

Consumer engagement across differentially service-oriented wine outlets: Moving beyond consumer involvement to predict loyalty

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While consumer engagement has received significant practitioner attention, academic investigation of the concept, including in wine research, is lagging behind to-date. Despite this, expected contributions of consumer engagement include a potentially greater predictive and/or explanatory power of relevant consumer and/or purchase behaviour outcomes including loyalty, which remain largely nebulous to-date using traditional constructs including customer satisfaction. As such, the consumer engagement concept is expected to be valuable to wine marketing scholars and practitioners seeking enhanced insights into customer relationship dynamics with differential consumer engagement levels expected to occur across wine distribution outlets characterised by differing levels of organisational service provision. Specifically, traditional outlets typified by relatively low service levels (e.g. supermarkets), and emerging outlet forms offering higher service levels (e.g. wine hospitality/tourism) are contrasted in terms of consumer engagement levels with differential implications for consumer loyalty. The distinct conceptual nature of consumer engagement and involvement is addressed, followed by a conceptual model illustrating these relationships across different wine outlets. Directions for further research are addressed.

Key Words: Consumer engagement, consumer involvement, loyalty, wine, outlets, conceptual model

Introduction

The limitations of conventional marketing constructs, such as perceived quality and customer satisfaction, in explaining and predicting consumer behaviour outcomes including loyalty, are widely acknowledged in the literature (e.g. Sureshchandar et al. 2002). While consumer involvement is an oft-used consumer segmentation variable for the purpose of explaining and/or predicting relevant wine consumers' behavioural outcomes (e.g. Lockshin et al. 1997) including loyalty, the predictive validity of this concept has been challenged by the recently emerged construct of consumer engagement (Bowden 2009), which is not known to be investigated in wine research to-date.

While consumer engagement is subject to considerable attention in the business community, academic development of the concept is in its infancy to-date. Exploratory research has centred on the expected strong, positive association between consumer engagement and loyalty (Bowden 2009), and the development of relevant consumer engagement measures to operationalise the construct (Sprott et al. 2009). Despite these recent advancements, the conceptual nature of consumer engagement remains debated with wide variation observed in its definitional scope (Ilić et al. 2009). In particular, with an abundance of motivational constructs such as consumer involvement (Zaichkowsky 1994), consumer engagement is yet to develop its conceptual and operational foundations.

The purpose of this paper is to address the consumer engagement construct across wine outlets characterised by differing levels of service orientation. Specifically, wine retailed at traditional outlets (e.g. supermarkets) is proposed to generate differential consumer engagement levels relative to that which may be observed in emerging, more service-oriented outlets. Further, the paper explores how the interrelated constructs of consumer engagement and involvement differ conceptually. Based on this analysis, a conceptual model is provided to guide future work in this area. The paper is structured as follows. First, literature in the areas of consumer engagement and involvement is reviewed, followed by a consumer engagement-based wine channel service orientation model. The paper concludes with a set of future research directions.

Consumer Engagement vs. Involvement

Consumer involvement represents a widely-used consumer segmentation variable in wine research (e.g. Aurifeille et al. 2002; Lockshin et al. 1997; Hollebeek et al. 2007). Despite its valuable contributions to furthering insights into the nature and dynamics of wine consumers' purchase decision-making and behaviours, a significant lack of clarity still obscures a comprehensive understanding in this area. Consumer involvement, typically conceptualised as the level of a consumer's interest and/or personal relevance with respect to a focal object (e.g. a wine brand) or task (e.g. purchase decision-making) (Mitchell 1979; Mittal 1983), encompasses a duality of cognitive/emotional consumer motivational forces. As such, the scope of the consumer involvement concept does not explicitly account for a behavioural element, thus potentially limiting its explanatory and/or predictive power of relevant consumer and/or purchase behaviour outcomes (cf. May et al. 2004).

Several involvement forms have been proposed in the literature including product, purchase and brand decision involvement (Lockshin et al. 1997). While product involvement refers to a consumer's relatively enduring disposition of interest exhibited toward a focal product category, brand involvement addresses the consumer's level of interest in a particular brand. Further, a consumer's purchase decision involvement levels may be more variable based on the situational characteristics inherent in particular purchase situations. The concept of situational variation in consumer choice behaviour (e.g. Quester and Smart 1998) is addressed in further depth in the Conceptual Model section. Despite the potential

overlap between relevant consumer involvement forms and consumer engagement, the latter construct has been shown to incorporate an explicit behavioural component which is not directly incorporated in the involvement construct.

The conceptual roots of the consumer engagement concept, by contrast, are based on a broader tripartite cognitive, emotional and behavioural dimensionality (May et al. 2004; Hollebeek 2009) thus extending beyond the definitional scope of the consumer involvement construct and providing greater potential explanatory and/or predictive ability of ensuing consumers' post-purchase behaviours. While the behavioural aspect of consumer engagement addresses relevant behavioural expressions at the time of purchase of a bottle of wine, consumer engagement's behavioural consequences may include repurchase behaviours and/or loyalty.

As a consequence of the relatively underexplored state of the consumer engagement concept in marketing, clear conceptualisation of the construct is lacking in the literature to-date. Patterson et al. (2006) define engagement as the level of a consumer's behavioural, cognitive and emotional presence in their relationship with an organisation/brand, thus illustrating the high potential applicability of the consumer engagement concept in value co-creation contexts such as those observed across different wine retail outlets. Based on Patterson et al. (2006), 'consumer engagement' in the present paper was defined as the level of a consumer's cognitive, emotional and behaviourally-based motivation in brand interactions.

As such, the conceptual foundations of the consumer engagement concept in the present paper are rooted in customer/brand interactions (cf. Bakker et al. 2008) and/or customer participation in brand-related activity (Ilić et al. 2009) contributing to ensuing consumer engagement levels. Consumer involvement, by contrast, may be limited to cognitive and/or emotional components, thus not requiring the existence of physical brand interactions per se (i.e. consumer involvement may exist outside and/or independent of direct brand interactions, in contrast to consumer engagement. As such, consumer engagement implies, by definition, a two-way reciprocal exchange by virtue of interactions between actors. Similar to involvement, consumer engagement represents a motivational state variable which may exist at a specific level at a particular point in time (Ilić et al. 2009).

Consumer Engagement & Wine Channel Service Orientation

Any business offering, including the sale of physical goods such as wine, involves some element of service provision (Vargo and Lusch 2004) although the extent of the service element may differ across purchase and consumption and/or purchase contexts (Hollebeek and Brodie 2009). For example, wine retailing through supermarkets typically requires only limited levels of service provision such as through customer/staff interactions at check-out. In contrast, wine tourism is typically characterised by considerably greater customer/service staff interactions, thus permitting greater potential for value co-creation, and thus consumer engagement, to occur (Hollebeek and Brodie 2009).

The level of consumer engagement at a particular point in time, relying on the pre-existence of customer/brand interactions, is thus expected to be greater in wine outlets characterised by higher service levels reflecting direct consumer interactions with a particular brand, and permitting greater opportunity for value co-creation, relative to those outlets typified by lower interaction levels (e.g. supermarkets). Therefore, the degree of channel service orientation may be viewed to moderate the level of a customer's engagement with a particular brand in a particular purchase and/or consumption situation, which, under an expected strong, positive association between consumer engagement and loyalty, is expected to result in differential consumer and/or purchase behaviour implications.

Conceptual Model

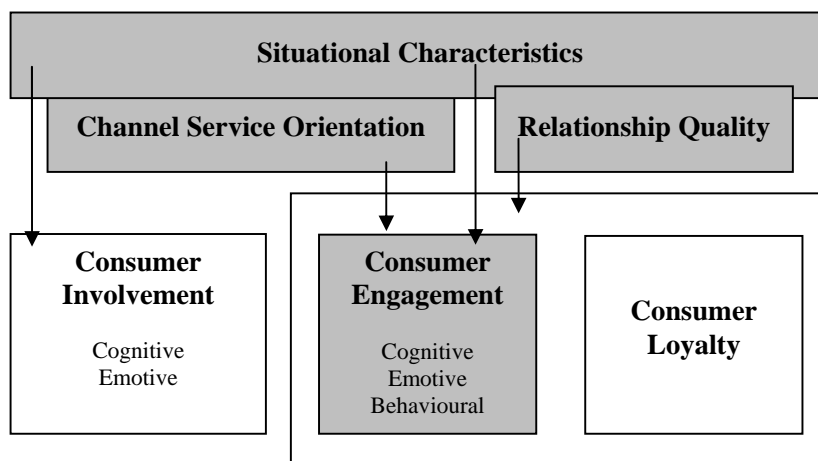
Based on the preceding analysis, a conceptual model (Figure 1) was developed incorporating the consumer engagement and involvement concepts across wine outlets characterised by differing levels of service orientation. In the model, consumer involvement is viewed as an antecedent to consumer engagement, with a requisite level of consumer interest required for the emergence of consumer engagement. As such a minimum threshold level of consumer involvement is required for the emergence of consumer brand engagement levels. Figure 1 also indicates that level of consumer engagement ensuing from relevant consumer involvement levels in turn, may exert an effect back on consumer involvement levels. As such, a potentially bidirectional relationship exists between these constructs.

Consumer involvement may be interpreted from a product category, brand and/or purchase decision perspective as addressed in the literature review. As such, in the present paper a focus is adopted on consumers’ brand-related involvement, with focal levels on this construct contributing to ensuing consumer engagement levels. Such brand involvement, however, may transcend beyond the traditional view of ‘brand decision involvement’ (e.g. Lockshin et al. 1997), which is limited to e.g. point-of-purchase decisions as to which brand to purchase, in contrast to the conceptually broader concept of ‘brand involvement,’ which could address a consumer’s more enduring levels of interest and/or personal relevance of a particular brand to the individual.

Similarly, the pre-existence of customer/brand interactions is required prior to the emergence of consumer engagement as indicated in the model by the realm of ‘direct brand interactions’ referring to a consumer’s personal interactions with a particular brand, e.g. through purchase or use of a product/service, as opposed to indirect brand interactions which may be transmitted to consumers by relevant forms of mass communication. As such, ‘channel service orientation’ shown in Figure 1 addresses not only the specific degree of opportunity for human interaction characterising a particular exchange, but in addition, implicitly incorporates the particular level of customer-perceived service received e.g. on a particular purchase occasion.

The model also shows the potential level of the particular wine channel service orientation adopted by a specific wine outlet, as addressed in the literature review. Further, focal situational characteristics residing in e.g. the purchase and/or consumption situations may exert a demonstrable effect on resultant consumer purchase behaviours, including loyalty (e.g. Quester and Smart 1998; Hollebeek et al. 2007). Based on these antecedent factors, relevant consumer engagement levels are expected to emerge, which are thought to contribute to consumer loyalty outcomes as shown in the model. As such, consumer engagement may have an effect in the formation of customer-based brand equity (Keller 1998).

Figure 1: Conceptual Model





Realm of Direct Brand Interactions

The consumer's perceived degree of brand satisfaction was also addressed by incorporation of the construct of 'relationship quality,' a higher-order construct comprising consumer satisfaction, trust and commitment (Dorsch et al. 1998). As such, a consumer's perceived degree of relationship quality may exert an influence on ensuing levels of consumer engagement with a brand, as shown in Figure 1.

Conclusions & Future Research Directions

This paper has illuminated the need for further research on the emerging consumer engagement concept in wine research, which is thought to represent a potentially fruitful area contributing to the development of academic thought and business practice alike. The consumer engagement concept is not known to have received previous application in wine research, although it is posited in the present paper that further exploration of this concept may serve to develop enhanced understanding of wine consumer purchase-related decision-making and behavioural processes, including loyalty. A conceptual model was presented which proposes the level of wine channel service orientation act as a moderating factor in the development of specific consumer engagement in particular contexts. Specifically, higher levels of wine channel service provision are thought to contribute positively to consumer engagement levels, which, in turn are expected to generate favourable behavioural consequences in terms of customer loyalty. Further investigation and testing of these theorised relationships is, however, required.

Moreover, while consumer involvement represents a useful segmentation variable for wine research, the explicit incorporation of a behavioural element in the consumer engagement construct, which is lacking in consumer involvement, suggests a potentially superior explanatory and/or predictive power of the consumer engagement, relative to consumer involvement, construct. Despite these preliminary insights, further research into this area is needed in order to further substantiate and validate findings and before consumer engagement can be validly heralded as a step up to understanding wine consumer decision-making and behavioural processes.

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