

Discovering Mediators of Digital Engagement Initiatives in a Business-to-Business (B2B) Context

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Purpose – Business-to-business (B2B) firms can adopt self-service technologies to offer customers value propositions beyond their core offerings, i.e., engagement initiatives (Gill, Sridhar & Grewal, 2017) infused with digital technology. In B2B markets, such endeavors involve a limited and identifiable customer base, characterized by a well-defined utilitarian focus and a complex long term relational structure. The latter means that new value propositions are associated with higher risks in terms of jeopardizing established trust and commitments which can result in absent or even negative actor engagement. This study explores what mediates the outcomes of an digital engagement initiative and how firms a priori can estimate the related value proposition outcome.

Design approach – The study applies a service-dominant (S-D) logic perspective (Vargo & Lusch, 2016; 2017) on value co-creation and adopts a longitudinal case study of a prime mover and its customers. It also follows the engagement definition from a S-D logic rather than a relationship marketing perspective and hence acknowledge the resulting value co-creation takes place within a service ecosystems perspective (Jaakkola, Conduit & Fehrer, 2019) rather than merely in a dyad. The field study is involving participatory observations, workshops, and in-depth interviews as data collection methods. The data were then analyzed in a abductive manner by four independent researchers to offer a robust result.

Findings – The results shows that the outcome of an digital engagement initiative in B2B markets is affected by the (firm-customer) relationship quality and the value congruence related to the engagement-facilitating technology's value proposition. Depending if there is a match in either the relationship quality or value congruence (or both) the actor engagement outcome differ. However, misalignment in both dimensions lead to sunk costs and potential negative actor engagement. Thus, the resulting digital engagement initiative alignment (DEIA) model offers both theoretical and managerial implications.

Research limitations – The study builds on a single case study and do thereby not offer theoretical generalization. However, it is a midrange theory contribution within the field of actor engagement research and technology-infused services and can thus provide conceptual guidance.

Practical implications – The resulting DEIA model is useful for any B2B firm that develops and introduces a digital engagement initiative to their customers.

Originality/value – The paper is a contribution within the intersection of service and (digital) technology research. It is also a mid-range theory contribution to S-D logic and brings a theoretical understanding of both the bright and dark side of actor engagement.

Keywords – Service-dominant logic, actor engagement, value proposition, self-service technology, engagement initiative

References

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