

Customer Engagement and Retention Strategies of Online Travel Agencies – A Study of IT/ITES Segment in Bangalore

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Abstract

Engagement as an idea has a lengthy history, going all the way back to the 17th century, with roots that can be traced over centuries. Customer engagement as the temporary state that occurs from a deeper process evolving with time. For almost ten years, customer engagement has been a top research objective. They are not just a mode of converting customer loyalty or repeat purchases but more of a set of repeated behaviors that guarantees to create lifelong patrons. It has been acknowledged as a significant research topic by academics and professionals alike. Customer Engagement has often been considered as any of the things providing Customer Satisfaction or Repeat purchase. Companies must go beyond mere transactional behavior so that they are not poached by their more alluring competitors. Customer Engagement is moving to a more holistic event of psychological, emotional, and physical. Customer engagement is a tactic for cultivating and strengthening relationships with customers. Customer engagement has multiple dimensions that correspond to the behavioral, emotional, and aspects of the customer-brand connection that are cognitive. Customer Engagement is a mental state that arises from conversations and co-creation by a focal agency, such as a brand, and its clients. It has several facets that takes into account contextually specific behavioral, emotional, and cognitive components. CE takes the form of the amount of focus, inspiration, and energy dedicated to the brand. Customer engagement (CE) is defined by experts as the extent to which a customer engages with a business's products and services after making a purchase that was made on their own initiative.

Keywords: Customer Engagement, Customer Retention, Trust, Customer Loyalty, Repurchase Intention, Online Travel Agencies (OTA)

1. Significance of Customer Engagement

- Gives a boost to sales
- Increases Customer Loyalty and Trust
- Increases Customer participation in Brand improvement
- Improves Customer Involvement
- Improves Customer Experience
- Reduces Customer Acquisition cost

2. Evolution of Customer Engagement in India

In his research, Verma (2014) demonstrated how subject and object interact with underlying characteristics like emotions, thought, and behavior to create total consumer engagement. A comparative study identified markers of successful blogging practices and the connection between other social media platforms and blogs' reach. To enhance brand interaction on Facebook brand pages, Jayasingh and Venkatesh (2015) offer a model that was constructed using empirical data from Indian Facebook brand pages. Jayasingh and Venkatesh (2015), suggest that customer engagement, as a novel marketing tactic, influences conventional marketing tactics by causing a proactive shift in the existing marketing ecosystem. In addition to the already-established constructs of convenience and satisfaction, Thakur (2016) found that consumer engagement plays a substantial role in predicting customer loyalty. Country cultural elements impact the interactions within (Gupta, 2018). Pansari and Kumar (2016) demonstrate how addressing pertinent initiatives can increase customer engagement and maximize corporate success. In their study, Sondhi et al. (2017) make a compelling case for understanding consumer engagement as a whole rather than breaking it down into its component elements.

3. Customer Retention and its Influencing Factors

Customer Engagement as a concept takes its roots from Customer Relationship Management (Jacob, Karpagam, & Jhansi Rani, 2023). It can cost up to five times as much to get new customers as it does to keep existing ones (TOI, 2023). (Rosenberg & Czepiel, 1984) state that consumer marketing companies have invested more funds in acquiring new customers than in maintaining their existing clientele. Customer retention, as defined by Kassim and Souiden (2007) and Ranaweera and Prabhu (2003), is the propensity of customers to continue using a particular service provider in the future. But in today's low-growth, fiercely competitive market, customer retention is fast catching up to customer acquisition as a crucial area of analysis and strategy.

According to statistics, a 5% improvement in client retention might eventually result in a 25% gain in earnings, or almost 95%, for the organization. Kumar (2022). Retained customers can serve as channels for cross-selling and upselling of products. Keeping a customer means using fewer resources.

4. Factors Influencing Customer Retention

- Increases word of mouth recommendations
- Improves return on investment
- Acquiring new customers costly than retaining existing ones
- Boosts loyalty and familiarity
- Reduces churn rate
- Increases revenue
- Increases morale of customers
- Increases profitability
- Easier to upsell and cross-sell products

5. IT/ITES Sector in India and Bangalore

Both the overall welfare of the country and the expansion of modern industries depend on information technology (IT) (UNCTAD, 2018). India is a leading country in software development, making it a desirable destination for IT and ITES. The IT sector in India is anticipated to grow at its fastest rate in over a decade, to \$227 billion in FY22 at a rate of 15.5% (PTI and PTI, 2022). Between Q1 and Q4 of FY 22, the IT/BPM sector added 17.6 lakh new positions, the greatest rise in employment. In 2021–2022, the top four Indian IT companies hired 2.4 lakh new workers (Phadnis, 2022). According to the The ITes Power Movers 2020.

Report, Infosys, TCS, Wipro, IBM, and Cognizant have been ranked as the top five ITes players of 2020 ranked by rank (Report, 2021). Karnataka's capital city is Bangalore. It is among India's most significant cities. It is referred to as India's Silicon Valley. It serves as India's IT hub as well. The city is popular with MNCs and foreign investors. The city has ensured that enough tax breaks and infrastructural benefits are received by all the enterprises.

6. Online Travel Agencies

The history of Online Travel Agencies (OTAs) in India can be traced back to the early 2000s when e-commerce and internet penetration started gaining momentum in the country. These OTAs have been instrumental in transforming the Indian travel sector. An online travel agency (OTA) called MakeMyTrip (MMT) currently holds a sizable 53.8% market share in India, according to a recent analysis by the travel consulting company Videc. As a result, MMT gains a strong position of dominance and reinforces its role as an industry catalyst for growth in India's travel sector. According to the survey, EaseMyTrip (EMT), with 8.1 percent of the market, is closely followed by Cleartrip, which is the second-largest competitor in the OTA area. Together, these three companies control a large chunk of the market, suggesting that the OTA sector is consolidating into an oligopoly (By BL New Delhi Bureau, 2023b).

7. Review of Literature

Rohit et al. (2024) in this study indicate that when it comes to experiencing things, voice assistants are more successful at boosting cognitive and affective participation. According to Muglai Shernaz F. (2022) many organizations are utilizing the power of social media to increase their digital engagement. Surveys conducted show that when customer contact is high, then customer engagement becomes better and stronger leading to long-lasting customer relationships in the modern digital era. According to Raghavan & Pai (2021) customer engagement is a pertinent element in the marketing process. Service-dominant logic theory is used to examine the extent to which client interaction affects service industries such as the airline sector. It has been concluded that more research is required in customer engagement considering its socio-cultural-psychological dimensions. Azmi et al. (2023) states that product supply and new tourist destinations are two tactics that industry participants are using more and more to become competitive.

Sinha and Gupta (2023) in their study offer empirical evidence regarding the relationships that exist between the use of smartphone apps for trip planning and the travel outcomes that result from those apps, including the number of kilometers driven for various purposes (such as work/education, shopping, and recreation), social gatherings, new destinations, and group travel. Adil and Dogra (2022) in their study aims to investigate travelers' actual behavior when it comes to making an online trip purchase by adding perceived privacy and perceived security as two new variables to the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT2). The results of the study show that buying intention, habit, and enabling factors are important indicators of how travelers will really behave when making online trip purchases. Customer Engagement if applied in the tourism industry, both online and offline, can take Customer Relationship Management to the optimal level (Jacob, Karpagam, & Jhansi Rani, 2023)

8. Model of the Study

The customer engagement and retention model was inspired by the Serial Mediation Model put forth by Andrew Hayes (Figure 1).

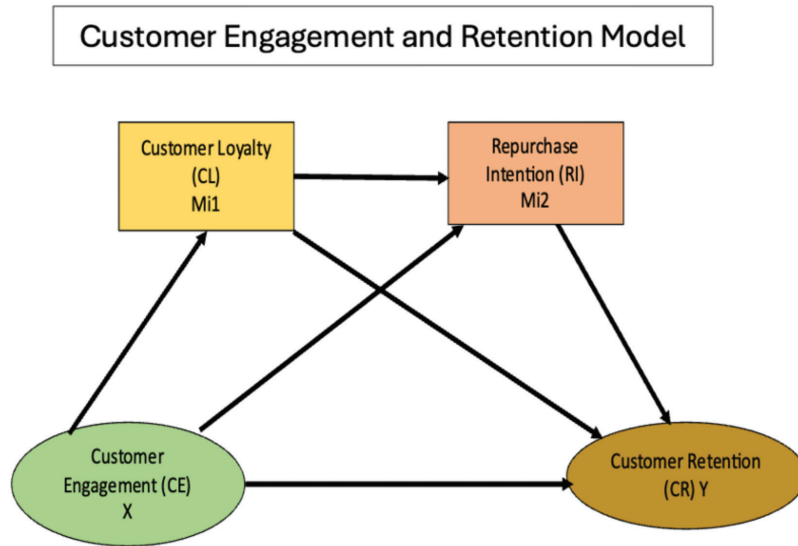


FIGURE 1. Customer Engagement and Retention Model.

9. Formulation of Hypothesis

- H1a: There is a significant difference in Customer Engagement Strategies with respect to Gender.
- H1b: There is a significant difference in Customer Engagement Strategies with respect to Age.
- H1c: There is a significant difference in Customer Engagement Strategies with respect to Income.
- H2a: Customer Engagement Strategies have a positive and significant effect on Customer Retention.
- H3a: Customer Engagement Strategies were found to have a positive and significant impact on Customer Loyalty.
- H4a: Customer Loyalty has a positive and significant impact on Customer Retention.
- H5a: Customer Loyalty has a mediating effect between Customer Engagement Strategies and Customer Retention.
- H6a: Customer Engagement Strategies have a positive and significant effect on Repurchase Intention.
- H7a: Repurchase intention has a positive and mediating effect between Customer Engagement Strategies and Customer Retention.
- H8a: Repurchase Intention was found to have a significant and positive impact on Customer Retention.
- H9a: Customer Loyalty was found to have a positive and significant effect on Repurchase Intention.

10. Objectives of the Study

- To analyze the relationship between the demographic profile of customers and the Customer Engagement Strategies used by OTAs.
- To measure the Customer Engagement Strategies adopted by OTAs.
- To analyze the effects of Customer Engagement Strategies on Loyalty and Repurchase Intention.
- To examine the relationship of Customer Loyalty and Repurchase Intention between Customer Engagement Strategies and Customer Retention.
- To evaluate the overall effectiveness of Customer Engagement Strategies on Customer Retention.

11. Data analysis and interpretation

The researcher has followed a process of dividing this chapter into sections:

- Descriptive Analysis of Demographic Profile and Study Variables
- Confirmatory Factor Analysis (Exploratory) KMO & Bartlett Test, & Structural Equation Modelling

Hypothesis 1a: At the 5% significance level, the significant values for intuitive design and trust are less than 0.01. The study concludes that the opinions of men and women differ in intuitive design and trust. The gender differences in mean values provide a clear explanation for why men place higher expectations on these topics than do women.

Hypothesis 1b: At the 5% level, the significant values for complaint management, trust, and services are less than 0.01. It is determined that there are notable differences in complaint handling, trust, and service amongst consumer age groups.

Hypothesis 1c: It is found that there are notable differences across the various income groups of customers in terms of service, benefits, intuitive design, trust, and complaint processing. Customers' expectations for service, benefits, user-friendly design, trust, and complaint resolution all rise as their income does.

Objective 2: To measure the Customer Engagement Strategies adopted by OTAs

Intuitive Design (ID) of the App/website has a significant impact in engaging customers as the mean of ID is 4.02. This leads us to believe that the app/website has a significant role in engaging customers and how it is designed, and its customer-friendly layout can add to keeping the customer interested in its usage. Similarly, the benefits provided by the company have a mean of 3.88 and Trust has a mean of 3.72 along with Complaint Handling (CH) with a mean of 3.73. The services provided by the company have a mean of 3.66 for Customer Engagement (Table 1).

TABLE 1. Results of the hypothesis testing of endogenous and exogenous latent constructs.

(Unstandardized Estimates)

Dependent Construct		Independent Construct	Estimates	S.E.	C.R.	P	Label
CL	<---	CE	0.858	0.056	15.388	***	Significant
RI	<---	CL	0.403	0.080	5.015	***	Significant
CB	<---	CE	0.875	0.056	15.581	***	Significant
RI	<---	CE	0.372	0.073	5.064	***	Significant
CR	<---	CL	0.699	0.129	5.405	***	Significant
CR	<---	RI	0.826	0.138	5.991	***	Significant
ID	<---	CE	0.837	0.048	17.308	***	Significant
Trust	<---	CE	0.936	0.053	17.576	***	Significant
CH	<---	CE	1.000			***	Significant
CR	<---	CE	1.039	.118	8.772	***	Significant

Source: Based on Primary Data Computation

12. Model Evaluation

The Customer Engagement and Retention Model's model fit indices are estimated, and the above figure's structural relationships were used to build and illustrate the relationships.

The structural model known as the "Customer Engagement and Retention Model" exhibits a high goodness of fit. A decent match between the model and the sample is shown by the Chi-Square (CMIN) to degree of freedom (CMIN/DF) value of 4.054, which is less than the suggested guideline value of 5.00. Since they are all above the suggested threshold value of 0.90, the fitness indices of the GFI (0.965), AGFI (0.915), CFI (0.961), NFI (0.935), RFI (0.965), IFI (0.962), and TLI (0.939) are all considered to be good. Additionally, the fit index's RMSEA value of 0.042 is less than the suggested value of 0.08. In the study conducted by MacCallum, Browne, and Sugawara (1996), the very fit indicator was 0.01, the good fit indicator was 0.05, and the middling fit indicator was 0.08. The created model has a strong capacity to explain how latent exogenous and latent endogenous characteristics are related. (Jacob, Karpagam, et al., 2023)

Customer Engagement and Retention Model

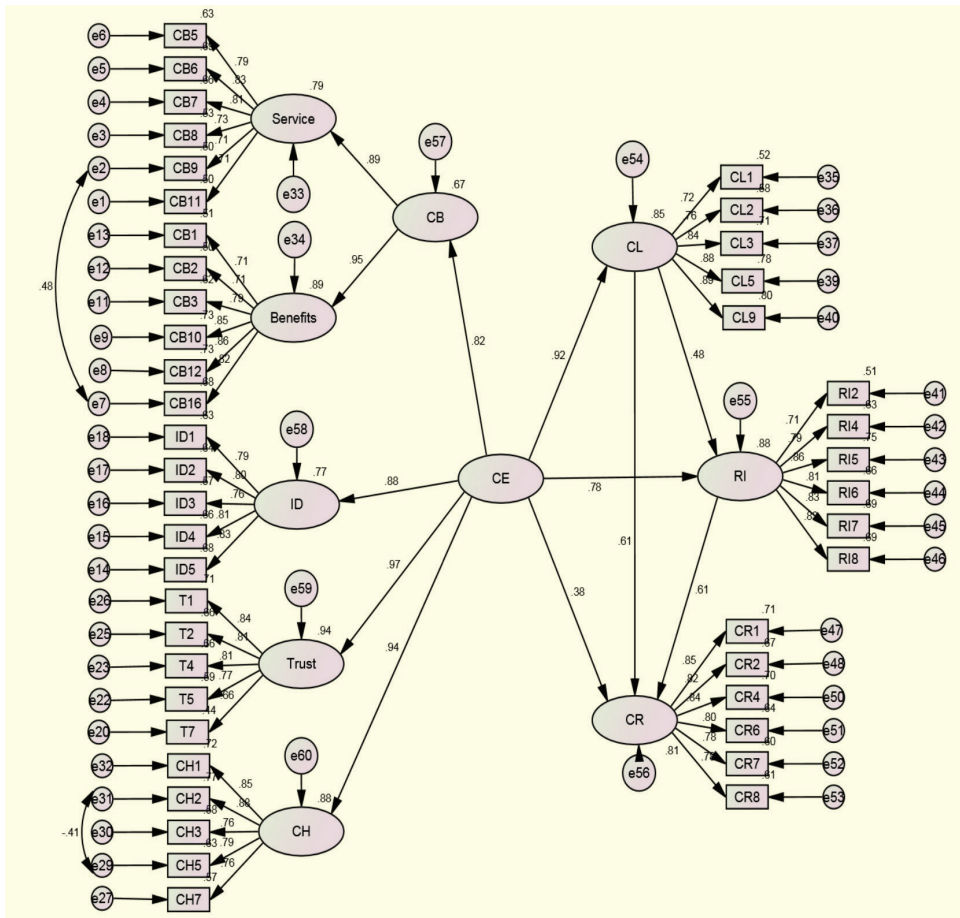


FIGURE 2: Customer Engagement and Retention Model

(CE = Customer Engagement, CL = Customer Loyalty, RI = Repurchase Intention, CB = Customer Benefits, CR = Customer Retention, ID = Intuitive Design, CH = Complaint Handling) as per Figure 2

Hypothesis 2

Customer Engagement Strategies has a positive and significant effect on Customer Retention At the 1% level, the regression coefficient (B) of 1.039 is deemed significant (C.R. = 8.72, $p < 0.01$). The test results refute the null hypothesis (H10). Thus, it is agreed upon to accept the alternate hypothesis (H1a) .

Hypothesis 3

Customer Engagement has a positive and significant effect on Customer Loyalty - At the one percent significance level, the regression coefficient (B) of 0.858 is determined to be

significant (C.R. = 15.388, $p < 0.01$). The test results refute the null hypothesis (H10). Therefore, it is agreed upon to accept the alternate hypothesis (H1a).

Hypothesis 4

Customer Loyalty has a positive and significant effect on Customer Retention - At the one percent significance level, the regression coefficient (B) of 0.699 is determined to be significant (C.R. = 5.405, $p < 0.01$). The test results refute the null hypothesis (H10). Thus, it is decided to accept the alternative hypothesis (H1a), which states that customer loyalty significantly and favorably affects customer retention.

Hypothesis 5

Customer Loyalty has a mediating effect between Customer Engagement and Customer Retention – The result signifies a positive relationship between the independent, the mediating and the dependent variables. Additionally, Sobel Test Statistic is used to test the coefficients of CE on CL (0.858) and CL on CR (0.699) and its significant value 0.000 is less than 0.01 which is significant at 1% alpha level. It is concluded that the CL is notably mediating the relationship between CE and CR.

Hypothesis 6

Customer Engagement has a positive and significant effect on Repurchase Intention - At the one percent significance level, the regression coefficient (B) of 0.372 is determined to be significant (C.R. = 5.064, $p < 0.01$). The test results refute the null hypothesis (H10). Therefore, it is decided to accept the alternate hypothesis (H1a).

Hypothesis 7

Repurchase Intention has a positive and mediating effect between Customer Engagement and Customer Retention – The result signifies a positive relationship between the independent, the mediating and the dependent variables. Additionally, Sobel Test Statistic is used to test the coefficients of CE on RI (0.372) and RI on CR (0.826) and its significant value 0.000 is found to be less than 0.01 which is significant at 1% alpha level. It is concluded that the RI is significantly mediating the relationship between CE and CR.

Hypothesis 8

Repurchase Intention has a positive and significant effect on Customer Retention – At the one percent significance level, the regression coefficient (B) of 0.826 is determined to be significant (C.R. = 5.991, $p < 0.01$). The test results refute the null hypothesis (H10). Thus, it is decided to accept the alternative hypothesis (H1a).

Hypothesis 9

Customer Loyalty has a positive and significant effect on Repurchase Intention - At the one percent significance level, the regression coefficient (B) of 0.403 is determined to be significant (C.R. = 5.015, $p < 0.01$). The test results refutes the stated null hypothesis (H10). Therefore, it is decided to accept the alternate hypothesis (H1a).

TABLE 2. Standardised path coefficients of indicators and constructs.

Dependent Construct		Independent Construct	Standardised Estimates	P	Label
CL	<---	CE	0.922	***	Significant
RI	<---	CL	0.480	***	Significant
CB	<---	CE	0.819	***	Significant
RI	<---	CE	0.781	***	Significant
CR	<---	CL	0.614	***	Significant
CR	<---	RI	0.610	***	Significant
ID	<---	CE	0.880	***	Significant
Trust	<---	CE	0.969	***	Significant
CH	<---	CE	0.938	***	Significant
CR	<---	CE	0.380	***	Significant

Source: Based on Primary Data Computation

The standardized path coefficient of indicators of each latent construct and path coefficients of constructs are given in Table 2. The latent exogenous construct of customer engagement is significantly influencing the latent endogenous constructs namely, customer loyalty (Beta = 0.922), customer benefits (Beta = 0.819), repurchase intention (Beta = 0.781), intuitive design (Beta = 0.880), trust (Beta = 0.969), complaint handling (Beta = 0.938) customer retention (Beta = 0.380). It is inferred from the above-standardized coefficients that engagement strategies adopted by companies have a very high influence on all the above endogenous constructs.

The latent exogenous construct of customer loyalty is significantly influencing the latent exogenous construct namely repurchase intention (Beta = 0.480), and customer retention (Beta = 0.614) It is inferred from the above-standardized coefficients that customer loyalty has a high impact on the intention to repurchase and on retaining customers. The latent exogenous construct repurchase intention is significantly influencing customer retention (Beta = 0.610). It is inferred from the above-standardized coefficient that repurchase intention significantly impacts customer retention. All indicators' standardized path coefficients on the latent constructs are found to be more than 0.50, suggesting that each indicator reflects the corresponding latent construct more than the other.

13. Conclusion

In conclusion, OTAs customer engagement and retention tactics are crucial to their long-term viability and sustainability in a cutthroat industry. By concentrating on these tactics,

OTAs may build a base of devoted clients, develop trust, and ultimately stimulate revenue growth. (Jacob et al, 2023)

Engaging consumers effectively requires personalized interactions, prompt customer service, and user-friendly booking and trip-planning tools. OTAs may better understand client preferences and behavior by utilizing data analytics and AI-driven insights, which will allow them to customize their services and promotions. On the other hand, retention techniques include engagement after the trip, frequent communication, and loyalty programs (Jacob, Karpagam, et al., 2023). Offering exclusive deals, awards, and incentives in exchange for recurring business may persuade clients to continue with a specific OTA. For preserving trust and happiness, it's also crucial to gather consumer feedback on time and respond to complaints as soon as they arise.

14. Limitations of the Study

This investigation's conclusions are predicated on a small sample size. A deeper view of customer engagement strategies would undoubtedly provide a deeper understanding taken from a larger sample across industries. Another limitation that can be pointed out would be the slump in tourism during the COVID period and the time taken for resurgence. Hence multiple samples were discarded because they were incomplete or not able to provide requisite data due to inability to meet the research requirements. The third limitation was the factors considered for the study. A more comprehensive study considering these variables might provide more information about customer behavior characteristics not covered by the present study.

15. Scope of Future Research

The current study reveals potential future research directions, indicating gaps that arise due to the limitations of the present investigation. Conducting this research with a more extensive sample size investigation enhances the chances of obtaining reliable data, thereby improving the generalizability of findings by providing a more accurate reflection of the population.

Online travel organizations can improve engagement strategies by adopting measures to engage customers with offbeat recommendations and moving towards more technology-enabled travel options. OTAs can also provide more impetus to curated travel packages that can elicit interest in the ever-changing customer landscape. Additional exploration could delve into forthcoming research, examining other relevant factors influencing the assessment of customer engagement.

Conflict of Interest Statement

This is an original work conducted by myself. I hereby declare that there is no conflict of interest with respect to publication.

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