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Development and validation of the Customer Engagement Orientation scale: Assessing firms' customer engagement orientation and its impact on performance

Katarzyna Żyminkowska, Izabela Kowalik, Agnieszka Pleśniak

ABSTRACT

Objective: The article aims to develop and validate a new scale – Customer Engagement Orientation (CENOR) – to measure a firm's customer engagement orientation and to provide evidence of its impact on firm performance. Although customer engagement marketing has received growing scholarly attention, the concept of a firm's customer engagement orientation – particularly in capturing value from non-transactional customer behaviour – remains underexplored. Its precise definition, measurement, and firm-level effects are still unclear.

Research Design & Methods: We followed Churchill's procedure (1979) to create and validate the CENOR scale and analyse its impact on firm performance. Firstly, we proposed the scale items based on insights gathered from the literature review and qualitative research of six company managers. Subsequently, the scale underwent assessment and validation through a quantitative study of 100 firms in the household appliances industry and 101 firms in the financial services industry. Finally, we tested nomological validity through a separate quantitative study of 201 firms in the food, beverage, and fashion industries, using structural equation modelling to examine the relationships between the firm's CENOR and overall performance.

Findings: We developed and validated a comprehensive measurement tool for assessing the customer engagement orientation of marketing managers. Our findings demonstrate that the CENOR scale is reliable and valid across three distinct samples of companies operating in a developed economy of Poland. It remains invariant across consumer goods and services industries. Our findings support the external validity of the CENOR as a predictor of initiatives aimed at developing customer engagement behaviour. Furthermore, we confirmed a firm's customer engagement orientation as a critical factor in driving business performance.

Implications & Recommendations: The prepared measurement tool provides a robust basis for future investigations into the implementation of customer engagement orientation within firms stemming from different industries operating in developed markets. It offers practical guidance for implementing a customer engagement-oriented approach within an organisation and equips practitioners with tools to systematically assess and improve their customer engagement orientation, ultimately driving improved performance.

Contribution & Value Added: The unique contribution of this study to the theory of customer engagement marketing lies in combining the development of a new scale for measuring a firm's customer engagement orientation with an analysis of its impact on performance. It contributes to the knowledge of strategic marketing by identifying a firm's engagement orientation as an organisational culture focused on encouraging customers to interact and build relationships beyond transactions. It provides evidence of the positive impact of this orientation on firm performance enhancing our understanding of how a company's management system can successfully capture value from customer resources involved in their non-transactional activities.

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INTRODUCTION

Recently, marketing has shifted away from a purely transactional approach towards identifying alternative ways customers can contribute to a firm (Pansari & Kumar, 2017). This shift has led to the emergence of the concept of customer engagement in marketing (Pansari & Kumar, 2018). Customer engagement behaviour encompasses a customer's actions and interactions with a brand or firm that extend beyond mere purchases (van Doorn *et al.,* 2010). Such a behaviour includes various non-transactional customer activities, such as word-of-mouth recommendations, assisting fellow customers, writing reviews, pursuing legal actions, offering feedback and complaints, and suggesting new product ideas (Bijmolt *et al.,* 2010; Braun *et al.,* 2016).

For marketers, prioritising engagement behaviour can create value and impact firms' competitive advantage (Kumar *et al.,* 2010; Verhoef *et al.,* 2010). This underscores the need for management strategies that benefit both the company and its customers (van Doorn *et al.,* 2010; Verhoef & Lemon, 2013). Consequently, developing a framework enabling managers to cultivate customer engagement-oriented firms and foster customer relationships has emerged as an important theme in marketing (Alvarez-Milán *et al.,* 2018; Venkatesan, 2017).

However, academic research on this subject remains limited, leading to two critical research gaps. First, there is a lack of clarity on what constitutes a firm's customer engagement orientation and how to measure it. While previous consumer studies have introduced various scales to gauge customer engagement (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2023), managerial approaches have primarily focused on broader measurement frameworks, such as market or relationship orientation, without adequately addressing strategies for effectively engaging customers. A seminal study by Kumar and Pansari (2016) introduced the concept of a firm's engagement orientation, assessing it through a measurement of both customer and employee engagement. However, the literature does not adequatly explore the issue of a firm's specific customer engagement orientation and a comprehensive and validated measure for assessing the extent of such an orientation is lacking. Secondly, there is ambiguity regarding whether a firm's customer engagement orientation positively affects performance. While customer engagement can drive increased sales (Wirtz *et al.*, 2013) or enhance customer equity (So *et al.*, 2016), suggesting that fostering a firm's customer engagement orientation may improve performance, potential downsides also exist. Negatively valenced customer engagement, such as negative reviews, and challenges in integrating non-transactional customer activities into the firm's value formation process – such as information overload or diminished control (Naumann *et al.*, 2020; Echeverri & Skålén, 2021) – may have adverse effects on performance.

The present research aims to bridge these gaps by proposing a new comprehensive measure of a firm's customer engagement orientation and assessing its impact on performance, thereby advancing the existing literature. It contributes to the non-transactional research stream on customer engagement in marketing by identifying a firm's engagement orientation as an organisational culture focused on encouraging customers to interact and build relationships beyond transactions. Moreover, it provides a practical tool – the CENOR scale – to measure this orientation. CENOR, a cross-industry validated measure, provides a foundation for future investigations into the implementation of customer engagement orientation by firms. It is applicable to various industries operating in developed economies, including those beyond Poland. It also offers practical guidance for a customer engagement-oriented approach within an organisation and equips practitioners with tools systematically assessing and improving their customer engagement orientation, leading to improved performance.

The article is structured as follows. Firstly, we present how we developed and validated a concise scale for measuring a customer engagement orientation among firms' executives, utilising established procedures from the literature. We begin by providing a brief conceptual foundation for constructing the framework of a firm's customer engagement orientation. Subsequently, we detail the process used to create its measurement scale, and we go on with the scale's validation. Finally, we evidence how the CENOR influences the studied companies' performance. We conclude by discussing the research findings, implications for theory and practice, and directions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Customer Engagement Behaviour

We may define customer engagement behaviour (CEB) as the interactions and connections that customers (or potential customers) have with a brand or a firm's offerings and activities (Chen *et al.*, 2020; Vivek *et al.*, 2014). We may find various typologies of CEB in the current academic literature, including, *e.g.*, consumer liking, commenting, and resending marketing messages (Bijmolt *et al.,* 2010; Verleye *et al.,* 2014; Roy *et al.,* 2018; Żyminkowska *et al.,* 2023; Febrian, 2023). The literature considers customer actions, which extend beyond purchases, as voluntary contributions of resources that centre on a brand or firm but surpass what is strictly required for the transaction (Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014). According to Hollebeek *et al.* (2016), customer engagement involves a customer's motivated and voluntary investment of their resources into brand interactions, including both operant resources (knowledge and skills) and operand resources (equipment). Harmeling *et al.* (2017) identify four types of customer-owned resources that are contributed through their engagement with a firm's marketing function: network assets, persuasion capital, knowledge stores, and creativity.

The resources that customers contribute through their non-transactional behaviour (*i.e.*, CEB) can be valuable to a firm in many ways beyond mere transactions. Firms have come to recognise the value of CEB (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Verhoef *et al.,* 2010) and consider it essential to their business success. Consequently, in the development of marketing strategies, the non-transactional sources related to CEB are critical as they contribute to firm performance and form an integral part of customer engagement value for firms (Kumar *et al.,* 2010; Kumar & Pansari, 2016; Pansari & Kumar, 2017).

Conceptual Framework of a Firm's Customer Engagement Orientation

The conceptualisation and measurement of firm's customer engagement orientation within a firm represents a significant research gap. Previous measurement frameworks for strategic orientations in marketing, such as market or relationship orientation, have not tackled strategies for effectively engaging customers (Table 1). Although customer engagement marketing is gaining traction – incorporating artificial intelligence (Gupta & Khan, 2024) or corporate social responsibility (Kumar *et al.*, 2025) – the comprehensive framework for a firm's customer engagement orientation remains largely overlooked. A notable exception is the initial study by Kumar and Pansari (2016), which conceptualised a firm's engagement orientation and proposed assessing it based on the level of engagement among both its customers and employees. Their measurement approach requires conducting two separate studies with distinct groups of informants and utilising two different scales: one to assess customer engagement with the firm and another to assess employee engagement. However, measuring firms' orientations is often part of larger studies aimed at exploring relationships between constructs, where keeping measurements concise is crucial for practical and economic reasons (Deshpandé & Farley, 1998; Hakala, 2011). Thus, a dual perspective on engagement orientation – encompassing both customer and employee engagement – fails to adequately address this need. Moreover, when conceptualising and measuring customer engagement, Kumar and Pansari (2016) include not only non-transactional customer behaviour (CEB) but also customer purchasing behaviour. Thus, their measurement approach is not well-suited to demonstrate how a firm's customer engagement orientation – focused solely on encouraging non-transactional CEB (van Doorn *et al.*, 2010) – affects performance.

Therefore, there is a need to develop a new, concise scale for measuring a firm's customer engagement orientation, aligning with the non-transactional perspective on CEB. Addressing this need, this study aims to introduce a comprehensive measure of customer engagement orientation to enhance our understanding of how a company's management system can successfully capture value from customer resources involved in their non-transactional activities. Such a concise measurement scale, referred to as CENOR, will help identify how firm's customer engagement orientation influences overall performance. In developing the conceptualisation and measurement of customer engagement orientation, we drew upon previous definitions, and we reviewed the measurement approaches in prior studies assessing strategic orientations to compare them to this article.

Table 1. Measurement scales for strategic orientations in marketing

Construct and scale label	Authors	Focus / Construct conceptualisation	Scale dimensions and items	Informants
Market orientation: MARKOR	Kohli *et al.*, 1993	Activities that need to take place for the firm to be considered market-oriented.	Three-dimensional scale, 20 items in total.	**Marketing** and non-marketing **executives**
Market orientation: MORTN	Deshpandé & Farley, 1998	Cross-functional processes and activities directed at creating and satisfying customers through continuous needs assessment.	One-dimensional scale, 10 items.	**Marketing executives**
Market orientation: MKTOR	Narver & Slater, 1990	A culture that most effectively and efficiently creates the behaviours for creating superior value for buyers. Measured through behaviours that manifest those values.	One-dimensional scale, 15 items.	Top managers
Market orientation	Hooley *et al.*, 1990	Guiding philosophy for the entire organisation.	One-dimensional scale, 5 items.	**Chief marketing executives**
Relationship marketing orientation: RMO	Sin *et al.*, 2005b	Distinct organisational culture/value that places the buyer-seller relationship at the centre of the firm's strategic and operational thinking.	Six-dimensional scale, 19 items in total.	**Marketing directors/managers**
Online relationship quality	Brun *et al.*, 2014	An integrative model of relationship quality in online banking services.	Three-dimensional scale, 21 items in total.	Retail banking customers
Relationship marketing instruments: RMI	Binti Che Wel & Bojei, 2009	A set of relationship marketing instruments/tactics/ strategies that can be practiced to manage and strengthen customer relationships.	Five-dimensional scale, 54 items in total.	Customers of retail stores
B2C relationship quality	Roberts *et al.*, 2003	Measurement of quality of a relationship with the firm, perceived by the consumers; the extent to which consumers want to maintain the relationship with service providers.	One-dimensional scale, 15 items	Service firm consumers
Engagement orientation: EO	Kumar & Pansari, 2016	An organisation's culture and the process of embedding engagement in the organisation as a policy decision and ensuring that all strategies of the organisation focus on engaging the customers and the employees, along with value maximisation for all stakeholders.	Two separate scales to measure: (a) Customer engagement: four-dimensional scale, 16 items (b) Employee engagement: five-dimensional scale, 20 items	Customers and employees
Customer engagement orientation: CENOR	This paper	The customer engagement culture of the organisation reflected in cross-functional processes and activities at various levels in an organisation, incl. the firm's strategy and structure, enabling customers to interact and broaden their relationships beyond the purchase.	One-dimensional scale	Marketing executives

Source: own study.

As Table 1 shows, previous conceptualisations of strategic orientations in marketing, including engagement orientation have frequently linked them to organisational culture (Narver & Slater, 1990; Sin *et al.,* 2005b; Kumar & Pansari, 2016). Such a culture is assessed through behaviours that manifest

organisational values and beliefs (Slater & Narver, 1995; Narver & Slater, 1990; Kohli *et al.,* 1993) and is also conceptualised as the set of cross-functional processes and activities (Deshpandé & Farley, 1998). Notably, it can manifest at various levels within an organisation, including the firm's strategy and structure (Hurley & Hult, 1998). This enables considering customer engagement orientation in this article as the customer engagement culture of the firm, reflected in cross-functional processes and activities at various levels in an organisation, incl. the firm's strategy and structure, enabling customers to interact and broaden their relationships beyond the purchase. We also propose examining the attitudes and opinions of staff involved in shaping organisational culture. This approach aligns with previous literature (the 'Informants' column in Table 1), which provides comprehensive scales for studying firm executives (Sin *et al.,* 2005b; Deshpandé & Farley, 1998; Kohli *et al.,* 1993; Hooley *et al.,* 1990).

Operationalisation of the Firm's Customer Engagement Orientation

To identify the components of customer engagement orientation as previously conceptualised, we scrutinised key cross-functional processes that facilitate customer engagement at various organisational levels. We studied the recent findings on how to develop customer engagement behaviour (CEB) profitably, encompassing the CEB management process (van Doorn *et al.,* 2010; Verhoef & Lemon, 2013), customer engagement marketing (Harmeling *et al.,* 2017; Karam, 2018), strategic customer engagement marketing (Alvarez-Milán *et al.,* 2018), and firm's customer engagement initiatives (Beckers *et al.,* 2018; Karam *et al.,* 2019). Building upon this, we delineated components of the customer engagement orientation construct, which resulted in seven items for the CENOR scale.

Firstly, the integration of the customer engagement strategy with the customer relationship management. Beckers *et al.* (2018) suggest that firm-initiated non-transactional customer engagement, where firms adopt explicit strategies to promote customer engagement, does not solely aim to induce an immediate sale to an individual customer but to forge solid and enduring relationships with them. Consequently, an engagement strategy complements the conventional relationship strategy, which emphasises long-term transactional relations built on trust and commitment. As posited by Venkatesan (2017), executing a customer engagement strategy entails mapping the various stages of customer relationships alongside customer journey stages.

The second component involves the existence of organisational units dedicated to CEB within a firm, responsible for customer engagement assessment, dissemination within the firm, and acting accordingly. The concept of CEB management process (van Doorn *et al.,* 2010), implies the development of analytical capabilities and dedicated human resources within the firm focused on CEB management. Moreover, while acting on CEB, customer contributions, such as product or service suggestions, must be effectively disseminated within the firm and available to the right employees for appropriate utilisation. Addressing negative CEB adequately and converting into positive one also demands skilled personnel to manage negative engagements, offer refunds, or apologies.

The third component of the firm's customer engagement orientation involves the services from external providers to manage CEB, such as consultancy, IT solutions, and software. Thus, aside from internal organisational structures dedicated to customer engagement processes, the external ecosystems of firms and their respective supply chains may prove essential for customer engagement-oriented firms (Venkatesan, 2017).

The next constituents of the firm's CENOR refer to the organisational infrastructure that facilitates customer-to-firm interactions (fourth component) and enables customer-to-customer interactions (fifth component). Both these enable information flow through networked communication between the customer and the firm, as well as among customers (Harmeling *et al.,* 2017). Firms must establish customer engagement routes to facilitate CEB (Alvarez-Milán *et al.,* 2018; Vivek *et al.,* 2019). This includes providing platforms to express customer ideas, as well as establishing customer communities (van Doorn *et al.,* 2010). It may also necessitate the amplification, connective, feedback, and creative tools (Harmeling *et al.,* 2017).

The sixth element of the firm's customer engagement orientation involves a set of incentives offered by a firm to engage customers. Harmeling *et al.* (2017) and Van Doorn *et al.* (2010) emphasise the establishment of incentives for customers, including rewards for recommendations, or granting a status level within the ranking system.

Finally, the seventh component of the firm's CENOR involves assessing the costs and effects of CEB within the firm. According to van Doorn *et al.* (2010), evaluating CEB manifestations constitutes a pivotal stage of the CEB management process. The conceptualisation of customer engagement value has been devised to address this fundamental aspect of profitable customer engagement (Kumar *et al.*, 2010; Kumar, 2013).

Table 2. Proposed items for the customer engagement orientation scale (CENOR)

	Proposed scale item	References
P1	The firm's customer engagement strategy is seamlessly integrated with its customer relationship management.	Kumar *et al.,* 2010 Venkatesan, 2017 Beckers *et al.,* 2018
P2	Within the organisation, there are designated units responsible for overseeing customer engagement.	van Doorn *et al.,* 2010 Kumar & Pansari, 2016
P3	The firm collaborates with external partners to procure certain services aimed at managing customer engagement.	van Doorn *et al.,* 2010 Venkatesan, 2017
P4	Effective information systems and procedures are in place to facilitate direct communication between customers and the firm for sharing concerns, complaints, suggestions, or ideas.	van Doorn *et al.*, 2010 Harmeling *et al.,* 2017 Alvarez-Milán *et al.,* 2018 Vivek *et al.,* 2019
P5	The firm has established processes and platforms that empower customers to interact with one another, facilitating the exchange of opinions, advice, pictures, and more.	van Doorn *et al.,* 2010 Harmeling *et al.,* 2017 Alvarez-Milán *et al.,* 2018 Vivek *et al.,* 2019
P6	The firm offers a range of tangible and intangible incentives to encourage customer engagement, including rewards for recommendations, ideas, and rankings.	van Doorn *et al.,* 2010 Harmeling *et al.,* 2017
P7	The firm actively measures both the costs and the effects of customer engagement initiatives.	van Doorn *et al.,* 2010 Kumar *et al.,* 2010 Verhoef & Lemon, 2013

Source: own study.

In conclusion, the operationalisation of the firm's customer engagement orientation construct, enabled us to formulate the initial items for the CENOR scale (Table 2).

Customer Engagement Orientation-related Constructs and Hypotheses Development

In this section, we present the nomological network and hypotheses concerning the connections between the firm's customer engagement orientation and its outcomes. The network draws from previous research related to customer engagement behaviour (CEB). Specifically, it encompasses the firm's initiatives in developing CEB and firm performance (Figure 1).

We incorporated two general categories of firm initiatives in CEB development (Beckers *et al.,* 2018; Karam *et al.,* 2019). Firstly, these aimed at stimulating customer-to-customer communication behaviour, and promoting CEB in customer-to-customer interactions. Customer communication may encompass customer referrals, customers influencing others through word-of-mouth initiated by customers themselves, and content generation, including blogging, writing reviews, and sharing opinions with other customers (Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014; Romero, 2018). Secondly, there are initiatives designed to stimulate customer collaboration behaviour. They encourage CEB in interactions between customers and the firm, as well as its employees. They involve customers actively participating in product development and innovation (Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014), providing information, assistance, and feedback to the firm via suggestions (Verleye *et al.,* 2014).

Prior research has not empirically examined the relationship between a firm's engagement orientation and tactical initiatives in CEB development. However, it has conceptualised engagement orientation as a cultural framework that guides managerial efforts, *i.e.*, the firm's initiatives, to foster engagement throughout the organisation (Kumar & Pansari, 2016). Building on this theoretical framework, we addressed the aforementioned research gap and proposed the following hypotheses:

H1a: Customer engagement orientation within the firm has a positive effect on the firm's initiatives in developing customer-to-customer communication behaviour.

H1b: Customer engagement orientation within the firm has a positive effect on the firm's initiatives in developing customer collaboration behaviour.

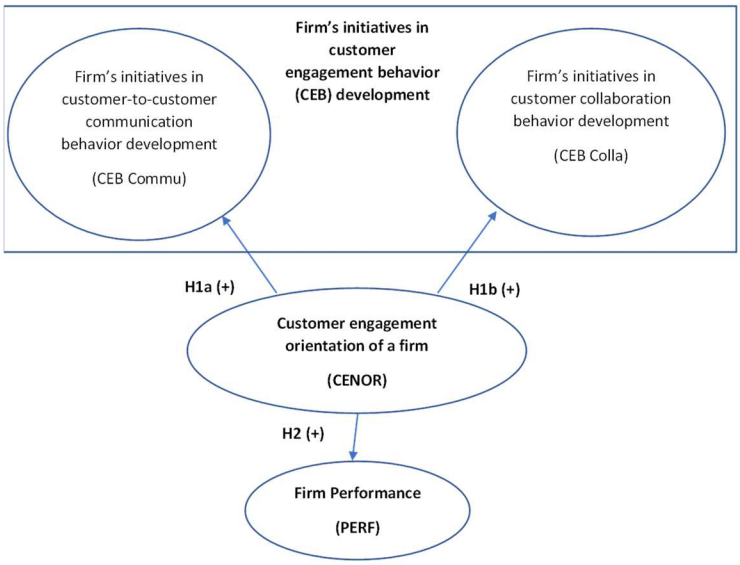

Figure 1. Causal diagram representing the nomological network
Source: own elaboration.

CENOR Impact on Performance

Customer engagement has been shown to enhance firm metrics, including sales, revenue, and profitability (Kumar *et al.*, 2025; Lim *et al.*, 2022; Wirtz *et al.*, 2013; So *et al.*, 2016). For instance, Kumar and Pansari (2016) evidenced that customer engagement, encompassing both non-transactional and purchasing behaviour, positively influences firm performance, increasing revenue and net income. However, adopting engagement marketing requires careful consideration. Firstly, negatively valenced customer engagement, such as negative word of mouth, can lead to adverse firm-level effects if not effectively managed and transformed into positive CEB (Bowden *et al.*, 2017; van Doorn *et al.*, 2010). Secondly, customer engagement, defined as the customer's contribution of resources to marketing function (Harmeling *et al.*, 2017), serves as a mechanism for interactive value formation (Echeverri & Skålén, 2021). Within this mechanism, value can be co-created, generating positive outcomes for firms, or co-destroyed, leading to negative consequences. The latter may include information overload, reduced control over strategic planning, and increased complexity in managing firm objectives (Hoyer *et al.*, 2010; Żyminkowska, 2019). Consequently, ambiguity remains in the existing literature regarding the impact of a customer engagement and firm's customer engagement orientation on performance, highlighting a research gap. Therefore, in this study, we aim to address this gap by testing the impact of CENOR on firm performance.

In doing so, we acknowledge that engaged customers have the potential to contribute to the long-term reputation and recognition of a brand. Therefore, while creating an environment that fosters greater customer engagement may entail an initial investment, it has the potential to generate higher profits over the long term (Verhoef *et al.*, 2010). Moreover, previous studies investigating the outcomes of strategic orientations in marketing have consistently shown their positive impact on firm

performance. Narver and Slater (1990) established that market orientation (MO) serves as a crucial determinant of profitability, both for commodity and non-commodity businesses. Jaworski and Kohli (1993) supported this idea by confirming that an organisation's MO is directly correlated with its business performance. Moreover, Hooley *et al.* (1990) discovered evidence that adopting MO leads to improved performance. Regarding relationship marketing orientation (RMO), Tse *et al.* (2004) and Sin *et al.* (2005b) have both reported its positive impact on market share and return on investment. Furthermore, in their replication of Sin *et al.*'s (2005b) study, Gordon *et al.* (2008) reaffirmed these same associations. Kucukkancabas *et al.* (2009) undertook further exploration of the impact of RMO on company performance. Analogously, a firm's customer engagement orientation, which encompasses long-term principles that guide marketing initiatives focused on CEB, is likely to have a positive influence on its performance. Thus, we hypothesised the following:

H2: A firm's customer engagement orientation has a positive effect on its overall performance.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

We followed Churchill' s procedure (1979) to create and validate the CENOR scale (Table 3). Firstly, we proposed the scale items based on insights gathered from the literature review and qualitative research (Step 1). Subsequently, the scale underwent assessment and validation through quantitative studies (Step 2). Finally, we conducted tests for nomological validity (Step 3), involving the development of a nomological network and hypotheses that outlined the relationships between the firm's CENOR and related constructs, including firm performance, grounded in the existing literature. To verify hypotheses, we utilised structural equation modelling.

Table 3. Procedure in the development and validation of the customer engagement orientation scale (CENOR)

Steps in the process	Details	Based on / effects
Step 1. Conceptualisation and operationalisation of the constructs	Conceptualisation and operationalisation of the firm's customer engagement orientation and item generation for the CENOR scale.	Literature review: a) Approaches utilised in constructing firm's strategic orientation scales in marketing. b) The managerial strategies employed by firms to foster customer engagement behaviour.
	Further operationalisation of CENOR: Expert assessment of generated items to evaluate content validity of the initial scale.	Qualitative studies – an expert review (3 scholars and 6 managers). An initial pool of 7 items was generated.
Step 2. Scale assessment and validation	Psychometric properties of scale & item selection.	Study 1: 100 companies in the household appliances industry. Reduction to 5 items.
	Cross-industry validation.	Study 2: 101 companies in financial services.
	Measurement invariance assessment.	Study 1 and Study 2: 100 companies in the household appliances industry and 101 companies in financial services.
Step 3. Nomological and discriminant validation of the scale	Nomological network development and hypotheses statement.	Literature review: Examining the connections between customer engagement orientation and associated constructs, specifically, firms' initiatives in developing customer engagement behaviour and firm performance.
	Model estimation and hypotheses testing; nomological and discriminant validity assessment.	Study 3: 201 companies in the food, beverages, and fashion industries.

Source: own study.

The following section focuses on the results achieved in each step shown in Table 3.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Scale items and content validity [Step 1]

The seven initial items for the CENOR scale (Table 2) reflect the components of the firm's customer engagement orientation discussed in the preceding section. The objective was to assess the content validity of this initial scale. To achieve this, we conducted qualitative research involving both scholars and managers. Initially, we sought critical evaluations of the CENOR items from three scholars. They represented research areas crucial for understanding customer engagement orientation, including strategic orientations in marketing (1 scholar), research methodology (1 scholar), and customer experience and engagement research (1 scholar). They accepted the generated items without reservations.

Next, we interviewed managers from six companies to further clarify scale items. The nature of a company's offerings may influence customer engagement behaviour and potentially moderate its relationships with other constructs (Barari *et al.*, 2020; Behnam *et al.*, 2021; van Doorn *et al.*, 2010; Pansari & Kumar, 2017). Thus, we selected companies with distinct offerings, including tangible products (household appliances, fashion, and food and beverages) as well as financial services. By choosing these specific industries, the sample represents both low-involvement offerings (food and beverages) and high-involvement products (fashion, household appliances, and financial services) (Ratchford, 1987; Vaughn, 1986). Furthermore, we aimed to gather insights from all sizes of enterprises. We also engaged marketing executives from various management levels (Table AI – Appendix). Based on these respondents' feedback, we confirmed that the initial scale items are clear and relevant across diverse contexts.

Psychometric Properties and Cross-industry Validation of the Scale [Step 2]

We evaluated the proposed CENOR scale with regard to its psychometric properties, cross-industry validation, and measurement invariance using a survey method. Surveys offer the advantage of high external validity since data is collected in real-world settings and can capture a relatively large number of variables. However, due to their cross-sectional nature, surveys tend to have lower internal validity. We addressed this concern when assessing nomological validity.

Sample and Data Collection in Step 2

In Step 2, we conducted two surveys from companies operating in the B2C markets in Poland. Over the last decades, Poland has transitioned from a perennially backward, poor, and peripheral country to join the ranks of the world's high income countries. As the literature advocates the development of marketing theory by incorporating inputs from diverse cultures (Burton, 2002), and research results from Poland are rarely disseminated in reputed business journals, we focused on Polish companies to fill this empirical gap and to use this interesting research context.

As mentioned in the previous section, the nature of the offering may impact CEB and moderate its relationships with other constructs. Therefore, Study 1 focused on companies in the household appliances industry, while Study 2 centred on financial services companies. This aimed to validate the scale in different product contexts (Table AI – Appendix). We used probabilistic stratified sampling to ensure sample representativeness. We employed company size (*i.e.*, 5-9, 10-49, 50-249, and 250 or more employees) as a stratification variable and applied proportional sampling from the Dun & Bradstreet Bisnode database, which contains 7.4 million companies registered in Poland. We conducted data collection through computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI). Each interview began with a brief introduction to explain the fundamentals of a firm's customer engagement orientation. This aimed to ensure that respondents understood the components of this concept. We collected data from 100 companies in the household appliances industry (Study 1) and 101 companies in financial services (Study 2). Such sample sizes are quite satisfactory when compared with sizes offered in previous empirical research aimed at validating new scales for strategic orientations. For instance, Kohli *et al.* (1993) surveyed 102 companies, and Deshpandé and Farley (1998) surveyed 27 companies.

The respondents in both studies represented marketing executives from lower, middle, and senior management and were responsible for marketing-related activities such as relationship management,

promotion campaigns, customer complaints management, new product development, and innovation. To assess CENOR items, we used a five-point Likert scale, where 1 indicated 'strongly disagree' and 5 indicated 'strongly agree.' As we conducted the interviews in Polish, we followed a four-step translation process ensuring the accuracy, cultural sensitivity, and capturing the intended meaning in the target language (Behr & Shishido, 2016). Firstly, we translated the items from English to Polish by a professional translator fluent in both languages. Secondly, another qualified translator independently translated the items back from Polish to English, helping identify any discrepancies or misunderstandings. Thirdly, we compared the original items with the backward-translated ones, discussing discrepancies with the translators to reach a consensus on the most accurate and culturally appropriate translation. Fourthly, we tested the translated items with three executives to gather feedback on clarity and cultural relevance.

Analytical Strategy in Step 2

At the first stage of the CENOR scale assessment, we constructed the measurement model for consumer goods companies in the household appliances industry (Study 1) and evaluated the psychometric properties of the scale using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and F-L criteria (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). During this phase, we selected the items demonstrating the best performance in measuring CENOR.

Secondly, we validated the scale by applying the same measurement model to a sample of financial services companies (Study 2), to determine whether the scale can be replicated and generalised to different settings (Lourenço *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, we anticipated that, similar to CEB, CENOR may be context-specific (Behnam *et al.*, 2021; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, by examining the applicability of CENOR to services, we also investigated measurement invariance to ensure that we are measuring (1) the same construct (2) and in the same way across both industries. We employed multiple group confirmatory factor analysis (MGCFA) to address these issues.

CENOR is operationalised as a latent construct measured by statements representing cross-functional processes and activities that reflect customer engagement orientation. Thus, we assumed a reflective measurement model and employed CFA and CB-SEM approaches for its estimation (Jarvis *et al.*, 2003; Sarstedt *et al.*, 2016). Because of some missing values in the dataset, we opted for FIML estimation and we applied AMOS 28 software.

In assessing the scale's psychometric properties, we adhered to the Fornell and Larcker (1981) criteria for reliability and convergent validity. However, we applied cutoff values of 0.6 for reliability (Streiner, 2003; Nunnally, 1967) and an AVE close to 0.5, supplemented by a CR exceeding 0.7 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). This is because the CENOR scale is new, and there are no well-established social (collective) representations of it in the sense defined by Durkheim (1982). Secondly, the Fornell and Larcker (1981) criteria tend to be conservative and the scale's length can influence CR (in our case, 7 items).

In step 3, we evaluated discriminant validity, which assesses whether inter-construct correlations differ from unity.

In step 2, we assessed the model fit based on criteria outlined by Sharma *et al.* (2005) due to the small sample sizes (100 and 101). For nested model comparison, we employed the chi-square difference test and ΔAFI (Chen, 2007; Cheung & Rensvold, 2002).

Results of Step 2

We initially developed a measurement tool for consumer goods companies in Study 1. However, the standardised loadings for items P.3 and P.6, were lower than 0.5, leading to a low AVE value of 0.380. Consequently, we decided to remove these items from the originally proposed scale. Finally, the CENOR scale demonstrated both reliability and validity, even when applying a more conservative criterion. We assessed convergent validity using the CR criterion, which is less conservative than the Fornell and Larcker one (1981).

Next, when validating the measurement model among consumer service companies in Study 2, the CENOR scale exhibited reliability, with a CR value of 0.771, and convergent validity. Thus, the scale may be applicable to both consumer goods and services companies (Table 4).

Table 4. Psychometric properties of the CENOR scale

Items	consumer goods companies		services companies	Assessment Criterion
	Preliminary CENOR scale	CENOR scale	CENOR scale	
	Std loadings	Std loadings	Std loadings	
P.1	0.703	0.669	0.592	> 0.5
P.2	0.716	0.720	0.531	
P.3	0.332	n.a.	n.a.	
P.4	0.647	0.690	0.593	
P.5	0.609	0.619	0.674	
P.6	0.471	n.a.	n.a.	
P.7	0.729	0.729	0.772	
CR	**0.803**	**0.816**	**0.771**	> 0.7 (0.6)
AVE	**0.380**	**0.471**	**0.407**	> 0.5 (*)

Note: In the brackets, we indicate the less conservative criterion for new scales; *close to 0.5 & CR > 0.7.
Source: own study.

Finally, we tested measurement invariance to determine whether CENOR is similarly understood across the studied industries and whether service providers react to the scale's items consistent with consumer goods companies.

We confirmed the configural measurement invariance, as the model fit reasonably well, and all factor loadings remained significant in both studied industries. Next, metric measurement invariance was supported, as the model fit did not deteriorate when we imposed restrictions on factor loadings. Regarding scalar measurement invariance, the study met two out of three criteria. To establish partial scalar invariance, we released the equality restriction for the intercept of item P.2, which displayed the most significant violations of the scalar measurement invariance (Ariely & Davidov, 2012; Putnick & Bornstein, 2016). The fit of the partial scalar model did not deteriorate compared to the metric model. Therefore, we can conclude that we achieved partial scalar measurement invariance, and meaningful comparisons of CENOR means between goods and service providers are possible (Steenkamp & Baumgartner, 1998).

Nomological and Discriminant Validation [Step 3]

We based the nomological network regarding the relationships between the firm's customer engagement orientation and related constructs on the existing literature. The structural equation model tested the hypotheses underpinning the proposed network. Moreover, we checked discriminant validity by including all constructs relevant to the firm's customer engagement orientation within the nomological network.

Measures, Sample, and Data Collection in Step 3

For assessing firm's initiatives in customer engagement behaviour development, our items are based on Bijmolt *et al.* (2010), Braun *et al.* (2016), Ho *et al.* (2020), Kumar and Pansari (2016), Muntinga *et al.* (2011), and Verleye *et al.* (2014). We employed five-point Likert scales to measure all variables (Table AII – Appendix).

To evaluate managers' assessment of performance, we used sales growth, market share, and net profit relative to main competitors (Hooley *et al.*, 1990). We adopted a subjective assessment of firm performance, aligning with the approach in Narver and Slater's (1990) study on the impact of market orientation on business performance. The prior studies have established a strong correlation between subjective assessments and objective performance indicators (Dess & Robinson, 1994). We rated the sales growth, market share, and net profit on five-point Likert scales, ranging from 1 (definitely worse than competition) to 5 (definitely better than competition (Table AII – Appendix).

In Step 3, we conducted a quantitative Study 3. The survey involved consumer goods companies in Poland that operated in food and beverages, as well as fashion industries (Table AI – Appendix). We followed the same sample design and data collection method as in Step 2, and obtained data from 201 companies. Previous research on the impact of strategic orientation on firm performance involved samples of 102 companies – Kohli *et al.* (1993), 110 business units – Narver and Slater (1990), and 130 firms – Kucukkancabas *et al.* (2009).

Analytical Strategy in Step 3

In step 3, we assessed the psychometric properties of the scales used to measure all constructs related to customer engagement orientation within the nomological network. Next, we evaluated discriminant validity, and adopted the bootstrap confidence intervals for inter-construct correlations (Bagozzi *et al.*, 1991) instead of relying solely on the commonly used AVE/SV criterion (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), which has been shown to have a high rate of false positives in detecting a lack of discriminant validity (Rönkkö & Cho, 2022). Finally, to assess nomological validity and test our hypotheses, we estimated the SEM model using the CB-SEM approach. Due to our relatively small sample size (201), we utilised model fit criteria outlined by Sharma *et al.* (2005).

Results in Step 3

The estimated measurement model displayed a good fit with $\chi^2 = 140.9$ with 98 degrees of freedom and TLI = 0.950, CFI = 0.964, RMSEA = 0.047 (90% CI for RMSEA [0.028, 0.063]). All constructs in the model demonstrated reliability, with high values of CR exceeding 0.7, and convergent validity (AVE) exceeding 0.5 (Table 5). The construct 'firm's initiatives in customer-to-customer communication behaviour development' met the less conservative criterion of AVE close to 0.5, supported by CR exceeding 0.7.

Table 5. Psychometric properties of construct scales and discriminant validity assessment

Construct			Count of items	Std. loadings range	CR	AVE
Customer engagement orientation of a firm (CENOR)			5	0.71-0.81	0.873	0.579
Firm's initiatives in customer collaboration behaviour development (CEB_colla).			4	0.60-0.79	0.807	0.512
Firm's initiatives in customer-to-customer communication behaviour development (CEB_commu)			4	0.60-0.74	0.749	0.429
Firm performance (PERF)			3	0.70-0.89	0.850	0.657
Discriminant validity assessment						
Parameter			**Correlation**	**90% bootstrap CI**		***p***
CENOR	<-->	CEB_commu	0.831	0.736	0.905	0.003
CENOR	<-->	CEB_colla	0.579	0.441	0.699	0.002
CENOR	<-->	PERF	0.419	0.272	0.528	0.004
CEB_commu	<-->	CEB_colla	0.542	0.390	0.671	0.002
CEB_commu	<-->	PERF	0.262	0.103	0.413	0.008
CEB_colla	<-->	PERF	0.212	0.032	0.385	0.045

Note: To perform the bootstrap, we excluded the missing values pairwise and estimated the model based on the covariance matrix with the use of the Monte Carlo (parametric) bootstrap. We caluclated the bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals (CI) on 1000 replications.
Source: own study.

We successfully established discriminant validity for all constructs within the study (Table 5). This was determined by assessing bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals, where none of the 90% bootstrap confidence intervals included the value of 1. Therefore, we can conclude that CENOR scale effectively distinguishes itself from other constructs.

We assessed nomological validity based on the structural model which demonstrated a good fit to the data, as evidenced by chi-square ($\chi^2 = 142.2$ with 101 degrees of freedom) and fit indices (TLI = 0.954, CFI = 0.966, RMSEA = 0.045, 90% CI for RMSEA [0.025, 0.062], Figure 1). We found the hypothesised

effects to be positive, significant, and substantial, supporting the stated hypotheses. CENOR had a positive effect on Firm's initiatives in customer collaboration behaviour development (estimate 0.582, S.E.=0.1, C.R.=5.806, p<0.001, beta=0.590, support for H1b). Moreover, CENOR had a positive effect on firm's initiatives in customer-to-customer communication behaviour development (estimate 0.796, S.E.=0.116, C.R.=6.881, p<0.001, beta=0.838, support for H1a). Finally, CENOR had a positive effect on firm performance (estimate 0.283, S.E.=0.061, C.R.=4.661, p<0.001, beta=0.411, support for H2).

Discussion

Previous research has emphasised the significance of a customer engagement focus in marketing. This is because customers' voluntary contributions through non-transactional behaviours have been identified as a valuable resource for firms (Harmeling *et al.*, 2017; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2016). Consequently, recent academic research has recognised the necessity for a framework regarding a firm's customer engagement orientation (Alvarez-Milán *et al.*, 2018; Venkatesan, 2017). Our research significantly advances these initial discussions. We clarified the nature of the firm's customer engagement orientation construct and proposed a measurement tool and framework for investigating its impact on firm performance.

Based on our research findings, we propose to conceptualise a firm's customer engagement orientation as a culture of customer engagement. This culture is reflected in cross-functional processes and activities across various levels within an organisation, including the firm's strategy and structure, all of which enable customers to interact and cultivate relationships beyond the initial purchase. Such a conceptualisation focuses on organisational culture with a long-term impact on management actions, which aligns with prior studies on strategic orientations (Hakala, 2011), particularly in marketing (Narver & Slater, 1990; Sin *et al.,* 2005b). Our approach differs from Kumar and Pansari's (2016) definition of a firm's engagement orientation, which involves policies to engage both customers and employees. While employee satisfaction, identification, commitment, and loyalty are crucial for the successful implementation of any business strategy, they fall under the domain of human resource management. In contrast, our focus is on the marketing function, specifically on customer engagement. Additionally, in our definition, we follow non-transactional views on customer engagement (Ho *et al.*, 2020; Vivek *et al.*, 2014) asserting that a firm's customer engagement orientation influences marketing initiatives to encourage customer interactions beyond purchases. In contrast, Kumar and Pansari (2016) include customer purchases as a dimension of customer engagement, which might distort the results when assessing its impact on performance. Customer purchases directly impact sales growth which is a key indicator of firm performance. By clarifying the nature of the firm's customer engagement orientation, which focuses solely on encouraging non-transactional CEB, we propose a solid foundation for demonstrating how it affects firm performance, thereby advancing existing literature.

We have developed and rigorously validated the concise, one-dimensional scale designed to measure the customer engagement orientation among firms' executives. While measuring a firm's engagement orientation, Kumar and Pansari (2016) do not provide a single score for engagement. Instead, they use an aggregate score encompassing both customer engagement (assessed among the firm's customers) and employee engagement (assessed among the firm's employees) to represent engagement within the firm. In contrast, we propose a valid and concise measure, which allows for the calculation of a single score for a firm's customer engagement orientation based on evaluations by its executives. Our method is better suited for measuring firms' strategic orientations, as it is often part of larger studies where keeping measurements concise is advantageous, as suggested in prior literature on strategic management (Hult & Ketchen, 2001; Lumpkin & Dess, 1996). Our approach focuses on executives' subjective assessments of the customer engagement orientation. This aligns with previous research on strategic orientations in marketing, where scales were developed to identify specific orientations through the subjective assessment of their components by management staff (*e.g.*, Kohli *et al.*, 1993; Sin *et al.*, 2005b).

The CENOR scale has demonstrated remarkable reliability (ranging from 0.771 to 0.873 depending on the industry), exceeding our expectations, with a cutoff point of 0.6 (Streiner, 2003). Regarding convergent validity, the scale has met the less conservative criterion. Importantly, we found that the CENOR scale is invariant across both consumer goods, such as household appliances, and financial services companies. This indicates that the scale is understood similarly in both industries and versatile companies

respond similarly to the scale's items. This result surpasses our expectations, as establishing scalar measurement invariance is less common in studies, especially when analysing such diverse industries (Putnick & Bornstein, 2016). This result indicates that the CENOR scale is an effective tool that fulfils its intended purpose across diverse contexts. The tool's effectiveness is demonstrated by its psychometric properties, including reliability and validity, which remained consistent across the industries under study. Specifically, the CENOR scale enables managers to accurately identify the firm's customer engagement orientation in various industry settings, including both tangible products and services as well as industries offering high- and low-involvement offerings, such as fashion and food and beverages, respectively.

Given that the firm's strategic orientation guides efforts to stimulate customer engagement behaviour, we anticipated a positive relationship between these constructs. Our research findings support hypotheses H1a and H1b, confirming the external and nomological validity of the CENOR scale. The relationship between the firm's customer engagement orientation and its initiatives in customer-to-customer communication behaviour development is notably strong, with a standardised effect size of 0.838. This is followed by the firm's initiatives in customer collaboration development (beta = 0.590). The stronger effect observed for initiatives in customer-to-customer communication development could be attributed to the ease of nudging customers toward communication compared to collaboration. Indeed, prior research has shown this type of consumer engagement to be a key facet of CEB (Braun *et al.*, 2016; Romero, 2018). Collaboration, being a higher level of engagement, requires more substantial incentives to overcome customer inertia. Customers tend to engage for their benefit in anticipation of securing greater value (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019; Prentice & Loureiro, 2018). Additionally, stimulating customer communication is relatively easier to implement and requires fewer resources compared to stimulating customer collaboration, which involves adapting R&D processes and production (Kunz *et al.*, 2017; Verhoef *et al.*, 2010).

In the external validation of the scale, we also supported the predictive validity of the firm's customer engagement orientation measure on performance, thereby providing support for hypothesis H2. It is worth noting that company performance is influenced by various factors, including regulatory, environmental, and economic conditions, which were not considered in our model. Nonetheless, the standardised effect of the customer engagement orientation on performance, which stands at 0.411 is substantial. Our findings align with previous research that has explored the impact of various strategic orientations on performance using a similar approach. For instance, Sin *et al.* (2005b) discovered a standardised effect of 0.34 for relationship marketing orientation on overall firm performance, including sales growth, customer retention, return on investment, and market share, in their Hong Kong sample, and an effect of 0.49 in their Mainland China sample. Similarly, Kohli *et al.* (1993) identified effects of 0.419 for market orientation dimensions related to intelligence generation and 0.426 for dimensions associated with dissemination and responsiveness. Hence, considering the customer engagement orientation as a critical factor contributing to business success is confirmed and consistent with prior research (Ho *et al.*, 2020; Shawky *et al.*, 2020). The study demonstrated a significant relationship between CENOR, viewed as a component of company culture, and firm performance relative to competitors. This finding suggests that a firm's customer engagement orientation may serve as a strategic tool for maintaining alignment with its microenvironment, thereby supporting the assumptions of the resource-based view and strategic orientation theories (Peteraf & Barney, 2003) advancing existing literature on marketing orientations.

CONCLUSIONS

This study addresses research gaps by clarifying the nature of a firm's customer engagement orientation in capturing value from non-transactional customer behaviour and by developing and validating a measurement tool for a firm's customer engagement orientation to provide evidence of its impact on firm performance. Our findings demonstrate that the CENOR scale exhibits reliability and validity across three distinct samples of companies operating in Poland, encompassing both consumer goods and services industries. In addition, a firm's customer engagement orientation is confirmed to be a

critical factor contributing to business success. The study holds significant theoretical and practical implications and opens avenues for future research.

Theoretical Implications

The theoretical contribution of our research centres on advancing the literature concerning the implementation of a firm's customer engagement orientation in marketing and the development of management systems and cultures that prioritise customer engagement.

The nature of customer engagement orientation includes five key components:

- Integration of customer engagement strategy with customer relationship management within the firm.
- Establishment of designated organisational units responsible for customer engagement.
- Implementation of effective information systems and procedures enabling direct customer communication for concerns, complaints, suggestions, or ideas.
- Creation of processes and platforms facilitating customer-to-customer communication, allowing the exchange of opinions, advice, and content.
- Measurement of the costs and effects of customer engagement.

This framework contributes significantly to the theory of customer engagement marketing, shedding light on how firms stimulate, empower, and evaluate customers' voluntary, non-transactional contributions to marketing functions.

Second, support of the reliability and validity of the CENOR scale is evidenced. This scale is a reliable means of assessing a firm's customer engagement orientation which demonstrates robust performance across both consumer goods and services industries. Moreover, the CENOR scale is invariant between sectors, enabling meaningful comparisons of mean levels and relationships across industries. This facilitates the practical application of the CENOR scale and enhances the interpretability of results across contexts.

Finally, a firm's customer engagement orientation model was validated, significant associations with specific firm initiatives in customer engagement development were evidenced. Moreover, overall business performance, indicated by sales growth, market share, and net profit is positively influenced by a firm's customer engagement orientation. This provides a robust basis for future investigations into the implementation of a firm's customer engagement orientation within firms stemming from different industries.

Managerial Implications

The developed firm's customer engagement orientation scale focuses on processes and activities essential for fostering a customer engagement-oriented approach. It offers practical guidance for implementing a customer engagement-oriented approach within an organisation and equips practitioners with tools to assess and improve their customer engagement orientation and performance systematically.

Firms aiming to harness their customers' resource contributions beyond the point of purchase might use CENOR scale for systematically gauging a firm's orientation in various industries. This tool can also function as a diagnostic instrument, enabling firms to assess the completeness of their customer engagement orientation and identify areas requiring specific adjustments.

Top-level management can utilise this framework to develop strategies and tactics for customer engagement marketing, foster a customer engagement-oriented organisational culture, and enhance customer relationships extending beyond monetary transactions. Periodic measurements of a firm's customer engagement orientation, as well as industry-level benchmarks, can further contribute to the development of a competitive advantage.

As verified in our study, a high CENOR level can contribute to the development of company performance, as the firm's customer engagement orientation places customer engagement behaviour at the core of its strategic and operational thinking.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this study offers substantial contributions, further research is warranted to extend the generalisability of our findings. Additionally, our current findings should be considered indicative rather than conclusive, underscoring the need for ongoing research.

One limitation pertains to the geographic scope of our study, which focused solely on testing the scale within a single post-transition market – Poland. Poland was reclassified from an emerging to a developed market by global index provider FTSE Russell in September 2018. While the three distinct samples encompassed a variety of businesses, expanding the analysis to include more mature market economies and testing CENOR in global markets is imperative. Given that respondents' perceptions and attitudes are shaped by their national cultures, replicating this study on a broader scale across diverse cultural contexts is essential to validate the generalisability of our findings.

Regarding the nomological validation of the CENOR scale, we concentrated on exploring the associations between a firm's customer engagement orientation and its outcomes, including firm's initiatives in customer engagement behaviour development and performance. The future theoretical and empirical research could incorporate the antecedents of customer engagement orientation. This would involve assessing the internal characteristics of a firm that either facilitate or hinder the development of a customer engagement orientation. Investigating organisational factors such as top management's risk aversion, interdepartmental conflicts, or centralisation could provide valuable insights into the determinants of customer engagement orientation.

Further studies are also necessary to determine whether CENOR effectiveness is contingent on environmental conditions. Subsequent research could investigate the moderating effect of environmental turbulence factors – such as technological and market turbulence, as well as competitive intensity – on the relationship between a firm's customer engagement orientation and performance.

Furthermore, our data collection focused exclusively on managers in firms operating within the business-to-consumer (B2C) market. Given suggestions by some researchers, such as Pansari and Kumar (2017), that the operational context, whether business-to-business (B2B) or B2C, may influence the impact of customer engagement orientation on performance, future research should explore the role of this moderator in the link between firm's customer engagement orientation and business performance.

In addition, because of the cross-sectional approach our results should not be interpreted as conclusive proof of a causal relationship between a firm's customer engagement orientation and business performance. Establishing a time-series database and conducting longitudinal investigations to test this relationship could offer more comprehensive insights.

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Appendix:

Table A I. Sample characteristics

Qualitative study (Step 1)				
Firm no.	**Product offered**	**No of employees**	**Management level of the respondent**	**Scope of the business**
1	Household appliances	10-49	Senior	Retailing & services
2	Household appliances	10-49	Lower	Production
3	Fashion	50-249	Middle	Production & retailing
4	Financial services	5-9	Senior	Services
5	Food and beverages	50-249	Senior	Production
6	Financial services	10-49	Middle	Services

Quantitative study				
		Step 2		**Step 3**
		Study 1	**Study 2**	**Study 3**
Industry		Household appliances	Financial services	Food, beverages, and fashion
N		100	101	201
No of employees	5-9	47%	9%	35%
	10-49	32%	49%	34%
	50-249	14%	34%	22%
	250 and more	7%	9%	8%
Management level of the respondent	Lower	8%	19%	7%
	Middle	45%	30%	31%
	Senior	47%	51%	62%

Source: own elaboration.

Table A II. The distribution of responses to scale items in Step 3

Variable	Items	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Firm's initiatives to stimulate customer-to-customer communication behaviour	We initiate discussions among consumers about our firm, brand, or products on our website and fun page.	76	39	6	32	41
	We encourage our consumers to click the 'like' button for our firm, brand, products, or posts.	37	18	8	47	85
	We encourage consumers to share the content, pictures, and videos that we provide.	73	40	8	42	26
	We collaborate with independent bloggers who initiate discussions among consumers about our products or firm.	118	33	8	16	15
Firm's initiatives to stimulate customer collaboration behaviour	We invite consumers to participate in surveys to express their preferences regarding products or ideas.	73	39	4	44	25
	We encourage consumers to submit their product designs, such as in design contests.	104	37	2	12	12
	We organise crowdfunding campaigns to finance our product prototypes.	101	32	2	9	3
	We gather consumer suggestions on products, packaging, promotions (including our website), and sales.	87	29	8	32	23

Variable	Items	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
		Definitely worse than the competition	Rather worse than the competition	Neither better nor worse than the competition	Rather better than the competition	Definitely better than the competition
Firm performance	Sales growth	6	16	85	53	14
	Market share	5	16	84	60	13
	Net profit	4	19	80	47	13

Source: own elaboration.

Authors

The contribution shares of authors: KŻ – 40%: conceptualisation, literature writing, data gathering, discussion; AP – 40%: conceptualisation, methodology, calculations, discussion; IK –20%: conceptualisation, discussion, editing and submission

Katarzyna Żyminkowska
Associate Professor and the head of the Department of Marketing and Entrepreneurship at the University of Bielsko-Biala (Poland). Her research interests include customer engagement marketing, customer engagement orientation, consumer engagement behaviour, and entrepreneurship pedagogy.
Correspondence to: Willowa 2, 43-309 Bielsko-Biala, Poland, e-mail: kzyminkowska@ubb.edu.pl
ORCID https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7377-1998

Izabela Kowalik (corresponding author)
Full Professor at the Department of International Marketing, SGH Warsaw School of Economics (Poland). Her research interests include marketing management, entrepreneurship and international business.
Correspondence to: al. Niepodległości 162, 02-554 Warsaw, Poland, e-mail: iza123@sgh.waw.pl
ORCID https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9066-0974

Agnieszka Pleśniak
Assistant Professor at the Department of International Marketing, SGH Warsaw School of Economics (Poland). Her research interests include marketing research and applying statistical methods to measure latent constructs and traits such as attitudes and beliefs and their relation to behaviour.
Correspondence to: al. Niepodległości 162, 02-554 Warsaw, Poland, e-mail: Agnieszka.plesniak@sgh.waw.pl
ORCID https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7392-2231

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Use of Artificial Intelligence

The authors declare that they used generative artificial intelligence (GPT-5) to assist with proofreading the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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