

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL SUPPORT ON CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT IN ONLINE NONPROFIT COMMUNITIES

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Abstract: *While several studies have explored marketing implications in virtual environments, there has been limited focus on the factors influencing customer engagement in nonprofit organizations. Therefore, this paper aims to investigate the effect of social support on customer engagement within online nonprofit communities. The author conducted an online survey targeting individuals who follow nonprofit organizations' Facebook pages. The results indicate that emotional support plays a significant role in predicting customer engagement. This research adds to the existing literature on customer engagement in the context of online nonprofit communities and offers valuable insights for marketing practices.*

• Keywords: *social support, customer engagement, nonprofit community.*

JEL codes: L31, M10, M31

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1. Introduction

Nonprofit organizations often focus on addressing social, environmental, or cultural issues that are overlooked by government and for-profit sectors, thereby filling service gaps and advocating for marginalized or underrepresented groups. They unite people around common goals and causes, fostering a sense of community and collective action. Pope et al. (2009) categorize nonprofit customers into three main groups: donors, clients, and volunteers. Nonprofit clients receive services, volunteers seek experience and the opportunity to contribute, while donors focus on the efficient distribution of resources. With the rise of digital platforms that enable interaction, collaboration, and resource sharing, online nonprofit communities have become key tools for connecting with and engaging customers. Customer engagement (CE) in these online communities plays an essential role in relationship-building, creating a sense of community, and encouraging participation and actions like volunteering, word-of-mouth promotion, or donations (Algharabat, 2018).

Despite the advantages of CE in online nonprofit communities, research on factors that stimulate CE in this context remains limited and warrants further exploration. Existing literature often examines CE as a unidimensional construct (Sprott

et al., 2009). However, when considering CE as a multidimensional construct including cognitive processing, affection, and activation factors (Hollebeek et al., 2014) it remains unclear whether these elements can stimulate CE in online nonprofit communities. Thus, this study seeks to address the gap by exploring how CE is fostered within the specific context of online nonprofit communities.

2. Literature review

2.1. Customer engagement in online nonprofit community

Customer Engagement (CE) was developed as a sub-unit of engagement that focuses on interactions or participation with specific brands or services (Vivek et al., 2014). It is defined as a customer's positive cognitive, emotional, and behavioral activity related to brand interactions (Hollebeek, 2014). Although some studies have explored CE from a unidimensional perspective, a multidimensional approach is more commonly favored (e.g., Romero, 2017). The key dimensions of CE are cognitive processing, affection, and activation (Romero, 2017). First, cognitive processing refers to the level of thought and elaboration a customer applies to brand-related interactions. Second, affection reflects the customer's positive emotional response during a brand interaction. Third, activation involves the energy, effort, and time a customer invests

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in a brand during an interaction. Consistent with previous studies, online CE encompasses customers' online behaviors related to brand engagement, extending beyond mere purchases.

In the nonprofit sector, Akingbola (2019) identifies value congruence, along with rewards and recognition, as key antecedents of CE. Drawing from Social Exchange Theory, these scholars suggest that the cognitive, emotional, and physical energy customers invest is influenced by the resources and support provided by nonprofit organizations (NPOs). Shared values, which are central to NPOs, promote engagement and involvement in problem-solving activities. NPO missions and goals reflect values that customers perceive as worth their resources. However, while several NPOs incorporate values as organizational resources linked to performance, Helmig et al. (2015) found no significant difference in value prioritization or performance across different value groups. Another important antecedent of CE in nonprofits is rewards and recognition. Since nonprofit customers are motivated by the opportunity to contribute to social causes and align with the organization's values, extrinsic rewards are less important. Instead, nonprofit customers are typically motivated by intrinsic rewards, such as recognition and the chance to contribute to a greater social purpose (Akingbola, 2013). This suggests that non-monetary rewards, equal policies, and environments that reflect their values are more significant. However, nonprofit customers' engagement with rewards and recognition varies, as individuals perceive the benefits of their contributions and the rewards they receive differently (Akingbola, 2019).

2.2. Social support in online nonprofit community

Social support refers to the resources individuals perceive as available to them from non-professionals within both formal support groups and informal helping relationships (Gottlieb & Bergen, 2010). Offer (2012) suggests that social support is not just a result of connections but also emerges from one's efforts to collaborate and utilize their personal networks. When supported, individuals may feel warmth and satisfaction in their social interactions, gradually fulfilling their social needs (Liang et al., 2011). Researchers have explored various dimensions of social support, such as informational, emotional, instrumental,

and appraisal support (Barrera, 1986; House, 1981; Van Den Akker-Scheek et al., 2004). However, since online social support is often intangible, informational and emotional support are the most commonly discussed dimensions in existing literature (Coulson, 2005; Huang et al., 2010; Madjar, 2008). Informational support involves providing advice, suggestions, or knowledge to help others navigate their challenges (Lee, 2018). This type of support is seen when online community members share their experiences and offer guidance about services (Bagizzi & Dholakia, 2002). Emotional support, on the other hand, involves offering empathy, listening, and building trust. Through this, members not only gain support but also form relationships with friends in online communities. These two forms of support informational and emotional are the primary aspects in online communities (Liang et al., 2011). Therefore, this study will focus on informational and emotional support as separate constructs rather than as two dimensions of a broader social support construct.

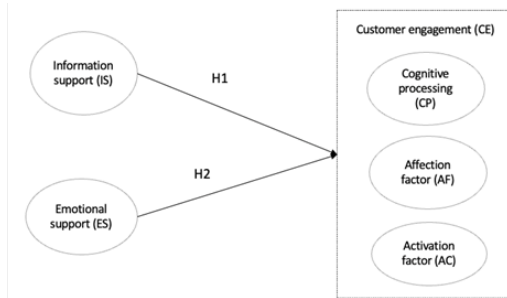
3. Hypothesis development and research model

Existing research on online communities suggests that members who receive strong support from others are more likely to reciprocate (Zhang et al., 2014). Specifically, online communities serve as effective platforms for providing comfort and solutions related to products, fostering trust and motivating members to contribute. Furthermore, as members' interpersonal trust grows through communication, they are more inclined to respond positively by offering advice, sharing experiences (informational support), and providing emotional comfort (emotional support). These actions are typical indicators of cognitive processes, affection, and activation in customer engagement (CE) (Van Doorn et al., 2010). Park et al. (2009) also emphasize that receiving social support in online communities is crucial for motivating social support. The sharing and reception of information or emotions significantly influence customers' intentions to engage with services (Liang et al., 2011). Based on this, this study proposes that:

H1. Informational support is positively related to CE in online nonprofit communities.

H2. Emotional support is positively related to CE in online nonprofit communities.

Figure 1. The research framework



4. Research method

A quantitative survey was conducted in May 2024 to gather data for empirically testing the research framework within online nonprofit communities. All survey items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). A total of 504 valid responses were collected from Vietnamese individuals who follow the Facebook pages of nonprofit organizations (NPOs) related to charity foundations that share information about their activities and solicit donations. Respondents were filtered by asking if they frequently follow the news feed of their preferred NPO’s Facebook page. Those who answered yes were asked to think about their most favorite NPO’s Facebook page, with the nonprofit’s name automatically populated for all related questions in the survey. Of the 504 respondents, 42.5% were male (214 individuals) and 55.8% were female (281 individuals). Regarding age, 62.3% were between 18 and 30 years old, and 29.4% were aged 31 to 50 years. The largest proportion of the sample consisted of students, making up 48%, while officers and business people accounted for 8.1% and 11.1%, respectively. Geographically, the sample included 58.9% from Hanoi, 5.8% from Da Nang, 20.6% from Ho Chi Minh City, and 14.7% from other provinces.

Table 1. Measurement scales

Construct	Authors
Informational support (IS1-IS3)	Zhang, M., Hu, M., Guo, L., & Liu, W. (2017)
IS1: On this community, some people would offer suggestions when I need help.	
IS2: When I encounter a problem, some people on this community would give me information to help me overcome the problem.	
IS3: When faced with difficulties, some people on this community would help me discover the cause and provide me with suggestions.	

Construct	Authors
Emotional support (ES1-ES3)	Zhang, M., Hu, M., Guo, L., & Liu, W. (2017)
ES1: When faced with difficulties, some people on this community comfort and encourage me.	
ES2: When faced with difficulties, some people on this community listen to me talk about my private feelings.	
ES3: When faced with difficulties, some people on this community express interest and concern in my well-being.	
CE “cognitive processing” (CP1-CP3)	Hollebeek, Glynn and Brodie (2014)
CP1: Following its Facebook page gets me to think about [Non-profit organization X].	
CP2: I think about [Non-profit organization X] a lot when I’m following its Facebook page.	
CP3: Following its Facebook page stimulates my interest in learning more about [Non-profit organization X].	
CE “affection” factor (AF1-AF4)	Hollebeek, Glynn and Brodie (2014)
AF1: I feel very positive when I follow [Non-profit organization X].	
AF2: Following [Non-profit organization X] makes me happy.	
AF3: I feel good when I follow [Non-profit organization X].	
AF4: I’m proud to follow [Non-profit organization X].	
CE “activation” factor (AC1-AC3)	Hollebeek, Glynn and Brodie (2014)
AC1: I spend a lot of time following [Non-profit organization X] compared to other non-profit organizations.	
AC2: Whenever I’m following my non-profit social networking sites, I usually follow [Non-profit organization X].	
AC3: I follow [Non-profit organization X] the most.	

5. Findings

The authors utilized SPSS and AMOS software to analyze both the measurement model (via confirmatory factor analysis) and the structural model (including the proposed conceptual model and hypotheses). The Cronbach’s alpha values for Informational support, Emotional support, Cognitive processing, Affection, and Activation were 0.865, 0.885, 0.801, 0.858, and 0.8818, respectively, indicating high reliability for the measures.

Customer Engagement (CE) was treated as a second-order construct, and the model fit was assessed. The results demonstrated a satisfactory model fit, as all indices fell within the acceptable threshold ranges ($\chi^2 = 58.712$, $df = 31$; $\chi^2/df = 1.894$), CFI = 0.987, GFI = 0.977, TLI = 0.982, and RMSEA = 0.042 (Figure 2 and Table 2). The first-order constructs Cognitive processing (CP), Affection (AF), and Activation (AC) all showed significant coefficient values with CE as a second-order construct. Table 3 presents the discriminant validity, which was confirmed through Pearson correlations between constructs compared to the square roots of the average variance extracted along the diagonal, all of which were found to be acceptable.

Table 2. Discriminant validity of CE

Construct	AF	AC	CP
AF	0.786		
AC	0.547***	0.777	
CP	0.461***	0.549***	0.758

In the next phase of the structural equation modeling analysis, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed for all constructs. The coefficient alpha values for all constructs were found to be greater than 0.70. Additionally, all items were found to load significantly on their respective constructs, with standardized values exceeding 0.89 (Hair et al., 2009). The fit indices for the measurement model were all within the recommended ranges (i.e., $\chi^2 = 414.213$, $df = 254$, and $\chi^2/df = 1.631$, CFI = 0.976, GFI = 0.938, TLI = 0.972, and RMSEA = 0.035) (Hu & Bentler, 1999), indicating that the measurement model fit the observed data well.

To test the proposed hypotheses, structural equation modeling was applied to the research model. The results showed that all constructs had coefficient alpha values greater than 0.70. Observed items significantly loaded onto their respective constructs with standardized values above 0.89 (Hair et al., 2009). The fit indices for the measurement model again fell within the recommended levels (i.e., $\chi^2 = 491.452$, $df = 262$, and $\chi^2/df = 1.876$, CFI = 0.966, GFI = 0.927, TLI = 0.961, and RMSEA = 0.042) (Hu & Bentler, 1999), suggesting that the measurement model was a good fit for the observed data.

Table 3. Results of structural equation model

Hypothesis	Direction	Estimate	t-value	P	Result
H1	CE <--- IS	0.085	1.952	0.051	Rejected
H2	CE <--- ES	0.386	6.597	***	Supported

The result of hypotheses testing support postulated path for H2. Emotional support has an impact with $\gamma_{CE<ES} = 0.386$; t-value = 6.597. Unexpectedly, the hypothesis for Informational support is not supported in this case ($\gamma_{CE<IS} = 0.085$; t-value = 1.952). Hypothesis H1 is rejected; however, with p-value = 0.051, it can be said that Informational support may positively affect CE for 90% confidence limit

6. Discussion, conclusion and recommendation

Based on the data analysis and findings, this research offers several contributions. The author empirically tested the antecedents of Customer Engagement (CE) as a multidimensional construct,

including cognition, affection, and activation, within online nonprofit communities. The results reveal that only emotional support positively impacts CE in online nonprofit communities in Vietnam. This finding aligns with previous research conducted in different contexts (Algharabat et al., 2018). Informational support, however, was found not to influence CE in this case. This may be because Facebook, a widely used social media platform in Vietnam, has made information search relatively easy for users, who can access the information they need without difficulty. Furthermore, according to Resource Dependency Theory, nonprofit organizations actively post information and knowledge that encourage customers to take action, providing transparency and fostering engagement (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). A limitation of this study is the use of the snowball sampling method. Future research could utilize alternative sampling techniques to improve the generalizability of findings across different NPO customer groups. For example, systematic random sampling of NPO customers, including donors, volunteers, and clients (from the NPO database), could generate a more representative sample. Additionally, since this study focused on NPO Facebook pages, we recommend that future research test our model across different social media platforms used by NPOs.

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