The Key Qualities of a Strong Customer Engagement in the Customer-Brand Relationship Context

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Abstract

A strong customer-brand engagement has become the basis in achieving sustained competitiveness and survival. To excel at engaging customers, marketing practitioners heightened the critical need of having a clear definition and understanding of the key qualities of a strong customer engagement. Due to a lack of empirical research, the nature of customer engagement has remained rather vague. Thus, the aim of this study is to bridge this gap by determining the qualities of engaged customers with respect to cognitive, emotional, behavioural and overall engagement. A sample of 600 mobile phone users were surveyed, but only 539 responses were usable. Data were analysed using descriptive analysis. The findings show that customer engagement towards the brand is relatively moderate. Comparing the engagement dimensions, customers are engaged most by behavioural drivers, followed by emotional and cognitive drivers. Moreover, customer behavioural and emotional engagements outperform the overall engagement. This paper is an important contribution to marketing literature, particularly on customer-brand engagement and provides useful managerial insights for marketing practitioners. However, having in mind only one brand and limited choice of the sample, there is a need for replication using other brands with a more extensive sample.

Keywords: Customer Engagement, Customer-Brand Relationship

Introduction

Coping with current changes in the marketing environment, particularly brand commoditization and increased customers' expectation, companies are extremely required to make significant shifts in their differentiation strategy. It may no longer effective for companies to differentiate their brands in terms of price, quality or customer satisfaction but to strive on building a strong relationship with customers (Alqahtani, 2011; Carter, 2008; Circles, 2010; Hess & Story, 2005; Kotler & Armstrong, 2010; Louis & Lombart, 2010; Schraft & Micu, 2010). A strong customer-brand relationship is viewed as essential for brand differentiation, which without it, the possibility to achieve overall performance and sustainability would be seriously endangered (Eisingerich & Rubera, 2010; Fisher-Buttinger & Vallaster, 2008; Fournier, 1998; Story & Hess, 2010; Sung & Choi, 2010). In particular, strong customer-brand relationship has become the basic foundation to build a strong brand (Bowden, 2009a; Schraft & Micu, 2010; Tripathi, 2009), brand resonance as described in Customer-based Brand Equity model (Kevin Lane Keller, 2001, 2003, 2010; Kevin Lane Keller, 2012) or even *lovemark* as in the Lovemark Theory (Pawle & Cooper, 2006; K. Roberts, 2004). That is, the power of brand can only be achieved when the brand-person relationship is successfully maximized (Kevin Lane Keller, 2010; C. Roberts & Alpert, 2010). As to establish a strong customer-brand relationship, it would be insufficient for marketers to focus only on promoting customer commitment and loyalty, but need to do even more by encouraging the customers to actively engage with the brand on an ongoing basis (Eisingerich & Rubera, 2010; Pawle & Cooper, 2006; Tripathi, 2009; Veloutsou & Moutinho, 2009). Accordingly, it is critical for companies to induce the customers "*to remain associated, interested and involved with the brand*" in order to strengthen the customer-brand bond (Tripathi, 2009, p. 132).

Recognizing the significance of customer engagement, most companies have rushed to launch their engagement initiatives to cultivate a strong customer-brand relationship (Voyles, 2007). Companies have spent a huge amount of money trying to tailor their product/brand to meet customer preference and consequently induce customer engagement (Gallup, 2001). Nevertheless, due to the complexity of customer engagement in today's marketing landscape, most of the engagement initiatives have been ineffective in engaging the customers (Forbes, 2010; R. Passikoff & Weisler, 2006). What is even worse, ineffective engagement initiative might lead the companies to face negative impacts (Forbes, 2010; So, King, & Sparks, 2012; Voyles, 2007) including to bear the huge cost that might be unsustainable in the long run (So, et al., 2012). In order to craft the right and effective engagement strategy, it is critical for companies to grasp a clear understanding of how to successfully engage the customer with brands (Forbes, 2010; Schraft & Micu, 2010).

Although every brand across all product categories faced the increased pressures to secure their market share (Schraft & Micu, 2010), the challenge is even more marked among mobile phone brands, which considered as one of the technology brands. In particular, the competition among various mobile phone brands is expected to become increasingly tough as all brands are racing to come out with a new model with the latest technology and application to cater the need and wants of increasingly demanding customers. As a technology brand, the failure of the mobile phone companies to effectively engage the customers may lead them to quickly lose their market and brand shares and consequently highly risk their brand competitiveness and survival (Euromonitor International, 2011, 2013; Interbrand, 2011, 2012; International Data Corporation (IDC), 2012; Youthsays Malaysia, 2009). Despite a high tendency of brand switching (Bugel, Buunk, & Verhoef, 2010; Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998), the loyalty sentiment of consumers around the world is highest for

mobile phone brand (Nielsen, 2013), which highlighted that mobile phone brand could truly discriminate the engaged from disengaged customers (R. Passikoff & Weisler, 2006; R. K. Passikoff, 2013). Therefore, to prevent companies from continuously losing their sales and customers to competitors (Barnes, 2011; Carter, 2008) and guide them on how to sustain the brands' competitiveness and survival (Euromonitor International, 2011, 2013; Interbrand, 2011, 2012; International Data Corporation (IDC), 2012; Youthsays Malaysia, 2009), the study on the customer engagement towards a mobile phone brand is extremely critical. Thus, an empirical research pertaining to customer engagement towards the mobile phone brand is clearly warranted. Accordingly, this study aims to determine the qualities of engaged customers with respect to cognitive, emotional and behavioural and overall engagement. In this regards, this study will answer "What are the key drivers of customer-brand engagement?".

Literature Review

The marketing practitioners had long embraced the significance of customer engagement as to develop and sustain a strong customer-brand relationship (McEwen, 2004; Schraft & Micu, 2010). The major reason underlying the rationales for practitioners to adopt customer engagement (Voyles, 2007) was the ability of customer engagement to reflect the emotional connection established between customer and brand, either partially (McEwen, 2004; Peoplemetrics, 2009) or in total (Circles, 2010, p. 10; Schraft & Micu, 2010). It was noted that *"the more frequently and consistently a brand connect with customers on an emotional level, the stronger and deeper the customer becomes engaged with the brand"* (Circles, 2010, p. 1). In other words, a higher level of customer engagement reflects a deeper emotional connection that a consumer has with the engagement objects including brand, to the extent that the customers are willing to develop and sustain such relationship (Circles, 2010; Forbes, 2010; McEwen, 2004).

Marketing scholars, on the other hand, have just begun to value of customer engagement (Bowden, 2009b; Brodie, Hollebeek, Juric, & Ilic, 2011; Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2013; Hollebeek, 2009; Sashi, 2012; van Doorn et al., 2010; Verhoef, Reinartz, & Krafft, 2010). It had been argued that customer engagement is a broader motivational state variable, which outweigh the role of commitment. Though it had been emphasized that customer engagement reflects most of the emotional connection between customer and brand, it also encompasses the cognitive and behavioural components. What is more, customer engagement required two-way reciprocal exchange with respect to customer-brand interaction and participation (Mollen & Wilson, 2010; Nammir, Marane, & Ali, 2012). Furthermore, a strong engagement would lead to a more relevant behavioural expression including repurchase, recommend, provide feedback and even to become advocates for the brand (C. Roberts & Alpert, 2010; Sashi, 2012). Therefore, customer engagement is deemed a broader construct that extends the definitional scope of involvement, attachment and commitment, and has a greater explanatory power to indicate the customer-brand relationship strength.

Despite considerable attention had been devoted to investigate the roles of customer engagement, up to now; there was a lack of agreements on the conceptualization and operationalization of the construct. From the practitioners' view, customer engagement can be viewed from any one of the two perspectives. First, customer engagement was regarded as *"the interaction, experiences and context that create and nurture enduring profitable customer relationship"* (Forbes, 2010, p. 3). Basically, this perspective stressed on the development of great customer emotional, intellectual and behavioural experiences, which

resulting from the repeated interactions between the relationship partners (Customer Engagement Strategies, 2006; Sedley, 2010). Second, customer engagement was defined as the emotional connection between a customer and the engagement object including a company or a brand that will encourage larger purchases, greater commitment and loyalty, positive word-of-mouth and active recommendation (Circles, 2010; Forrester, 2008; McEwen, 2004; Peoplemetrics, 2009). Though the emphasis is on the psychological connection between the customer and the partner, several practitioners considered the behavioural expression as an essential component to accompany the emotional connection in forming a strong customer engagement (Forrester, 2008; McEwen, 2004; Peoplemetrics, 2009). For instance, McEwen (2004) pointed out loyalty as complement to emotional attachment, while Forrester (2008) considered a combination of emotional connection and active participation. Though the customer experiences in a relationship as well as the emotional connection established toward a relationship can indicate the strong ties developed between customer and brand, the latter approach can provide the overall level of engagement between customer and brand (Schraft & Micu, 2010). Consequently, the majority of practitioners had adopted the psychological-based conceptualization of customer engagement (Gallup, 2001; Peoplemetrics, 2009).

Theoretically, customer engagement was also conceptualized based on two major perspectives. First, customer engagement was viewed as a psychological state (Brodie, et al., 2011; Hollebeek, 2009, 2011a) that is characterized by the level of emotional, cognitive and behavioural connections (Brodie, et al., 2011; Brodie, et al., 2013; Hollebeek, 2011a) and commitment (Bowden, 2009a, 2009b; Mollen & Wilson, 2010; Sashi, 2012). Further, the positive state of mind drive the customer willingness to exhibit brand supporting behaviours including increasing purchases, remaining loyal, continuing investment and making positive recommendations (Bowden, 2007, 2009b; Sashi, 2012; Tripathi, 2009) as to sustain a long-term intimate relationship with the relationship partners. Particularly, customer engagement was defined as "*the level of an individual customer's motivational, brand-related and context-dependent state of mind characterized by specific levels of cognitive, emotional and behavioural activity in direct brand interactions*" (Brodie, et al., 2013; Hollebeek, 2011a, p. 790). In several other studies, a strong customer engagement was characterized by a high relevance of brand to customers, strong emotional connection between customer and brand (Rappaport, 2007), customer's sustained attention towards a brand and commitment to an active relationship with brand (Abdul-Ghani, Hyde, & Marshall, 2011; Higgins & Scholer, 2009). Although taking the same perspective, these scholars were still arguing on whether customer engagement should serve as an antecedent or outcome (Brodie et al. 2013; Hollebeek 2009; Singh 2011), and whether it should be measured as unidimensional (Brodie, et al., 2011) or multidimensional (Brodie, et al., 2011; Brodie, et al., 2013; Patterson, Yu, & de Ruyter, 2006; Vivek, Beatty, Dalela, & Morgan, 2014).

Second, the customer engagement was identified as behaviours exhibited by the customer as a manifestation of a strong psychological ties towards the engagement object as well as his/her strong willingness to participate, involve and cooperate with brand that usually go beyond the purchase situation (Porter, Donthu, MacElroy, & Wydra, 2011; So, et al., 2012; van Doorn, et al., 2010; Verhoef, et al., 2010). Furthermore, Kumar et al. (2010) pointed out that highly engaged customers would exhibit four types of customer behaviours, which include purchasing, referral, influence and knowledge behaviours. This view seems to match the "active engagement", which refers to "*the strongest affirmation of brand loyalty, which occurs when customers are willing to invest time, energy, money, or other resources in the*

brand beyond those expended during purchase or consumption of the brand" Keller (2001, p. 15). In the Keller's Customer-based Brand Equity (CBBE) pyramid, active engagement was the final dimension to be achieved in the attainment of brand resonance (Ginman, 2011; Kevin Lane Keller, 2001, 2003).

With respect to the measurement scale, marketing practitioners had emphasized the effectiveness of their proposed metrics. In particular, Gallup (2001) proposed 11 questions metric to measure the customer engagement, that is known as CE^{11}. The scale consisted of three loyalty items and eight emotional attachment items. The emotional attachment items could be further classified into four emotional states, i.e. confident, integrity, pride and passion, in which each component is measured using two items. Besides, PeopleMetrics (2009) also proposed a four-items scale to measure customer engagement. In particular, customer engagement was measured based on the customer response to four questions that relate to four aspects of engagement i.e. retention, effort, advocacy and passion. Using the customer engagement scores, customers could then be grouped into four distinct groups, i.e. fully engaged, engaged, on the fence and actively disengaged, in which each customer engagement segments tend to demonstrate different types of behaviours.

Although practitioners have tried to convince on the effectiveness of their engagement scales, marketing scholars seemed to argue on the validity and reliability of the metrics (Haven, 2007; Haven & Vittal, 2008; Tripathi, 2009). Specifically, it was highlighted that the practitioner metrics had failed to capture the intimacy aspect, although by definition, the customer engagement should reflect the intimate relationship that customer has with brand (Haven & Vittal, 2008). Accordingly, an increasing amount of research had embarked to develop and verify a scale to measure customer engagement. The earlier empirical study would be Vivek (2009) and Vivek, Beatty, Dalela, and Morgan (2014), which confirmed the measurement of consumer engagement to consist of three dimensions i.e. enthusiasm, conscious participation and social interaction. Besides, in the tourism context, So et al. (2012) validated a 25-items scale to measure five dimensions of customer engagement i.e. identification, enthusiasm, attention, absorption and interaction. By adopting both the conceptualization and operationalization of employee engagement, Malciute (2012) had further verified the applicability of the employee engagement scale, which comprises the emotional, cognitive and behavioural dimensions, to be used in the customer-brand context, particularly to measure the customer engagement toward brand in the social media platform. Nevertheless, to date, almost no further studies were conducted to provide empirical evidence on the validity and reliability of scales built.

Most of the customer engagement research adopts a multidimensional perspective rather than uni-dimensional perspectives. Customer engagement has commonly described as to comprise 3 major dimensions i.e. cognitive, emotional and behavioral (Brodie & Hollebeek, 2011; Brodie, et al., 2011; Patterson, et al., 2006). Cognitive engagement refers to the level of customer's concentration towards brand, emotional engagement relates with level of customer's passion towards brand, while behavioral engagement is the level of energy, effort and time spent in the interaction with brand (Hollebeek, 2011b; Patterson, et al., 2006). Besides, it had been highlighted that each dimension generates different level of engagement intensity (Brodie, et al., 2011). Empirical study by Malciute (2012) revealed emotional engagement as the strongest engagement drivers, while So, King, Sparks, & Wang (2014) demonstrated that behavioral and emotional engagement highly contribute to the overall engagement.

Method

This study adopted a quantitative approach. A random sample of 600 mobile phone users aged 15 and above were surveyed, but only 539 responses were usable. Data, which collected using self-administered questionnaire, were analyzed using descriptive analysis. Comparing among all conceptualizations of customer engagement, the psychological definition of customer engagement is more appropriate to indicate the overall level of engagement between customer and brand (Schraft & Micu, 2010). Accordingly, in this research, the conceptualization of the customer engagement is built upon the psychological rather than behavioural approach. Specifically, customer engagement is defined as the intensity of the customer's psychological state characterized by the emotional connection, sustained attention, brand relevancy and commitment to an active relationship with brand (Abdul-Ghani, et al., 2011; Higgins & Scholer, 2009; Hollebeek, 2011a; McEwen, 2004). The operationalization of this construct is based on Cheung et al. (2011). In particular, the customer engagement construct was measured using 16 items, in which five items measured cognitive engagement, six items measured emotional engagement and the remaining five items measured behavioural engagement.

Finding And Discussion

An overview of the respondents' profile reveals that the sample is slightly dominated by male respondents (58.3%). The mean age of the respondents is 34.35 years old, with 32.7 percent of the respondents are in the age range of 30 to 39 years old, while 31.4 percent in the age range of 20 to 29 years old. Respondents are mostly tertiary educated (56.6%), which 38.4 percent of them have obtained bachelor degree, while the remaining 18.0 percent have completed postgraduate education. On average, the respondents earn about RM2617.96 per month. However, 27.6 percent of the respondents report that they have no income, while 19.1 percent earn between RM3000 to RM3999. The average duration of respondents using the mobile brand is 2.9 years, which 56 percent of the respondents have been using the brand for more than 1.5 years and 43.2 percent for less than 1.5 years.

Findings, depicted in Table 1, demonstrate that overall customer engagement towards a mobile phone brand is relatively moderate with a mean of 4.39. Comparing the engagement dimensions, customers are engaged most by behavioural drivers ($\bar{x} = 4.52$), followed by emotional ($\bar{x} = 4.47$), and cognitive drivers ($\bar{x} = 4.17$). Thus, the results seems to be in consistent with the previous findings by (Malciute, 2012; So, et al., 2014) Furthermore, the results reveal that customer behavioural and emotional engagement outperform the overall engagement. Therefore, to engage the customer, companies need to really focus their engagement efforts on promoting behavioural and emotional engagement.

Table 1 .

Mean and Standard Deviation across Different Engagement Groups

Constructs and Items		Mean	Std. Deviation	Engagement Level
Cognitive engagement		**4.17**	**1.44**	**Moderate**
a1	*I am interested in anything about X.*	*4.55*	*1.52*	*Moderate*
a2	Using X makes me forget about everything else.	3.88	1.69	Moderate
a3	I feel difficult to detach myself from X.	4.07	1.66	Moderate
a4	My mind is focused when using X.	4.18	1.61	Moderate

a5	I pay a lot of attention to X.	4.18	1.63	Moderate
Emotional engagement		**4.47**	**1.38**	**Moderate**
a6	I am very enthusiastic about X.	4.29	1.58	Moderate
a7	X inspires me.	4.27	1.53	Moderate
a8	*X means a lot more to me than other brands.*	*4.49*	*1.55*	*Moderate*
a9	*I am excited when using X.*	*4.58*	*1.57*	*Moderate*
a10	Time flies when I am using X.	4.47	1.50	Moderate
a11	*I am proud of using X.*	*4.71*	*1.53*	*Moderate*
Behavioural engagement		**4.52**	**1.32**	**Moderate**
a12	*I would remain using X for a very long time.*	*4.90*	*1.47*	*Moderate*
a13	I feel more alive when using X.	4.38	1.52	Moderate
a14	*Over time, X becomes more important to me.*	*4.59*	*1.56*	*Moderate*
a15	I would remain using X even when things do not go well.	4.30	1.57	Moderate
a16	I try my hardest to make my relationship with X works.	4.42	1.47	Moderate
Overall customer engagement		**4.39**	**1.31**	**Moderate**

Notes:
Engagement level scale: 1-3 Low, 3-5 Moderate, 5-7 High
n=359

Specifically, customers with strong behavioural engagement tend to remain using the brand for a long time and feel the increased importance of the brand over time. Thus, to engage the customer behaviorally, the companies must be able to induce the customer loyalty towards brand and heighten the importance of the brand that customers cannot live without.
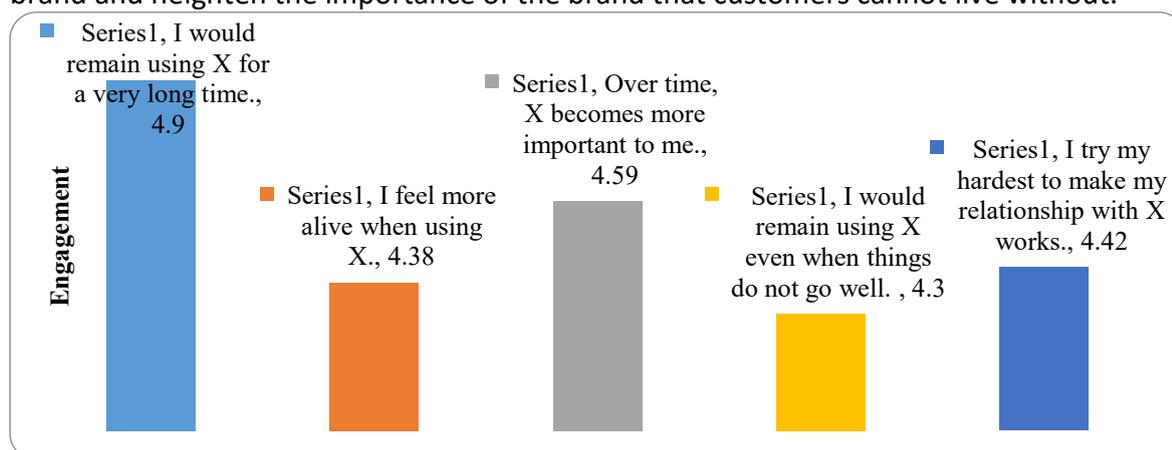

Figure 1. Behavioural Engagement Drivers

As for customers who have a strong emotional engagement, they are more likely to feel proud using the brand, show their excitement when using brand and perceive the brand as more meaningful than other brand. Thus, to engage the customer emotionally, the brand should be able to emphasize the brand elements that can trigger customers to feel proud, excited and hard for not using the brand.
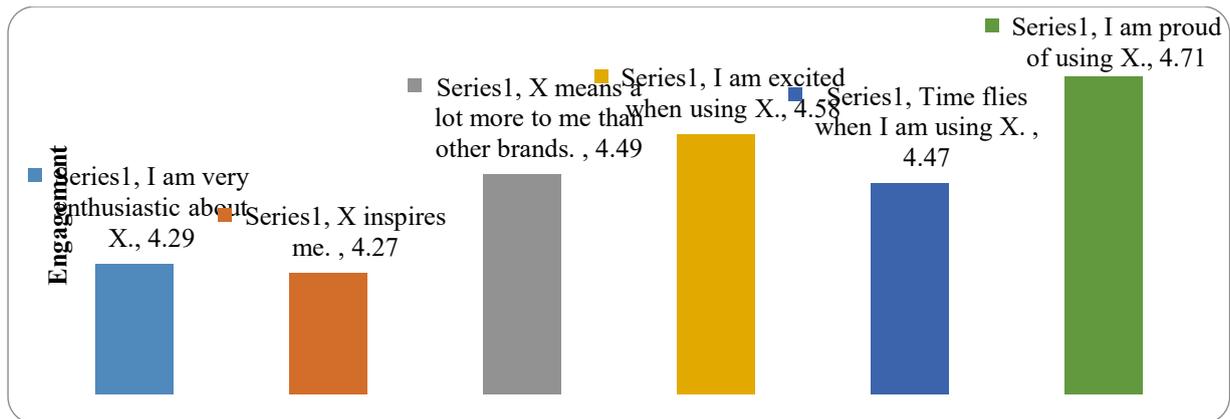
Figure 2. Emotional Engagement Drivers

Finally, customers that strongly engaged cognitively are identified as those who have a high interest in brand, focus when using and pay greater attention towards the brand. Hence, to engage the customer, companies may want to sustain the customer interest, focus and attention towards the brand.
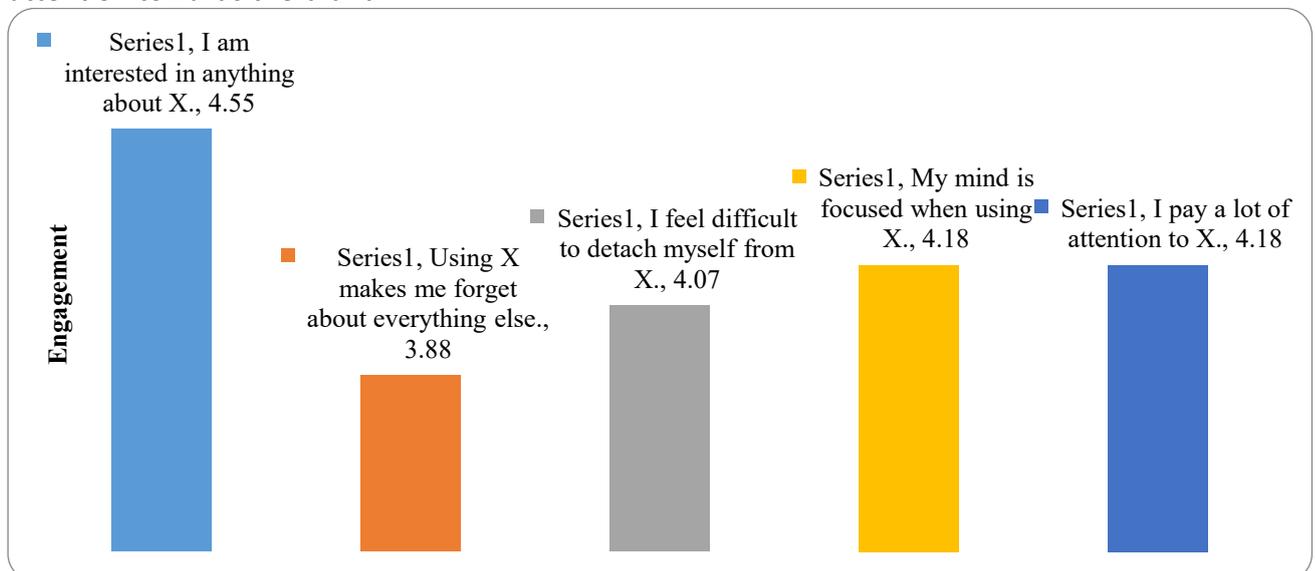

Figure 3. Cognitive Engagement Drivers

Implication And Limitation

The findings of this research provide some important theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the findings provide empirical evidence on the multidimensional role of customer engagement. In particular, the findings posit customer engagement as multidimensional constructs comprise cognitive, emotional and behavioural dimensions. The findings also provide useful managerial insights for marketing practitioners. First, all three customer engagement (CE) dimensions contribute to the overall engagement. Therefore, the result suggests that, when attempting to create and enhance CE, companies should focus on the enhancement of each of the three CE dimensions, with particular emphasis on behavioural and emotional. For example, to increase the level of energy, effort and time that customer spent in the interaction with brand, companies needs to provide valuable incentives, such as recognition and reward program to encourage customer participation and loyalty. To enhance the customer's passion towards brand, companies need to create a unique and clear identity of a brand that is desired by the customer. By being unique, brand actually creates sustainable differentiation of the offering. For instance, the brand can be positioned as aspirational brand, which lead customers to not only feel good about their life,

but also to achieve better life. Finally, to sustain the customer concentration towards brand, companies needs to provide the customers with information that are relevant, important and interesting.

This research had the following limitations. This paper discusses the drivers of customer engagement based on only descriptive measures. This research was conducted by having in mind only one brand, which limited the sample choice. Therefore, replication and extension of this research are clearly needed.

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