

Customer Engagement during Covid-19: Radical Shift towards Usage of Mobile Apps

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[Abstract] COVID -19 being a global crisis presented the world with unseen challenges where people are bound to follow new habits, this, in turn, persuades companies to discover new ways of engaging their customers. The paper synthesizes the existing literature by considering the impact of functional, hedonic, and social motives on customer engagement. Moreover, the study also explores how businesses engage customers amidst the challenges of COVID-19. The findings of the study would prompt the app developers to design the apps as per the customer's motivations. Consequently, with increased usage of mobile apps, companies can earn more profits.

[Keywords] customer engagement, COVID-19 pandemic, engagement motivations and mobile apps

Introduction

The unprecedented crisis of COVID-19 presents a significant impact on the economic and social life of the people worldwide. During this period, the daily routines of the people came to a halt. The COVID-19 pandemic laid down restrictions on mobility and closure of not only educational institutions and workplaces, but the operations of social and religious places were also impeded (Irawan et al., 2020). People were confined to stay at home and remain isolated from the societies. It has become a global challenge that changed the preferences of the customers and forced marketers to cater to their customer's needs accordingly (Diebner et al., 2020). Digital engagement is on the hike during this pandemic as customers are shifting towards online shopping, digital payment methods, work from home, etc. Such changes are visible in all industries from cosmetics to groceries. Hence, social isolation led to virtual access closer to the human heart (Accenture, 2020). Customers are constantly going to be active on digital platforms, therefore, their expectations about virtual experiences will keep rising in the future as well (Koch et al., 2020). Before this crisis, businesses persuaded their customers using distinct approaches, but the crisis created a haze for the businesses. Nowadays, every type of business is using the same ways of communication to serve their customers. Consequently, businesses are necessitated to create favored channels for customer engagement.

The outbreak of coronavirus influenced the usage of mobile apps for different purposes including entertainment, education, ordering food, health checkups, managing finances, etc. There is skyrocketing growth observed in mobile app usage as an increase of over 132 percent is observed in installations of apps on mobile phones. It was discovered that out of total media usage, about 57 percent is accessed through mobile apps. This was witnessed during the pandemic when people spend most of their time engaging in mobile apps (Venkatesh, 2020). The usage of mobile apps during the pandemic needs to be considered for the successful implementation of customer engagement of any brand or company. Firstly, all the companies are prompted to realize that the impressions of the COVID-19 pandemic on the behavioral patterns of people are creating a long-lasting impact. Eventually, the influence of social isolation measures on customer behavior needs to be explored keeping in mind their usage of mobile apps.

Several researchers have highlighted the importance of engagement motives such as functional, hedonic motives, and social motives in mobile app usage (Heijden, 2004; Batra & Ahtola, 1990; Fernandes & Barfknecht, 2020; Kim et al., 2013; Rasool et al., 2020). The existing literature has highlighted the importance of engaging customers through these motives in the normal condition. The functional motives to engage with mobile apps are concerned with the management of tasks and useful purposes, whereas

hedonic motives include the entertainment and enjoyment from engaging. In addition to this, social motives are concerned to connect with others and be in social unity.

Nevertheless, the distinctive situation created by the pandemic and factors involving functional, hedonic, and social motives needs to be considered in the wake of the paradigm shift in the behavior of customers. Therefore, the present study aims to explore motives that drive customers to engage with mobile apps in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Theoretical Background

Customer Engagement

In recent years, Customer engagement has attracted the interest of academicians from different domains. The concept of customer engagement has been used as a competitive tool to speculate the behavior of customers (Brodie et al. 2011). From a psychological perspective, customer engagement is defined as the experiences that occur when customers are using the platform, which is the cognitive involvement of customers. Thakur (2018) defined “customer engagement as the psychological state of mind which leads to consistent interaction with the platform or the product-driven by utilitarian and emotional motivation for building long term relationships.” The interactive customer experiences revealed cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions of customer engagement (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Brodie et al. 2011).

Mobile Apps and Customer Engagement

In the mobile context, customer engagement is generated when customers interact with the mobile apps. Throughout the day, a large variety of activities ranging from education to entertainment can be performed on smart mobile phones with advanced features nowadays. Access to apps on mobile phones can be made at anytime and anywhere (Thakur, 2018). Due to ease of use, a wide variety of functions, and convenient accessibility of mobile apps, mobile phone users have undergone tremendous growth. This saves users’ time, entertains them, and helps in making social connections, which drives them to engage with apps for various activities (Kim et al., 2013). The better experience users have while interacting with the apps, the more it would engage them, which in turn, assists companies to achieve their goals (Dovalienė et al., 2016). The success of an app can be attributed to its features and functionality which can be measured by downloads of that app (Lim et al., 2015). Hence, it becomes crucial for companies to understand the newer ways to engage customers in such a highly competitive world using mobile apps.

Dimensions of Customer Engagement

The framework from Kolbe’s 1990 model of Cognitive, Affective, and Conative explains the three dimensions which focus on why and how customers behave. These are the stages of the mental processes of the mobile app user. McLean (2018) explained the cognitive dimension (ease of use, usefulness, and all functional tasks) as well as the affective dimension (enjoyment, fun, and pleasure) that ultimately affect customer engagement through mobile apps.

The cognitive dimension is associated with the thinking and understanding process which came out of customer interaction. The affective dimension is linked with one’s emotions or feelings associated with an object (mobile apps). These can be both positive as well as negative. The affective dimension is found to be more persistent than the cognitive (Kim et al., 2007). Wilkie (1994) defined the conative dimension which manifests the action of the individual. This reveals the willingness and intention of the mobile app users to continue to engage. The conscious decisions of the usefulness of apps, enjoyment, and the social need to connect with others are driven out of using mobile apps in line with these dimensions (Kim et al., 2013).

Thus, it reflects user engagement and is important to explain how customers think (cognitive), feel (affective), and act (conative). The present study has analyzed the key insights and findings from the literature to categorize the motivations for using mobile apps. The motives which drive to engage are classified based on the use of mobile apps as follows:

Functional Motives: Functional benefits to engage with mobile apps are concerned with the management of tasks, and useful purposes like calendar, time management, etc. These are functional motivations that engage customers to fulfill the performance of particular functions with app utility. (Fernandes & Barfknecht, 2020; Stocchi et al., 2018) defined the functional motives of engaging with the mobile apps, where customers expect the app to fulfill the desired functions such as a calendar for managing tasks, a clock for managing the time, e-commerce apps to access information of various goods and services, etc. These motivations are concerned with the app utility which came out of comprehensive information provided by the apps that will bring out the expected functions. Ease of use is another factor derived from various studies that elicit positively on mobile app usage. Any technology is fruitful if a customer can use it efficiently and works without much effort (Malik et al., 2017; Mehra et al., 2020).

Hedonic motives: Hedonic motives include entertainment derived using the mobile app and it inculcates customer engagement (Venkatesh et al., 2012). Customers' enjoyable experience, fun and pleasant while using apps derive hedonic motivations which directly relate to their feelings and emotions. Researchers found out that hedonic motives act as a strong predictor to engage with technology like mobile apps (Alnawas & Aburub, 2016). Trust in the digital context is an essential factor to be taken care of where the information of the consumers to be dealt with confidentially. The digital transaction is not completed in absence of trust. If the mobile app meets the consumers' need of protecting their data that motivates them to engage with mobile apps (Fernandes & Barfknecht, 2020; Stocchi et al., 2018). Key implications analyzed by Kim et al. (2013) was that enjoyment received while engaging with the mobile app is the delighted experience derived from engaging with the app which is derived in the affective state.

Social motives: To connect with others and be in social unity, social features influence the individuals, which drives social motivation. Social influence acts as a significant predictor of behavioral intention (Verkijika, 2018). Adding upon, exploring the social influence, results depict that peer influence is a driver for use of the apps (Arora et al., 2020). Prior studies (Kim et al., 2013; Malik et al., 2017; Sharma & Girija, 2018) depict that social influence is a major driver in influencing the use of mobile apps. Understanding social motives would highlight the need for companies and app developers to design apps with integrated social features which encourage customers to connect with their family and friends. This enlightens the need for companies to get information about social motivation among customers.

Engaging Customers: In the Era of COVID-19

The radical shift in buying patterns of the customers has created a dire need for the companies to respond as per their varying motives to engage them during this pandemic. Since coronavirus has forced people to break with their previous normal routines and re-imagine the new world ahead. The companies need to respond to various pressures faced by the customers and thus, expedite a deeper sense of belongingness for the customers to engage them. This came out as an opportunity for the companies for a competitive edge shortly. The model is proposed for engaging customers in this era of COVID-19 including the parameters as follows:

Adaptation of digital technology for utilitarian needs: In times of crisis, the information needs of the customers shifted and the mobile apps turned out to be the panacea. Simultaneously, people sought more facts, data, support, and guidelines for sailing through the uncertainty posed by COVID-19 to ensure the safety of their families (Venkatesh, 2020). They navigate information about risk assessment due to the pandemic as well as learn appropriate skills to overcome this distressing situation. The mobile apps create awareness among people by tracking symptoms of COVID-19 (Kondylakis et al., 2020). Regardless of this, people shifted their activities online for ensuring a contactless and safest mode of delivery, which made the need to deliver seamless experiences as per the desire of the customers (Diebner et al., 2020). Before the pandemic, people made limited use of digital technology to meet their daily needs, but after the restrictions posed due to the pandemic on the stores worldwide, people switched to mobile apps for ordering utilities to delivering their services (Koch et al., 2020; Irawan et al., 2020).

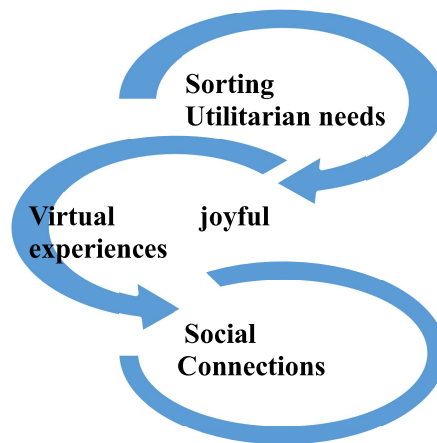
Adaptation of virtual means to derive joy: The mobility restriction in the times of COVID-19 prohibited the opening of hotels, theatres, and bars which hindered the customers to engage in leisure activities (Koch et al., 2020). Since people are unable to pursue leisure activities, they realize their desires

for fun, enjoyment, entertainment, etc. through online modes. As the field trips ceased, the museums took the initiative to offer unbelievable virtual trips to deliver live experiences through live videos, virtual rides, games, and interactive websites at their homes (Bright, 2020). The Mattel Playroom was launched as a digital platform for engaging kids to relieve boredom during the crisis. They put forward the unique idea to exemplify the doctors, nurses, and all frontline workers as real-time heroes (Mattel, 2020). In another example, oOh! Media joined hands with Facebook for a Campaign namely, “The Kindness Pandemic” that spread the stories of selflessness and kindness from different areas of Australia (oOh! Media 2020). The campaign collected stories from the locals and shared them online to persuade one lakh followers in a single day as an online community (Retailbiz, 2020). People approached their favorite brands to maintain their mental well-being as well as to develop a sense of belongingness (Karpen & Conduit, 2020).

Social engagement to reduce social pressures: The golden rule of “stay home, stay safe” was advisory by WHO (2020) as a preventive measure urged people to stay in their homes to curb the spread of coronavirus and it dismissed the physical connections. Hence, interactions and social engagement through technology become an integral part of our daily lives (Accenture, 2020). The digital means came to light as a boon to keep people connected with their loved ones. Facebook live is one example of a digital service, people were reluctant to use it initially, but it experienced a manifold rise in its users nowadays (Hutchinson, 2020). Along with this, there is a hike in live video calls and conversations on digital platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook messenger. The explosive growth of social media usage occurs by worldwide social distancing measures. People are compensating for their support networks by using social media platforms to connect with others (Nabity-Grover et al., 2020). Therefore, people are not only limited in their extent towards getting experiences and staying connected with their near and dear ones but also feel attached to the mobile apps which provide these services (Karpen & Conduit, 2020). The model proposed is as follows.

Figure 1

Flexible Customer Engagement Model (Using Mobile Apps)



Findings

During COVID-19, the flexible engagement model for engaging the customers is adopted by the companies which will continue even post-crisis. When it comes to utilitarian needs as in figure 1, customers are adapting the mobile apps not only for their informational needs but for all the utilities (Bright, 2020). Arogya Setu is a great example of such an app as users were highly engaged with the features of the app helping them not only to monitor the number of corona cases and timely safety guidelines but helping them

by alerting them about nearby cases and disease tracking feature as well (Kodali et al., 2020). Moreover, the app incorporated the expectations of its users thus, engaging them well (Kondylakis et al., 2020).

Another parameter is enjoyment, referred to as virtual joyful experiences in figure 1, where delivering seamless experiences, not at the cost of safety among customers became vital for the companies, which in turn serve the purpose by engaging their customers. Customers are approaching their favorite brands to maintain their well-being (Karpen & Conduit, 2020). This would reflect in the post-COVID era where customers would think about how companies are serving them in such difficult times for their joyful experiences. Along with this, social connections are built on social media platforms for relationship base interactions. The mobile apps provide their users to share their opinion regarding the services received and interact with other customers with similar preferences by suggesting posts with the highest likes or comments etc., hence, it gives the users a feeling of being part of a community (Koch et al., 2020). Companies facing a decline in their sales or customer base can go for strategically use mobile apps to make their customers feel their presence and meet the specific motives of their customers. As the behavior of customers has undergone numerous changes, the findings of the paper suggest that companies must discard the earlier assumptions about customer engagement and think of new ways to get to the customers. People have a multiplicity of motives so, businesses should develop apps that go beyond utilitarian needs and offer them opportunities to get joyful experiences by engaging in various activities such as posting feedback, crossword puzzles, spinning wheels, and winning rewards. Further, these apps can be used to develop a community of users with similar interests and buying preferences as in the case of MI phones, Elle18 fashion community, etc., and these platforms allow users to share their experiences which in turn will reinforce their engagement and loyalty to the companies. Man is a social animal and always has a desire to stay connected to social groups. Online social communities extend emotional support to overcome the stress and anxiety created by feelings of isolation.

Implications

Initially, it can be emphasized that people became more active on mobile apps due to the COVID-19 pandemic than ever before and shifted nearly all of their activities online. This change has presented the companies to frame unique policies for reaching the customer and keeping them engaged with the company digitally because it is difficult to track them in person on account of COVID-19 protective measures. On the other hand, usage of virtual platforms has increased as compared to pre-COVID times as advisory and counseling services which were most preferably sought through personal meetings are now comfortably received through video calls. Thus, the organizations are prompted to use their limited resources in this tough time not only to provide their service in hand but to increase the engagement of their customers as well.

Digital and online systems are trending ranging from education to banking and from insurance to medical visits, everything is available through apps. All that a company is required to do is just to gain the trust of their customers and assure them easy access, privacy, and unhindered procurement of service whenever and wherever they demand it. Our results have greater implications for the companies to make use of the mobile apps for promoting themselves under current circumstances when the customers can not be reached out physically to stimulate their buying intentions of the customers. The companies can take to their social media pages for that as people nowadays have started to spend more of them on apps like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc. to meet their social engagement needs. The research has also extended the theoretical implications for the impact of different usage motives in the time of this uncertain and uncommon situation of the COVID-19 pandemic. This would add value to the literature on customer engagement. The usage of mobile has witnessed tremendous growth which paves the way for all the companies to make use of this for increasing the effects of their customer engagement efforts in this difficult time of global crisis.

Conclusion

In the present paper, the influence of the pandemic on customer engagement through mobile apps is studied, and how the customer has rehabilitated the usage of mobile apps in this crisis. In the first place, the paper

has discussed customer engagement along with utilitarian, hedonic and social motives behind it to form a sound theoretical base for future studies. Secondly, the use of mobile apps during times of crisis, a novel area of research, is explored to present solutions for the problem posed due to the restricted movement of the people. This paper has unfolded the utilitarian, hedonic and social motives in the context of mobile apps during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study is not limited to examining the impact of COVID-19 on mobile app usage but has gone far beyond to study how companies can make use of this opportunity to engage their customers in this tough time.

Limitations & Scope for Future Research

Customer engagement has emerged as an important research destination, as supported by prior studies. Although in previous studies, this concept has evolved in different disciplines. However, through this paper, the researchers approached it in the context of mobile apps but still, the study has certain limitations. The paper is exploratory in nature and found to be pertinent from the review of existing literature. But, the impact of demographic factors has not been considered on customer engagement in mobile apps as the usage of mobile apps varies across demographics. For further research venues, the focus should be on how demographic factors exert influence on customer engagement especially, age and gender on customer engagement in the mobile context. Another limitation relates to the fact that the paper covered the impact of engagement motives on customer engagement as suggested by prior studies, but as the COVID-19 changes behaviors of the customers, thus the need arises for conducting empirical research based on primary data which would help in exploring more new factors in line with customer engagement dimensions.

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