

A 360-degree view of actor engagement in service co-creation

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Abstract

In recent years, discussion surrounding the construct of customer engagement in service research has gained significant attention from academics and practitioners alike. This discussion of engagement, an important topic for service research, has focused on the customer only, neglecting the roles of other actors, such as employees, who can play a large part in the value co-creation process. This paper is a call-to-action for academics to include a 360-degree view of engagement into the service research discourse. The employment of a service ecosystems perspective is suggested to include engagement from an actor-to-actor perspective. The objective is to focus on all actors who intend to participate, already actively participate in, or actors who are disengaged from the value co-creation process in such systems.

Keywords

Engagement, experience, co-creation, service ecosystem, actor-to-actor

Introduction

The current discussion in service research highlights customer engagement as an emerging and important topic (Brodie and Hollebeek, 2011; Ostrom et al., 2015; Van Doorn et al., 2010; Verhoef et al., 2010). Customer engagement is credited towards the positive affects it has on the firm and on other stakeholders (Brodie et al., 2011; Jaakola and Alexander, 2014; Verleye et al., 2014). Recent articles (Brodie et al., 2011; Javornik and Mandelli, 2012) point out that the concept of engagement has been prevalent across varying disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, organisational and political sciences. A thorough literature review has been conducted by researchers (Brodie et al., 2011) in order to identify the disciplines employing the notion of “engagement”. The findings

reveal these are as diverse as “civic engagement” in sociology (Kupchik and Catlaw, 2015; Mondak et al., 2010), “client engagement”, “family engagement” and “social engagement” in social work (Cortis et al., 2009; Duggan et al., 2000; George et al., 2015; Petriwskyj et al., 2015; Sabbath et al., 2015), health sciences (Wild et al., 2006) and psychology (Huo et al., 2009; Lyons-Ruth, 2015). Furthermore, “student engagement” in education (Dyson et al., 2015; Sinatra et al., 2015), “state engagement” in political science (Resnick, 2001) and law (Reiss, 2014) are discussed. The concepts of “employee engagement” (Jiang et al. 2015; Saks, 2006), “work engagement” (Bakker et al., 2011; Zacher et al., 2015) and “stakeholder engagement” (Dawkins, 2014; Vracheva et al., 2016) have entered organisational science and management research. Yet, an integration of all these perspectives, in particular from an actor’s point of view, appears to be lacking. This paper is a call-to-action to address this gap. It will be argued that the construct of engagement requires a 360-degree view across actors and disciplines.

Literature

When adopting an actor’s perspective of engagement in a market-based service ecosystem, customers and providers, as well as stakeholders, need to be taken into account. Viewed as customer engagement, Brodie et al. (2011, p. 260) define the construct as a “psychological state that occurs by virtue of interactive, cocreative customer experiences with a focal agent/object (e.g., a brand) in focal service relationships” and conceptualise it as multidimensional entailing cognitive, emotional and behavioural dimensions. Earlier work by Bruner (1986, p. 3, italics added) also suggests that experience is referring “to an *active self*, to a human being who not only *engages in* but *shapes an action*”.

In disciplines, such as social (Cortis et al., 2009) or health services (Wild et al., 2006), so-called client engagement is described as a client-owned (for example, patient) construct (Wild et al., 2006) influenced by cognitive, emotional and (voluntaristically) behavioural factors. However, client engagement is also viewed as “a complex and multifaceted experience” based on unique interpersonal relationships with clients and their life sphere (George et al., 2015) by “interacting and communicating with clients effectively and providing opportunities to contribute” (Petriwskyj et al., 2015), herewith taking a service provider’s perspective. The latter is comparable with the definition of “employee engagement” in organisational science. From the perspective of an organisation’s workforce, employee engagement is used as a “distinct and unique construct that consists of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components that are associated with individual role performance” (Saks, 2006, p. 602), thus focusing on an intra-organisational (for example, connection to co-workers) but also on an extra-organisational perspective (for example, relationship to customers). The latter is also apparent in an organisation’s stakeholder engagement where the provider, as such, undertakes practices to involve stakeholders in a positive fashion in organisational activities (Dawkins, 2014).

Discussion

The review of the extant literature across disciplines reveals the diverse actor-related perspectives of engagement which are yet to be sufficiently integrated into the current academic discussion.

The first call is to *dissolve the firm-customer divide of engagement*. Brodie et al. (2011) argue that specific customer-firm interactions may also occur within broader networks of

customers and/or stakeholders. Verleye et al. (2014) suggest that assisting other customers can be seen as a behavioural manifestation of customer engagement. Recent discussion questions the usefulness of pre-designated roles such as producers and consumers etc. Scholars urge the dissolution of such distinction by addressing all as simply “actors”. This incorporates an actor-to-actor view in value co-creation (Vargo and Lusch, 2016). This paper proposes to apply the same notion to the construct of engagement. By adapting such a view, the concept of engagement becomes all-inclusive and is applied to all different types of human actors present in a service ecosystem (cf. Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014).

The second call is to comprehend *engagement as evolving from interactive processes among actors* (Brodie et al., 2011). If engagement reflects psychological states based on interactive experiences with another actor (Brodie et al., 2011) and entails behaviour founded on an actor’s volition (Verleye et al., 2014), such a concept requires its application to all actors engaged in service exchange and their psychological state and behaviour (cf. Higgins and Scholer, 2009; Pham and Avnet, 2009). Engagement can be viewed as emerging in interaction, like a seesaw, among the actors (and resources) involved.

The third and related call is to view *engagement as an encompassing construct*. When discussing the construct of engagement it is helpful to understand the etymological origins of the term. The verb “to engage” describes “to do or take part in something” and “to give attention to something” (Merriam-Webster 2016a). The adjective “engaged” means to be “involved in activity” and to be “greatly interested” (Merriam-Webster 2016b). “Engaging” as an adjective can be described as “attractive or interesting”

(Merriam-Webster, 2016c). Hence, “to engage” involves an active and intentional mind and can relate to an activity, for example, co-creation, i.e. it encompasses both psychological state (cognitive, emotional; Brodie et al., 2011) and behaviour (Brodie et al., 2011; Verleye et al., 2014; Van Doorn et al., 2010). To be “engaged” relates to being receptive to something or somebody which or who activates and stimulates a cognitive or emotional response, i.e. creates a psychological state. In addition, it also describes the immersion into an activity. “Engaging” sits in the middle, i.e. it relates to the stimulus, for example, an actor and / or a resource that is the trigger. Brodie et al. (2011) speak of agent and object.

Implications

If these three calls are included in the current discussion of engagement, the construct can be viewed as emerging in interaction, referring to all actors (and resources) involved and encompassing both psychological state as well as behaviour. Figure 1 represents the three points discussed above. Such a notion would also have **several** implications.

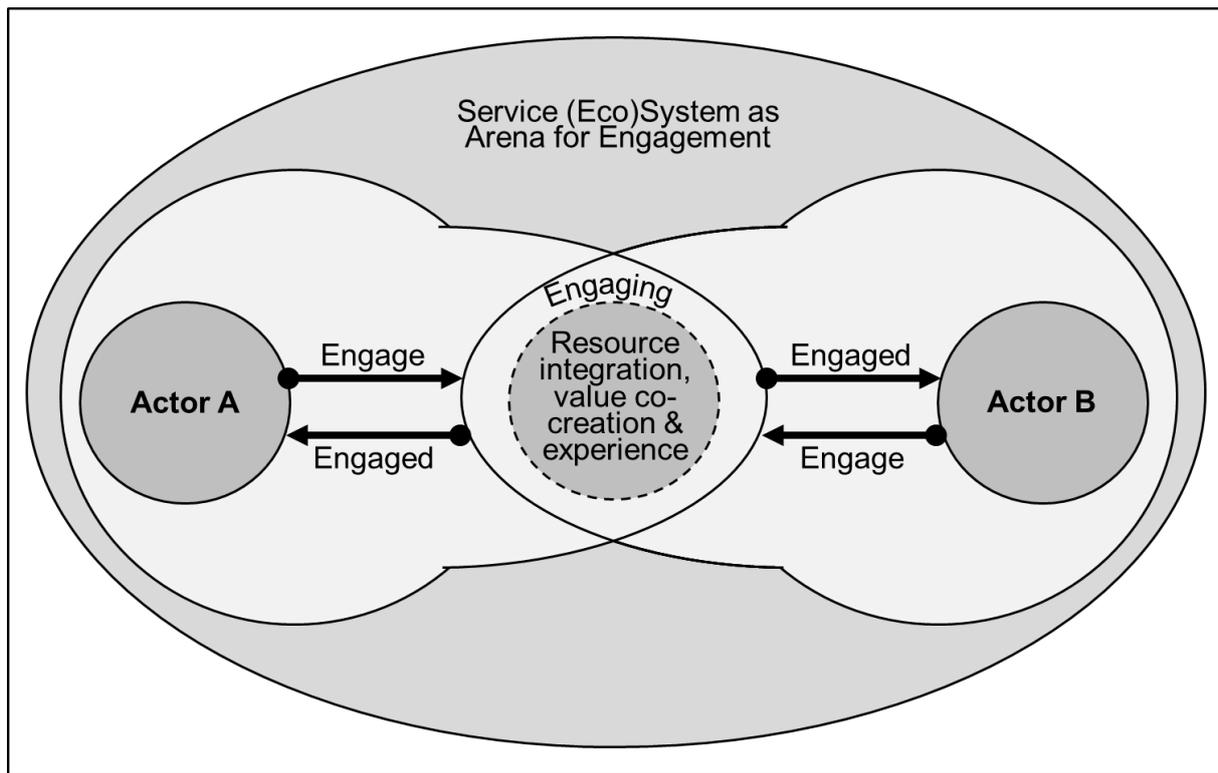


Figure 1. Engagement as an interactive actor-to-actor construct

The emergent nature of engagement in interaction, in other words its dynamic characteristic (Brodie et al., 2011), implies that actors not only have a certain level of engagement with another actor or resource but also that an actor's engagement level varies throughout the interactive process. This may require a certain (additional) stimulus to initiate and increase the actor's engagement at the beginning, during and towards the end of the interactive process. Otherwise, actors might show repulsion instead of attraction towards the focus of value co-creation and experience (Higgins, 2006; Scholer and Higgins, 2009). Strengthening (or weakening) engagement in such interactive processes might also have an impact on the level of engagement from a time horizon perspective for related and potentially even unrelated co-creation processes in the future (Higgins and Scholer, 2009) with (other) actors or objects (Brodie et al., 2011).

Understanding engagement as a multi-actor construct necessitates for its measurement the use of corresponding scales to evaluate the level of engagement of each actor in the focal interaction, either towards other actors or objects, for example resources, or both as the focus of value co-creation activities. Furthermore, levels of engagement towards the various other actors and resources being part of the same value co-creation activities need to be measured. An actor may choose primary and secondary activities within one value co-creation process and hence their engagement with the different activities, including other actors and resources may vary (cf. Higgins et al., 1995). This may also differ among actors. The same other actors as well as resources present in the service ecosystem may stimulate different foci of engagement, engagement levels and value co-creation behaviour from the perspectives of the different focal actors involved.

Defining engagement as a psychological state as well as a behavioural concept allows for its boundary-spanning use as an integrative concept across disciplines. Yet, such consensus has yet to be reached to use one definition and conceptualisation of engagement across disciplines. Although this might mean the application of a more generic construct of engagement, it could transcend disciplines and be applied by, for example, Human Resources Managers and Customer Experience Managers alike. For this to eventuate, “silo” thinking and discipline-related compartmentalisation need to be overcome.

Conclusion

Engagement need not be viewed as a construct with a delimited application. As the literature review and discussion reveals, engagement is a prevalent construct in multiple areas and is yet to transcend disciplines in order to form a coherent understanding.

Hence, it is important to apply a 360-degree view of engagement, which focuses on all actors and their active selves (cf. Bruner, 1986) and to interpret it as an encompassing concept with “receptive” (i.e. psychological) as well as “transmissive” (i.e. behavioural) properties. This may assist researchers to cross boundaries and, when conducting research in areas of value co-creation (Vargo and Lusch, 2016) and experience (Bruner, 1986), may permit an actor-to-actor perspective of analysis.

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