding the FOR, RFCD and SEO reporting requirements.

FOR, RFCD, SEO and ANZSIC Codes (Australian Government)

- **[FOR Classifications and definitions by Division, 2008](#)**

Marketing is traditionally identified as **FoR 1505**, within one of 8 fields with three notable exclusions:

- 150501 Consumer-Oriented Product or Service Development
- 150502 Marketing Communications
- 150503 Marketing Management (incl. Strategy and Customer Relations)
- 150504 Marketing Measurement
- 150505 Marketing Research Methodology
- 150506 Marketing Theory
- 150507 Pricing (incl. Consumer Value Estimation)
- 150599 Marketing not elsewhere classified

Exclusions:

- a) Tourism marketing is included in [Group 1506 Tourism](#).
- b) Social impacts of marketing are included in [Group 2001 Communication and Media Studies](#).
- c) Cultural impacts of marketing are included in [Group 2002 Cultural Studies](#).

Papers in Track 21. Tourism, Sports, Events and Recreation Marketing may wish to consider **FoR 1506 Tourism**

- **[RFCD Classifications and definitions by Division, 1998](#)**

Marketing is located within the Research Fields, Courses and Disciplines under the following structures

- 350000 COMMERCE, MANAGEMENT, TOURISM AND SERVICES
 - 350200 Business and Management
 - 350201 Human Resources Management

- 350202 Business Information Systems (incl. Data Processing)
- 350203 Industrial Relations
- 350204 Marketing and Market Research
- 350205 Sales and Distribution
- 350206 Advertising and Public Relations
- 350207 Office Services
- 350208 Organisational Planning and Management
- 350209 Small Business Management
- 350210 Quality Management
- 350211 Innovation and Technology Management
- 350212 International Business
- 350213 Electronic Commerce
- 350299 Business and Management not elsewhere classified
- 350500 Tourism
 - 350501 Tourism Policy and Planning
 - 350502 Tourism Resource Appraisal
 - 350503 Impacts of Tourism
 - 350504 Tourist Behaviour
 - 350505 Tourism Economics
 - 350506 Tourism Forecasting
 - 350507 Tourism Management
 - 350508 Tourism Marketing
 - 350599 Tourism not elsewhere classified

- **Socio-Economic Objective (SEO) classification, 2008**

Marketing is nested within Division 91 Economic Framework in Group 9104 Management and Productivity.

According to the ABS, this group has seven objectives:

- 910401 Industrial Relations
- 910402 Management
- 910403 Marketing
- 910404 Productivity (excl. Public Sector)
- 910405 Public Sector Productivity
- 910406 Technological and Organisational Innovation
- 910499 Management and Productivity not elsewhere classified

Exclusions:

- a) The provision of market research, administration, business support and professional services are included in [Division 90 Commercial Services and Tourism](#).
- b) Occupational health is included in [Group 9205 Specific Population Health \(excl. Indigenous Health\)](#).
- c) Employment, work and workplace safety issues are included in [Group 9405 Work and Institutional Development](#).

- **Australian and New Zealand Standard Industrial Classification (ANZSIC), 2006**

Australian and New Zealand Standard Industrial Classification. Not entirely sure you'll ever needed, but provided for completeness.

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