

# *Rethinking nonprofit service disintermediation through service communication interactions*

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## **Rethinking nonprofit service disintermediation through service communication interactions.**

### **Abstract**

**Purpose** - A significant management issue for nonprofit organisations (NPOs) is the disconnect between services beneficiaries and the funders of those services. Individual donors and fundraisers provide the resources to enable other people (or animals) to be supported. The purpose of this paper is to address this service management challenge through new types of customer service interactions that bring together service donors and service recipients through innovative digital communication.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Based on a review, and illustrated by recent examples of innovative best practice, the authors develop a new conceptual framework for understanding the relationship between customer participation and service brand communication.

**Findings** - The paper starts by identifying the problem of ‘nonprofit service disintermediation’. The paper also outlines the inadequacies of popular frameworks of communication, widely taught in business schools, to understand the new reality of customer-service organisation engagement in the digital age. Through adopting a customer engagement lens, the paper develops a new conceptual framework for understanding the relationship between customer participation and service brand communication.

**Research limitations/implications** – Given the authors’ focus on the intersection between new communication opportunities and customer service interactions, this paper adds novel insight to theory and raises important implications for management.

**Originality** – The paper explores how, through these new communication interactions, engagement with, and loyalty to, the brand is built over time in a fluid and dynamic way. It identifies a disintermediated relationship, distinct to other service contexts, but significant in terms of value and social impact.

**Keywords:** service interactions, communication, customer engagement, nonprofit organisation, disintermediation, conceptual framework, mission-based services, prosocial motivation.

**Paper type** - Conceptual paper

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## Introduction

*“Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn.”*  
(Benjamin Franklin, 1763)<sup>1</sup>.

A significant management issue for nonprofit organisations (NPOs) is the disconnect between service beneficiaries and funders of those services. Individual donors, fundraisers, and grant-givers provide the resources to enable other people (or animals) to be supported. Without these funds, NPOs cannot provide services to fulfil their social mission. This disintermediated relationship is distinct to other service contexts but it is not small scale. In the UK alone, the charity sector spends over £40 billion each year, contributing £12 billion to the UK economy (NCVO, 2021). The nonprofit sector employs over 850,000 people, as well 21 million volunteers. Latest figures show 88% of people had used a charitable service in the previous year, up from 78% two years before (CAF, 2018).

The challenge is that the exchange of funds for nonprofit services benefitting someone else risks becoming transactional: a low-involvement engagement that lacks being underpinned by emotional and cognitive engagement, so necessary to create a deeper relationship. This disintermediation threatens future resource provision in four ways: lack of awareness of the mission, lack of personal relevance, lack of ongoing engagement, and lack of perceived impact of donations made. What NPOs need to survive long-term is supporters who go beyond the transaction, who are motivated by the mission, and who believe in the NPO’s ability to achieve it. They need supporters who engage across multiple touchpoints and for a range of reasons/motivations. They need supporters who stay with them across different life-stages and show commitment and loyalty to the brand, despite the fierce competition for resources in this sector.

These contextual drivers have created a perfect storm for innovation in digital communication within the nonprofit sector; one that connects supporters with the mission and beneficiaries in a cost-effective way. The purpose of this paper is to address the service management challenge of disintermediation, and subsequent lack of deep engagement, through new types of customer service interactions utilising innovative digital communication. However, what

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<sup>1</sup> 1763, Poor Richard’s Almanac.

the paper also identifies is the inadequacies of popular frameworks of communication, widely taught in business schools, to understand the new reality of customer-service organisation engagement in the digital age.

The paper adopts the approach recommended by Heerde *et al.* (2021) for theory development to be anchored in ecological value, defined as “*the degree to which research reflects and is relevant to marketing as it exists and evolves among marketing stakeholders and marketing ecosystems*” (2021, p.1). They identify 24 reality checks to strengthen the value of future research, one of which [#1] asks “*Have you looked to the real world of marketing, not just the literature, for ideas?*”. This paper starts by considering three popular communication models. It then identifies how NPOs currently engage customers and describes nine characteristics at the intersection of communication and service in the nonprofit context. It explores the implications for the sector issue of disintermediation. Finally, through bringing together theory on communication and service interactions, the paper contributes a new conceptual model for customer engagement in the nonprofit service context.

### **Background: Current frameworks for understanding service communication**

Three frameworks dominate the academic exploration, and especially teaching, of how customers engage with organisations through communication: AIDA (Strong and Edward, 1922), Hierarchy of Effects (Lavidge and Steiner, 1961), and the SMCR model (Berlo, 1960). Firstly, AIDA is a process model that charts the stages a single individual goes through with respect to the purchase of a single product or service from an organisation (Colley, 1961). *Awareness* that the product/service exists is built through communication by the organisation, or can come from word of mouth/mouse from people outside the organisation or from knowledge the customer has already, for example from a previous purchase. *Interest* reflects a deeper connection, where the customer wants to find out more. The third stage of *Desire* signals intent to purchase and refinement of the competitive set from which the customer makes their choice. *Action* is the purchase moment but can also include behaviours such as trying a sample, requesting a test drive, or viewing a house. To more accurately reflect the lifetime value of the customer, a fifth stage of *Retention* is commonly added to create AIDAR (Fortenberry and McGoldrick, 2020). Despite its age and simplicity, the AIDA model

remains a staple of communication research (Ullal and Hawaldar, 2018; Gever and Olijó, 2017; Prathapan, Sahadevan and Zakkariya, 2018) and teaching (Lee and Hoffman, 2015; Polk, 2015). However, in an era of digital communication the flaws within the AIDA model become apparent. Delineation between the stages is more challenging to determine, as information flows from multiple sources in real time. The direction of travel is also questionable as consumers can flow between knowing/forgetting, liking/wanting/losing interest and deciding to purchase/changing their minds/procrastinating. And, in particular for service organisations, the goal has moved beyond purchase and repeat purchase to one of building a relationship with the customer that is grounded in cognitive, behavioural, and emotional engagement (Hollebeek, 2011; Brodie *et al.*, 2011; Verhoef, Reinartz and Krafft, 2010). Attempts to map the AIDA model against customer engagement literature, for example by Montazeribarforoushi, Keshavarzsaleh and Ramsøy, (2017) retain the linear stage process approach anchored in a single purchase, despite reconsidering them through knowledge of neural processing. They argue decision-making can be studied in different aspects such as reward-based decision-making, value-based decision-making, or goal-oriented decision-making where researchers specifically focus on only one factor to assign the sequences and steps of decision-making in different contexts.

Secondly, the Hierarchy of Effects (HoE) model was developed to understand advertising communication in particular (Lavidge and Steiner, 1961). It is similar to AIDA in three key ways: it is linear, sequential, and a single customer view. Awareness and knowledge reflect the customer learning about the product/service and processing information about it. Together this is known as the *cognitive* stage. Liking and preference reflect the customer forming feelings about the product/service, known as the *affective* stage. Conviction and purchase are when the customer overcomes any barriers to purchase and takes action, originally known as the conative or *experience* stage (Barry and Howard, 1990). The authors summarise the framework as a think-feel-do sequence (Lavidge and Steiner, 1961). Subsequent papers have argued the sequence depends on the type of brand/product (Bruce, Peters, and Naik, 2012), with Ray *et al.* (1973) describing the learning hierarchy (cognition → affect → experience sequence), the dissonance attribution hierarchy (experience → affect → cognition sequence), and the low-involvement hierarchy (experience → cognition → affect sequence). In contrast, Vakratsas and Ambler (1999), reviewed more than 250 empirical

papers and found little support for any temporal hierarchy. They argued that cognition, affect, and experience effects occur simultaneously, effectively pronouncing the HoE model 'dead'. More recently though, econometric modelling of 30 brands across 15 categories identified that the sequencing within the HoE model was found to be valid, with the affect → cognition → experience sequence the most prevalent (Valenti *et al.*, 2020). Despite its popularity, the HoE model remains a flow of stages that an individual customer processes through before the purchase of a particular product/service.

Finally, the SMCR model (Berlo, 1960) includes the concepts of sender, message, channel, and receiver. It was developed from Shannon and Weaver's (1948) model of technical communication and has been widely applied to different fields of communication which also introduced the filtering of the message between the sender and receiver by the encoding and decoding of the message and through disruption of 'noise' which interferes with the communication flow. In an age of fake news, message bombardment, and short media attention spans, the SMCR model continues to have some resonance. However, given the changing landscape of digital communication, the linear process and one-time event characteristics of SMCR represent a narrow perspective that does not consider multiple moments of interaction, rise of user-generated content, and the motivation/communication ability of the customer.

Together, these three models have provided a bedrock for understanding the intersection between organisational communication and customer choice of product/service. However, the increasing use of digital communication is changing the way customers engage with organisations, particularly in the nonprofit context. This paper identifies why the nonprofit context warrants a distinctive focus and then considers current state of the art examples of digital practice by NPOs. It concludes by re-examining service communication theory to better reflect current practice.

### **State of the art communication characteristics and opportunities**

The distinctiveness of the nonprofit context has four foundational pillars (Mitchell and Clark, 2020a). Firstly, the purpose of each organisation is to achieve their social mission, in contrast to profit or shareholder return motives within the commercial sector. Secondly, the

organisational culture strongly reflects their values, with subsequent high expectations of behaviour from public and regulators alike. Thirdly, the funders of the service are usually distinct from the beneficiaries of the service. Finally, the relationships between the NPO and its various stakeholders are complex. What this contextual distinctiveness creates is a unique opportunity for innovation, for thinking differently about the customer-organisation service interaction and the part that communication contributes to that. Drawing on state of the art nonprofit practice, this section of the paper identifies nine characteristics (C) of new service and communication interactions. The following section then considers the theoretical implications of these characteristics for service communication, particularly how they overcome the issue of disintermediation between stakeholder and beneficiary.

### **C1: Individual customer vs. Multivalent stakeholders**

Traditional models of service communication describe one type of customer (Valenti *et al.*, 2020). However, in the nonprofit context, NPOs have moved beyond the dyadic customer-firm relationship, or mediated dyadic relationship through a third party, to multivalent stakeholder relationships (Mitchell and Clark, 2019). For international development charity Oxfam, for example, 'customers' go beyond those directly supported through in-field programmes, and includes purchasers of second hand goods (online or on the high street), purchasers of new goods (such as Fairtrade coffee or greeting cards), advocates of the lobbying campaigns such as climate change and women's rights, users of their credit card, volunteers at festivals, and users of their classroom teaching materials. In practice, what this leads to is the need for a range of storytelling techniques and media channels to appeal to different people. In their research on how NPOs use storytelling to differentiate themselves, Mitchell and Clark (2021) identify that employing a breadth of story formats demonstrates both inherent digital storytelling capability and a determination to appeal to wide range of audience through story construct (Dixon, 2014, Aaker and Aaker, 2016). For example, Cancer Research UK demonstrated strong storytelling capability through formats including tragedy, parable, fairy-tale, game, and legend used across digital media such as websites, YouTube, and Facebook (Mitchell and Clark, 2021).

### **C2: Individual customer vs. Multiple personas**

Conventionally, the customer is the person making the purchase of the product or service. In the current nonprofit context, however, complexity is also created through customers having the potential for multiple personas: that is the same person could volunteer, fundraise, and donate for example. As a result, definitions of what 'customer' means within the nonprofit context needs to reflect this fluidity. Whatever persona the customer is portraying when they are interacting with the NPO at any specific time will affect their motivation for the engagement and, subsequently, how effective the service communication is at meeting their needs. A donor mindset for example might prefer to understand the impact the charity has made and where their money has gone. A customer mindset wants information to understand how the problem might affect them or their family. A fundraiser mindset will be motivated by hearing the emotional stories of volunteers or victims (Pera & Viglia, 2016, Escales, 2004, Dush, 2016). The use of digital personal experience narratives (DPEN) to tell stories has been seen as a significant opportunity for nonprofits, with Aaker and Smith (2010) encouraging 'storybanking' to enable authentic stories to be deployed at the most effective time. In addition, there has been growing use of video by NPOs (Waters and Jones, 2011), as well as Instagram (McNely, 2012) with recent increased affordability and availability of blogging platforms such as WordPress and Exposure, making it easier for smaller charities who lack in-house digital capability to appeal to different stakeholder personas.

### **C3: Personal choice vs. Public choice**

Traditional communication models consider the importance of word of mouth – with friends and family influencing consumption choices. However, the advent of social media has elevated this beyond immediate peer groups, to choice being influenced by the opinions of total strangers (Flavian et al., 2019). Secondly, public reach for that advice can now be global rather than from one local area. Finally, social media ensures the recommendations can be in real time, reflecting changing service levels (such as out of stocks) or price deals. Online reviews have been seen as the most important electronic word of mouth (eWOM), providing information to drive customer choice (Ruiz-Mafe et al., 2020). In this way, social media enables the customer to share both their decision-making journey and their choices. Functionality such as posts and hashtags, likes, and sharing not only facilitate knowledge sharing (Zhang, 2020), but also place individual choices, such as which NPO to support, in the shared context of their network and beyond. Crucially, they move the customer from passive

recipient of information to actively contributing to the engagement of other customers, through co-creating content (Klein et al., 2020).

Within the nonprofit context, Wallace and Buil (2021) draw on theories of value co-creation, impression management, and conspicuous donation behaviour to understand why people share on Facebook that they have donated to an NPO. They identified typologies of donor including those wanting to impress others as well as those who gain intrinsic value in endorsing the NPO, such as 'Facebook expressives' and 'dirty altruists'. For campaigns that capture the public imagination, the rewards are significant: Habitat for Humanity has raised over \$14 million for its Global Village Campaign using 'Fundly', America's Food Fund has so far raised \$45 million using 'GoFundMe', and the Captain Tom appeal in the UK on 'JustGiving' raised £32 million. Functionality, such as sharing endorsement of the campaign, size of donation, and publicising the cause within a person's network, builds visibility and credibility for the campaign as well as reflecting positively on the donor. The communication opportunity therefore is not simply to build awareness or enable payment but also to stimulate this prosocial digital behaviour.

#### **C4: Individual experience vs. Group experience**

Traditional service communication models consider the consumption choices of an individual person. However, development in digital platforms enable group experiences in real time. The highest profile examples of nonprofit support have been collective online experiences. For example, the *ALS Ice Bucket Challenge* [Summer, 2014] spread initially by golfers with a personal connection to the disease before going viral with world leaders, celebrities, and the public alike (Kwon, 2019). By the end of the year, it raised over in \$220 million for ALS/motor neurone disease charities and 2.4 million tagged Facebook videos were uploaded. The eWOM phenomenon of the ALS ice-bucket challenge was analysed by Pressgrove, McKeever, and Jang (2018) using Berger's 2013 STEPPS framework (social currency, triggers, emotion, public, practical value and stories) to understand tweets about the campaign. They identified the herd mentality within the public sharing of content, the social currency created through the charity-link, and the positive emotion connected with the event that combined to make it so effective. More recently, *The 2.6 Challenge* [April, 2021] was a collaboration by mass

participation events companies to support charities following the cancellation of fundraising events such as the London Marathon due to Covid-19. Developed in four weeks through collaboration, on a pro bono basis, it became the widest mass participation fundraising event in the UK with 3,900 charities benefitting. The user-generated content resulted in a number of effects: building momentum for event participation, sharing ideas for Covid-compliant personal challenges, and generating fundraising support for individual efforts (Mitchell, 2021). Finally, the social campaigns such as #clapforcarers, started by Annemarie Plas, a Dutch woman living in South London to show support for health workers during Covid-19, illustrated how national participation in prosocial behaviour can build through a simple hashtag [2nd April – 28<sup>th</sup> May 2020].

### **C5: Inward benefit vs. Outward benefit**

Traditional communication models focus on the customer receiving the benefit; they do not consider being motivated to help others. Debates about altruistic motivation underpinning prosocial behaviour run long and deep. Organ donation (Moorlock et al. 2014, Morgan and Miller, 2002), blood donation (Otto and Bolle, 2011, Steele et al. 2008), and bystander heroism (Franco et al., 2011, Kohen et al., 2019) have been identified as moments when people exhibit outward-motivation rather than inward. However, the body of evidence leans towards social exchange rather than altruism (Blau, 1968; Cropanzano et al., 2017), for example where giving up time to volunteer to help others also brings personal benefits such as feeling useful, being able to make a difference, and living according to one's personal values (Mitchell and Clark, 2020a). This doesn't lessen the social value of the gift of time in this case, but demonstrates there is a motivation spectrum with pure altruism at one end (100% outward), mutual benefit received in the centre (combination) and pure personal benefit at the other (100% inward). Holbrook (1999) identifies this as self-orientated value vs. other-orientated value. Recent digital examples of mutual benefit are the *Dryathlon* in aid of Cancer Research UK and *Go Sober for October* for Macmillan, where friends and family donate to encourage the participants. The money raised goes to a good cause and the participant benefits from a healthier lifestyle, if only for one month! In a different way, the Oxfam online shop does this also, with over 100,000 items on sale at any time and a campaign to encourage vintage buying called *SecondhandSeptember*, with 62,000 people participating

(Oxfam, 2021). Proceeds from the sale go towards the mission but the customer is motivated by buying something they want/need.

### **C6: Purchase purpose vs. Entertainment purpose**

In traditional models of service communication, the primary purpose of the interaction between customer and company is the purchase of the service. For charity shops on the high street that purchase moment still exists. But increasingly, digital communication presents opportunities where the primary purpose is entertainment, which in turn builds participation with the brand. Customers are intrinsically motivated, that is engaged with the content for the inherent satisfaction of the activity itself (Mathwick and Rigdon, 2004), rather than extrinsically motivated by other rewards (Ryan and Deci, 2000). However, Bauer *et al.* (2020) identify that even when intrinsically motivated, gamification triggers enjoyment which in turn drives business outcomes. Vashisht and Royné (2019) argue that gamification drives consumer behaviour, and research by Mulcahy *et al.* (2021) identified that gamified apps and serious games create three transformative value dimensions - knowledge, distraction, and stimulation, which had both direct and indirect effects on desired outcomes. Hwang and Choi (2019)'s research showed that gamification can be used as a tool for the retention of customers in loyalty programmes and repeat purchases. Two examples within the nonprofit context illustrate how NPOs are harnessing gamification to build engagement with the brand. The first harnesses pre-existing customer behaviour. As part of the *Max Out for Mental Health* campaign, run by Mind, players fundraise using 'twitch' while livestreaming their gaming, such as playing Call of Duty. The campaign argued that gaming can have a positive effect on mental health of the player but then also raised funds for others who need mental health support. In this example, the streaming/sharing of play created a benefit for the charity. The other perspective is where the charity creates the entertainment experience, for example the Citizen Science series created by Cancer Research UK which proved that non-scientists could accurately analyse certain types of cancer data. Across the *Citizen Science* programme, over half a million people from 182 countries participated through beating puzzles, building magical worlds and playing adventure games on their mobile phones. Effectively, it crowdsourced data analysis through gamification. The reach of their games such as Reverse the Odds (bladder cancer, 135,000 downloads), Cell Slider (oestrogen receptor, 2 million

played), and Genes in Space (breast cancer, 400,000 downloads) illustrated the popularity of game participation for a good cause.

In addition to gaming, the pure entertainment benefit of film and livestreaming has been embraced by NPOs, particularly during lockdown. The Donkey Sanctuary in Sidmouth created six 30 minute broadcasts via Facebook Live [Easter, 2020] enabling viewers to 'visit' the herds and understand the importance of the volunteers, especially during lockdown. The appeal of this gentle entertainment at a time of national anxiety resulted in a reach of 1.1 million on Easter Sunday alone, including 440,000 unique viewers, 8,300 comments and 347,000 minutes of live donkey interaction on one day. The knock-on effect was increased brand awareness and a rise in public donations. Finally, the growth of entertainment platforms such as Netflix has enabled social issue films to reach a global audience. Documentaries such as *Seaspiracy*, created by Ali and Lucy Tabrizi with Netflix, are motivated by achieving social change; in this case to create 'no-catch' zones across 30 of the UK's waters. Having watched the film, 260,000 people signed a petition to lobby government on this issue and 42% said they were considering giving up eating fish.

### **C7: Objective-driven creative vs. Channel-driven creative**

Traditional models of communication start with the objective for the consumer, such as building awareness/desire in AIDA or conviction/preference in HoE. However, there has been a recent increase in NPOs driving their creative content through their channel choice. For example, the immediacy of text messaging brings an urgency in real time, harnessed by the RNLI through supporters signing up for text alerts when a lifeboat is launched in a place that means something to them, such as where a family spent a vacation. Each text alert triggers a one-off donation, directly connecting support with action. The effect is to bring the consumer virtually close to the service at a time when they are no longer physically close. In contrast, the use of Clubhouse by the British Red Cross (BRC) is conversational, intimate, and by invite only, reflecting the platform. It enables BRC host conversations with volunteers, specialists, and community leaders on topics such as global health, education, and migration.

The fleeting presence of Snapchat drove the creative for WWF<sup>2</sup> #LastSelfie campaign. The purpose of the campaign was to raise awareness of endangered animals ('don't let this be my last selfie'), to create an urgency that would drive donations and enable sharing online. In one week, the snaps were posted to twitter by 40,000 people, translated into six languages, and reached 120 million users (which is 50% of all twitter users). In their research on the use of twitter for environmental campaigning, Shin and Ki (2021), identify the importance of message orientation, framing, specificity, and the issue itself. Finally, the rapid growth of TikTok illustrates the appeal of quick entertainment based 'soundbites', often user-generated, to reach a younger demographic. One example is Macmillan Cancer Support working with influencer, amputee and cancer survivor Bernadette Hagans, to bring humour to otherwise serious subjects [November, 2020].

#### **C8: Communication to persuade vs. Communication as service delivery**

Communication frameworks identify how communication persuades customers to purchase the service. However, digital developments have also created new opportunities for innovative service experiences in the nonprofit context, where the communication is the service. For example, Anthony Nolan, the blood cancer charity, identified that patients felt they found it difficult to manage their recovery and that there was scientific evidence that people who manage their own recovery have a better quality of life and live longer. The charity launched the *My Transplant Tracker* app for patients to set up appointment reminders, track their recovery, access information, and monitor their progress. The result is any problems can be reported to their medical team quicker and so can be treated more effectively. Password protected, confidential, and free, the app is also having a secondary benefit in reducing the strain on the NHS. Although a core part of the service delivery of their mission, the clearly brand app also provides a strong communication link between the customer and the NPO, strengthening salience, reinforcing distinctiveness, and driving engagement.

#### **C9: Single product vs. portfolio approach**

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<sup>2</sup> World Wide Fund for Nature

Traditional communication frameworks relate one customer to one product/service. However, digital communication presents a greater opportunity for NPOs to adopt a portfolio approach. The RNLI<sup>3</sup>, for example, whose mission is to save lives at sea, is well known for its provision of volunteer-manned lifeboats working off the UK coastline. It also offers prevention services such as public beach safety guides on and offline, 'swim safe' water safety sessions for children, lifeguards for beaches as part of organisational positioning as 'sea safety experts. In addition, they provide emergency services for flood relief, migrant rescue and international lobbying to reduce global drowning. So, for the RNLI, service provision is not just for those drowning who need rescuing but also the many more people who are beach and water users who benefit from safety provision and information.

Therefore, the opportunity for NPOs is to communicate with 'customers' across the breadth of their service provision to provide multiple ways to strengthen the engagement and participation. In conventional language, this could be considered as up-selling and cross-selling across a product/service range, but in order to build stakeholder engagement, this needs to go beyond simply increasing donation size to building a relationship with the brand. In the RNLI example this potentially includes participation such as watching the *Float to Live* online film, downloading the *Beach Finder* app to identify beaches manned by RNLI lifeguards, or enrolling children as *Storm Force* members with its online 'crew room' of activities.

This breadth of service type and customer personae creates multiple opportunities for engagement. Given the intense competition within the nonprofit sector for resources, including time, money, and public consciousness, the objective is to ensure engagement moves beyond single transactional interaction to a deeper, longer-lasting relationship anchored in emotion and value self-congruity. This intersection between service and communication is vital, but understanding that through popular communication frameworks is challenging. What this deep dive into the state-of-the-art marketing practice within the nonprofit context reveals is that the intersection of service and communication is more complex than the traditional communication models, still widely used in teaching and research, can accommodate. However, that does not mean the models need increased

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<sup>3</sup> Royal National Lifeboat Institute.

complexity but greater fluidity. Customer engagement with NPOs covers multivalent stakeholder roles, often within the same person having multiple personas. Engagement can be mission-based and/or entertainment based. It can connect emotionally, cognitively and/or behaviourally. The channel for engagement can drive the creative connection or the creative drive the channel choice. What is clear is that the theoretical lens for exploring this breadth of customer engagement needs revisiting.

## **Discussion**

Van Doorn *et al.* (2010, p.254) define Customer Engagement (CE) as “*customers’ behavioural manifestation toward a brand or firm, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers*”. Those motivational drivers, in this case prosocial motivation, mean that for each moment of engagement will depend on which stakeholder or persona lens then person is looking through (such as donor, volunteer, service user, advocate). The original tripartite pillars of CE theory are identified as behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement (Brodie *et al.*, 2011; Hollebeek, 2011). However, more recently, the construct has been extended to include ‘social’, specifically an individual’s social connections and interactions (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2016), with Kumar and Pansari (2016) highlighting the importance of social influence. Therefore, the motivational drivers include their social context, the role of their family, peers and the wider content available online. That motivation can be public or private, and choice made individually or as part of a wider social movement.

In literature, CE is traditionally represented through an organisational lens, an output of marketing activities (Brodie *et al.*, 2011), or as an objective for the organisation to develop commitment and trust (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Pansari and Kumar (2017) argue that engagement is the mechanic of how a customer adds value to an organisation, either directly or indirectly, something that develops through a satisfied relationship and the establishment of an emotional bond. Successful application of CE as an organisational strategy is believed to lead to sales growth and profitability (Bijmolt *et al.*, 2010). In particular, the investment of operant resources into the relationship has been identified as a “*fundamental source of competitive advantage*” (Vargo and Lusch, 2016, p.8) to the organisation. In the context of service firms, CE has been identified as a higher order strategic capability that helps firms to co-create value through collaboration with customers (Garrido-Moreno *et al.*, 2020; Leroi-

Werelds, 2019). Either through face to face or via technology, CE reflects the organisation's ability to encourage customers to participate and rapidly respond to their changing needs during the service encounter (Agarwal *et al.*, 2014). Damali *et al.* (2021) argue that customer participation is the outcome of CE. That participation enables the firm to develop stronger marketing which leads to improved customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Social media has strengthened the importance of CE and participation (Garrido-Moreno *et al.*, 2020; Diffley *et al.*, 2018), with customers becoming active co-producers of value for organisations (Kunz and Walsh, 2020; Leeflang *et al.*, 2014). This digital trend accelerates the shift from product orientated to service dominant logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2016), with Kim and Ko (2012) observing that social media enables deeper CE with the brand. Namisango *et al.* (2021) argue social media builds the social capital of NPOs. That social capital, including structural, relational, and cognitive linkages enabled by social media (Zhang *et al.*, 2020), "*facilitates knowledge transfer, improving absorptive capacity and performance in value co-creation*" (Namisango *et al.*, 2021, p.784). In effect the social media builds the social capital which attracts social media based resources such as personal networks (sharing of content), content creation (posts), and endorsement (likes, sharing) all of which contribute to achievement of the mission (Saxton and Guo, 2020, Namisango *et al.*, 2021). In effect the digital communication opportunities enable stronger customer participation in the NPO which in turn creates content to contribute to that communication. In this way customer participation and brand communication are locked in an important and symbiotic relationship, two constructs within one orbit.

Customer participation has been a central construct within service management literature and has been described as the value of customer input to service design, production, and delivery (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Other authors argue that engagement itself is a higher level of relationship, relating to "*the intensity of an individual's participation in and connection with an organisation's offering and activities which either the customer or the organisation initiate*" (Vivek *et al.*, 2012, p.127). It is fed by antecedents such as stakeholder involvement and participation (Namisango *et al.*, 2021).

However, there is a lack of construct clarity between involvement, participation, and engagement (Oertzen *et al.*, 2018), with generic definitions including involvement as: *“the cognitive, affective or emotional state of an individual towards an object or entity seasoned by one’s inherent needs, values and interests”* (Namisango *et al.*, 2021, p.784) and participation as *“the extent to which customers [i.e. supporters, key stakeholders or the public] are involved in service production and delivery by contributing effort, knowledge, information, and other resources”* (Dong and Sivakumar, 2017, p.944). More convincing is the development of the CE construct to consider the ecosystem within which CE resides (Maslowska *et al.*, 2016). They argue there are three depths of engagement. ‘Observing’ is a passive engagement, the consumption of marketing communication such as reading information on a website or watching a video. ‘Participating’ is described as low-level contributing through activities such as liking a picture or sharing a hashtag. ‘Co-creating’ represents a higher level of engagement through a dialogue with the brand and may involve creating something new, such as posting advice on a service user forum or sharing their volunteer story. In effect, the customer is sharing their brand consumption experience with their peers and/or the company. Building on the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), they argue that when people are motivated to process communication messages in a deeper way, they are more receptive to the content, considering the issues raised and potentially responding through behaviour, such as making a donation or contributing to a user forum (Petty and Brinol, 2008). When communication is only considered in a shallow way, the central message can be lost and the link to subsequent behaviour less stable (Maslowska *et al.*, 2016). Stein and Rameseshan (2020) argue it is this motivation orientation that moderates the link between customer experience and customer loyalty. However, unlike traditional models of communication, Maslowska *et al.* (2016), do not position these three constructs as a linear progression from one to the other, but as inter-related states within the CE ecosystem.

### **Contribution to theory and practice**

Connecting this theory development with current service-communication practice, it becomes clear that customer engagement in the nonprofit context is also not linear. However, given the importance of mission, rather than shopping behaviours, and the other characteristics that make the nonprofit context distinct, a new model is needed (Figure 1).

Different stakeholders have different motivations for engagement. Different people can have a range of motivations depending on their current persona, such as volunteer, donor, and advocate. That engagement might be passive or active, might result in behaviour change or simply be entertainment. However, across a customer-brand relationship, every communication touchpoint creates an opportunity for the NPO to build engagement, which Maslowsaka *et al.* (2016) describe as brand dialogue behaviours. This moves beyond a hierarchy of effects or the linear flow of AIDA or sender-receiver models. At different times, the customer might be participating at different levels of engagement, including observing or co-creating. Over time, these brand experiences accumulate, building depth of knowledge about the work of the NPO, and empathy with the cause, and credibility of the NPO to contribute to the mission in an impactful way. The positive customer experience of participating in the brand’s communication drives loyalty to the brand (Gahler *et al.*, 2019) and “satisfied and loyal customers take part in more engagement behaviours” (Brodie *et al.*, 2013, p.112).

**Figure 1: Nonprofit Engagement Orbit**



This creates an orbital relationship, circling between the customer and the NPO, which overcomes the disintermediation effects so common in the nonprofit context. The objective for the NPO is create a gravitational pull that attracts customers to participate in the range of their mission-based communication, to strengthen the relationship over time. In effect, they need to create an engagement orbit into which customers are happy to be pulled, as shown in Figure 1. The customer is motivated to engage with the NPO in a prosocial way, attracted through their communication to their mission-based services. Communication of the mission-based services by the NPO is the way the customer is enabled to participate in that interconnected relationship, through the nine distinct characteristics of the context.

Participation in that relationship can drive positive perceptions and interaction outcomes (Liang, Chu and Lin, 2020), although of course there is always the risk of online incivility and dysfunctional customer behaviour (Bacile, 2020). Rather than share of voice or share of wallet, they are competing for share of pro-social engagement with 'customers', including volunteers, service beneficiaries, donors, and fundraisers.

The nine characteristics of the nonprofit context illustrate just how much the digital landscape creates new opportunities for brand communication to build customer engagement with nonprofit services through a dynamic relationship. The limitations of the paper are its focus on one context only, the nonprofit sector, and its conceptual nature. However, this creates a strong platform for the development of future research streams including mapping the direct relationship between mission-based services and the various digital communication channels, the relationship between pro-social motivation and participation with the NPO, and the interaction between that participation and level of communication investment by the NPO.

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