

# MODERATING ROLE OF INCENTIVES ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CUSTOMER CHARACTERISTICS AND CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT BEHAVIOUR

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## ABSTRACT

*In the past decade, a significant practitioner interest has developed in business relationships with the notion of “engagement”. Customer engagement behaviour (CEB) is a significant variable that has direct bearing on valuation of customers, marketing metrics and firm’s value. The present study examines the impact of customer characteristics, namely, customer identity, perceived costs and perceived benefits on the CEB. We conceptualize the CEB through employee interactions, value co-creation and word-of-mouth. It is proposed that the various customer characteristics such as perceived costs and perceived benefits have a significant impact on the customer engagement behaviour. This relationship is influenced by the incentives that are provided to the customers for enhancing the existing customer base. Thus, highly engaged customers tend to be more loyal and can be retained. This implies that incentivising the customers in a right manner would lead to a profitable customer base. Thus, we also hypothesize that incentives will moderate the relationship between these customer characteristics and CEB. The present study will be a unique contribution both for retailers as well as academicians since it would help in developing a better and deeper understanding of the phenomenon of CEB and how we can help in engaging customers for better profitability by providing them with incentives.*

**Keywords:** *Customer Engagement Behaviour (CEB), Customer Characteristics, Incentives, Firm’s Profitability*

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, a significant practitioner interest has developed in business relationships with the notion of “engagement” (Harvey 2005; Saks 2006; Haven 2007). Engaged customers play a vital role in the development of a new product/service (Hoyer et al. 2010; Kothandaraman and Wilson 2001; Nambisan and Nambisan 2008), superior competitive advantage (Sedley 2008 & Brodie, et al. 2010), and profitability (Voyles 2007, Brodie, et al. 2010).

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Prior to 2005, the terms “consumer engagement”, “customer engagement” and/or “brand engagement” were used to a little extent. But in the present scenario the terms like customer engagement (Patterson et al. 2006), online brand engagement (Mollen and Wilson, 2010), customer engagement process (Bowden 2009), customer engagement behaviour (van Doorn et al., 2010, Kumar et al. 2010; Brodie et al. 2013; Wei et al. 2013) and customer brand engagement (Hollebeek, 2011) are being used noticeably in the organizations and their impact on firms performance outcomes is duly considered.

Patterson et al. (2006), define customer engagement as “the level of customer’s physical, cognitive, and emotional presence in their relationship with a service organization”. “Customer engagement behaviour (CEB) is defined as a customer’s behavioural manifestations that have a brand or firm focus, beyond purchase resulting from the motivational drivers” (van Doorn et al. 2010). Thus CEB is studied on behavioural aspects in a customer-to-firm relationship. These elements comprise of cognitive and affective components which include the experiences and feelings of customers, and the behavioural and social elements that capture the participation by current and potential customers and this is examined both within and outside of the exchange situations (Vivek, Beatty and Morgan 2010).CEBs encompass value co-creation, which involves customer participation in the creation of the core offering (Lusch & Vargo 2006). Customer participation, is conceptualized as the extent to which the customer is involved in the production or delivery of the service (Dabholkar 1990; Vivek, Beatty and Morgan 2010).Vivek, Beatty and Morgan 2010 postulate that there is a positive association between the level of participation of an individual and the intensity of his/her engagement. Joshi and Sharma (2004) proposed that customers can help the firm to enhance its value by participating in the knowledge development process. There are two dimensions of customer participation—customer participation as an information resource and customer participation as a co-developer (Fang 2008). Firm outcomes like efficiency, revenues and profits are directly influenced by customer participation (e.g. service usage, repeat purchase behaviour and word-of-mouth).

Doorn et al. (2010) proposed 5 dimensions of CEBs: valence; form of modality; scope; nature of its impact and customer goals to understand the nature of customer engagement. These dimensions represent the ways in which the consumers may choose to engage. CEBs have cognitive, behavioural and attitudinal consequences for the customers who are engaging in them (Oliver 1999; Doorn et al. 2010). Kumar et al. (2010) states that highly engaged customer is more valuable for the company and provides improved profitability. However, interactions between frontline employees and customers influence the overall perception of service quality and leads to customer satisfaction (Gounaris 2008).

The successful CEB efforts will result in engaging customers more frequently and more intensively. Borle et al. (2007) also shows that customers can be engaged more deeply with the firm by mere act of filing out a customer satisfaction survey and would positively affect their customer equity.

It is shown in the past literature that the various activities involved in engaging customers such as feedback and information services, has a strong influence on reputation (Fombrun and Shanley 1990) and customer retention (van Wangenheim & Bayon 2007). Highly engaged customers are a critical source of knowledge and help firms in a wide range of activities to enhance customer satisfaction and retention (Birkinshaw, Besant & Delbridge 2008; Schau, Muniz and Arnould 2009; Doorn et al. 2010).

## 1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Based upon the existing literature (van Doorn et al. 2010; Kumar et al. 2010, Verhoef et al. 2010; Brodie et al. 2011; and Gummerus et al. 2012), a conceptual framework is proposed (See Appendix A). A brief overview of the existing literature is given below:

### 2.1 Customer Engagement Behaviour (CEB) and Customer Characteristics

Customer engagement behaviour (CEB) is defined as customer behaviour that “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” (van Doorn et al. 2010). CEB result in cost advantages for the firm by integrating feedback from the customers for service improvement (Hoyer et al. 2008). They also affect the attitudinal and behavioural formation of the customers towards the firm by spreading word-of-mouth (WOM) (Gupta & Harris 2010). Brodie et al. (2011) emphasized that in order to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of firm’s efforts, a better understanding of CEB is essential. They argue that customer engagement behaviour benefit the firm and its stakeholders by enhanced customer participation and involvement. Mittal and Lee (1989) define involvement as a goal-directed motivation that indicates the extent to which the personal relevance of a decision is viewed by the customer.

Past researches have shown that the key antecedents to CEB are categorized into 3 heads. Firstly, the customer based factors, which include satisfaction (Anderson & Mittal, 2000; Palmatier et al. 2006); attitude (Bolton 1998, Verhoef 2003); brand commitment (Gabarino & Johnson 1999); brand attachment (Schau, Muniz & Arnould 2009); trust (de Matos and Rossi, 2008) and brand performance perceptions (Mittal, Kumar & Tsiros 1999), moral identity (Winterich, Mittal & Ross 2009), customer experience (Bitner, Booms & Tetreault, 1990; van Doorn & Verhoef 2008).

The firm based factors include reputation or brand equity (de Matos & Rossi 2008; Keller 1998; Roehm & Brady 2007; Walsh et al. 2009); brand commitment (Schau, Muniz & Arnold 2009); consumer information environments (Clow, Kurtz, and Ozment 1998; Bolton & Saxena-Iyer 2009); rewards and recognition (Henning-Thurau et al. 2004; Winterich, Mittal & Ross 2009). Thirdly, context based factors that include the environmental factors that have a direct bearing on the CEBs (van Doorn et al. 2009).

### 2.2 Employee Interactions

Previous research depicts that those employees who are in direct contact with customers play an active role in making customers enthusiastic to become engaged customers (Berry, 1981; Gounaris 2008; Paswan, Pelton, and True, 2005; Fierro, Polo and Carrasco 2014). The level of customer engagement is positively influenced by the attitude of frontline employees (Fierro et al. 2014).

Thus, employees by delivering the service, providing information, showing customers how to make better use of the service acquired, process complaints or claims, apologize, propose solutions or alternative uses, and generate feedback, all of which is of great importance for the present and future value of the company (Fierro, Polo and Carrasco 2014). Engagement demands continuity and due to the customer-company connection and the interaction of the relationships, this continuity is ensured. (Druckemiller, 2009).

## 2.3 Value Co-Creation

“The customer’s value creation process can be defined as a series of activities performed by the customer to achieve a particular goal.” (Payne, Storbacka and Frow, 2008:38). Vargo and Lusch (2004) proposed the fundamental propositions that provide a strong theoretical support to the notion of value co-creation with respect to the customer engagement behavior. In their seminal work, they proposed that “The customer is always a co-creator of value: There is no value until an offering is used—experience and perception are essential to value determination”. The co-creation of value is a significant goal as it can facilitate firms in emphasizing the customer’s or consumer’s view point and in refining the front-end process of recognizing customers’ needs and wants (Lusch and Vargo2006). Since value co-creation emphasizes cross-functional activity, the measurement of relationship performance spans the processes, functions and channels used to engage and interact with customers (Payne, Storbacka and Frow, 2008).

## 2.4 Word of Mouth

Word of mouth is a non-transactional behaviour depicted by a customer that does not directly influences the firm’s profitability (van Doorn et al. 2010). Since, these are not directly linked to a transaction; these do not impact the cash flows of the company (Fierro et al. 2013). However, it is imperative that this behaviour contributes to the firm’s present and future value, thereby enabling them to facilitate a better understanding of customers’ needs, enhance brand image and capture new clients. Bijmolt et al. (2010) propound that the word of mouth communication has a positive impact on the firm’s revenues, thereby suggesting that firms should target customers with high propensity to word of mouth. Van Doorn et al. (2010) suggest that if delightful experiences are provided to the customers, they are motivated to set up a brand community and even engage in positive word of mouth. It has been shown by the past researches that some customers may be high on self-enhancement, or the desire for positive recognition by others, and they have been witnessed to engage in higher WOM behaviour (Henning-Thurau et al. 2004; Sundaram, Mitra & Webster 1998).

## 2.5 Incentives

Customers can also contribute indirectly to profitability through several ways. One such popular option is by promoting through customer referrals (Kumar, Petersen & Leone, 2007). Incentivizing existing customers to bring in new customers through customer referral works well in determining the engagement and profitability of a customer. It is important to incentivize the right customers to provide referrals or references. This is because incentivizing an unprofitable customer is likely to bring in customers of similar profit potential who would severely undermining the company’s bottom line. Anghelcev (2013) postulates that increase in incentives will result in increase in consumer motivation ranging from the purchase of a brand to its recommendation to other customers.

## II. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the present study include the following:

- To examine the impact of customer characteristics (identity, perceived costs and perceived benefits) on the customer engagement behaviour.
- To examine the moderating role of incentives on the relationship between customer characteristics and customer engagement behaviour.

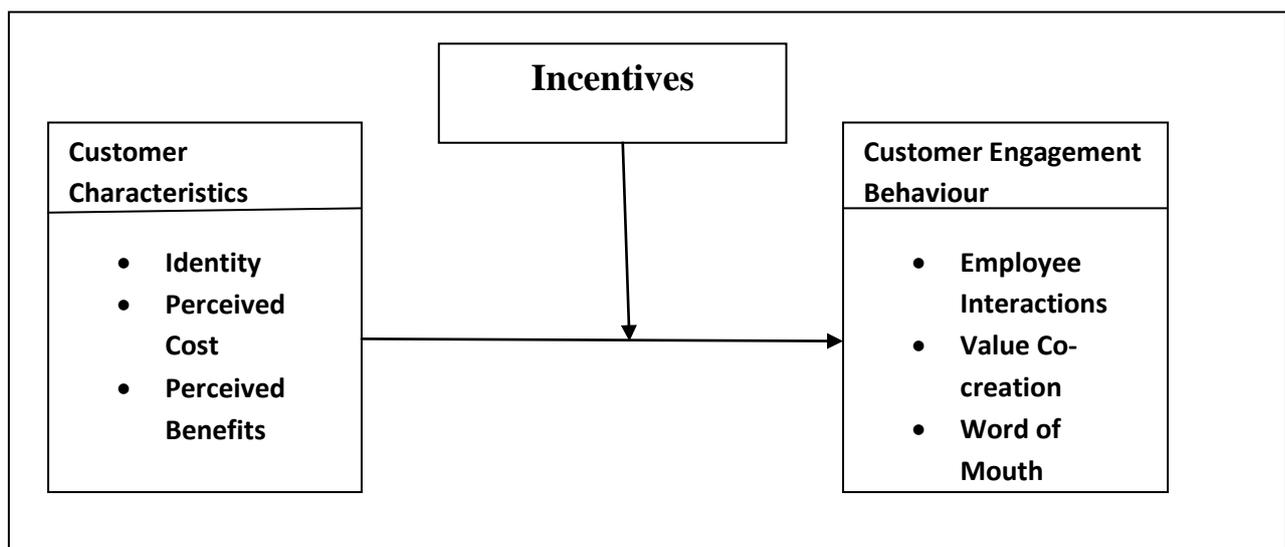
### 3.2 Research Methodology

Data will be collected from 500 respondents using a pre-defined well structured questionnaire on 5-point likert scale ranging from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree”. The sample will be drawn through convenience sampling and judgement sampling. The sample will include the customers of the retail industry.

### 3.3 Measures

The survey questionnaire will consist of items that will measure antecedents of customer engagement behaviour. These items will be based on the current scales from previous studies. Item analysis will be used to refine the scale items. The reliability of the scale will be accessed using cronbach alpha. The analysis will be done using exploratory factor analysis (EFA) followed by confirmatory factor analysis (CFA).

### 3.4 Proposed Model of the Study



(Fig.1)

### 3.5 Hypothesis

On the basis of the conceptual framework, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1a: customer identity has a positive relationship with the customer engagement behaviour.

Hypothesis 1b: The perceived costs and perceived benefits have a direct and significant impact on the customer engagement behaviour.

Hypothesis 2: The relationship between customer characteristics and customer engagement behaviour is moderated by incentives

The existing literature provides a thorough grounding for examining the role played by the antecedents of customer engagement behaviour in influencing the profitability of the firm. It is proposed that the various customer characteristics such as perceived costs and perceived benefits have a significant impact on the customer engagement behaviour. This relationship is influenced by the incentives that are provided to the customers for enhancing the existing customer base. Thus, highly engaged customers tend to be more loyal and can be retained. This implies that incentivising the customers in a right manner would lead to a profitable customer base. Thus, the proposed hypotheses are supported by the past literature.

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