

# Customer Engagement in Emerging Markets: Framework and Propositions

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**Abstract.** *Emerging markets are a major contributor to global GDP, thus offering a primary source for economic growth. However, despite these acclaimed benefits, little remains known regarding customer engagement (i.e., a customer's resource investment in his/her brand interactions) in emerging markets, thus*

**Received:** 9/7/2022. **Accepted:** 2/9/2022

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*exposing a pertinent literature-based gap. The development of enhanced insight into customer engagement dynamics in emerging (vs. developed) markets is important, given the idiosyncrasies characterizing these markets (e.g., chronic resource shortages, inadequate infrastructure), thus warranting the undertaking of further research in this integrative area. In response to this gap, this paper develops a framework and an associated set of Propositions of emerging market-based customer engagement, by drawing on Sheth's (2011) emerging market hallmarks. Specifically, our Propositions postulate that the emerging market tenets of socio-political governance, inadequate infrastructure, market heterogeneity, chronic resource shortages, and unbranded competition uniquely affect emerging market-based customer engagement. We conclude by discussing our findings and by outlining key implications that arise from our analyses.*

**Keywords:** *customer engagement, emerging markets, framework, propositions*

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## 1. Introduction

*Emerging markets*, which are characterized by a low per-capita income, an above global average GDP growth rate, and a favorable policy environment (Shankar & Hanson, 2013; Appiah, 2017), offer a key source of economic growth. For example, in 2017, 58.7% of the world's gross domestic product (GDP) was generated by emerging markets, thus exceeding that of all developed nations combined (Shankar & Narang, 2020). Moreover, the world economy's forecast growth is expected to be primarily fueled by emerging markets in the coming years, necessitating further investigation of this important, and growing, topic area (e.g., Cavusgil, 2021; Kumar & Steenkamp, 2013).

In parallel, scholarly acumen of *customer engagement* (CE), defined as a customer's resource investment in his/her brand interactions (Hollebeek et al., 2019), is rapidly advancing. For example, scholars have proposed a host of CE conceptualizations (e.g., Kumar et al., 2019), measurement instruments (e.g., Hollebeek et al., 2014), and explorations of CE's nomological network (e.g., Kumar & Pansari, 2016; Brodie et al., 2011). However, despite the emerging avalanche of research addressing CE, understanding of the concept's dynamics in *emerging markets* remains tenuous (e.g., Wahid & Gunarto, 2022), thus exposing an important literature-based gap. Drawing on Sheth (2011), we argue that CE's dynamics in emerging (vs. developed) markets are likely to differ (e.g., Agnihotri, 2020; Carlson et al., 2019). For example, emerging markets are, typically, characterized by deficient infrastructure, thus yielding expected unique CE dynamics (vs. those observed in developed markets). However, as the majority of published research has focused on CE in more industrialized, or more economically advanced, markets, the advancement of scholarly acumen of *emerging market-based CE* lags behind to date, thus warranting further scrutiny.

In response to this gap, we explore CE vis-à-vis key emerging market characteristics (e.g., Kumar & Srivastava, 2020; Meyer et al., 2009), thus linking these literature streams that remain largely disparate to date. While debate surrounds the hallmarks of emerging markets, we adopt Sheth's (2011) widely cited five-partite framework that

proposes the key emerging market traits of socio-political governance, inadequate infrastructure, market heterogeneity, chronic resource shortages, and unbranded competition, as integratively examined in relation to CE in this paper. We selected this model given its comprehensive coverage and the anticipated relevance of its proposed factors to CE.

Based on these analyses, this conceptual paper makes the following contribution to the emerging markets—and CE literature. By presenting an integrative set of analyses of emerging market-based CE, as informed by Sheth's (2011) emerging market hallmarks, the paper offers novel insight at the interface of these theoretical entities. The development of insight in this integrative area is important, given CE's anticipated unique dynamics in the emerging (vs. developed) market context (Mogaji et al., 2021; Melnyk et al., 2012). For example, Hollebeek (2018) suggests that engaging typically more collectivistic emerging market-based consumers will likely yield these individuals' differing brand evaluations vs. those of more individualistic consumers in developed markets (Monga & Roedder-John, 2007; Gupta et al., 2018).

However, the adoption of a cross-cultural perspective paints only part of the picture characterizing CE in emerging (vs. developed) markets, including by overlooking the effect of structural emerging market characteristics on CE, yielding a need for more comprehensive insight into emerging market-based CE (e.g., Carlson et al., 2019). In this paper, we respond to this literature-based gap by presenting a series of conceptual analyses addressing emerging market-based CE, informed by Sheth's (2011) emerging market hallmarks, thus generating pertinent new insight. Our work reveals MacInnis' (2011) *integrating* purpose of conceptual research, which involves "seeing how wholes [i.e., emerging markets/CE] and parts [i.e., Sheth's (2011) emerging market characteristics and CE's hallmarks] are related" (p. 146).

The paper's remainder is structured as follows. We next review key literature on emerging markets and CE in Section 2, followed by the development of a conceptual framework and an associated set of Propositions of emerging market-based CE in Section 3. Section 4 concludes with an overview of pertinent implications that arise from, and limitations associated with, our analyses.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Emerging Markets

Emerging markets have several unique characteristics that set them apart from developed markets (Kumar & Steenkamp, 2013), including a modest per-capita income, an above-average GDP growth rate, and a conducive policy environment (Shankar & Hanson, 2013), as outlined. Key emerging markets include the BRICS countries, or Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (Dant et al., 2016; Qin et al., 2011), which are broadly recognized to possess these characteristics. A number of additional emerg-

ing markets also exists (e.g., Pakistan, Mexico, Saudi Arabia, or Korea etc. [Park et al., 2018]), revealing the substantial theoretical breadth inherent in the *emerging markets* concept.

However, despite broad recognition of the value of emerging markets, debate surrounds the particular critical success factors contributing to emerging market performance. For example, though authors including Elg et al. (2015) or Meyer et al. (2009) highlight the effect of socio-political forces on emerging market-based firm performance, scholars like Aulakh et al. (1996) focus on the role of trust in cross-border partnerships and relationships. Yet others (e.g., Ghauri et al., 2003) examine how cohesive firm networks serve to boost emerging market-based firm performance, thus revealing a level of literature-based dissent. Therefore, insight into the key factors driving emerging market success remains nebulous in the literature.

Consequently, to develop a more comprehensive understanding of doing business in emerging markets, Sheth's (2011) five-dimensional perspective has been widely adopted, which comprises the following factors. First, *socio-political governance* refers to the extent to which a market is influenced by socio-political institutions, e.g., government, non-governmental organizations, religion, or local communities (Lawson, 2000), which tends to be extensive in many emerging markets (Marquis & Raynard, 2015). For example, (ex-)communist markets (e.g., China) were served only by monopoly-based governmental enterprises, such as Gazprom (Russia), Petrobras (Brazil), CNOOC (China), or India Coal (India) in the energy sector (Sheth, 2011). Moreover, a number of countries are anchored in faith-based political governance, including Saudi Arabia and several Gulf countries in the Middle East (Sinha & Sheth, 2018), thus further illustrating the key role of socio-political governance in the emerging market context.

Second, *inadequate infrastructure* refers to the existence of a sub-standard architecture or developmental state of the business environment, including (but not limited to) unsealed roads, deficient logistics and storage capabilities, or lacking equipment (e.g., limited point-of-sale terminals or poor access to financial resources), which tend to yield communication-, information-, and/or transaction-related challenges (Marques et al., 2017). Given these infrastructure challenges, particularly outside the major cities, marketers are advised to use non-traditional channels in innovative ways to reach their target audiences (e.g., Avon Products has been able to efficiently organize 1 million independent sales agents in Brazil, boosting its profitability [Sheth, 2011]).

Third, *market heterogeneity* reflects the extensive variance characterizing different emerging markets based on factors ranging from market size, resource availability, climatic differences, differences in consumer tastes and preferences, unique legal frameworks and characteristics, to name a few. Therefore, market heterogeneity arises as a consequence of the local, fragmented nature of most emerging markets, which – for instance – widely feature owner-operated micro-businesses and/or bottom-of-the-pyramid customers, who live on less than \$2 a day (Martin & Hill, 2012).

Fourth, *chronic resource shortages* characterize emerging market-based production, exchange, and consumption (Li, 2016; Sheth, 2011). For example, the ongoing lack of power (electricity), irregular supply of raw materials, or the lack of skilled labor can see inconsistent production and selling activity (Sinha & Sheth, 2018). Moreover, the limited scale of emerging market-based production and consumption may incur high transaction costs, which can be further complicated by scarcity of electricity, running water, or (e.g., office/production) space. As a result, emerging market stakeholders often engage in *resource improvisation*, where they *make do* with the sub-optimal resources they have to achieve their goal(s) (e.g., by innovating low-cost, versatile, and affordable products [Oyedele, 2016; Skudiene et al., 2021]).

Finally, *unbranded competition* denotes the wide use of unbranded products and services in emerging markets, which arises based on reasons including the limited availability of branded offerings in rural or remote communities that feature a lack of access or poor infrastructure (Wang et al., 2017). Relatedly, the demand for branded offerings remains lower in emerging (vs. developed) markets, as many households produce their own food (e.g., vegetables), build their own home, and sew their own clothes (Sheth, 2011). Even when an activity is outsourced (e.g., dress-making to a tailor), these individuals tend to supply unbranded garments to their buyers. Moreover, emerging market consumers more frequently use second-hand products, while undesirable activities like product duplication or imitation are also prevalent (Sinha & Sheth, 2018).

## 2.2 Customer Engagement

The customer/consumer engagement (CE) literature started to develop from around 2010 (e.g., Hollebeek & Belk, 2021; Clark et al., 2020). Initial work tended to focus on conceptualizing CE and exploring the concept in its broader nomological network, to help carve out a niche for it. For example, authors including Van Doorn et al. (2010), Brodie et al. (2011), and Hollebeek (2011a) propose their respective CE-based definitions and theorize regarding the concept's key antecedents and consequences. Moreover, these authors also tend to point out the managerial benefits of having an engaged customer base, which is expected to yield higher customer loyalty, advocacy, and referrals, among others (e.g., Kumar & Pansari, 2016; Hollebeek, 2011b).

However, despite its acclaimed benefits, CE's conceptualization remains contested. For example, though Hollebeek et al. (2019, p. 166) conceptualize *customer (brand) engagement* as a “customer's investment of operant [i.e., cognitive, emotional, and/or behavioral] ...and operand (e.g., equipment-based) resources ...in [his/her] brand interactions,” Brodie et al. (2011, p. 258) define *customer engagement* as “a state which occurs by virtue of interactive customer experiences with a focal agent/object.”

Notwithstanding this debate, authors commonly agree regarding several CE tenets, as discussed further below. First, CE is commonly understood to boast an *interactive* nature, that is, one that centers on a customer's/consumer's interactions with a particular

engagement object (Hollebeek, 2011a). Here, *interaction* has been defined as “mutual or reciprocal action or influence” (Vargo & Lusch 2016, p. 9). Moreover, while the engagement object is commonly a brand, customers may also engage with other or related objects, including a product, an organization, or brand-related content, and so on (e.g., Vivek et al., 2014; Schivinski et al., 2016).

Second, CE reflects a customer’s *resource investment in or contribution* to his/her brand interactions (Kumar et al., 2019; Hollebeek et al., 2019). In other words, the more of their resources (e.g., time, energy, thought, etc.) a customer invests in interacting with an engagement object (e.g., a brand), the higher his/her engagement with that object (Harrigan et al., 2018; Hollebeek & Belk, 2021). A customer’s resource investments can transpire *positively*, thus benefiting or supporting the firm, or *negatively* by being to the firm’s detriment in some way (e.g., through brand sabotage or negative brand-related word-of-mouth [Bowden et al., 2017]).

Third, CE is commonly viewed as a multidimensional concept comprising cognitive, emotional, and behavioral facets (e.g., Dessart et al., 2016; Calder et al., 2009). Here, a customer’s *cognitive engagement* denotes the individual’s “level of brand-related thought processing and [mental] elaboration in a ... brand interaction,” while *emotional engagement* reflects his/her “degree of positive brand-related affect in a ... brand interaction.” Finally, *behavioral engagement* refers to the individual’s “level of energy, effort, and time spent on a brand in a ... brand interaction” (Hollebeek et al., 2014, p. 154). In this paper, we adopt Hollebeek et al.’s (2019, p. 166) *customer (brand) engagement*, as defined above, given its theoretical versatility (e.g., Kumar et al., 2019) and its applicability to the emerging market context.

In sum, we reviewed important literature addressing emerging markets in Section 2.1, leading us to apply Sheth’s (2011) emerging market hallmarks, including socio-political governance, inadequate infrastructure, market heterogeneity, chronic resource shortages, and unbranded competition to emerging market-based CE. We, then, reviewed key CE literature in Section 2.2, which leads us to adopt Hollebeek et al.’s (2019) engagement conceptualization to analyze emerging market-based CE. Based on these theoretical foundations, we next present our integrative conceptual framework of emerging market-based CE.

### 3. Conceptual Framework

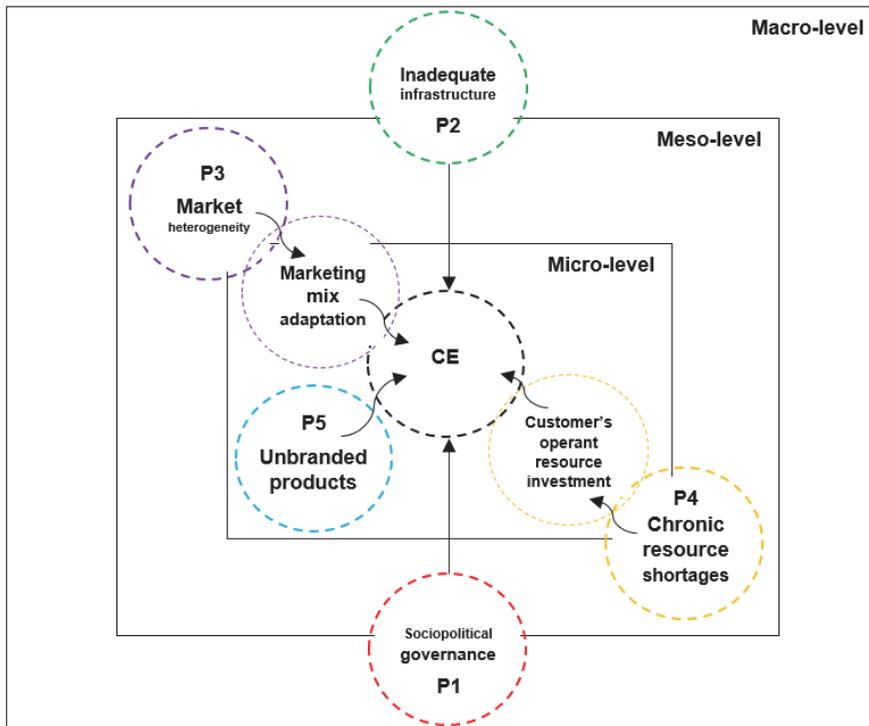
#### 3.1 Overview

In this section, we develop a framework and an associated set of Propositions of emerging market-based CE, as organized by Sheth’s (2011) emerging market hallmarks, including socio-political governance, inadequate infrastructure, market heterogeneity, chronic resource shortages, and unbranded competition (e.g., Sinha & Sheth, 2018), as discussed further below. We also visualize Sheth’s (2011) emerging market charac-

teristics vis-à-vis customer engagement in a proposed conceptual framework, as shown in Figure 1. Following Vargo and Lusch (2017), the framework distinguishes between macro- (e.g., national), meso- (e.g., industry-based), and micro- (e.g., firm) level emerging market hallmarks and their respective impact on customer engagement (Storbacka et al., 2016), as discussed and illustrated further below.

**Figure 1**

*Conceptual Framework of Customer Engagement in Emerging Markets*



Note. CE: Customer engagement.

### 3.2 Socio-political Governance

Macro-level socio-political governance denotes the extent to which a market is impacted by socio-political institutions, including national or local governments, non-governmental organizations, local communities, religion, and so on (Lawson, 2000), as discussed and shown in red in Figure 1. Here, *institutions* have been defined as “humanly devised rules, norms, and beliefs that enable and constrain action, and make social life predictable and meaningful” (Vargo & Lusch, 2016, p. 6).

Socio-political governance can either be conducive or detrimental to CE’s development (Hollebeek et al., 2022a). First, firm-based connections or networks, for instance,

can *open doors* (Gulati et al., 2000), thus leveraging the firm's socio-political position. For example, top executives may *warm up* key regulators to the firm's forthcoming innovation, thus setting the scene for a favorable regulatory environment and, in turn, stimulating the development of customers' positive (future) innovation-related engagement (Hollebeek & Belk, 2021; Bowden et al., 2017). In other words, when emerging market-based customers' interactions with, or access to, relevant marketing mix elements (e.g., new products) is facilitated, we expect this to be conducive to the development of their *positively-valenced* brand engagement (Hollebeek & Chen, 2014).

Conversely, socio-political governance can also hinder or impede CE's development. For example, red tape may delay the development of new product innovations, thus potentially stifling the development of customers' positive brand engagement (Hollebeek et al., 2022a). Here, we expect CE to either remain relatively stable around its existing intensity and valence, or to become more negative, thus extending Bowden et al.'s (2017) notion of shifting positive-negative CE, or vice versa. For example, customers may get bored, or dissatisfied, with a product's current generation, shaping their desire to purchase the next generation, which – however – remains unavailable, thus rendering their brand engagement more negative. We theorize:

**P1:** *While conducive or beneficial socio-political governance renders CE's intensity and valence more positive, detrimental or hindering socio-political governance renders its intensity and valence more negative.*

### 3.3 Inadequate Infrastructure

Macro-level inadequate infrastructure implies the sub-standard developmental state of an emerging market-based firm's environmental architecture (e.g., deficient roads, logistics, payment methods, and/or facilities [e.g., Shankar & Narang, 2020]), as discussed and depicted in green in Figure 1. These infrastructure challenges complicate emerging market-based firms' execution of their marketing mix functions, including for product (e.g., by imposing product innovation challenges), promotion (e.g., by comprising the firm's reach of its target audiences), place/distribution (e.g., by hindering product delivery/availability, potentially yielding stock-outs), and pricing (e.g., by limiting revenue opportunities [Cuervo-Cazurra et al., 2016]). Given these constraints, emerging (vs. developed) market-based customers' positive brand engagement is likely to remain lower, or at a minimum, take more time to develop to comparable levels (Hollebeek & Chen, 2014). We postulate:

**P2:** *Inadequate emerging (vs. developed) market-based business infrastructure stifles the development of customers' positive engagement.*

### 3.4 Market Heterogeneity

As outlined, the observed heterogeneity across emerging markets suggests the existence of substantive differences across developing markets and their respective sectors, including in terms of their respective *meso*-level market (e.g., industry) size, production characteristics, (e.g., cultural) norms, and so on (Sheth, 2011), in turn influencing specific *micro*-level (e.g., customer engagement-based) discrepancies across emerging market sectors (e.g., Gupta et al., 2018; Hollebeek, 2018; Vargo & Lusch, 2017), as discussed and shown in purple in Figure 1.

For example, the (e.g., automobile) industry in China is large, that in Bhutan is much smaller, which we expect to yield CE-related differences across these emerging markets (e.g., based on product supply, serviceability, or access-related disparities), in turn generating CE levels of differing intensity and/or valence across these markets (Hollebeek & Chen, 2014). To best serve their customers across emerging market sectors, multinational firms will tend to offer *adapted* (vs. standardized) marketing mix elements (Theodosiou & Leonidou, 2003), as also depicted in Figure 1. Using this approach, customers' engagement in specific emerging markets is expected to thrive (e.g., given buyers' perceived relevance/applicability of the adopted marketing mix elements [Hatzithomas et al., 2016; Hollebeek & Macky, 2019]). We postulate:

**P3:** *The more heterogeneous a firm's emerging markets, the more likely it is to adapt (vs. standardize) its marketing mix, with a view to optimizing its customers' engagement across its different markets.*

### 3.5 Chronic Resource Shortages

The emerging market environment is typified by chronic resource shortages at the industry or *meso*-level (Li, 2016; Sheth, 2011), thus substantially impacting customers' opportunity to *invest resources* in their brand interactions and affecting their engagement at the *micro*-level (Hollebeek et al., 2019; Vargo & Lusch, 2017), as depicted in yellow in Figure 1. For example, bottom-of-the-pyramid, or subsistence customers tend to have limited financial resources and/or lack access to the Internet or banking services (e.g., Hasan et al., 2019), thus potentially limiting the development of their engagement with particular brands.

In other words, emerging (vs. developed) market-based consumers tend to primarily lack *operand* resources, or those upon which an act is performed to produce an effect (e.g., financial resources that are used to purchase products/raw materials, which are, then, converted into final goods [Hollebeek, 2019]). However, these customers are, nevertheless, often able to creatively or resourcefully invest their *operand* resources, or those that are used to *act upon* operand resources (e.g., time/energy [Vargo & Lusch, 2004]). For example, to fix a broken product, emerging market-based customers are more likely than those in developed markets to take the item apart and creatively try

to reverse engineer it, or work out how to reuse its component parts. Based on this rationale, we posit:

**P4:** *Emerging (vs. developed) market-based customers' engagement is based to a greater extent on these individuals' operant (vs. operand) resource investments in their brand interactions.*

### 3.6 Unbranded Competition

Unbranded competition refers to the common sale and use of unbranded (vs. branded) products/services in emerging markets (Sinha & Sheth, 2018), as discussed and shown in blue in Figure 1. However, as noted in our literature review, CE's *typical* engagement object is the brand (e.g., Leckie et al., 2016; Hollebeek et al., 2014), yielding a *particular* need for the development of further insight into this micro-level emerging market characteristic (Vargo & Lusch, 2017). In this vein, we argue that, though unbranded offerings lack an explicit (e.g., national/store) brand, they can, implicitly, still serve several of a brand's functions, including by identifying the producer (e.g., through the customer's recognition of a producer's offering), reducing the consumer's perceived (e.g., purchase) risk, or by adding value in the consumer's mind (e.g., for known, trusted products [DeChernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998]).

In other words, while no brand logo or name may be shown on many products in emerging markets, customers are, nevertheless, likely to recognize offerings sourced from a particular supplier (e.g., by their color, size, or other attributes), revealing a focus on unbranded – or rather, *not traditionally* branded – products in these markets (e.g., Bahadir et al., 2015), as shown in Figure 1. For example, consumers may recognize butter or milk made by a specific farm or farmer, or produced from a particular herd of cattle's milk, leading them to display elevated, positive engagement with their preferred offerings (Hollebeek et al., 2022a). Relatedly, formal marketing communications (e.g., advertising/public relations) are typically not used for these unbranded products, which – instead – primarily rely on consumers' (e.g., visual/sensory) product assessments and word-of-mouth (Oraedu et al., 2021). Therefore:

**P5:** *Emerging market-based customers' engagement with unbranded (vs. branded) offerings tends to be more positive and higher.*

## 4. Discussion, Implications, and Limitations

### 4.1 Theoretical Implications

In this paper, we presented a set of integrative analyses of emerging market-based customer engagement CE based on Sheth's (2011) emerging market hallmarks. Though the pertinent contribution made by emerging markets to global GDP is increasingly recognized (e.g., Cavusgil, 2021), little is known to date regarding the theoretical in-

terface of emerging markets and customers' emerging market-based (e.g., brand) engagement, which, likewise, represents a key area of contemporary research interest (Kumar & Pansari, 2016; Carlson et al., 2019). Addressing this gap, this paper developed a conceptual framework of the emerging market/customer engagement interface based on Sheth's (2011) *emerging market* hallmarks, which we expect to yield the following theoretical implications.

First, by conceptually linking the key tenets of customer engagement and emerging markets, our analyses provide novel integrative insight into the interface of these theoretical entities, thus yielding a wealth of opportunities for further research. For example, *which* customer engagement tenets (e.g., interactivity/valence) are particularly prominent in shaping, or optimizing, customers' brand engagement in specific emerging markets? How do multinational firms best design and execute their *customer engagement marketing* strategies across in their respective emerging markets (Harmeling et al., 2017), and which elements, in particular, require adaptation to local market needs and wants? How does customers' engagement differ across generations (e.g., Gen Y/Gen Z) in specific emerging markets? How can firms more efficiently and effectively engage their emerging market-based customers? As emerging markets become more developed, how might the nature of firms' customer engagement marketing activity need to be further developed or adjusted?

Second, while we addressed the expected dynamics characterizing emerging market-based *customers'* engagement (e.g., with brands), it is also of interest to explore the nature, dynamics, requirements, and potential impediments of different *stakeholders'* engagement, and their respective journeys, across emerging markets (Hollebeek et al., 2022b). For example, what effect might a firm's adapted product offering have on its emerging market-based customers, suppliers, or regulators (Skudiene et al., 2021)? How might a new entrant in an emerging market build its network to successfully conduct business in the new environment? What are the critical success factors to engage different emerging market stakeholders and optimize firm returns? What role do regulatory (e.g., rules) and normative institutions (e.g., mores), and their respective assemblages of institutional arrangements play in emerging markets?

#### 4.2 Managerial Implications

This research also raises important implications for emerging market-based managers, as discussed further below. First, P1 reads: "*While conducive or beneficial socio-political governance renders CE's intensity and valence more positive, detrimental or hindering socio-political governance renders its intensity and valence more negative.*" Though the potential effect of socio-political dynamics on emerging market-based customers' engagement remains tenuous (Hollebeek et al., 2022a), our analyses suggest the importance for managers to (a) leverage favorable socio-political dynamics, while (b) avoiding or minimizing those that are unfavorable as much as possible. Often, these opportunities

(or risks) emerge without much warning, exposing the importance of managerial, and firm, agility and adaptability (Skare & Soriano, 2021), which can be cultivated through training and planning activities. To identify potential socio-political opportunities and risks, practitioner intuition is also pertinent (Simon, 1987), warranting the importance of adequate managerial selection, recruitment, and attraction policies.

Next, P2 states: “*Inadequate emerging (vs. developed) market-based business infrastructure stifles the development of customers’ positive engagement.*” Given the macro-nature of emerging market-based business infrastructure, infrastructure improvements require a multi-stakeholder effort (Hollebeek et al., 2022a/b), unveiling the importance of stakeholder communication and coordination (e.g., among firms, employees, customers, the public, NGOs, etc.). For example, to ameliorate Internet coverage or customers’ access to point-of-purchase terminals, emerging market-based firms are advised to communicate, and build relationships, with (e.g., local/regional) councils, Internet service providers (ISPs), and/or other businesses (e.g., to highlight the need for infrastructure improvements in this area).

P3 posits: “*The more heterogeneous a firm’s emerging markets, the more likely it is to adapt (vs. standardize) its marketing mix, with a view to optimizing its customers’ engagement across its different markets.*” That is, in line with existing international marketing-based thought, we, likewise, recommend customer engagement marketing-implementing firms to adapt (vs. standardize) their marketing mix (Theodosiou & Leonidou, 2003; Harmeling et al., 2017). To achieve marketing mix adaptation, we advise managers to personalize or customize their offerings and communications, which are predicted to boost customers’ engagement (e.g., through digital content marketing [Hollebeek & Macky, 2019]).

P4 notes: “*Emerging (vs. developed) market-based customers’ engagement is based to a greater extent on these individuals’ operant (vs. operand) resource investments in their brand interactions.*” As (some) emerging market-based customers’ operand resources may remain limited in the future, we advise managers to offer products and services to these markets that allow customers to focus on investing their *operant* resources (e.g., time, effort, or cognitive resources) in their brand interactions (Vargo & Lusch, 2016), thus leveraging their brand-related creativity and/or resourcefulness. For example, offering products that have multiple uses is expected to leverage or stimulate emerging market-based customers’ creativity (e.g., Vaseline, which may be used to treat dry skin, to fix household items such as bicycles, etc.).

Finally, P5 states: “*Emerging market-based customers’ engagement with unbranded (vs. branded) offerings tends to be more positive and higher,*” revealing a key difference vis-à-vis the majority of developed markets. Consequently, (e.g., multinational) brands will need to *work harder* to secure emerging market-based customers’ brand loyalty and support, which – in conjunction with the discussion presented for P1 above – implies a need for (further) marketing mix adaptation (vs. standardization [Hatzithomas et al., 2016]). To engage emerging market-based customers with (e.g., foreign/multinational) brands,

it is important to clearly differentiate the firm's products in the customer's mind (e.g., by outlining their benefits vs. those of local brands), thus also reducing customer ethnocentrism, which sees buyers prefer local (vs. foreign) products (Kwak et al., 2006).

### 4.3 Limitations and Further Research

Notwithstanding its contribution, this paper is subject to several limitations, from which we derive additional research avenues. First, the purely conceptual nature of our analyses raises a need for their future empirical testing and validation (e.g., MacInnis, 2011). For example, the postulated associations of emerging market-based tenets and customer engagement may be further explored in future qualitative (e.g., depth interview-based) research, or tested in quantitative (e.g., survey-based or longitudinal) studies (Malhotra, 2019).

Second, while we adopted Sheth's (2011) *emerging market* tenets, other authors propose different sets of emerging market characteristics (see e.g., Paul, 2020), which future scholars may wish to work with. For example, Aulakh et al.'s (1996) model for cross-border marketing partnerships, or Ghauri et al.'s (2003) framework advocating the role of business network cohesion to improve emerging market-based firm performance may be adopted in future studies, yielding an opportunity to compare and contrast the results to those reported in this paper.

### Acknowledgements

We thank the Editor-in-Chief, Professor Sigitas Urbonavicius, for his constructive guidance in this paper's development. We also thank Brodie et al. (2016) for a discussion on engagement and related issues.

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