Customer Loyalty to C2C Online Shopping Platforms:
An Exploration of the Role of Customer Engagement

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Abstract

With the keen competition in C2C e-marketplaces, C2C online shopping platform providers are finding ways to keep and maintain customer relationship. In this study, a research model that examines the role of customer engagement in customer loyalty to C2C online shopping platforms is proposed and empirically tested with 385 customers who have used Taobao to perform online shopping. The results provide supports to our research hypotheses and illustrate the importance of customer engagement in building customer loyalty to C2C online shopping platforms. Findings of this study are expected to provide useful insights for emarketers to develop loyalty through customer engagement in online shopping platforms as well as for researchers to better understand the relationship between customer engagement and loyalty in consumer-based e-marketplace.

Keywords: Customer engagement, online shopping platforms, e-marketplace, customer loyalty, electronic word of mouth, repurchase

1. Introduction

Consumer-based online market remains a major shopping platform for netizens in China. In 2012, the total C2C market has reached USD 29.34 billion, accounting for 65% of overall online shopping market in China[1]. Before 2004, eBay China had a dominant position in C2C e-marketplace in China. With the emergence of Taobao, eBay China quickly lost its market share and even disappeared from the C2C e-marketplace in China in the late 2006 [1]. According to the figures released in December 2012[2], Taobao is now the market leader of online shopping platforms in China. It is obvious that many former eBay China members had switched their online shopping platforms to Taobao. Thus, how to build and maintain customer loyalty to C2C online shopping platforms becomes an important topic for C2C e-marketplace providers.

Customer loyalty has long been an important research topic in the traditional marketing literature. Researchers have explored various determinants of customer loyalty, such as perceived value [2], satisfaction [3], trust, switching barrier [4, 5], and commitment [6, 7]. With the high penetration of Internet technologies among individual users, researchers have begun to explore customer loyalty in the online environment [8-11]. In the context of C2C online shopping platforms, much previous research on customer loyalty has examined how service quality [12], satisfaction [13], and trust [14] affect customer loyalty to C2C online shopping platforms. In this study, we focus on the role of customer engagement in customer loyalty to C2C online shopping platforms.

The reason that we focus on the role of customer engagement is that C2C online shopping platform is a highly engaging environment for many customers [15]. Customers log in to their favorite C2C online shopping platforms as part of their daily routine. Some customers even lose track of the amount of time and money they spend on these shopping platforms [16, 17]. The concept of customer engagement, however, is still understood in a very vague and unsystematic way in the academic literature. The role of customer engagement in the online environment remains underexplored [18]. Thus, the objectives of this study are (1) to define the concept of customer engagement in the online context, and (2) to identify its role in customer loyalty to C2C online shopping platforms.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The next section addresses the theoretical foundation of the research model. The third section presents the research model and hypotheses. The fourth section describes the research design. The fifth section presents the results of our empirical study. Finally, the

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http://ec.iresearch.cn/shopping/20121102/186049.shtml#3745362-tsina-1-42514-8b107929a860af6d2ef940fd7120df86

2   http://www.chinainternetwatch.com/1801/china-online-retail-exceeded-53-billion-in-q3/#more-1801

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paper is concluded by discussing implications for both research and practice.

2. Literature Review

In this section, the concept of engagement is first defined. A review of prior literature on customer engagement in the online environment is then discussed.

2.1. The Concept of Customer Engagement

Although many marketing studies with constructs carrying the "engagement" label, the definition, dimensionality, and operationalization of engagement are inconsistent and mixed [18]. Van Doorn et al. [19] defined engagement as *"the behavioral manifestation from a customer toward a brand or a firm which goes beyond purchase behavior. (p.254)"*. Verhoef et al. and Bijmolt et al. [20, 21] also defined engagement as behavioral manifestation and further elaborated on their definition and identified a number of related behaviors such as word of mouth, blogging, providing customer ratings, and so on. Bowden [22] proposed a framework for the process of engagement, with a focus on the underlying mechanisms by which loyalty forms for new customers of a service brand as well as the mechanisms by which loyalty may be maintained for repeat purchase consumers of a service brand. Patterson et al. [23] drew on a variety of parent disciplines including social psychology and organizational behavior and defined engagement as a psychological state that is characterized by a degree of vigor, dedication, absorption, and interaction in brand interactions. In summary, there are three key ways to conceptualize engagement Cheung et al. [24]:
- Customer engagement as a psychological process
- Customer engagement as behavioral manifestation
- Customer engagement as psychological state

2.2. Customer Engagement in the Online Environment

With the advent of the Internet and as more customers become adept at using the Internet, companies are developing online channels through a company's website, online portal, or social networking site. The most prominent study of customer engagement in the online environment is by Hennig-Thurau et al. [25]. They built on Balasubramanian and Mahajan's framework [26] and identified five main motivational categories of user participation including focus-related utility (concern for other consumers, helping the company, social benefits, and exerting power), consumption utility (post-purchase advice-seeking), approval utility (self-enhancement and economic rewards), moderator-related utility (convenience and problem-solving support), and homeostase utility (expressing positive emotions and venting negative feelings). Sun et al. [27] also proposed an integrated model to explore the antecedents and consequences of customer engagement in music-related communities. They found that innovativeness, internet usage, and internet social connection are significant factors in engagement.

3. Research Model and Hypotheses

A research model explaining the development of customer loyalty to C2C online shopping platforms through customer engagement is proposed. Figure 1 depicts our research model.
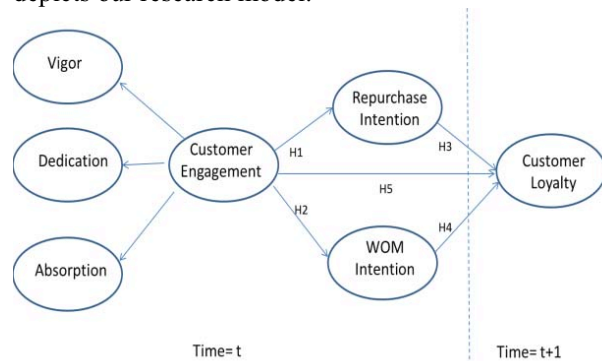

Figure 1. The research model

3.1. Customer Engagement in C2C Online Shopping Platforms

The conceptual foundation of "personal engagement" was applied to derive the definition of customer engagement for the current investigation. Customer engagement is defined as the level of a customer's physical, emotional, and cognitive presence in connections with a particular online shopping platform. It is commonly agreed that a multidimensional view of engagement can best capture the breadth and complexity of this construct [28]. The three key dimensions of customer engagement are explained:
- Vigor (Physical) refers to the level of energy and mental resilience while using an online shopping platform, willingness to invest time and effort in one's role as a customer.
- Dedication (Emotional) refers to a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge towards an online shopping platform.
- Absorption (Cognitive) refers to being fully concentrated and deeply engrossed in an online shopping platform.

3.2. The Relationships between Customer Engagement, Repurchase Intention, and WOM Intention

Organizational engagement literature [29, 30] states that engagement is found to significantly relate to behavioral intention, such as intention to quit, and organizational citizenship behavior. In the marketing literature, Algesheimer [31] found the impact of brand community engagement on behavioral intentions: (a) membership continuance intentions, (b) community recommendation intentions, and (c) community participation intentions. In the context of online shopping platforms, if a customer is highly engaged in an online shopping platform, he/she will have a higher propensity to participate in activities on the online shopping platform as well as to spread word-of-mouth (WOM) communication about the platform.

Hypothesis 1: Customer engagement is positively associated with repurchase intention in C2C online shopping platforms.

Hypothesis 2: Customer engagement is positively associated with WOM intention in C2C online shopping platforms.

3.3. Customer Loyalty to C2C Online Shopping Platforms

According to the relationship marketing literature, customer loyalty is one of the key relationship marketing outcomes. This concept can be conceptualized into behavioral loyalty and attitudinal loyalty [32]. Behavioral loyalty means that customers will continue to purchase products or services from the same supplier. Attitudinal loyalty refers to commitment or preferences when considering unique values associated with a brand [33]. In this study, the behavioral loyalty is explored and its relationships with customer engagement are examined. Building on the intention-based models (i.e., theory of reasoned action), we believe that repurchase intention and WOM intention will be positively associated with behavioral loyalty to C2C online shopping platforms.

Hypothesis 3: Repurchase intention is positively associated with customer loyalty to C2C online shopping platforms.

Hypothesis 4: WOM intention is positively associated with customer loyalty to C2C online shopping platforms.

In the customer behavior literature, van Doorn et al. [19] argued that customer engagement is closely related to their frequency and intensity of participation. Particularly, they have already invested a lot of time and energy into the platform, as well as built sense of belonging and commitment to the platform.

Hypothesis 5: Customer engagement is positively associated with customer loyalty to C2C online shopping platforms.

4. Research Design

In this study, the research model examines how customer engagement shapes the complex nature of loyalty in online shopping environment. A sample of Taobao users was employed to test our conceptual model. Taobao e-marketplace (www.Taobao.com), a leading company in China, virtually owns the country's C2C business with a 90% of market shares[3]. Founded by Alibaba Group in May 2003, Taobao e-marketplace facilitates C2C online transaction by providing an online platform for small businesses and individual entrepreneurs to open online retail stores.

4.1. Data collection

The sample frame was individuals who have used TaoBao.com to perform online shopping. In order to improve the response rate and sample quality, a market research firm was employed for data collection. IP addresses were provided by the market research firm to prevent double-counting of survey respondents.

Our research model was assessed in a longitudinal setting. Data was collected at two different point of time. At time t, responses related to customer engagement, repurchase intention and WOM intention were collected. At time t+1 (3 weeks after the first round), participants were asked to complete another set of questionnaire with measures about loyalty.

A total of 1356 people accessed the survey link of the first questionnaire. Among them, 850 responded in the first round (time t) of the study. Of the original 850 respondents, 385 completed the questionnaire in the second round (time t+1). Table 1 presents the demographic profiles of respondents. Among the 385 respondents, 55% were female and 45% were male. 33.5% of our respondents aged 18-25 and 30.1% aged 31-40. A majority of the respondents (81.3%) were educated to degree level or above.

4.2. Measures

The constructs of interest to the current study were all borrowed from prior literature and revised to fit the current context of C2C online shopping platform (i.e., Taobao). Table 2 lists the measures used. In our study, customer loyalty was measured with formative indicators. Others were measured with reflective items.

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3 http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2098451,00.html

Table 1. Demographic profile of the respondents		
Characteristics		Distribution
Gender (%)	Male	44.9
	Female	55.1
Age (%)	Under 18	0.3
	18- 25	33.5
	26-30	29.4
	31-40	30.1
	Over 40	6.8
Income (%)	Under 2000	20.8
	2000-5000	42.6
	5001-10000	29.4
	Over 10000	7.3

5. Data analysis and results

The Partial Least Squares (PLS) method was used to perform the statistical analysis in current study. PLS is widely adopted by IS researchers in recent years [34] because of its ability to estimate multiple and interrelated dependent relationships under conditions of non-normality and in some small to medium-sized samples [35-37]. Following the two-step analytical procedures [38], the measurement model was first examined, and then the structural model was evaluated.

5.1. Measurement model

In this section, the convergent validity and discriminant validity of the constructs in our model was examined.

5.1.1. Convergent validity

Convergent validity indicates the degree to which the items of an instrument that are theoretically related are also related in reality. Table 3 presents the results of analysis. Composite reliability scores for the final reflectively measured scales ranged from 0.90 to 0.96, exceeding the 0.707 recommended guideline [35]. Furthermore, the average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct exceeded 0.5 recommended level [45]. All item loadings were higher than the 0.71 benchmark.

As noted, customer loyalty is measured with formative indicators. The formative measures should be evaluated based on the significance of their weights via indicating their contributions to their corresponding constructs [36]. Therefore, common statistical indicates of measurement quality (such as reliability, discriminate validity, and convergent validity) were not reported; instead, weights of formative indicators were included in the current study. Table 4 summarizes the weights of two formative indicators.

Table 2. List of Measures		
Constructs	Measures	Sources
Vigor	1. I can continue using this online shopping platform for very long periods at a time. 2. I feel strong and vigorous when I am using this online shopping platform. 3. I feel very resilient, mentally, as far as this online shopping platform is concerned. (*) 4. In this online shopping platform, I always persevere, even when things do not go well. 5. I devote a lot of energy to this online shopping platform.	[24, 39-41]
Absorption	7. Time flies when I am using this online shopping platform. 8. Using this online shopping platform is so absorbing that I forgot about everything else. 9. I am rarely distracted when using this online shopping platform. 10. I am immersed in this online shopping platform. 11. My mind is focused when using this online shopping platform. 12. I pay a lot of attention to this online shopping platform. (*)	[24, 39-41]
Dedication	13. I am enthusiastic in this online shopping platform. 14. This online shopping platform inspires me. 15. I found this online shopping platform full of meaning and purpose. 16. I am excited when using this online shopping platform. 17. I am interested in this online shopping platform.	[24, 39-41]
Repurchase Intention	1. If I were to buy products of this category again, I would consider buying from this online shopping platform. 2. The likelihood of my purchasing a product again from this online shopping platform is high.	[42] [43]
WOM Intention	1. I would like to introduce this online shopping platform to others 2. I would like to recommend this online shopping platform to others	[44]
Customer Loyalty	1. How many times did you purchase from Taobao in the last 3 weeks? 2. Have you recommended Taobao to others in the last 3 weeks?	[42]
Notes: * Items were removed because of low item loadings		

5.1.2. Discriminant validity

Discriminant validity is indicated by low correlations between the measure of interest and the measure of other constructs. Following the research by Fornell and Larcker [45], this validity can be assessed by having the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) of each construct greater than the correlations between it and all other constructs. Table 5 shows the correlations between variables. The square root of the AVE of each construct, located on the diagonal of the table and in bold, is higher than the correlations between it and all other constructs. Discriminant validity was then verified.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics and Psychometric Properties of Reflective Measures				
Constructs	Item	Loading	Mean	S.D.
Vigor (CR=0.90, AVE=0.65)	VIG1	0.79	5.85	1.15
	VIG2	0.87	5.66	1.21
	VIG4	0.77	5.74	1.12
	VIG5	0.81	5.19	1.36
Absorption (CR=0.93, AVE=0.70)	ABS1	0.79	5.79	1.12
	ABS2	0.85	4.85	1.50
	ABS3	0.88	5.07	1.31
	ABS4	0.91	4.94	1.51
	ABS5	0.86	5.44	1.24
Dedication (CR=0.94, AVE=0.77)	DED1	0.90	5.79	1.20
	DED2	0.80	5.55	1.21
	DED3	0.87	5.49	1.22
	DED4	0.91	5.95	1.13
	DED5	0.89	5.96	1.08
Repurchase Intention (CR=0.95, AVE=0.91)	REPI1	0.96	6.55	0.83
	REPI2	0.95	6.52	0.85
WOM intention (CR=0.93, AVE=0.81)	WOMI1	0.96	6.05	1.06
	WOMI2	0.96	6.03	1.03

Table 4. Weights and Loadings of Measures of Constructs with Formative Items			
Construct	Indicators	Weights	t-Statistics
Customer Loyalty	Repurchase	0.62***	8.04
	WOM	0.70***	10.23
Notes: *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001			

Table 5. Correlations Between Constructs with Reflective Measures (Diagonal Elements Are Square Roots of the Average Variance Extracted)						
	VIG	ABS	DED	REPI	WOMI	LOY
Vigor (VIG)	**0.81**					
Absorption (ABS)	0.80	**0.84**				
Dedication (DED)	0.80	0.78	**0.88**			
Repurchase Intention (REPI)	0.56	0.47	0.65	**0.95**		
WOM Intention (WOMI)	0.63	0.60	0.69	0.66	**0.90**	
Customer Loyalty (LOY)	0.34	0.31	0.41	0.43	0.40	-

5.2. Structural model

Figure 2 shows the results of structural model with explanatory powers (R^2), estimated path coefficients (significant paths indicated with an asterisk), and associated t-value of each path. The bootstrap resampling technique was performed to test the significance of all paths.
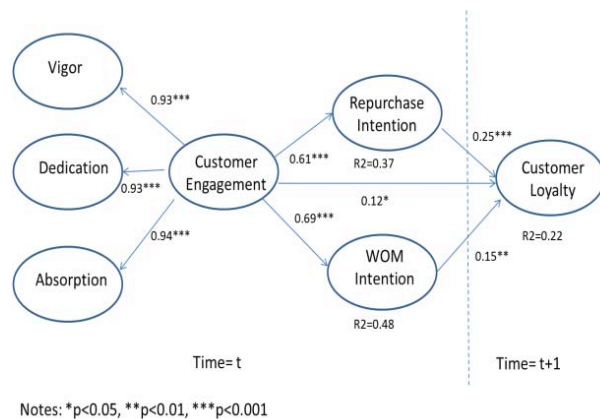

Notes: *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

Figure 2. Results of the research model

An examination of R^2 value indicates that the exogenous variables explain a substantial amount of the variance in the endogenous variable. In our model, it explains 22% of the variance in customer loyalty. All hypothesized paths in the research model were found to be statistically significant.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

In today's highly competitive business environment, keeping customers happy and maintaining a long-term relationship with them has long been an important business strategy. In this study, we aim at exploring the role of customer engagement in C2C online shopping platforms. This research has several key findings. First, customer engagement is a multidimensional construct which comprises of vigor, dedication, and absorption. The empirical results showed that customer engagement is well-reflected by these three first-order dimensions. Second, though previous studies have indicated that C2C e-marketplaces are highly engaging [16], they did not examine how customer engagement in these online platforms affects customer loyalty behavior. This study has empirically validated the research model with existing customers of Taobao. The results showed that customer engagement has positive relationships between repurchase intention and word-of-mouth intention, and repurchase intention and WOM intention in turn affect loyalty behavior.

6.1. Theoretical and Practical Contributions

Customer loyalty is crucial for C2C online shopping platform providers. This study sheds some light on this issue by examining the role of customer engagement in customer loyalty to C2C online shopping platforms. This study offers several theoretical and practical implications.

From the theoretical perspective, the study makes important contributions to the existing literature. First, previous studies mentioned that C2C e-marketplace is highly engaging, but there is no empirical validation about the role of customer engagement in C2C online shopping platforms. This is one of the very first studies that explores the dimensions of customer engagement in the context of C2C e-marketplace, as well as identifies its relationship with customer loyalty. The three dimensions of customer engagement, vigor, dedication, and absorption were empirically validated in the current investigation. This study also enhances our understanding of customer loyalty to C2C online shopping platforms through a new lens – customer engagement. This study has empirically validated the relationship between customer engagement and customer loyalty to C2C online shopping platforms. The result adds insights to previous loyalty literature in the e-commerce context, which often emphasizes the effect of service quality, trust, and satisfaction on customer loyalty.

From the practical perspective, customer engagement has become a key indicator to measure the impact and effectiveness of marketing campaigns. For example, 67% of senior marketers said that customer engagement is very important to their company, with 86% stating that customer engagement is an ongoing topic of conversation amongst their top management teams. In addition, 69% of Chief marketing officers highlighted that their companies had a defined strategy for customer engagement[4]. This study provides a set of validated measures for practitioners to examine customer engagement in their online shopping platforms. In addition, this study found that highly engaged customers are more likely to repurchase and spread WOM about the online shopping platforms. This gives companies a new way to think about the value of engaging customers in their online platforms and how they should invest their marketing resources.

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[4] http://www.marketingprofs.com/charts/2010/3718/senior-marketers-rethinking-customer-engagement

6.2. Limitations and Future Research Directions

The current study is subject to some limitations. First, this study only focuses on the relationship between customer engagement and customer loyalty to C2C online shopping platforms. The scope of this study can be expanded to gain a more complete understanding of customer loyalty in C2C e-marketplace. Specifically, future research can include key antecedents of customer loyalty, such as trust, service quality, and satisfaction, and identify the relative impacts of these key determinants to customer loyalty in C2C e-marketplace. Second, this study examines the role of customer engagement in a Chinese-based C2C e-marketplace. Future research can extend the current research model to other C2C online shopping platforms. This may give us some ideas whether there is any cultural bias in customer loyalty in the online environment.

6.3. Conclusion

Customer engagement has drawn increasing attention in both practice and research. In this study, the dimensions of customer engagement were identified and a conceptual model was developed to explain the relationship between customer engagement and customer loyalty to C2C online shopping platforms. The concept of customer engagement is still evolving and researchers have started to explore its role in different online contexts, including e-commerce sites, social networking sites, and online brand communities. This study is expected to enhance our understanding of the universal phenomenon of customer engagement in C2C e-marketplace. Furthermore, this study will provide some insights among researchers and practitioners to further investigate the role of customer engagement, as well as its relationship with relational constructs in the online environment.

7. Acknowledgement

8. References

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