



A Bibliometric Review of Customer Engagement in the International Domain: Reviewing the Past and the Present

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Abstract

This study addresses/examines how the conceptual structure of customer engagement in the international context has changed since its emergence. These layers of analysis will assist researchers to uncover the historical basis, and identify the changes in the knowledge structure of customer engagement research in the international business domain. Our bibliometric analysis included 151 customer engagement articles. We employed cluster visualization (VOS) along with text mining to classify the most important and informative research in customer engagement in the international context.

Keywords Research method · Customer engagement · VOS · Text mining · Leximancer · Global · International marketing

Introduction

The burgeoning rise of service activities around the world can be analyzed through a new concept called customer engagement. In such challenging environment, making customers engage with firms has been identified as a valuable way of enhancing firm performance (Chatterjee et al. 2022). Consequently, with such performance consideration, service firms should be more motivated to make their customers more engaged. Researchers (e.g., Liu et al. 2022; Kumar and Pansari 2016; Verhoef et al. 2010) have argued that customer engagement is a key success factor for different firms. Regarding this, engaged customers make a profound contribution to firms beyond purchase interaction (Chatterjee et al. 2022; Kumar and Reinartz 2016). All these value contributions to firms have been accommodated in a concept called ‘customer engagement’ introduced by Van Doorn et al. (2010).

In previous years, customer engagement has drawn considerable attention from a wide range of researchers in different fields such as marketing (Gupta et al. 2018), economics (e.g., Zaborek and Mazur 2017), and hospitality management (e.g., Rather et al. 2022). Such vast interest is not surprising due to the consequences of customer engagement, such as positive word of mouth (Oliveira Santini et al. 2020). Due to the positive impact of customer engagement on firm performance (Ho et al. 2020), over the past decade, researchers have analyzed a wide range of relationships concerning customer engagement such as customer engagement marketing (Harmeling et al. 2017), or peer engagement behavior (Lin et al. 2019).

Accordingly, a considerable body of knowledge has been advanced. In recent years a number of studies (e.g., Hollebeek et al. 2021; So et al. 2016; Srivastava and Sivaramakrishnan 2022) have implemented the bibliometric analysis technique to investigate the customer engagement domain. However, because of the role of different contingencies that can impact customer behavior in the international business context, global customer engagement can be different from other business contexts (Gupta et al. 2018) and, therefore, warrants particular research attention. To answer this call, Srivastava and Sivaramakrishnan (2022) investigated the intellectual structure of customer engagement in the international context. However, their research lacks a proposed model for future investigation and fails to establish an agenda or offer suggestions for future research that could incorporate existing theories and concepts in the field to

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propel the advancement of global customer engagement. Furthermore, their study only relied on applying co-citation analysis. In this vein, to best of our knowledge, this is the first work in which employs text mining and co-citation to holistically review the research domain. Applying these methods together can subsequently enhance theoretical and conceptual understanding of the customer engagement in the international context.

Consequently, in order to enhance the continuous development of customer engagement in the international context, a robust inspection of the intellectual structure is needed. Hence, the purpose of this study is to systematically analyze the past, present, and possible future of customer engagement in the international context to evaluate the current progress and profound contribution of this burgeoning field. This study is motivated by the pressing need to comprehend what research areas and theoretical concepts and roots pertain to customer engagement in the international business literature. Furthermore, it aims to understand how cross-disciplinary research insights can guide customer engagement in the international context and advance the customer engagement research domain. These layers of analysis will help researchers to uncover the historical basis of and changes in the knowledge structure of customer engagement research in the international domain.

Assessments of the most cited works in customer engagement research offer a fruitful future research agenda (Kuhn 1996; Yadav 2010). Different researchers have used bibliometric analysis (e.g., Akarsu et al. 2022; Fan et al. 2021; Wilden et al. 2017; Xie et al. 2017). The bibliometric analysis and text-mining approach allows researchers to analyze the most highly cited and important topics in customer engagement with a higher level of quantitative sophistication (Colmekcioglu et al. 2022). Quantitative analysis helps researchers acquire a more specific and better understanding of the links between intellectual topics.

As such, our research makes three key contributions to the literature on customer engagement in the international context. *First*, it maps the intellectual structure of customer engagement in the international business context which can help to streamline such a diverse and fragmented research domain. *Second*, the mixed-method approach applied here generates visual maps which denote the theoretical foundations of customer engagement in the international context. Through linking theories, we can identify theoretical and methodological toolkits that researchers can apply in their future studies. *Third*, based on the findings, this study proposes a conceptual future model for customer engagement in the international context which integrates relevant disciplines to advance the research context. *Last*, from a methodological perspective, by combining text-mining and co-citation analysis, this study overcomes the common literature review bias (Randhawa et al. 2016). On

the one hand, the co-citation technique collects data from published scholarly articles and therefore can be used for supporting and assessing the current state of the research domain (Wilden et al. 2017). On the other hand, text mining helps researchers to overcome within-text bias through dictionary development, concept seeding, and mapping (Colmekcioglu et al. 2022).

The study is structured as follows. First, the method is presented. Then, the citation data extracted from the customer engagement are analyzed and used for a different co-citation analysis. This is followed by a discussion, and opportunities for future research are offered.

Method

To start with, the researcher identifies the customer engagement concept and its scope by using the bibliometric research methodology. A vital purpose is to distinguish the customer engagement terms currently in use and develop a method which allows the researchers to identify the publications related to customer engagement. Although the term ‘engagement’ has been used in different papers, the term ‘customer engagement’ is applied in different contexts. Such vast usage is due to the wide application of the word ‘engagement’ ranging from sociology (Jennings and Zeitner 2003), organizational behavior (Bejerholm and Eklund 2006), to employee engagement (Schaufeli et al. 2002). In marketing, the term has been used in many sub-forms including ‘customer engagement behavior’ (Van Doorn et al. 2010) ‘advertising engagement’ (Wang 2006), and employee engagement (Saks 2006). So, the researchers had to narrow down their research scope to obtain better results.

In order to collect our data, initially, articles related to research topic were identified. We intended to be as inclusive as possible and therefore followed the previous scholarly works recommendations (e.g., Chabowski et al. 2018; Chabowski and Samiee 2023). As such, we developed our syntax for customer engagement in international domain encompassing four keywords components: customer engagement inclusion terms (e.g., “customer engagement*”, “consumer engagement*”, “engaged”) and international context (e.g., “inter\$nation*” OR “bination*” OR “global*” OR “cross\$nation*” OR “cross\$border*” OR “cross\$scultur*” OR “multi\$nation*”). We searched our syntax in Web of Science since it is considered as an established source of citations, publication and journal analysis and can be used for network-based co-citation analysis (Hutzschenreuter et al. 2007). We used our search syntax in the keywords, title, and abstract of all available articles in WOS. The results initially revealed 218 articles in business and management domain. However, following previous research (Samiee and Chabowski, 2021) all



editorial notes, book chapters, and less relevant works that do not undergo peer revision were removed. We ensured that: (1) the articles encompass complete pieces and are not designated for paper or proceedings, (2) they incorporate at least one keyword in the abstract, title, and keywords section, (3) they are accessible through online archives or databases, and (4) they are published in the English language. We also reviewed the articles and ensured that they are all linked and related to our research topic and therefore any articles that were not related to our research topic were excluded. This process resulted in 151 articles for analysis.

To shed light on the conceptual structure of customer engagement within the international context, we have integrated their text-mining analysis findings with co-citation analysis which involves different related research streams. Through co-citation analysis, we identified the theoretical roots of most deeply rooted articles, and then, through text mining, we identified the conceptual structure of the customer engagement domain.

To gain an understanding of the most highly cited works, we conducted a network analysis using *visualization of similarities* (VOS) mapping software. VOS can not only be used for displaying constructed maps also can be used for another form of bibliometric analysis such as multidimensional scaling. In the next stage, we employed text mining using Leximancer. Leximancer is a computer-assisted content analysis program which determines the contextual association of words via “term occurrence information, such as frequencies, positions, nouns, and co-occurrence of verbs” (Colmekcioglu et al. 2022, p. 237). This approach offers a high level of complexity in hidden

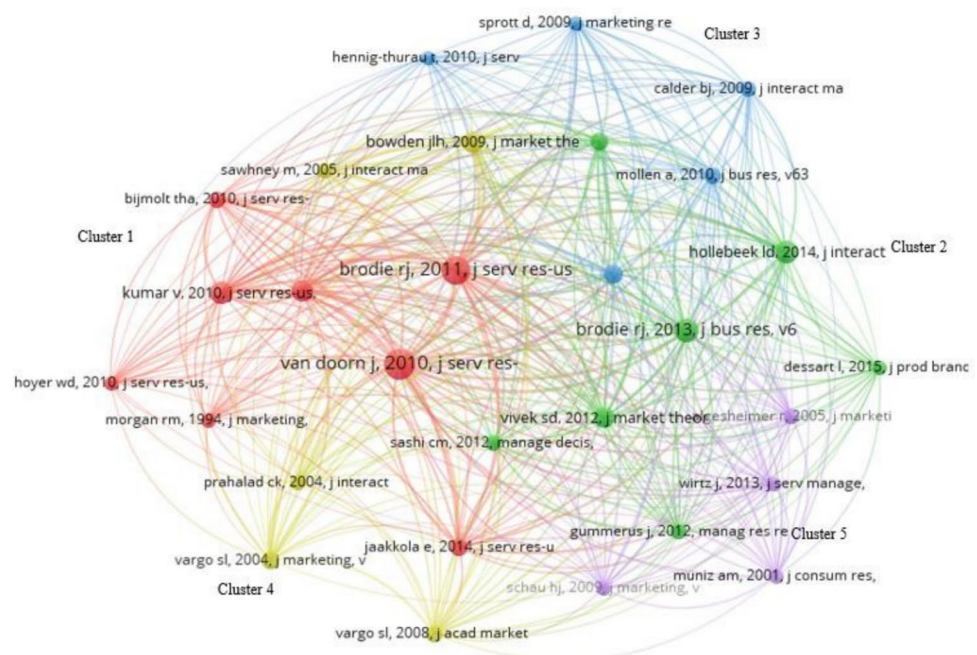
structures and patterns. Therefore, Leximancer can create a level of association between text elements—(known as *concepts*, and groupings of related concepts—known as *themes*). The color of the theme shows its level of importance in comparison to other themes. Hot colors (e.g., red, orange) denote important themes and cold colors (e.g., blue, green) denote the themes that are less important in the research domain (Stead et al. 2022). The semantic relationships between different concepts are shown by their closeness or distance (Smith and Humphreys 2006). Hence, strongly connected concepts appear in closer approximately to each other. In order to recognize the concepts, the algorithms employ concept seeds which can be extracted by researchers.

As such, following previous researchers (e.g., Wilden et al. 2017) we first converted all the downloaded articles into text and cleared the reference lists. All headings (e.g., journal title) were removed to avoid any bias in our findings. Although Leximancer is an automated text-mining algorithm, it still requires researchers to clear and group the seeds into one particular concept (e.g., customer and customers) and exclude general words. These general words—such as research, findings, and method—are commonly used in research and are excluded since they can skew the results.

Results

Figure 1 and Figure 2 shows the co-citation and text-mining results for 151 customer engagement focal articles, respectively. A number of themes appear closely linked to each

Fig. 1 Cluster visualization by VOS. r parameter = 1.2; Min cluster number = 4



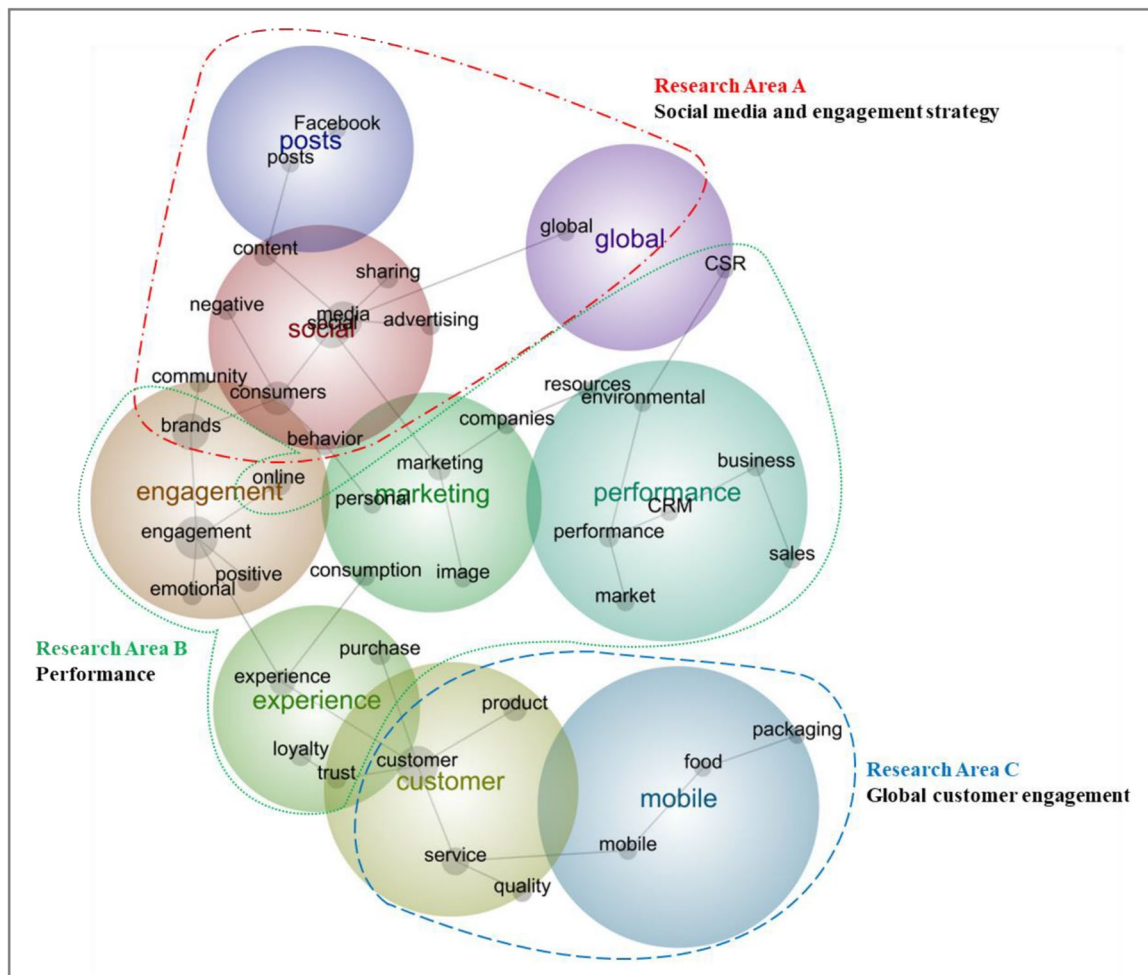


Fig. 2 Text-mining results

other whereas others are more distant. Not surprisingly, the most dominant themes are ‘social’ and ‘engagement’ which seem to have the main connection to other themes. We analyzed themes and concepts that are semantically closely related to these two dominant themes which reveals the three main research areas as shown in Fig. 2.

Research Area A—Social Media and Engagement Strategy

Our results revealed that research on social media marketing mainly focused on three themes of performance, social, global, and posts, and the related main concepts being investigated are the impact of social media marketing and performance. In this line, the social theme is closely linked to the *posts* and the global theme shows the ways that global firms leverage social media networks such as Facebook to enhance their global engagement. Based on our findings, our analysis revealed that previous studies on customer

engagement in the international context focus primarily on Facebook to support customer engagement (Beckers et al. 2018).

Our cluster analysis showed that Clusters 2 and 5 are strongly linked to social media marketing research. Research in this cluster is centered around customer engagement in social media and tries to shed light on the importance of online communities in social media in enhancing customer engagement. Results of researchers in this cluster direct our attention to the behavioral, cognitive, and emotional natures of customer engagement. In this cluster, while Dessart et al. (2015) considered customer engagement to be a third-factor construct, Hollebeek et al. (2014) viewed it as a second-factor construct. Similarly, Brodie et al. (2013) viewed customer engagement as a second-factor construct including cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions. The majority of the articles in this cluster account for the interactive customer entity-related, and hence fit within the wider theoretical perspective such as consumer culture



theory. Culture theory approaches deal with how consumers' regular interactions with global brand communities can help them to create meaning that transcends into engagement (Novak and Hoffman 2019).

Ultimately, the fifth cluster in Figure is online brand community engagement. Due to significant changes in both societies and economies, human communities have changed considerably. Before online communities, consumption communities existed on account of mass media. Today, because of online developments, some traditional organizations have had to embrace online communities. Subsequently, this cluster addresses the question of what makes customers engage in these communities. In this regard Wirtz et al. (2013) investigated the three dimensions of brand communities comprising: (1) brand orientation (which suggests that main focus of online brand communities are brand themselves); (2) online/offline communities (brand communities can be both online or offline, and have their own advantages and disadvantages), and (3) funding of online brand communities (suggesting that brand communities can be either funded by the firms themselves or by enthusiasts). Muñiz and Schau (2007) suggested that online communities can motivate customers to build attention-grabbing advertising for their chosen brands.

Research Stream B—Performance

In research area B, we identify an area which is closely related to engagement marketing. This research area involves themes of engagement, marketing, and performance. The dominant *engagement* theme consists of concepts such as emotional or positive. The *engagement* theme is linked to marketing *themes* through consumers' concepts within which customer-related outcomes such as image (i.e., outcomes such as brand image and consumption appear/ emerge) and consumption appear. In this line, the *marketing* theme is in close proximity to the *experience* theme. The *experience* theme which consists of purchase, loyalty, and trust concepts, reflects researchers' attention to consumer relationship-based consequences of engagement (Harmeling et al. 2017). *Experience* is also closely linked to the *engagement* theme. This shows that customer experiences that heighten the emotional and psychological bonds with customers are crucial components of customer engagement. Such powerful experiences can move the customer from a transactional state to a relational state and thus advance the customer relationship to a new next level (Chandler and Lusch 2015). The appearance of the *performance* theme on the right side (in Fig. 2) of marketing, and its distance from the to the *engagement* theme indicates researchers' attention to the supply-side perspective on outcomes of engagement such as increases in sales (Ho et al. 2020).

According to co-citation analysis, two research streams in two clusters (clusters 3 and 1) contributed to the customer- and firm-related outcomes measures. *First*, Hennig-Thurau et al. (2010) direct researchers' attention to the fact that the digital character of new media implies that there is no managerial cost for individuals to distribute their creation among the global audience. In a similar vein, other researchers have detailed the scholarly view that tends to use customer engagement to assess consumer experience in the online global context and measurable outcomes such as loyalty or usage intention (Calder et al. 2009; Mollen, and Wilson 2010; Sprott et al. 2009).

Second, cluster 1 can be regarded as the fundamental of customer engagement and its roots in marketing literature. This cluster more has explicitly analyzed the newly emerged perspective—*customer engagement*. The more cited articles of Van Doorn et al. (2010) and Brodie et al. (2011) contribute to providing a broader and more comprehensive theoretical analysis of customer engagement. Another important research stream in this cluster can be traced to the work of Kumar et al. (2010) through indirect contribution of global customer engagement comprising customer referral value, customer influence value, and customer knowledge value. Customer *referral* value is the indirect contribution that customers make to firms by referring potential new customer to purchase from these firms. Customer *influence* value is the impact that customers make on firm performance by influencing their social network. Last, customer *knowledge* value shows the customer's indirect contribution to firms by providing feedback and suggestions which can show itself in new product development (Hoyer et al. 2010).

Drawing on the relationship marketing theory (which is in the cluster) (Morgan and Hunt 1994) and service-dominant logic (Vargo and Lusch 2004) these researchers try to propose a general definition and define the conceptual domain of customer engagement. Additionally, the cluster yields the importance of customer engagement in relation to customer value. Articles in this cluster suggest that value due to interaction and engagement between firms and customers has four components; these are customer *lifetime* value (or customer purchasing behavior by which customers purchase or repurchase), customer *referral* value (related to gaining new customers due to initiated referral programs), customer *influencer* value (refers to influence on other attained customers by WOM), and customer *knowledge* value (refers to feedback and notions for product/service development). studied the moderating role of new product development.

Research Stream C—Global Customer Engagement

The last research area (area C) involves area themes of customer and mobile. The *customer* theme comprises of concepts such as product, service, or quality. The customer



theme is closely linked to the *mobile* theme. Such a link suggests how service providers utilize mobile applications to constantly enhance customer equity towards purchase intention and create value for their customers (Ho et al. 2020). This link adds insight into service-dominant logics by theorizing the link between customer equity and customer engagement (Vargo and Lusch 2017). In this line, this research stream is closely linked to cluster 4. As discussed above, analysis puts *value* as one of the important consequences of engagement. However, more specifically, this cluster investigates value co-creation as a result of engaged customers. The two articles of Vargo and Lusch (2004, 2008) study the service-dominant logic as a theoretical root of value co-creation in the marketing domain. This theoretical framework suggests that both economic and social actors in an exchange (e.g., suppliers, customers, and stakeholder) are service providers—and can be referred to as engagement actors (Brodie et al. 2019). This generic system can result in value co-creation.

Discussion

Previous studies on customer engagement have employed bibliometric analysis to shed light on the customer engagement domain. However, unlike these studies, in this study we proposed a future conceptual model (Fig. 3) along with research questions that future scholars can benefit from. To propose our future map, we collated our findings and

reviewed recent works to identify the most important dimensions that future customer engagement scholars need to look at. The designation for each of our dimensions stems from the themes we identified in our text mining. We conceptualized a three-stage model to clearly show how customer engagement can take place. This three-stage process model was inspired by the previous work on the consumer journey conducted by Hamilton et al. (2021).

International Engagement Strategy

Our findings revealed that customer engagement in the international context can be conceptualized and reviewed in three important stages (Fig. 3). *First*, some articles focus on understanding the main international engagement strategy with a lens on market characteristics, platform, and global customer engagement marketing. The following section explains each of these dimensions and the related questions to guide future researchers.

Platform—As identified in both text-mining, and co-citation results (research stream A), platforms are an important dimension in shaping customer engagement in the global context. Customers can use these digital platforms to engage with a particular firm anywhere across the globe (Fraccastoro et al. 2021). Customer engagement in the international context has been investigated in connection with two major platform types—the *community-based* platform and the *social networking* platform. While in social media, customers engage with firms directly (Cao et al.

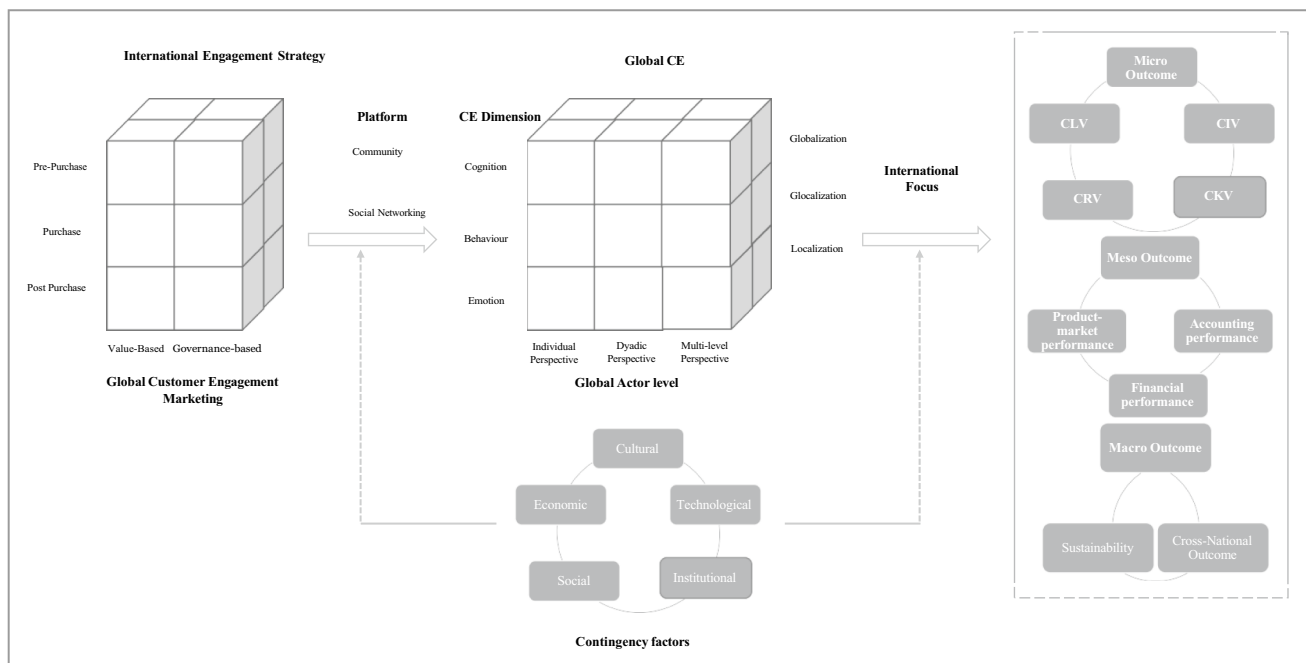


Fig. 3 Future research map



2021), in online community engagement customers engage with each other (Baldus et al. 2015).

Recent studies have highlighted the importance of engagement in such global communities because of shared norms, tie strengths, and positive influence on continuous purchase intention (Tolstoy et al. 2021; Williams et al. 2020). However, despite these scholarly investigations, a number of important research paths that need further investigation. *First*, the idea of using celebrities is becoming a well-known marketing strategy that a number of companies are employing (Knoll and Matthes 2017). Against this background, we believe that there are a number of research opportunities that need investigation. One such opportunity is determining what qualities and traits (e.g., authenticity) can lead to engagement. In this line, virtual influencers (e.g., Lu do Magalu) are more popular than at any time (Creevey et al. 2022). Thus, future researchers are also advised to investigate how a virtual influencer can lead others to better engagement in global context. That said, it is important for these researchers to consider the limitations associated with these new technologies. For instance, virtual influencers cannot eat; therefore, their use in various contexts to engage the customer needs further investigation. Accordingly, understanding their success has to do with actual influencer type, type of content, sponsorship, and whether the influencer is sponsored or not. These factors call for further investigation. In addition, a future research focus can be on understanding what makes an influencer's content appealing for global customer.

Furthermore, since there have been calls to investigate the negative aspects of social media on customer well-being and mental health (Primack et al. 2017), future studies can address whether customer engagement with other actors in an online community can be employed as a tool to combat the decline in customers' well-being and mental health, which is drawing increased attention. We strongly advise future researchers to examine whether the quantity of engagement platforms such as online community or social media platforms can impact the ways users choose to engage with these platforms in order to understand issues associated with customer well-being. Last, with the rise of new technologies such as virtual reality (VR) or artificial intelligence (AI), managers need to understand how different formats of sensory creation used in these new technologies (e.g., VR) can impact customer engagement and how managers can integrate these tools into their offline marketing decision to enhance such engagement.

Global Customer Engagement Marketing Strategy—Grounded on our findings in research stream B, we identify two forms of global engagement initiative that global firms can apply to motivate customers to engage in different platforms like Facebook. These two strategies can be categorized into two categories—*governance based, value-based*

strategies. While the value- engagement strategy is focused on customers' internal decision-making criteria, the governance-based criteria is more focused on external decision criteria. While these studies have tried to investigate a wide range of strategies for global customer engagement, very limited is known into this global customer engagement strategy effectiveness. While one particular strategy can be effective in one country, it might backfire in another market and another country (Beckers et al. 2018). Furthermore, customers in different parts of the world might react differently to various customer engagement strategies (Singh et al. 2021); a strategy that works well in Western countries might not work as well in another part of the world (Varadarajan 2019). For instance, in line with our above-highlighted research gap, interacting with social media influencers and product recommendation may be perceived differently in China in comparison to Europe (Kyodai 2020).

Furthermore, additional research is needed to examine the customer engagement implications of customer engagement strategies and homogenization across different cultures and markets. In more detail, although studies have provided an understanding of the antecedents of customer engagement, they are still to offer an understanding of potential cross-national and cross-cultural variance in the effect of engagement strategies on customer engagement in actual contexts. Insight from such studies can be helpful for practitioners and in particular international firms that seek to design optimal multi-channel engagement marketing strategies.

Customer journey—customer engagement can take place at different stages of the customer journey. Customers might engage with a particular brand when they are seeking information (i.e., pre-purchase) or when they leave comments and reviews after using products and services (i.e., post-purchase). A review of our findings shows that the majority of studies focus on post-purchase customer engagement; when customers actually made purchases and left comments for service providers (research stream A). Despite this, future researchers can investigate how customers engage in different stages of their purchase and also examine the important role of the platform in the different stages of customer engagement. For instance, do customers engage with a brand and acquire most of their necessary information using a particular social media platform or not? Is Twitter used more in pre-purchase customer engagement or more in online communities? It is also vital for future research to investigate the firms' strategies for customer engagement to see how different global strategies can impact customer engagement at different stages of the customer purchase journey. Importantly, given diverse customer backgrounds in different countries (Hofstede 2001), it is not surprising to see how differences in international focus can have a notable impact on the customer journey across different countries



(Nam, and Kannan 2020). For instance, the emphasis of the Western shopping purchase journey is on efficiency and speed and therefore attention is on responding to customers quickly. On the other hand, Chinese customers are interested in engaging with the product search to reduce their information uncertainty (Erdem and Swait 2001; Lee et al. 2018; Nam and Kannan 2020) through engagement with online social communities (Chen et al. 2017). Therefore, it is expected that Chinese customers be engaged with international brands in their pre-purchase stage in comparison to Western customers who are more likely to be engaged. As such, while a particular strategy (e.g., gamification) for one market works well for a particular purchase journey, it might backfire for different purchase journey in another country. Such differences can highlight important future research considerations.

Global Customer Engagement Ecosystem

Global Actor level—Our findings have shown the importance of the customer-firm dyad in customer engagement literature (as highlighted in research streams A and C). However, recent changes in the business environment have highlighted that customer engagement occurs in a dynamic network structure which emphasizes the social, mutual, and collective nature of customer engagement which goes beyond dyadic interaction between just firms and customers (Alexander et al. 2018; Jaakkola and Alexander 2014) and can include different actors (Brodie et al. 2019). Below, we discuss different elements related to the global CE ecosystem. The initial literature provides the conceptual foundation of actor engagement at the global scale (refer to Brodie et al. 2019). In this regard, different actors reflect the interplays across different levels of aggression in an international context (Jaakkola, and Aarikka-Stenroos 2019). On a lower level this can consist of customers, employees (individual level), and firms (Wajid et al. 2019). Networks at the higher level can include online communities where customers, brands, and other customers engage with each other at the global scale (dyadic perspective) (Brodie et al. 2019) On a higher level of aggression, the engagement process unfolds between marketers, social collectives, and service-offering providers across the globe (Foroudi 2019). Because the engagement actors in a network can include a range of individuals and non-individual actors (Alexander et al. 2018; Perez-Vega et al. 2021; Sharma et al. 2020), future researchers are advised to identify and map actors across connections and interactions within different settings to advance our understanding of global engagement actors. Such understanding can help us to achieve valuable understanding when identifying the engagement behavior that global stakeholders can adopt and the key mechanisms which make this engagement practice effective. As such, our

understanding should help the development of public policy and social innovation at the global scale. A future research direction is to investigate how the dynamic processes of global actors unfold and how engagement can emerge and evolve through these global networks of structures such as social ecosystem, or the business-to-business (B2B) context. To do so, we recommend employing systematic theoretical frameworks such as *interstitial theory* (Scott 2001) or *dynamic capability theory* (Teece 2007). In more detail, since customer engagement at the global scale is embedded in institutional context, institutional theory can help future researchers to understand the formation of institutional arrangements at the global scale.

International Focus

Our review revealed the extent to which the foundation of customer engagement research is rich and diverse (research stream B, cluster 1). However employing customer engagement in an international context is limited to the single market context; therefore international researchers cannot generalize their findings (Donthu et al. 2021) to the international context. Therefore, future research need to pay particular attention to exploring different aspects of internationalism. For instance, different perceptions of sensory images and their mental association can be different in different cultures. Therefore, depending on the characteristics of the target market, different international foci such as globalization can be key to creating and enhancing customer engagement. Accordingly, future research can investigate how different international foci can impact customer engagement.

Although our findings revealed that social media and online community can be used for global customer engagement (research stream A), international firms should carefully consider whether they need to employ locally adapted or globally standardized approaches to creating an engagement ecosystem with their international customers (Sharma et al. 2020). This approach is similar to international research on customer choice of adaption versus standardization in their product development (Cuervo-Cazurra et al. 2021) when multinational enterprises enter a foreign market (Williams and Steriu 2022). Subsequently, depending on their focus, international firms might vary in maintaining one particular unique online community, or may have their own dedicated country-based online communities. We advise further investigation on how the role of different available social media and online communities can impact such international focus as well as investigation of what the most optimal international focus in regard to customer engagement is. While localizing the engagement initiatives by acknowledging local traditions or social media platforms can facilitate local customer engagement (Simon et al. 2018),



having a globalization focus and using internationally known influencers can impact more on facilitating an engaging ecosystem. Such questions and future studies offer fruitful research directions.

Customer Engagement Dimension

Although our results have highlighted the important dimension of customer engagement (Cluster 1), our results suggested that most of the studies have included the behavioral dimension of customer engagement such as resource integration or interaction with firms (Hollebeek 2011). Aligned with this, some researchers mainly took the behavioral perspective and focused on the behavioral aspect of customer engagement. Although this can be helpful in enhancing conceptual clarity, it can have its own limitations that future research needs to address. First, limiting customer engagement to the behavioral aspect across a number of definitions (e.g., Van Doorn et al. 2010; Vivek et al. 2012) can result in mis-conceptualizing with similar constructs such as repeat purchase or behavioral loyalty. Therefore, constructing customer engagement on the behavioral aspect alone and referring to it as any activities that can go beyond purchase can subsume a wide range of behaviors such as brand learning or product disposal. As such, future researchers are advised to better conceptualize customer engagement with its explicit meaning. We expect that clarifying and narrowing the ‘customer engagement’ definition based on other customer engagement dimensions can help researchers to build blocks for strong theory development in the customer engagement domain (Suddaby 2010). In this line, the role of business customers and different business contexts (e.g., peer to peer context) is largely missing from the literature (Davey et al. 2022; Hillebrand et al. 2015).

Customer Engagement Outcome

Our results highlighted the important outcomes of customer engagement (research area B) with a great emphasis on the customer-related outcomes such as loyalty or trust (Marvi et al. 2023). The findings show that most of the studies have focused on the micro outcomes of customer engagement for firms (research stream B) (Barari et al. 2021; Oliveira Santini et al. 2020; Liu et al. 2022). Therefore, there are two important pathways that future research needs to investigate. First, the research stream needs to shed light on performance ramification like turning positive customer engagement into a favorable performance outcome for firms such as product-market performance. Future studies need to apply a cross-cultural view on such positive performance outcomes to provide insightful understanding for international firms. Furthermore, global customer engagement studies have

predominantly focused on the customer engagement and a narrow set of customer-related outcomes, particularly customer lifetime value. Yet, they have overlooked examining the meso- and macro-based outcomes of customer engagement. This research gap seems to be because more recent articles have predominantly relied on the fundamental articles. Therefore, future researchers could investigate how global customer engagement can impact the macro-level policy decisions at the global scale; for instance, how customer engagement with international brands such as Prada—which is focused on contributing to sustainable development goals (Foroudi et al. 2022)—can result in policy decisions that contribute to sustainability.

Country-Level Contingency Factors

Customer engagement in the global context can vary with common customer engagement due to country-level contingency factors since they can have significant impacts for international markets (Samaha et al. 2014). These country-level contingencies can impact how customers behave and react to customer engagement initiatives (Christofi et al. 2020).

Therefore, we suggest that future research investigates the moderating impact of country contingency factors as proposed in our future model. As such, the most important factors that can impact customer engagement in the global context can be categorized into cultural, technological, institutional, social, and economic factors.

Along with previous international business studies, Hofstede’s (2001) cultural dimensions can impact customer engagement initiatives and how customers react; for example, uncertainty avoidance in particular countries (e.g., Greece) can hinder customer engagement strategies at the global scale (Chatterjee et al. 2022). In this regard, researchers can empirically investigate the cultural dimensions in different country contexts. For instance, in countries with higher levels of individualism (e.g., the UK), we expect that customers do not show sharing behaviors (e.g., WOM) and this impacts on customer engagement outcomes. In this line, future researchers are advised to assess how such cultural differences impact customer engagement global strategies. It is important for global researchers to investigate how customers can be encouraged to engage with firms across different culture and context.

Furthermore, as observed in our first research stream, many leading global firms provide their offerings in e-commerce platforms like websites and mobile application which are not consistent across the countries, and therefore warrant additional studies. While studies in this regard have investigated the impact of platform quality on customer engagement (Brieger et al. 2022), they do not provide any understanding of the technological differences between



countries and how these can moderate such relationships, as proposed in our model. We also advised that in some industries—e.g., the car industry—the level of technology adoption at the country level can impact how consumers perceive a particular product and therefore engage with it. For instance, in the automobile industry, many brands are strongly associated with the location of their headquarters (e.g., BMW) regardless of the fact that manufacturers can be in the customers' home countries. As such, technological adoption in a particular industry at the country level can play a particular role in the context of customer engagement that calls for further investigation.

Institutional contexts determine the regulatory environment which can impact customer engagement. For instance, in a democratic country, customers trust their own rights and therefore can speak up not only as citizens but also as customers in the customer context. This mindset can greatly impact customer willingness to engage with global brands as they have trust in their country institutions (Gäthke, et al. 2022; Liu et al. 2022; Xu et al. 2021) creating an environment in which engagement with global firms carries little risk. On the other hand, in Western cultures, there are strong privacy regulations in place to support customers rights. As such, these institutional policies can impact customer engagement effectiveness—an interesting area for further investigation.

The social aspect of any country can impact how customers behave (Westjohn et al. 2022) and offers interesting research streams for global customer engagement researchers. For instance, happiness and generalized trust in a society can positively impact the deployment of customer engagement as individuals will have fewer worries concerning their lower-level needs such as basic medical care. Furthermore, generalized trust between individuals in a society can encourage customers to trust global firms and other customers and, therefore, create a strong relational tie which can result in customer engagement and subsequent financial firm performance (Degbey and Pelto 2021). On the other hand, high social inequality can heighten anxiety and stress among different members of society and, therefore, those who have lower resources become hostile towards those with more resources (e.g., Germany). Subsequently, future studies are needed to see how the underlying social structure of a society can impact customer engagement effectiveness at the global scale. Accordingly, it is important for researchers to investigate how firms should communicate their strategies to customers at the global scale as well as how such underlying social factors can impact firm performance. For example, are customers more willing to spend money because of engagement in countries with higher rate of inequality or not? Different cross-national studies can reveal interesting insights.

Last, the economic factor is another important factor that researchers need to investigate. In the international business context, the emerging market vs the developed market has received considerable attention (e.g., Luo et al. 2021; Morgeson et al. 2015; Mukherjee et al. 2021) as an economic indicator. In this regard, high economic growth countries are mainly associated with emerging markets rather than developed markets. In emerging markets, the economic dynamic is booming and dynamic and there are significant economic opportunities. Therefore, customers are often looking for such opportunities and are willing to interact and engage with firms and with one another in such an environment (Özsoy et al. 2022). On the other hand, in emerging markets, not all customers have access to resources and there is some degree of resource distribution inequality (Kozlenkova et al. 2021) which can hinder customer engagement. In this line, future studies could investigate how such differences can impact the effectiveness of customer engagement strategies at the global scale. Researchers need to investigate how such differences can impact the effectiveness of customer engagement outcomes overall. It is important for future researchers to investigate how customer engagement can contribute to the development and equal distribution of resources across different actors in emerging markets.

Conclusion and Limitations

Customer engagement in the international context constitutes a complicated research topic which has generated increasing attention in international marketing and international business studies. This research offers an in-depth and rigorous investigation of the evaluation of customer engagement in a global context. We explicitly considered research that refers to customer engagement from a global perspective to pave the way for future researchers to investigate different aspects of customer engagement in the global context. Our findings also discussed the status of customer engagement in the international context, highlighted the existing gaps, and provided a theoretically robust research model along with grounded research avenues for continued research in customer engagement in the international context. This relies on transcending the different research boundaries and employing robust methodologies to move the research domain. Our proposed research-based model along with research suggestions can expand the understanding of the customer engagement international context and shed light into new possible research avenues.

Through our study, we identified several important research streams which are helpful for advancing the field. Nevertheless, like all research our study has some limitations. First, data collection in this study is limited to



WOS. Future studies can investigate other databases and compare the findings with this study. Second, this study used one technique (VOS) in its co-citation analysis. Future researchers can apply other techniques (e.g., multidimensional scaling) to reveal interesting findings worthy of future attention. Last, as the bibliometric results largely depend on the most highly cited articles, any change in the chosen sample can have an influence on the nature of the results. If the change magnitude is high, then the outcomes will be distinctive.

Declarations

Conflict of interests The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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