The Impacts of Customer Engagement on Brand Equity in E-Commerce

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Abstract

Although there are number of customer engagement studies in engagement processing, antecedences and consequences of customer engagement, and its conceptualization and measurement, there are limited studies that have studies customer engagement from the branding perspective, especially in terms of brand-value creation. This study aims to determine the impacts of customer engagement on brand equity in E-commerce platforms in Thailand. The hypotheses were proposed to test the influence of customer engagement on brand equity. The samples of 358 respondents were collected by using self-administered questionnaire survey. The path analysis was implemented to test the hypotheses by using structural equation modelling method. The results suggest that customer engagement positively influences brand equity in all four dimensions. The results of the study were discussed.

Keywords: Customer engagement, Brand, Brand equity, E-Commerce, Engagement, Cognitive

I. INTRODUCTION

In the present days, it is clear that the growth in number of online shoppers has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is because the state policies like: lockdown, stay-at-home order, work from home policy, or curfew have been implemented in numerous countries around the world. Some businesses have been closed or limited number of business hours. Therefore, it is clearly that, with this COVID-19 situation, if people cannot go out and shopping, they could turn to buy what they want from online platforms.

In Thailand, the market value of E-commerce is about $7.09 billion in 2021 and continue growing (Leesa-Nguansuk, 2020). The number of internet users is increasing by 3.4 million from 2020 to 2021 as well as the number of active social media users (Hootsuite, 2021). Most of E-commerce activities like using credit cards, making online transaction, online banking, or pays bill online, have increasing since the COVID-19 Pandemic in Thailand.

With this increasing number of customer engagement on online-activities, it provides a valuable marketing strategy for creating valuable relationships with customer, like customer-brand relationship. Therefore, marketers are investing more time and resources in interacting with online-customer, while researchers are examining the opportunities for utilizing online marketing as a strategy for generating engaged consumers especially related to E-Commerce opportunities (Calderón-Monge & Ramírez-Hurtado, 2021). More importantly, the research stream of 'engagement-related dynamics' has become more interested due to it is expected to lead to superior organizational performance outcomes.

Although there are number of customer engagement studies in engagement processing, antecedences and consequences of customer engagement, and its conceptualization and measurement, there are limited studies that have studies customer engagement from the branding perspective, especially in terms of brand-value creation (Naumann, Bowden, & Gabbott, 2020; Osei-Frimpong & McLean, 2018; Pagani & Malacarne, 2017; Thakur, 2019).

Therefore, it is questionable that how do consumers engagement create a brand value? And how does customer engagement process in the brand building program? This study aims to determine the impacts of customer engagement on brand equity in E-commerce platforms in Thailand. This would enhance the knowledge of online consumer behaviors and assist the online marketing practitioners to design an online marketing plan to create brand equity in the mind of customers.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. E-Commerce

The electronic commerce (E-commerce) refers to a business model that allows companies and individuals to buy and sell goods and services over the Internet. E-commerce operates in four major market segments and can be conducted over computers, tablets, smartphones, and other smart devices. Nearly every imaginable product and service is available through E-commerce transactions, including books, music, plane tickets, and financial services such as stock investing and online banking. In the recent days, consumer can engage on E-commerce platform via mobile applications, social media service platforms, website or webpage on various online devices.

B. Customer Engagement

Customer engagement has been one of the main stream in marketing researches in the last decade (Bowden, 2009; Hollebeek & Chen, 2014). For Customer engagement theoretical foundation, there are various forms of the concept, including 'consumer engagement'

(Haili, 2020), 'Customer Engagement' (Linda, Tripti Ghosh, RiteshPandey, PriyavratSanyal, & Moira, 2021) 'customer engagement behavior' (Van Doorn et al., 2010), 'customer–brand engagement' (Hollebeek & Chen, 2014; Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014) , 'community engagement' (Wu, Fan, & Zhao, 2018), 'continued engagement intention' (Chen, Tsou, Chou, & Ciou, 2019) , and 'brand engagement in self-concept' (Palazon, Delgado-Ballester, & Sicilia, 2018).

The past literatures shows that there are numbers of conceptualizations and definitions of customer engagement (Bowden, 2009; Hollebeek & Chen, 2014; Linda et al., 2021; Simona & Alin, 2021). These conceptualizations and definitions of customer engagement in previous literatures are differed because of their theoretical perspectives which are, for example, engagement objects (products/services, online/offline) or subject (she/he), term of engagement (payment method, level of participation), or engagement behaviors (helping, reviewing, commenting) (Bayraktar & Yıldırım, 2019; Hollebeek et al., 2014).

In addition, customer engagement has primarily been defined either in the concept of psychological phenomena or behavioral contribution. The most accepted definition of customer engagement is from the work of Bowden (2009)'s. Bowden (2009) defines customer engagement as "a psychological process that helps understand how customer loyalty forms and can be maintained. He uses various measures such as satisfaction, commitment, involvement, trust, and brand loyalty to explain the process of customer engagement". Recently, many researchers have focused on the behavioral approaches of Customer Engagement, especially in the context of social media in the pattern of likes, comments, and shares (Gainous et al., 2020; Reirveld et al., 2020).

For the study conceptualization standpoint, the majority of the studies on customer engagement

pointed out that customer engagement is a multidimensional concept with three major components: cognitive, emotional (affection), and behavioral (activation) (Bayraktar & Yıldırım, 2019; Bowden, 2009). Considering the multidimensionality of this concept, various authors propose the empirical examination of customer engagement as a higher-order construct measured through three simultaneous dimensions. For this concept, Hollebeek et al. (2014) proposed a measurement scale based on three similar dimensions of customer engagement which are cognitive processing, affection, and activation. Then, previous literatures have implemented this proposed scale in social media studies and verified its validity (Harrigan, Evers, Miles, & Daly, 2018; Obilo, Chefor, & Saleh, 2021).

For this study, the author focused on the customer engagement which related to online business. The three dimensions of customer engagement found to be statistically reliable to measure (Bowden, 2009; Hollebeek et al., 2014). Each of three components, for this study, refer to; (1) cognitive referring to absorption, attention, awareness, cognitive processing (Chen et al., 2019); (2) emotional, referring to enthusiasm, enjoyment, pleasure, positive affect for a brand (Bowden, 2009); (3) behavioral, referring to energy, effort and time spent on a brand.

For further explanation, cognitive engagement represents the processing, concentration and interest in an object (de Castro, 2017; Ghasemian Sahebi, Moshabaki, & Khodadad Hosseini, 2018) and refers to being immersed in the content of the brand social platform. For emotional engagement, it is expected to occur through recurrent feeling of these emotional responses after a certain time of satisfying cognitive immersion in brand social networks (Kuzgun & Josiassen, 2016) and refers to the consumer's level of excitement, interest, fun, pleasure, and happiness derived from engaging in brand related content or activities.

Behavioral engagement refers to the willingness to devote time and effort to the brand social platform. This can be seen in the fig.1

C. Brand Equity

A brand is a collection of symbols, experiences, associations or a combination of them intended to identify the goods and services of one seller from group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competition (Keller, 1993). Aaker (1996) argued that a brand is an intangible but critical of what a company should provide to consumers. A consumer generally does not have a relationship with a producer or service, but he or she may have a relationship with a brand. In part, a brand is a set of promises. It implies trust, consistency, and a defined set of expectations. Branding is commonly defined as the activities of creating added value in the minds of consumers, which includes building perceived value beyond the observable physical value of products or services (D. Aaker, 1996a, 1996b; D. A. Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993). Branding objective is to create the value to the customer by imprinting the psychological thoughts of the brand the customer memory, which widely called "brand awareness" (Aaker, 1996b; Keller, 1993; Keller & Lehmann, 2006). Therefore, brand and branding strategy is a major mission for companies in the present days to gain the competitive advantage and place their brand in the mind of consumers.

This value added of a brand has long been recognized as brand value or brand equity (Keller & Lehmann, 2006; Pappu, Quester, & Cooksey, 2006). Brand equity provides the primary point of differentiation among products and services. Building brand equity empowers companies to achieve negotiation power, increase effective marketing communication and enhance marketing mix performance (Yoo & Jeong, 2013). In addition, strong brand equity offers an opportunity to implement the brand extension strategy.

The concept of brand equity has been discussed, debated and argued for decades in variety perspectives (Keller & Lehmann, 2006; Simon & Sullivan, 1993). Brand equity is one of most important concepts in the marketing practice as well as in the academic marketing research. There were intense of literature in brand equity and brand value during 1990s. It was a main stream of marketing research according the shifting of the marketing paradigm and changing of consumer behavior (Aaker, 1991; Doyle, 2001; Keller, 1993; Rust, Lemon, & Zeithaml, 2004). Many marketing scholars tried to define the term of brand equity and brand value and proposed the domain of these constructs (Cobb-Walgren, Ruble, & Donthu, 1995; Park & Srinivasan, 1994; Simon & Sullivan, 1993; Yoo, Donthu, & Lee, 2000). All of them commonly defined the brand equity in terms of an intangible asset or added value of the brand and in terms of marketing effects attributable to the brand.

Aaker (1996) defined that "brand equity is the set of assets and liabilities linked to a brand that add to or subtract from its value to the consumers and business". Simon and Sullivan (1990) have viewed brand equity as "the incremental discounted future cash flows that would result from a product having a brand name, as compared to the proceed that would accrue if the same product did not have that brand name". Rust, Zeithaml, and Lemon (2004) have viewed brand equity as "customers' subjective and intangible assessment of the brand, above and beyond its objectively perceive value". They also proposed three sources of brand equity which are customer brand awareness, customer brand attitudes, and customer perception of brand ethics.

This study adopted the concept of Aaker's brand equity to create the research model. Aaker (1991)

summarized the brand equity into 5 categories; brand loyalty, name awareness, perceived quality, brand associations and other proprietary (as in the fig.1) as the followings;

Brand Associations (BAS) – Brand associations refer to a set of associations or images which differentiate the product or service from competitors. Brand associations are included those with product attributed, a celebrity spokesperson, or a particular symbol. Brand associations play a major role in driving brand identity and brand personality. In addition, brand associations stand for what a company wants to present in consumers' mind.

Perceived Quality (PQ)– Perceived quality is the association of overall quality which a consumer perceived. It is normally based on the knowledge of a consumer on a product or service. The quality perception may have a different form which depends on types of industries. Perceive quality drives financial performance of the brand.

Brand Awareness (BAW) – Brand awareness refers to the strength of a brand's presence in the consumers' mind. Brand awareness is an undervalued component of brand equity due to the intangible of its measure. Brand awareness can affect perception and attitude. Brand awareness reflects the salience of the brand in the customer mind. The level of brand awareness is based on the ability of recognition of a consumer.

Brand Loyalty (BL) – Brand loyalty is a key to determine the value of a brand due to the future sales and profits can be expected from highly loyal consumers. Aaker (1996) stated that brand loyalty can be measures by satisfaction of the brand.

Other Proprietary Brand Assets – This asset represents customer perceptions and reactions to the brand such as patents, trademarks, and channel relationships. These assets must be tied to the brand, not to the

company or the firm. This dimension of brand equity was not included in the research model.
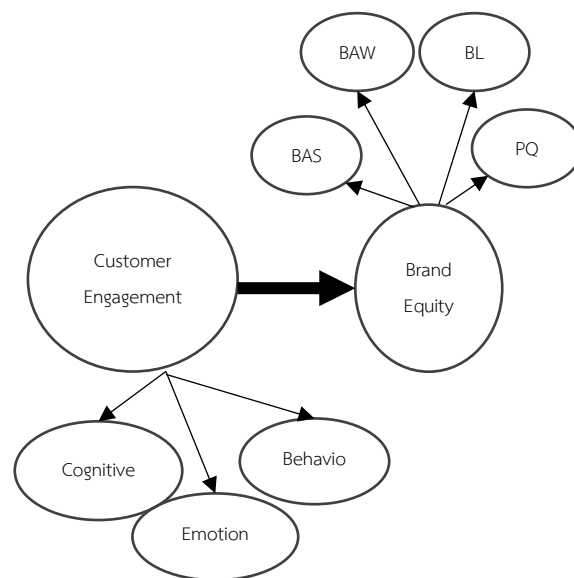

Figure 1: Research model

D. Customer engagement and Brand Equity

For this study, customer engagement refers to the cognitive abilities, behavioral manifestation, and a state on mind of being emotionally invested with the focal object, which is a brand. Previous researches agree that customer engagement is a psychological state that leads to frequent interactions with the focal object (brand) that go beyond transactional motive of merely a purchase (Corkum, Lie, Crish, Jobb, & Adreew, 2021; John Paul Basewe, Henry, Abednego Feehi Okoe, Robert Owusu, & Robert, 2018). Previous literatures have investigated and found the relationship between customer engagement and brand as a focal object (Bayraktar & Yıldırım, 2019; Haili, 2020; Matosas-López & Romero-Ania, 2021). Bayraktar and Yilirim (2019) proposed that customer engagement in brand social media is related to interactions and communications with the brand and other customers. This suggested that there is a relationship between customer engagement and brand-related factors.

Therefore, it can hypothesize that customers who have a high cognitive level of a brand more likely to have a high level of brand awareness. In addition, customers who have a positive attitude, favor emotion, or good feeling to a brand more likely to have a positive brand image in their mind. Furthermore, customers who have high frequent interactions with a brand lead to a high brand involvement (Ho & Chung, 2020). Therefore, this study hypothesizes that:

H1a: Cognitive Engagement positively relate to Brand Associations

H1b: Cognitive Engagement positively relate to Brand Awareness

H1c: Cognitive Engagement positively relate to Brand Loyalty

H1d: Cognitive Engagement positively relate to Perceived Quality

H2a: Emotional Engagement positively relate to Brand Associations

H2b: Emotional Engagement positively relate to Brand Awareness

H2c: Emotional Engagement positively relate to Brand Loyalty

H2d: Emotional Engagement positively relate to Perceived Quality

H3a: Behavioral Engagement positively relate to Brand Associations

H3b: Behavioral l Engagement positively relate to Brand Awareness

H3c: Behavioral Engagement positively relate to Brand Loyalty

H3d: Behavioral Engagement positively relate to Perceived Quality

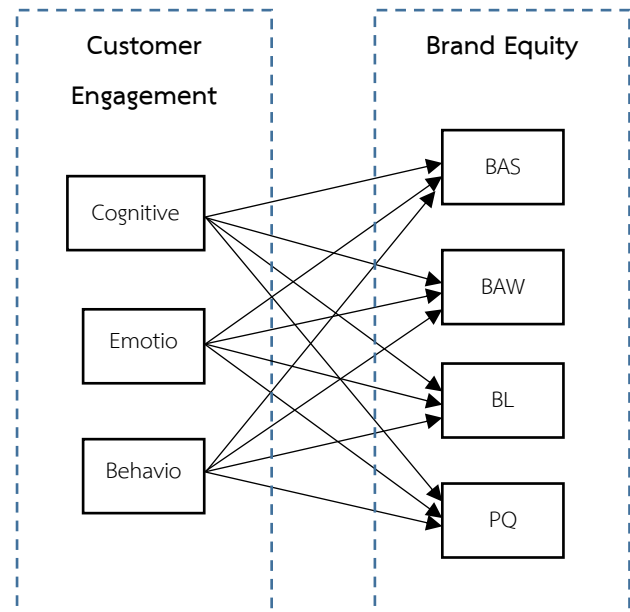This can be seen in the figure 2.

Figure 2: Path model

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

There were two-stage of research methodology and analysis; Stage 1 is to gather the qualitative data, purify the data and check the reliability and viridity. Stage 2 is to analyze the data with SEM.

Twenty in-depth interviews were conducted to identify the brand of E-Commerce Platforms and collect the quality information of the customer engagement attitude and behavior. The interview process allows the study to verify the measurement items and validate the components of customer engagement and brand equity. The results of the interview pointed out that the E-Commerce platforms which one-hundred percent of all interviewees know and realize are SHOPEE and LAZADA, and most of them preferred to purchase online products from SHOPEE. Therefore, the focused brand in this study is SHOPEE.

Next, the pilot test of one-hundred and two samples were tested. The exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) were tested to indicate the reliability and validity of the data. The results of the EFA show that cross loading items were

eliminated and other measurement items were consistent with the construct validity.

Four major criteria of fit indexes were applied to check the fit of the SEM model (R. B. Kline, 1998; T. Kline, 2005); $\chi2$/df, RMSEA, CFI, and SRMR (GFI and AGFI are affected by sample size (Sharma, Mukherjee, Kumar, & Dillon, 2005) and TLI is highly correlated to CFI). For this study, the SEM fit indexes show that the chi-square to degree of freedom ratio ($\chi2$/df) is 2.775 which is a reasonable fit (Kline, 2005). CFI was exceeded the acceptable fit point at 0.90 (CFI=0.932), RMSEA was 0.056 which considered to be reasonable fit as well as SRMR which was below 0.10 (SRMR = 0.065).

Therefore, the results of the CFA show that the sample data were a favorable fit to the measurement model. Hence, the structural model was reasonably accepted. The fit indexes for the path model are as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The model fit indexes for the path model

χ^2/df, $p < 0.001$	2.775
GFI	0.912
NFI	0.896
RFI	0.875
IFI	0.953
TLI	0.902
CFI	0.932
RMSEA, $p < 0.001$	0.056
SRMR	0.065

The samples of 358 respondents were collected by using self-administered questionnaire survey. The path analysis was implemented to test the hypotheses by using structural equation modelling method.

IV. RESEARCH RESULTS

The sample consisted of 358 respondents and 98 of them are male while 260 are female. Seventy-two percent of the respondents were between 21-40 years old while only 4.19% were less than 21 years old and 23.74%% were older than 40 years old. Approximately Fifty-eight percent of the respondents have income per month less than 30,000 baht and Forty-two percent of then have income per month more than or equal to 30,000 baht. Seventy-four percent of the samples are single and about seventy-nine percent graduated in Bachelor degree and higher. The majority of the respondents were a company employee.

Table 2: Characteristics of the respondents

Demographic Characteristics	Freq.	%
Gender		
Male	98	27.37
Female	260	72.63
Age		
Less than 21 years old	15	4.19
21 - 30 years old	135	37.71
31 - 40 years old	123	34.36
Older than 40 years old	85	23.74
Income per Month		
Less than 15,000 baht	12	3.35
15,000 – 29,999 baht	196	54.75
30,000 – 69,999 baht	106	29.61
70,000 – 99,999 baht	32	8.94
More than 100,000 baht	12	3.35
Marital Status		
Single	265	74.02
Married	79	22.07
Divorced / Widowed	11	3.07
Separated	3	0.84
Education		
High School or Lower	16	4.47
Vocational Degree	58	16.20
Bachelor Degree	206	57.54
Higher than Bachelor Degree	78	21.79
Occupation		
Company Employee	196	54.75
Government Officer	66	18.44
Self Employed / Business Owner	75	20.95
Student / Housewife	18	5.03
Other	3	0.84

The results show that the cognitive engagement significantly and positively influences brand associations, brand awareness, and brand loyalty. However, it does not significantly relate to perceived quality. For emotional engagement, it significantly influences brand associations, brand awareness, brand loyalty, and perceive quality. Similarly, to the behavioral engagement, brand associations, brand awareness, brand loyalty, and perceive quality are also significantly influenced by the behavioral engagement. This shows in the table 3.

Table 3: The results of hypothesis testing

Hypotheses and Path Analysis		Standardized Regression Weights	Critical Ratio (Z-value)	p-value
H1a	CE	→	BAS	H1a
H1b	CE	→	BAW	H1b
H1c	CE	→	BL	H1c
H1d	CE	→	PQ	H1d
H2a	EE	→	BAS	H2a
H2b	EE	→	BAW	H2b
H2c	EE	→	BL	H2c
H2d	EE	→	PQ	H2d
H3a	BE	→	BAS	H3a
H3b	BE	→	BAW	H3b
H3c	BE	→	BL	H3c
H3d	BE	→	PQ	H3d

Note: * shows p-value < 0.05

    ** shows p-value < 0.01

*** shows p-value < 0.001

NS – Not significant at a 0.05 significance level

The standardized coefficients are shown in the blanket.

CE – Customer Engagement

EE - Emotional Engagement

BE – Behavioral Engagement

BAS – Brand Associations

BAW – Brand Awareness

BL – Brand Loyalty

PQ – Perceived Quality

V. DISCUSSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results suggest that customer engagement positively influences brand equity in all four dimensions. This supports the study's in-depth interview which provided some evidences that the more customers engage the SHOPEE online marketplace, the more they realize, perceive, and understand the brand. The findings reveal that SHOPEE's customer engagement is a crucial factor in explaining how brand equity can be created. However, the cognitive engagement does not influence the perceive quality of a consumer. This implies that the cognitive process of a customer on a brand does not lead to how the customer realize the quality of the product. Among three dimensions of the customer engagement, the behavioral engagement shows the strongest relationship to brand associations and brand awareness. It suggests that customers, who fully focused on the platform interactions, were stimulated in learning more about their favorite brand as well as having a good picture of the brand in their mind. Behavioral engagement is also importance for keeping the customer loyal and making a repeat purchasing. It is also indicated that customers are willing to take part in brand-related initiatives. Repeated Interaction would magnify the customer-brand relationship.

Emotional engagement strongly relates to brand awareness and perceived quality as in the results. This suggests that emotional engagement is shows the key role of placing a good experience in the mind of customers and leads to the perception of quality of E-Commerce platform. For example, customers who feel exciting, fun, pleasure, or happy in their experience while they are engaging the platform, would perceive more value of the brand. In additions, the results of the study found that all customer engagement dimensions significantly influence factor the brand loyalty. This

result is compatible with the previous findings (John Paul Basewe et al., 2018; Vinerean & Opreana, 2021)

This study provides empirical evidence to support that customer engagement process is a part of brand building program for an E-Commerce platform. Customer engagement can motivate brand equity in all dimensions (brand awareness, brand image, brand loyalty, and perceive quality). Company must exploit points of engagement for a customer to pursuit along the customer journey in order to create a strong brand equity.

The major limitations of this study are that the generalization of the respondents and single-country sampling. Another limitation is that the study focused on a single brand, so the results were not generalized across the market. Finally, this study applied an online survey to collect data which may lead to measurement error and bias. However, the study implemented a reliability and validity analysis which presented a strong proof for validation of the statistic instruments. Therefore, the outcomes have a certain level of credibility.

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