

The bright and dark sides of online customer engagement on brand love

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Abstract

Purpose – Drawing on conservation of resources theory, this study aims to investigate the impact of online customer engagement on brand love via dual mediating mechanisms, empowerment (bright side) and stress (dark side). The roles of perceived brand quality and extroversion as weakener and facilitator respectively on the dark side effect are also examined.

Design/methodology/approach – An online survey is conducted, targeting people who have experience in participating in online engagement activities. The dual mediation and moderation analysis are examined.

Findings – The results confirm the proposed dual mediating mechanisms. Perceived brand quality and extroversion also significantly moderate the engagement–stress link.

Research limitations/implications – This study explains the mediating mechanisms between online customer engagement and brand love, with a focus on the fast-moving consumer goods industry. This calls for further research on other industries.

Practical implications – This study provides marketers with insights that online customer engagement strategies are not always good and that they should be more careful in formulating such strategies.

Originality/value – This study advances the understanding of the relationship between customer engagement and brand love in the virtual community especially in the social media context.

Keywords Stress, Empowerment, Brand love, Online customer engagement

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

With intensified competition, various brands endeavor to build brand love to elicit customer loyalty and commitment. Brand love depicts a customer's passion and emotional attachment to a brand (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006). Originating from the concept of human love, brand love is powerful and influential in building a long-lasting relationship and establishing strong emotional bonding (Fournier, 1998). Creating brand love is important and beneficial because it can promote positive word of mouth, encourage brand endorsement, increase customer satisfaction and enhance customer loyalty (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Joshi and Garg, 2020; Palusuk *et al.*, 2019).

Currently, the rapid development of digital technology has driven firms to adopt online marketing strategies to build brand awareness and love. In recent years, brands have used online platforms extensively, particularly social media, to engage customers (Alvarez and Fournier, 2016; Santos *et al.*, 2022a, 2022b). Compared with offline platforms, online ones allow greater traffic for brands and lower costs in customer engagement campaigns (Wirtz *et al.*, 2013). Extant studies on online customer engagement have been focused on the role of social media platforms in facilitating customer engagement

(Gensler *et al.*, 2013; Hall-Phillips *et al.*, 2016), on factors that encourage online engagement (Chan *et al.*, 2014; Santos *et al.*, 2022a, 2022b), as well as on consequences of online customer engagement (Kim and Johnson, 2016; Santos *et al.*, 2022a, 2022b). In general, online customer engagement is found to result in positive brand outcomes such as e-word of mouth, repurchase intention and stronger consumer–brand relationships (Chan *et al.*, 2014; Kim and Johnson, 2016).

Although online customer engagement and brand love are recognized as two main concepts in consumer–brand relationships (Gómez-Suárez *et al.*, 2017 for a review), the effectiveness of customer engagement on brand love in virtual communities remains under-researched (Wang and Lee, 2020). Some recent studies have shown preliminary evidence for the positive association between online engagement and brand love (Loureiro *et al.*, 2017; Paruthi *et al.*, 2022). Considering the emerging discussions on the potential negative impacts of online engagement (Beckers *et al.*, 2018; Heidenreich *et al.*, 2015; Kumar *et al.*, 2022; Wolter, *et al.*, 2023), the effectiveness of online customer engagement on brand love may not be as straightforward as expected. Some recent studies caution that online customer engagement might not always be beneficial (Santos *et al.*, 2022a, 2022b). For example, engagement activities may create reputation risks for the company (Beckers *et al.*, 2018) or open the door for

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customers to lampoon the company instead of providing innovative ideas (Verhoef *et al.*, 2013). Customer engagement can also be a considerable opportunity or potential threat for firms depending on how the organization handles customer engagement (Harmeling *et al.*, 2017). For example, Dove established the Speak Beautiful campaign on Twitter to engage customers. Online users used “#SpeakBeautiful” 168,000 times, reaching an audience of three million (Johnson, 2016). However, Benetton posted a picture of three young boys modeling their 2017 summer clothes with the caption “Sorry ladies. Girls not allowed.” on Instagram and created considerable criticism that led to a negative brand image (Gollin, 2020). Following this line of inquiry, the present study takes one step further by exploring the impact of customer engagement on brand love via both negative (i.e. stress) and positive (i.e. empowerment) mechanisms in an online context.

Drawing on conservation of resources (COR) theory (Halbesleben *et al.*, 2014), the present study is one of the first to explore the bright and dark side mechanisms of the impact of online customer engagement on brand love. COR theory emphasizes the importance of resources to individuals and argues that individuals strive to protect, acquire and invest resources, namely, conservation and investment (Hobfoll, 1989; Halbesleben *et al.*, 2014). Online engagement can simultaneously provoke better resource conservation and stronger tensions in resource investment, bringing positive and negative impacts on customers. Customers in online engagement can interact with others in wide-ranging forms, access a variety of information, and invest time and effort, resulting in psychological empowerment (Chu *et al.*, 2020; Croft and Beresford, 1995; Eigenraam *et al.*, 2018). Specifically, customers are given the power to create and contribute to online communities. Such participation easily triggers psychological ownership (Acar and Puntoni, 2016). However, intensive online engagement may also provoke stronger resource investment tension as customers may also incur opportunity costs (e.g. time/energy), such as engaging online at the expense of other entertainment activities. Opportunity costs associated with resource investment in the engagement activities imply loss of resources to other domains, potentially causing psychological stress based on the argument of COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989). Both sides could affect customers’ brand love. Therefore, we propose that online customer engagement can affect brand love positively by psychologically empowering customers and negatively by enhancing customer stress.

Furthermore, in light of the resource conservation perspective, we explore an enhancer (perceived brand quality) and a weakener (extroversion) in the impact of online engagement on stress. High perceived brand quality reduces the risks from uncertainty. Less time and effort are adopted in checking for product information, thereby potentially resulting in a lower need for resource conservation (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2012, 2018). This lowers the chances of resource competition with other domains (i.e. tensions in resource investment) when engaging online, decreasing the impact of online customer engagement on stress. By contrast, extroverts are gregarious and more inclined to interact and socialize with people surrounding them (Choi *et al.*, 2015). Personal traits may play a part in resource conservation (Chen *et al.*, 2020). In virtual

communities, extrovert customers may invest more resources in the engagement process. They may care about how others feel and comment. When they are challenged in an online community, they may be concerned with how to balance good relationships and the defense of their viewpoints. This increases the chances of tensions in resource investment when engaging online, strengthening the impact of online engagement on stress.

Fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) was chosen as the context for data collection due to its key role in daily life and intensive competition. Although the FMCG market includes product categories of low involvement, the brands in the market exhibit a variety of signifiers in consumer minds; these brands can work as social symbols or have a utilitarian appeal (Santos *et al.*, 2022a, 2022b). Studies on brand love and online customer engagement have been applied to consumer brands in the FMCG industry (Santos *et al.*, 2022a, 2022b; Srinivasan *et al.*, 2016). Online engagement with their customers is one pivotal strategy in maintaining long-term relationships. Given the background of the COVID-19 pandemic, convenience and snowball sampling were conducted via an online survey in Hong Kong. Findings confirm that customer empowerment mediates positively in the relationship between online engagement and brand love, and stress is a negative mediator. Brand quality perception negatively moderates the impact of engagement on stress, while extroversion strengthens the engagement–stress link.

In brief, the contributions of this study are threefold. First, online customer engagement has demonstrated its impact on positive brand outcomes in previous studies (Chan *et al.*, 2014; Kim and Johnson, 2016). Yet, its impact on brand love could be confounded considering the emerging concerns for the potential negative effects of online engagement (Johnson, 2016; Gollin, 2020; Santos *et al.*, 2022a, 2022b). The present research takes one step further to advance an understanding of the online engagement–brand love link in virtual communities. Second, drawing upon COR theory, this study is the first attempt to examine the bright side (customer empowerment) and dark side (stress) of online customer engagement, through which online engagement can be transformed into brand love. Third, the moderating role of perceived brand quality (an enhancer) and extroversion (a weakener) in the engagement–stress link offers additional insights to academics and practitioners in service evaluation in online communities. The findings help to enrich customer engagement and online customer research.

Literature review and hypothesis development

Conservation of resources theory

Online customer engagement initiated by organizations is a pivotal means of developing customer delight and even love (Alamoudi and Alharthi, 2021). This process is related to the use of customer resources (Alexander and Jaakkola, 2015; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2016). As such, the present study uses COR theory (Halbesleben *et al.*, 2014) to examine the underlying mechanisms in the relationship between online customer engagement and brand love.

According to COR theory, individuals are motivated to strive to acquire, accumulate, nurture and protect their resources.

This theory refers to an object, condition, state and characteristics that individuals consider valuable (Hobfoll, 1989). COR theory builds on two fundamental tenets. The first tenet is that individuals strive to protect their own resources (conservation) and obtain new ones (acquisition). The second tenet is the extension of the first, which is resource investment (Halbesleben *et al.*, 2014). The conservation tenet suggests that resources can generate further resources by establishing resource caravans, thereby yielding positive consequences such as well-being (Hobfoll, 2002).

Drawing on COR theory, Zhou *et al.* (2018) found that by enhancing work engagement, empowering supervision negatively influenced service employees' service sabotage. We argue that online customer engagement is related to connection and collaboration with particular brands (Moliner *et al.*, 2018; Santos *et al.*, 2022a, 2022b). Previous studies showed that the process grants people greater control over their resources, such as choices and information available to achieve their goals (Harmeling *et al.*, 2017; Yuksel, 2014). This autonomy allows customers to have better resource conservation, making them feel psychologically empowered. This psychological empowerment can foster more favorable offline customer behavior toward the brand (Yuksel *et al.*, 2016; Kim and Phua, 2020), consequently enhancing the customer-brand relationship (Yuksel *et al.*, 2016; Yuksel, 2014). The psychological experience of empowerment enables emotional brand attachment (Hung and Lu, 2018). Therefore, we propose that online customer engagement can build brand love through consumer empowerment.

However, the resource investment tenet of COR theory states that the consequence of engagement is not always good because different resources do not exist independently (Halbesleben, 2011; Hobfoll *et al.*, 2012, 2018). For example, in the work environment, investing resources in work engagement constrains those in other domains, such as family life, leading to stress among individuals (Halbesleben, 2011; Halbesleben *et al.*, 2009; Hobfoll *et al.*, 2012). Based on COR theory, findings from Van Woerkom *et al.* (2016) indicated that the exacerbating effect of job engagement impacts absenteeism. Lee and Ok (2014) found that burnout mediates the relationship between emotional labor and service sabotage. In the same vein, online customer engagement can induce stress due to the tensions between resources invested in engaging with the brand on the social media platform and those invested in another domain, such as spending time with friends. For example, Burger King's "Have It Your Way" campaign needs customers' creative input for the service design, potentially inducing stress (Roy and Jain, 2020). This is because some customers may lack such skills or perceived self-efficacy to give advice (Roy and Jain, 2020). As a result, they need more time to produce the outcome in this engagement, potentially consuming resources such as time and effort that can be invested in other activities. This tension may result in psychological stress. Information overload, high demand in time for navigation and unexpected comments can also cause customer anxiety (Gong and Choi, 2016). Dealing with such stress may reduce customer satisfaction and emotional well-being (Moschis, 2007). Thus, stress is a potential negative mediator in the customer engagement-brand love link.

The proposed moderators, that is, perceived brand quality and extroversion, can affect the impact of online customer engagement on stress by varying the need for resource protection and investment in the engagement process. Good brand quality induces trust, which plays a role in the strategy of resource investment (Colquitt *et al.*, 2007; Halbesleben and Wheeler, 2015). High brand quality implies high trust and low risks associated with resources, reducing the need for its protection or investment of new ones in the engagement (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2012, 2018). By contrast, extroverts tend to be active social media users who spend more time and generate content regularly toward the brand in social media. As such, the tension in resource investment tends to be intensified for extroverts, leading to stress. Thus, this study postulates that perceived brand quality reduces the impact of online engagement on stress, whereas extroversion may strengthen the impact of online engagement on stress by varying the chance of resource investment tensions in the engagement process.

Brand love

Brand love refers to the passion and emotional attachment of a satisfied customer for a specific brand (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006). This emotion is regarded as an extended concept of love with a similar nature (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006). In the model of brand-customer relationship, humans can generate love, passion, commitment, interdependence and self-identity toward a specific brand or object (Fournier, 1998).

Brand love is essential in establishing a long-lasting customer-brand relationship (Fournier, 1998) and creates deep-rooted and intense customer satisfaction (Fournier and Mick, 1999). A higher satisfaction level can lead to brand love, which can further result in spreading positive word of mouth (Karjaluo *et al.*, 2016; Joshi and Garg, 2020). Once brand love is created, the brand is irreplaceable (Palusuk *et al.*, 2019). Loyal customers with brand love create a more solid brand relationship than those without brand love (Palusuk *et al.*, 2019; Roy *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, brand love can help an organization stand out from the intense competition and promote positive brand evaluation.

Brand love is driven by various factors, such as brand experience (Bıçakcıoğlu *et al.*, 2018; Joshi and Garg, 2020), customer personality (Bıçakcıoğlu *et al.*, 2018; Roy *et al.*, 2013) and brand quality (Rauschnabel and Ahuvia, 2014). Cumulative customer satisfaction can evolve to love and induce attachment to a brand (Unal and Aydın, 2013). Customer engagement is considered a crucial means of creating a positive brand experience (Joshi and Garg, 2020), particularly in virtual communities (Yu and Yuan, 2019). Nevertheless, the impact of online customer engagement on brand love is underexplored. This study attempts to fill this research gap.

Online customer engagement

Engagement is a hierarchical process of consumption, contribution and creation (Vale and Fernandes, 2018). Online customer engagement refers to the customer interaction with a brand on social media, whether cognitive, behavioral or emotional (Eigenraam *et al.*, 2018; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014). Engagement activities include writing reviews, sharing thoughts, hashtagging a campaign, commenting on

brand-related activities, responding or reposting brand posts or videos and exchanging ideas or information with other customers (Chu *et al.*, 2020; Eigenraam *et al.*, 2018).

Extant studies focused on the role of social media platforms in facilitating customer engagement (Hall-Phillips *et al.*, 2016), and factors that encourage online engagement (Baldus *et al.*, 2015; Chan *et al.*, 2014). Baldus *et al.* (2015) highlighted various intrinsic motivations that encourage online engagement. Previous studies also identified stimuli of online engagement such as support systems and freedom of expression (Chan *et al.*, 2014), as well as consequences, such as word of mouth and repurchase intention (Kim and Johnson, 2016). Previous studies in different contexts, such as mobile brands (Verma, 2021), functional brands (Borges *et al.*, 2016) and self-exposure brands (Wallace *et al.*, 2014), have indicated that brand love is an outcome of brand engagement.

Online engagement can potentially enhance brand love in that it allows customers to not only engage with the brand but also to socialize with others (De Valck *et al.*, 2009). Such interaction with other customers or brands is a resource acquisition that may lead to positive outcomes (Hobfoll, 2002). Through this process, customers can recognize the brand value in terms of products or services (LaSalle and Britton, 2003), strengthen the customer–brand relationship (Wirtz *et al.*, 2013) and generate loyalty or endorsement (Joshi and Garg, 2020; Unal and Aydm, 2013). Brand interaction experience also allows customers to generate high familiarity, strong brand associations and deep product impressions, thereby strengthening the associations between individuals and brands (Palusuk *et al.*, 2019; Wirtz *et al.*, 2013). All of these effects are fundamental to brand love. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1. Online customer engagement is positively related to brand love.

Mediating role of customer empowerment

Customer empowerment, the umbrella concept of empowerment, is defined as “the extent to which a firm provides its customers avenues to:

- connect with the firm and actively shape the nature of transactions; and
- connect and collaborate by sharing information; praise; criticism; suggestions; and ideas about its products, services, and policies” (Ramani and Kumar, 2008, p. 28).

Customers that are empowered extend control over their behavior and options to create a unique consumption experience in practices, products or services (Yuksel, 2014).

Based on COR theory, we argue that customers are more likely to feel psychologically empowered in the process of online customer engagement. Acar and Puntoni (2016) indicated that the more effort and time customers are devoted to brand-related activities, the more psychologically empowered they will feel. One typical example is the “Ikea effect.” Customers experience psychological ownership when they are encouraged to be involved in the creation of the furniture (Festinger, 1962). In the same vein, writing reviews and exchanging ideas or information with other customers on social media platforms (Chu *et al.*, 2020; Eigenraam *et al.*, 2018) evoke empowerment, where customers are endowed with the freedom to decide

(Croft and Beresford, 1995) and information. The empowerment process thus grants customers the opportunities to control their behavior and influence decisions, leading to being psychologically enabled (Yuksel, 2014).

An empowered customer is more likely to have a satisfying brand experience (Coelho *et al.*, 2019). The reason is that the psychological experience of empowerment enables the trait of self-determination (Davis and Bowles, 2018), which brings a positive emotion of brand attachment (Hung and Lu, 2018), resulting in brand love. Therefore, customer empowerment tends to elicit a more satisfying brand experience that results in brand love. Thus, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H2. Customer empowerment positively mediates the relationship between online customer engagement and brand love.

Mediating role of stress

The literature tends to focus on the positive impact of customer engagement in the online environment. Recent studies suggest the potential negative effect of customer engagement and co-creation in different contexts (Beckers *et al.*, 2018; Heidenreich *et al.*, 2015). In observations on the role of stress, service incivility behavior (Temerak *et al.*, 2023) and idea rejection in idea contests in tapping the creativity of customers (Schaarschmidt and Dose, 2023) could serve as stressors in customer engagement. In the online environment, stress is related to intensive online engagement either between a company and customers or among customers themselves (Kumar *et al.*, 2022; Wolter *et al.*, 2023). This may badly affect the brand evaluation.

Stress is defined as “any environmental, social, or internal demand which requires the individual to readjust his/her usual behavior patterns” (Thoits, 1995, p. 54). The perception of stress commonly evokes stressful feelings in physiological or emotional states (Thoits, 1995). Under the assumption that individuals have resources constraints, an investment in one activity often means reducing resources invested in another activity, potentially leading to resource investment tension and subsequent stress for engaged individuals (Halbesleben, 2011; Halbesleben *et al.*, 2009; Hobfoll *et al.*, 2012). Online engagement can lead to stress because of resource investment tension and the pressure on consumer resources in the engagement process. According to COR theory (Halbesleben, 2011; Halbesleben *et al.*, 2009; Hobfoll *et al.*, 2012), investing resources in brand engagement activities may reduce those invested in other domains, for instance, time for exercise or with friends. This produces resource investment tensions that possibly cause stress on customers. Moreover, a great volume of negative messages in online engagement among customers (which is common in online communities) may lead to a negativity spiral (Beckers *et al.*, 2018). All these factors may cause information overload and reduce controllability for customers, damaging individuals’ resources, such as effort, confidence or energy, thereby leading to a high level of stress. Although stress reduces satisfaction (Zeytinoglu *et al.*, 2007) which is fundamental to brand love, online customer engagement may induce stress which, in turn, mitigates brand

love. Therefore, we propose a dark-side effect hypothesis and investigate the mediating role of stress:

H3. Stress negatively mediates the relationship between online customer engagement and brand love.

Moderating role of perceived brand quality

Zeithaml (1988) defined perceived brand quality as a customer's judgment about the overall excellence or superiority of a product or service; brand quality is regarded as a component of brand value. A brand name can evoke customer memory regarding the characteristics of the company's product or services in the short term (*Janiszewski and Van Osselaer, 2000*). This memory not only is an associative cue but also performs as a predictive cue of company performance in terms of products, services and brand-related activities (*Erdem and Swait, 2001*). Thus, high perceived brand quality is associated with trust toward the brand (*Sung and Kim, 2010*).

Perceived brand quality can reduce the likelihood of the dark-side effect of online engagement in that the invoked trust by perceived brand quality can reduce the resources needed in the engagement activities, thereby mitigating the occurrence of resource investment tension that leads to stress for an engaged consumer. Trust affects resource allocation in COR theory (*Colquitt et al., 2007; Halbesleben and Wheeler, 2015*). When customers are engaged with a brand that is perceived to have high quality, the need for resource conservation is lower (*Colquitt et al., 2007; Hobfoll et al., 2012, 2018*). First, less resources, such as time and energy, are needed to check product information because of perceived low risks from less uncertainty and more controllability. Second, potential risks of confronting opinions regarding the products of the focal brand are lower, reducing pressures on customers' resources to handle unfavorable criticism, potentially inducing acute stress to focal customers, especially if they trust the particular brand (*Thoits, 1995*). The decreased need for resources in engagement reduces the chance of resource investment tensions. Thus, perceived brand quality may mitigate the effect of online customer engagement on stress. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4. Perceived brand quality negatively moderates the impact of online customer engagement on stress.

Moderating role of extroversion

Extroversion refers to people's capability and tendency for interaction and socialization (*Choi et al., 2015*). It is a personality trait that influences people's behavior and determines their interactions in certain circumstances (*Islam et al., 2017*). Based on COR theory, personal traits play a part in resource conservation and investment (*Chen et al., 2020; Halbesleben, 2011; Halbesleben et al., 2009*). We argue that extroversion this personality trait amplifies the impact of online engagement on stress because extroversion tends to increase the likelihood of over-investing resources in engagement activities. Such over-investment can augment the chance of having resource investment tension that leads to stress for an engaged consumer.

Extroverts are attached to social surroundings (*Ross et al., 2009*) and are more likely to share or interact with others compared with introverts (*Itani et al., 2020*). Given their care about interpersonal relationships (*Harbaugh, 2010*), extroverts are more likely to consider how others feel in the interaction to maintain a good relationship. For example, when challenged in a virtual community, extroverts are more likely to be worried about how to strike a balance between the social relationship and the defense of their viewpoints. Therefore, based on COR theory, extrovert customers are assumed to invest more resources, such as time and effort, to consider how to respond to others' interactions, increasing the likelihood of over-investing resources in engagement activities. This case intensifies the tension in resource investment in engagement activities versus other activities, resulting in more stress for engaged consumers. We therefore propose the following:

H5. Extroversion positively moderates the effect of online customer engagement on stress.

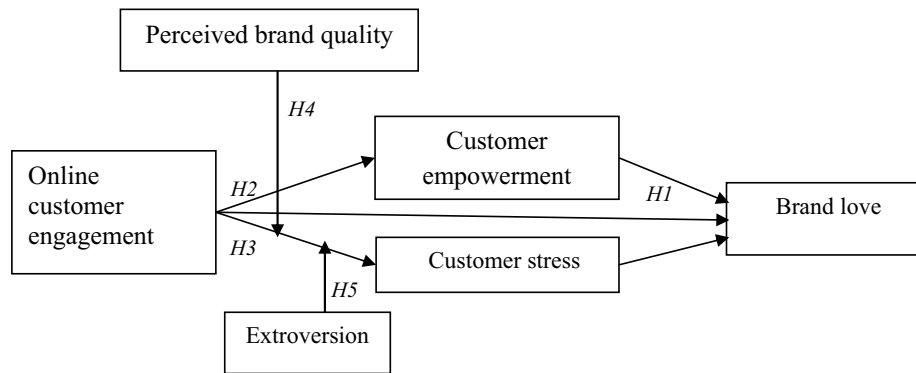
Figure 1 shows the conceptual model of this study.

Methods

Data collection and sample

This study targets respondents with experiences in brands' online engagement in the past two years. First, the example and definition of online brand engagement were given at the beginning of the questionnaire to let participants understand the meaning of online brand engagement. For example, Dove initiated the campaign "#SpeakBeautiful" on Twitter, encouraging women to build up self-confidence. Apart from changing how people talked about beauty, Dove changed how people thought of the Dove brand. Through this campaign, women were inspired by this message, and they used #SpeakBeautiful more than 168,000 times and drove 800 million social media impressions of the campaign. In the same vein, Coca-Cola created the hashtag "#ShareHappiness" on Twitter to encourage people to have a sip of joy and to tag their friends. This has helped to build up the bonding between customers and the brand in the virtual community. These brand names and their messages, together with Nike's "#Never Give Up," were shown to participants. This included the means of channels and the brief content of the campaigns. Participants needed to indicate that they understood the meaning. It was then followed by a screening question about participants' online engagement experience. Those who did not have relevant experience were excluded from the study. Some pertinent questions related to their online brand engagement (e.g. frequency, the field of the brand) were asked in the study to ensure the validity and consistency of their experience.

To control for differences among industries, we only selected one industry, namely, FMCG, as the context for data collection. FMCG was chosen because of its key role in daily life and its intensive competition. Much of the research on brand love and online customer engagement is in the context of the FMCG industry (*Gómez-Suárez et al., 2017; Santos et al., 2022a, 2022b; Srinivasan et al., 2016*). The product categories of the FMCG market are of low involvement, such as sports goods, apparel, luxury brands, textiles and furnishings. Severe competition given many similar businesses in the same category and the impact of globalization have encouraged leading brands

Figure 1 The conceptual model

Source: The figure is created by authors

to use various strategies to stand out from competitors (Oraman *et al.*, 2011). Fueled by the rapid development of digital technologies, brands use online engagement strategies to differentiate themselves from competitors in Hong Kong. According to Kantar Worldwide Report, the average digital marketing cost for FMCG brands in 2018 reached US\$79bn (Gilliland, 2020). Engaging customers online is one of the common marketing strategies (Alvarez and Fournier, 2016). Brands invest diverse resources in online engagement, making the exploration of its impact on brand love necessary. Thus, this study adopts the FMCG industry as the research context.

A questionnaire was first developed in English and then translated into Chinese. Both languages were included in the questionnaire for clarity. Before launching the large-scale data collection, a pre-test of 30 samples was carried out to check the clarity of measure statements and scale reliability. No measurements were altered after the pre-test; thus, the 30 respondents were also included in the final sample. The large-scale data collection was carried out in April 2020. Given the background of the COVID-19 pandemic, convenience and snowball sampling were adopted using an online survey. The questionnaire was set up on Qualtrics, and its link was distributed to an initial sample of around 1,000 respondents using social media platforms, including Instagram, Facebook, WeChat and Weibo. On these platforms, a post was created including the link and a poster. All of the friends of the respondents were invited to participate, and they were also encouraged to share the link with their own friends. All respondents were screened in the beginning by a question asking whether they had participated in online brand engagement activities in the past two years. Only those who indicated “yes” were allowed to proceed.

In total, 284 questionnaires were received within two weeks, 233 of which were from qualified respondents with experiences of online brand engagement. After the end of the survey, we shortlisted all the responses and deleted those answers with missing values. In the end, 205 responses were retained for data analysis. Most respondents (68.8%) were 18–24 years old.

Questionnaire design

The questionnaire consisted of four sections. Before answering, respondents were first screened by asking if they had any

engagement experiences in the past two years. Only those who answered “yes” were qualified and could continue with the survey. Following this screening question, respondents were asked to report their previous brand experience, such as the frequency and type of engagement activity. A couple of brand names and online engagement examples in the FMCG industry were provided to target respondents as hints to recall their memory, such as Dove, Coca-Cola and Nike. After these examples were shown, respondents needed to answer all the variables-related questions. In the final section, demographic information of respondents was collected. Table 1 shows the demographic information.

Measures

All measures were adapted from previous studies using five-point Likert scales, ranging from 1 “strongly disagree” to 5 “strongly agree.” Table 2 shows the measurement items with factor loadings.

To measure the construct of brand love, we adopted three items from Carroll and Ahuvia (2006). Online customer engagement was measured using an eight-item scale adopted from Hollebeek *et al.* (2014). Three items were used to measure empowerment based on Rogers *et al.* (1997) and Harrison *et al.* (2006). Four items measuring the concept of stress were adopted from Chan *et al.* (2010). Three items of perceived brand quality were adopted from Vera (2015), and five items of extroversion were from the Big Five Personality Traits (Islam *et al.*, 2017). The Cronbach’s alpha coefficients of constructs range from 0.753 to 0.913, all above the threshold of 0.7, indicating satisfactory internal consistency reliability.

Considering that demographic factors may affect the evaluation of respondents on engagement activities, we included three control variables in the model, that is, gender (1 = female, 0 = male), income (1 = HK\$10,000 and above, 0 = less than HK \$10,000) and frequency of engagement activity (1 = more than two times in a typical week, 0 = two times or below in a typical week).

Construct validity

We examined construct validity via a two-step approach recommended by Murray *et al.* (2005). Exploratory factor

Table 1 Demographic information

Variables	Frequency	%
Gender		
Female	95	46.34
Male	100	48.71
Prefer not to disclose	10	4.8
Total	205	100.0
Education level		
High school graduate	28	13.65
Diploma/High diploma	38	18.53
University or above	139	67.8
Total	205	100.0
Occupation		
Student	105	51.21
Clerical worker	26	12.68
Businessman	29	14.14
Professional	22	18.73
Retired	8	3.9
Others	15	7.31
Total	205	100.0

Source: The table is created by authors

analysis (EFA) was first performed to assure the unidimensionality of the proposed constructs, followed by confirmatory factor analysis (CFA).

EFA with principal component extraction was first carried out on the items of the proposed six constructs. The results of the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure and Bartlett’s test indicate that sampling adequacy is 0.913 ($p < 0.000$), showing sufficient items for each factor and useful results. The six factors explain a total variance of 68.9%. The proposed items for each construct are significantly loaded on the respective construct.

Next, CFA was performed on all multi-item constructs. Table 1 reports the standardized factor loadings, composite reliability (CA) and average variance extracted (AVE). The CFA results indicate a satisfactory model fit [overall model: $\chi^2(283) = 484.400$, $p < 0.01$, comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.937, incremental fit index (IFI) = 0.937, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.058]. All standardized factor loadings are significantly loaded on the proposed constructs ($p < 0.001$), and all CA are above 0.7, showing sufficient convergent validity (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). We assessed the discriminant validity of a construct by comparing the AVE of that construct with its squared correlations with other constructs. All AVEs are larger, demonstrating sufficient discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Overall, all constructs demonstrate sufficient convergent and discriminant validity.

Analysis and results

Table 3 presents the correlations and descriptive statistics of the variables in this study. Online customer engagement shows a positive relationship with brand love ($r = 0.305$, $p < 0.01$). Furthermore, perceived customer empowerment ($r = 0.581$, $p < 0.01$) and stress ($r = 0.467$, $p < 0.01$) are both associated with online customer engagement. In conclusion, the correlation coefficients between most of the dependent variables are significant.

Results

The hypotheses were tested using regression analysis with PROCESS 3.3, which offers assessment, such as the bootstrap test of indirect effects (Hayes, 2012), that is commonly regarded as more powerful for mediations than Sobel’s z-test (Zhao *et al.*, 2010). A total of 5,000 bootstrap samples were requested in our tests.

PROCESS 3.3 Model 4 was adopted to test the dual mediation effects, perceived customer empowerment and stress, in the customer engagement–brand love link. Table 4 shows the results of the mediation analysis. Engagement is significantly related to brand love ($b = 0.244$, $p < 0.01$), supporting *H1*. Furthermore, engagement is significantly related to both mediators: empowerment ($b = 0.624$, $p < 0.001$) and stress ($b = 0.644$, $p < 0.001$). As predicted, empowerment ($b = 0.259$, $p < 0.01$) is positively related to brand love, whereas stress ($b = -0.138$, $p < 0.01$) is negatively associated with brand love when engagement is controlled, implying potentially significant indirect effects through the two mediators. Further analysis indicates that the point estimate of an indirect effect of online customer engagement on brand love through empowerment is 0.162. The confidence interval (CI) excludes zero (lower limit, LL: 0.053; upper limit, UL: 0.270), indicating that the mediation of empowerment is significant. Overall, the results support *H2*. Moreover, stress shows a significant but negative mediation effect on the engagement brand love link with a point estimate of -0.088 (LLCI: -0.169 ; ULICI: -0.027). Therefore, *H3* is also supported. A comparison of the two mediators indicates that the completely standardized indirect effects via empowerment are much stronger than those via stress with a point estimate of difference of 0.235 (LLCI: 0.107, ULICI: 0.357).

PROCESS 3.3 Model 9 was used to examine the moderation effects of perceived brand quality and extroversion in the customer engagement–brand love link simultaneously. Table 5 shows the results. The interaction between perceived brand quality and online customer engagement via stress is significant and negative ($b = -0.277$, $p < 0.05$), thereby supporting *H4*. In addition, extroversion is a significant moderator ($b = 0.392$, $p < 0.01$) in the relationship between engagement and stress, supporting *H5*. The results indicated that the impact of engagement on empowerment does not change with different levels of perceived brand quality and extroversion. However, extroversion and perceived brand quality do interact with customer engagement to influence stress. In summary, perceived brand quality can mitigate, whereas extroversion can augment, the effect of online customer engagement on stress.

Discussion and implications

Based on COR theory, this study explores the effectiveness of online customer engagement on brand love, its underlying mechanisms and the moderating roles of brand quality and extrovert personality. The findings confirm that customer empowerment positively mediates the relationship between online customer engagement and brand love and stress negatively mediates the link. Brand quality reduces the effect of engagement on stress, whereas extrovert personality strengthens this impact.

Table 2 Measurement items and validity assessment

Multi-item construct measures	SFL
Brand love (CR = 0.757; AVE = 0.512)	
1. This is a wonderful brand	0.716
2. This brand makes me feel good	0.783
3. I love this brand	0.640
Online customer engagement (CR = 0.902; AVE = 0.536)	
1. Engagement activities online get me to think about brand	0.770
2. I feel very positive when I'm engaging with the brand online	0.719
3. Engaging with the brand online makes me happy	0.744
4. I feel good when I engage with the brand	0.740
5. I'm proud to engage with the brand	0.791
6. I spend much time engaging with this brand online compared with other category brands	0.726
7. Whenever I'm engaging this category online, I usually engage with this brand	0.684
8. This brand is one of the brands I usually use when I use this category	0.674
Stress (CR = 0.881; AVE = 0.651)	
1. I feel nervous in the process	0.836
2. The engagement increases my distress	0.894
3. The engagement creates more problems for me	0.711
4. I felt I cannot control my experience during customer engagement	0.775
Customer empowerment (CR = 0.832; AVE = 0.624)	
1. Online engagement gives me enough information	0.762
2. Online engagement allows me to make a decision or choice	0.797
3. Online engagement provides a clear direction for the activity	0.809
Extroversion (CR = 0.920; AVE = 0.698)	
1. I talk to different people at parties	0.721
2. I start conversations	0.833
3. I do not mind being the center of attention	0.905
4. I feel comfortable around people	0.883
5. I make friends easily	0.823
Perceived brand quality (CR = 0.801; AVE = 0.573)	
1. This brand always represents very good products	0.704
2. This brand is one of quality	0.801
3. The products within this brand are quality products	0.763
Overall model: $\chi^2 = 484.400$, $df = 283$, $p < 0.01$, $CFI = 0.937$, $IFI = 0.937$, $RMSEA = 0.058$	
Notes: SFL = standardized factor loading; CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted	
Source: The table is created by authors	

Table 3 Descriptive statistics of variables and correlation analysis

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Brand love	3.958	0.637	1					
2. Online customer engagement	3.892	0.597	0.305**	1				
3. Customer empowerment	4.015	0.643	0.351**	0.581**	1			
4. Stress	3.682	0.919	0.006	0.467**	0.310**	1		
5. Extrovert	3.734	0.812	0.039	0.600**	0.477**	0.404**	1	
6. Perceived brand quality	4.015	0.630	0.398**	0.555**	0.537**	0.223**	0.403**	1

Notes: $N = 205$; ** $p < 0.01$

Source: The table is created by authors

Theoretical implications

This study contributes to the literature in several ways. First, the study deepens our understanding of customer engagement in virtual communities on brand love.

The development of information and communication technologies has modified consumer behavior and consumer-brand relationships. In the “values-driven era,” customers are no longer mere customers but complex and multi-dimensional

Table 4 Mediation analysis results

Variables	Empowerment Model 1	Stress Model 2	Brand love Model 3		
Income (control)	−0.084 (−1.110)	0.143 (1.234)	−0.100 (−1.180)		
Frequency (control)	0.051 (0.582)	0.252 (1.891)	0.199* (2.047)		
Gender (control)	0.014 (0.192)	0.160 (1.387)	−0.004 (−0.049)		
Customer engagement	0.624*** (9.754)	0.644*** (6.596)	0.244** (2.677)		
Customer empowerment			0.259** (3.309)		
Stress			−0.138** (−2.693)		
R ²	0.342	0.249	0.188		
F	26.013***	16.541***	7.660***		
Indirect effects			BC 95% CI		
		Point of estimate	BootSE	Lower	Upper
Total effect of X on Y		0.317**	0.073	0.172	0.461
Direct effect of X on Y		0.244**	0.091	0.064	0.424
Indirect effect(s) of X on Y	Customer empowerment	0.162	0.055	0.053	0.270
	Stress	−0.089	0.036	−0.169	−0.027

Notes: Unstandardized coefficients are given, with *t*-values in parentheses. *N* = 205. BC = bias corrected (5,000 bootstrapping samples); CI = confidence interval; **p* < 0.05, ***p* < 0.01, ****p* < 0.001

Source: The table is created by authors

Table 5 Moderator analysis

Variables	Brand love Model 1	Stress Model 2
Income (Control)	−0.100 (−1.180)	0.106 (0.924)
Frequency (Control)	0.199* (2.047)	0.297* (2.281)
Gender (Control)	−0.004 (−0.49)	0.110 (0.981)
Customer engagement	0.244** (2.677)	0.694*** (5.013)
Perceived brand quality		−0.152 (−1.393)
Int_1 (Customer engagement × Perceived brand quality)		−0.277* (−2.033)
Extroversion		0.177* (2.029)
Int_2 (Customer engagement × Extroversion)		0.392** (3.044)
R ²	0.188	0.305
F	7.660***	10.738***

Notes: Unstandardised coefficients are given with *t*-values in parentheses. *N* = 205. **p* < 0.05, ***p* < 0.01, ****p* < 0.001

Source: The table is created by authors

human beings (Kotler *et al.*, 2010). Under this paradigm, companies need to position their brands to address social, economic and environmental issues as a way of engaging with society (Jiménez-Zarco *et al.*, 2014). The importance of engagement (Kim and Johnson, 2016; Rather and Sharma, 2019) and brand love (Coelho *et al.*, 2019; Karjaluo *et al.*, 2016) has been previously highlighted. The association between customer engagement and customer–brand relationships has also been explored (Rather and Sharma, 2017). Gómez-Suárez *et al.* (2017) asserted that brand love and customer engagement are two main concepts in consumer–brand relationships. However, few empirical studies have examined the effectiveness of customer engagement in social media platforms (Wang and Lee, 2020), not to mention its impact on brand love. This study extends the investigation of the impact of customer engagement on virtual communities. It is among the first to confirm the importance of online customer engagement to brand love. In line with the findings of the

general customer engagement literature, online engagement bears a significant and positive influence on brand love, both directly and indirectly through empowerment.

Second, this study advances our understanding of the potential negative impact of customer engagement on social media. Extant literature on online customer engagement largely focused on its positive impact (Chan *et al.*, 2014; Kim and Johnson, 2016). Recent studies have suggested that customer engagement in virtual communities can have a negative effect (Beckers *et al.*, 2018; Heidenreich *et al.*, 2015; Kumar *et al.*, 2022; Wolter *et al.*, 2023). Research from Chan *et al.* (2010) has found that customer participation is a double-edged sword in that it can enhance customer economic value attainment and strengthen the relational bond between customers and employees but can also increase employees' job stress. However, their study is based on professional financial services. The present research takes one step further by demonstrating how online engagement may exert a positive or

negative influence. Based on COR theory, the present study takes the initiative to theorize and substantiate one positive and one negative mediating mechanism in the online engagement–brand love link. The findings shed new light on the potential negative side of online engagement, that is, an increase in customer stress.

Third, this study helps provide a fine-grained view of the potential boundary conditions of online customer engagement by exploring an enhancer and a weakener of the negative mechanism. The importance of perceived brand quality (Smith and Park, 1992) and the influence of extroversion on brand love (Bıçakcıoğlu *et al.*, 2018; Roy *et al.*, 2013) have been previously highlighted. However, the extant literature was neither specific to the context of online engagement nor explored the potential moderating roles of such perceptions or personalities in managing the effect of online engagement. The findings of this study reveal that the negative side can be regulated by altering brand quality perceptions or paying attention to customers' personalities with particular reference to extroversion.

Managerial implications

The study provides brands with strategies to leverage brand love and online customer engagement to their advantage. Findings offer several takeaways for brands and marketers. First, online engagement deserves greater attention, given its apparent significant direct effect on brand love. Companies are advised to keep posting and updating pictures, videos and success stories to their online pages to enhance the involvement of customers. Managers are suggested to design innovative engagement activities online, such as management of online conversations on their websites, hashtag campaigns on social media, the development of related social groups and community engagement events, to boost engagement cognitively, affectively and behaviorally.

Second, customer empowerment is vital for transforming the potential benefits of online engagement into brand love, regardless of customer personality or brand quality perceptions. Managers are encouraged to implement particular measures to improve information transparency and to listen to customer views in the engagement process. For example, a company can allow customers more freedom for brand engagement using clear guidelines and information to maximize customer satisfaction. Thus, empowered customers will perceive online engagement as more enjoyable, potentially developing their love for brands.

Nevertheless, managers are also advised to be alert that online engagement can serve as a double-edged sword by inducing stress among customers. Marketers need to understand more about customer feelings to minimize negative influences and create win–win situations. Brands are suggested to maintain a friendly atmosphere in social media interaction by monitoring comments regularly. Customers are encouraged to respect one another, and indecent words are discouraged. The brand can also devise themes that do not easily arouse negative responses and avoid sensitive topics in considering marketing campaigns or hashtag topics. Such measures can help reduce customer stress to a certain extent, which ultimately helps increase brand love.

To manage the negative impact of online engagement, managers are suggested to design tactics to boost customer perceptions of brand quality because brand quality perception

helps reduce the dark side effect of engagement on stress. Marketers are strongly urged to create a high-quality brand image. For example, marketers can repeatedly highlight the brand image in various communication channels with high-quality products or performance. These findings also suggest that extrovert customers can feel considerably stressed in engagement activities, resulting in a low level of brand love. Therefore, marketers should be cautious about engaging extrovert customers online. Extroversion could be reflected in behaviors. For example, brands can use big data to analyze behaviors of extroverts, such as online users' past posts, sharing or online behavior, in terms of clicks on specific content. On this basis, marketers can execute varying degrees of engagement activities according to customers' level of extroversion. Specifically, marketers can invest more resources in technology to improve the provision of content targeted on an individual level, which is also in line with Marbach *et al.* (2016)'s findings, showing the importance of using technology to design individual content for customers with different personalities.

Limitations and directions for future research

This research is not without limitations. First, only a convenience sample is collected considering the influence of COVID-19. Many (68%) of the respondents are aged between 18 and 24, which may not be a representative sample. Future studies can extend the study to different groups of respondents. Second, only one industry is used as the context. The impact of customer engagement activity may vary across contexts and countries (cf. Hollebeek, 2018; Islam *et al.*, 2017). For example, engagement behavior may differ in the context of cultural products compared with the FMCG industry. Thus, we caution that the interpretation of our findings may be bounded by the selected industry. Future studies are strongly encouraged to validate our model and findings in other industries to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Third, we acknowledge that the cross-sectional survey nature of the study only suggests associative relationships among the proposed variables. Therefore, future studies can consider using a more rigorous method to test the proposed relationships. For example, an experiment can be an alternative means to consider the impact of online engagement. A longitudinal design can be rewarding to provide evidence for the long-term impact of online customer engagement. Fourth, based on COR theory, this study explores and evidences one positive mediator and one negative mediator in the link between online engagement and brand love. Further studies are warranted to explore other potential underlying mechanisms with additional theoretical perspectives. Finally, big data helps companies to build strong consumer–brand relationships. Future research could examine the impact of big data management in the engagement–brand love link.

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