

EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT ON TRADE SHOW PERFORMANCE: A B2B PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Trade shows are major business events and act as a significant medium for promoting industrial products. Firms must devise strategies to engage current and prospective attendees. Through well-orchestrated marketing activities, trade show organizers can engage with exhibitors at trade shows, enhancing their trade show performance. The paper highlights a significant contribution by employing the nascent literature on customer engagement within the B2B domain. The paper tests the model of marketing activities of trade shows on engagement impacting exhibitor performance with the help of quantitative research methods. The study synthesizes a three-stage framework of marketing activities namely pre-show, at-show, and post-show, and leverages 10 zero-order constructs to gauge customer engagement and seven statements to evaluate trade show performance. Based on a cross-sectional dataset, the study employs quantitative surveys from 349 exhibitors from multi-sectoral trade shows. The correlations and mediating effects are examined using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) demonstrating the positive impact of marketing activities on trade show performance, underlying the mediating role of customer engagement. The results offer comprehensive managerial implications about how exhibitors' performance can be improved through their real-time engagement during the three stages of marketing activities undertaken by trade show organizers. The paper provides a comprehensive analysis of these dynamics, which helps practitioners in the field and paves the way for future efforts to optimize trade show strategies.

Keywords: Customer engagement, Trade Shows, Performance, B2B, Structural Equation Modeling, Marketing activities.

INTRODUCTION

Customer engagement (CE) has transpired as a significant notion in today's business domain and has been recognized as a key driver in fostering a firm's success (McCarthy & Schadler, 2014). When a customer engages with the brand, they want to keep coming back, thereby augmenting the firm performance (Kumar & Pansari, 2016), and companies like Dove and Coca-Cola have been successful in continuously engaging their customers. According to a recent survey of marketers, 75 percent anticipate assuming responsibility for overseeing customer's comprehensive engagement over their lifetime (The Economist, 2015). Customer engagement has advanced as a strategic business tool and has become a topic of grand relevance for both academicians and marketing practitioners worldwide.

Previous studies indicate that an actively engaged customer typically represents a favourable scenario for marketers, as this type of customer demonstrates a propensity for repeat patronage, thereby bolstering overall firm performance (Kumar & Pansari, 2016). Therefore, the aim of organizations has metamorphosed from a perspective of relationship

marketing to engaging them in all possible manners. Existing studies on engagement have focused majorly on social media sector (Hollebeek, et al. 2014), hospitality sector (Verleye, et al. 2013), tourism sector (So, K.K.F. et al. 2014), online brand communities (Dessart, et al. 2016). On the other hand, trade shows within the B2B sector present a distinct and contrasting scenario. Trade exhibitions provide a concentrated setting for the interested groups of buyers and sellers providing them with an opportunity to establish a robust platform for marketing communications. In this ecosystem, sellers must make sure to engage visitors & buyers by offering them with great product/brand experiences (Tafesse, 2016). This current research is instrumental in employing the emerging CE literature in B2B context.

Trade shows constitute an integral component of the Business to Business (B2B) communications spectrum, with spending surpassing those allocated to advertising and direct mail both (Gopalakrishna & Lilien, 2012; Tafesse & Skallerud, 2017). Every year, more than 1.5 million firms from America and Canada exhibiting at trade shows, attracts approximately 50 million attendees (Gopalakrishna, et al. 2019). Organizers are the major stakeholders of the exhibition industry. In this competing environment, they must discover new ways to attract new and existing visitors & exhibitors both. Trade show organizers must strive to arrange a highly productive event that benefits both exhibitors and attendees. From the standpoint of the organizer, it's critical to understand what exhibitors consider to be an effective trade show and how marketing activities at different stages of the trade show engage the exhibitors in a trade show.

For trade show organizers, it's paramount to provide exhibitors with a successful experience for them to come back to the trade exhibition in near future. According to CEIR report (2009b), 80 percent of the trade show organizers believe that the success of their show depends largely upon their association with exhibitors. The study supports the current literature by evaluating the dynamics that enhance exhibitors' engagement through organizer's trade show marketing activities affecting exhibitors' trade show performance. This study examines the factors that enhance engagement dimensions that promote trade show performance. A key component to engage them is to formulate a strategic approach to promote the event with the aim of attracting potential exhibitors through well-planned marketing activities. Existing research provides insights about the role of customer engagement which is a highly beneficial aspect among both the organizers and exhibitors. For the trade show organizers, it's a premium occasion for the exhibition industry promoting several activities and events presenting a unique opportunity to learn and network. The show brings together several industry actors at one single location helping them to achieve their multiple objectives. For example, attendees have several objectives to attend the trade shows like seeking information, placing orders, comparing suppliers, networking, catching up with the industry events (Munuera & Ruiz, 1999; Smith & Smith, 1999; Godar & O'Connor, 2001;) while exhibitors' objectives of attending the trade show could be building awareness, acquiring new leads, introducing new products, finding distributors (CEIR, 2006).

The primary objective of this study is threefold. First, it aims to comprehensively examine the effects of customer engagement on trade show performance, offering a nuanced understanding of the variables at play (Pansari & Kumar, 2017). The inherent complexity of these variables requires a methodical and systematic exploration to uncover both direct and indirect effects. Second, it seeks to employ SEM analysis as a methodological tool to unravel the intricate relationships between different facets of customer engagement and various dimensions of trade show performance (Maslowska et al. 2016). SEM offers a unique advantage in that it allows for the simultaneous examination of multiple variables, providing a holistic view of the interconnections within the context of trade shows. Finally, it aspires to provide practical recommendations for businesses aiming to optimize their trade show

participation through enhanced customer engagement strategies (Kumar et al. 2010). These recommendations are intended to bridge the gap between theoretical insights and actionable strategies, providing real-world value for businesses navigating the challenges of trade show environments (Malthouse et al. 2016).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Trade Show Performance

The selling and non-selling role of trade exhibitions have been validated and marketing strategy related variable and trade show related variables have been identified affecting trade show performance. 13 variables have been reported influencing the trade show performance under industry, company, and trade show strategy influences categories. This study represents an essential initial effort to comprehend the utilization of trade shows and pinpoint factors crucial for effective management of this promotional medium (Kerin & Cron, 1987). Comprehensive assessment, meticulous planning, setting up of attainable objectives, execution and appropriate follow-up are the keys to a successful trade show (Sashi & Perretty, 1992).

A three-stage model, examining attraction, contact, and conversion efficiency and factors namely booth space, pre-show promotion, attention-getting techniques, competition, and salespeople are analyzed for their impact on each stage. The model is demonstrated for decision-making trade-offs, and general insights on optimal resource allocation in trade shows are discussed (Gopalakrishna & Lilien, 1995). The research identifies strategic variables namely pre-show promotion, show objectives, booth staff training, and follow-up activities, categorizing them into before-the-show, at-the-show, and post-the-show activities significantly impacting each trade show performance dimensions (Lee and Kim, 2008). The critical role of customer engagement connects engagement to two key outcomes-the intention to attend future shows and the intention to purchase from exhibitors. The study posits the mediating role of satisfaction impacting the behavioral engagement on these outcomes. This study offers valuable insights into steering customer engagement at trade exhibitions, demonstrating its significance for marketers in the B2B domain (Gopalakrishna et al., 2019). Trade exhibitions are very popular and important, making the model and its constructions great tools for scholars and practitioners involved in international marketing (Shoham, 1999).

The model includes a sales component that is based on the result, as well as four dimensions that are based on behavior: relationship-building, information-gathering, image-building, and motivating activities designed to evaluate exhibitors' assessments on their TS performance. This study enhances the comprehension of TS performance by including both outcome-oriented sales measures and behavior-based factors that are vital for exhibitors (Hansen, 2004).

Customer Engagement

Effective management of customer engagement has emerged as a fundamental principle embraced by businesses globally. It has been framed as a critical factor in driving the long-run success of a firm (McCarthy & Schadler, 2014). Several multinational companies like Mastercard, Sephora, Uber eats uses several customer engagement marketing strategies to keep their customers engaged by making them as their partners, asking feedback and offering them with some dynamic content. It is imperative to understand the exhibitor's motivations for attending the trade show which is influential in enhancing customer engagement. This is crucial as it supports the company in keeping customers engaged throughout the entire purchase process (Doorn et al., 2010). Keeping touch with the customer

throughout the purchasing procedure supports generating value for the company and thereby developing customer loyalty (Dessart et al. 2016).

This study explores the association between customer engagement and equity in business-to-business (B2B) firms. The research identifies commitment, satisfaction, involvement, and trust as customer engagement antecedents, with customer equity as a consequence. The study establishes that customer engagement is a multidimensional construct and highlights three customer equity drivers such as brand, value, and relationship equities (Youssef et al. 2018).

Examining the impact of customer involvement on attendees' intentions to attend future events and make purchases from exhibitors, this research delves into the realm of business-to-business (B2B) trade exhibits. The authors found that attendees who are actively participating in the trade show and enjoying it are more likely to express their goals in this way. Marketers, including show organizers and exhibitors, reap the rewards of visitors' comprehensive engagement with the trade show, even when some groups initially have low expectations, according to the report (Gopalakrishna et al. 2019).

This paper addresses the gap in understanding the service-dominant (S-D) logic-the much-informed nature of customer engagement in business-to-business (B2B) settings, particularly in B2B engagement and social media platforms like trade exhibitions. The model explores BCE antecedents, including effectiveness, efficiency, and business customer resource integration leading to customer co-creation, relationship productivity, and, ultimately, supplier performance (Hollebeek, et al. 2019).

Marketing Activities and Customer Engagement

Pre-show marketing activities serve as a pivotal element in the success of trade shows, offering organizers a critical opportunity to lay the groundwork for a fruitful event. Strategic promotional activities play a central role in amplifying the visibility and impact of pre-show marketing efforts. Through a multi-channel approach encompassing print, digital, and social media platforms, organizers can maximize exposure and engagement, reaching prospective attendees across diverse touchpoints (Tanner Jr, 2002).

At-show marketing activities represent a pivotal stage in the lifecycle of a trade show, where organizers have the opportunity to translate pre-show anticipation into tangible engagement and memorable experiences. This direct engagement not only facilitates informed purchasing decisions but also fosters a sense of excitement and curiosity, driving interest and engagement throughout the event. Exhibitors actively seek to contribute to and derive value from the trade show community highlighting the reciprocal nature of engagement, wherein through active participation in community discussions and knowledge-sharing activities, they tend to enhance their own learning and contribute well to the collective intelligence of the trade show ecosystem (Ling-Yee, 2007). Post the show, customer engagement emerges as a vital instrument for long-term purchase intentions (Gong et al., 2023).

Customer Engagement and Trade Show Performance

Customer Engagement has an ability to affect consumer behavior that comes in the form of intention to purchase, intention to return, acquisition (Al-Alak, 2014). It significantly contributes to the long-term success of the company. Customers who are engaged become valuable for firms as they have a potential of coming back to the firm for transacting business (Athanasopoulou, 2009). Engaged customers when satisfied with the firm's performance, helps to improve the performance of the trade shows by giving them feedback, helping them to earn good return on investments, maximise customer acquisition. Exhibitor's feedback has

a significant role in enhancing the performance of trade shows (Aurier & Séré de Lanauze, 2011).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To substantiate the soundness of the research methodology, we employed quantitative research techniques utilizing the questionnaire method as a means of data collection. This aim was achieved through the application of correlation and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) analyses to examine the relationship between customer engagement and trade show performance specifically within B2B context.

The data were acquired via a self-administered questionnaire distributed to 349 exhibitors participating in seven diverse range of sector-specific trade exhibitions. Employing a non-probability sampling technique known as snowball sampling, the study categorized numerous exhibitors for inclusion in the research. This list was compiled based on exhibitor accessibility and existing relationships. The questionnaire concentrated on variables delineated in the extant literature. The dimensions of marketing activities, customer engagement, and trade show performance were sourced from established scales as proposed by reputable authors (Gopalakrishna and Lilien, 1995; Lee & Kim, 2008; Tafesse & Korneliussen, 2011; So et al., 2014; L. Dessart et al., 2016; Lin Y, 2016; Kumar & Pansari, 2016; Harrigan et al., 2017).

The customer engagement is measured with the help of ten zero order constructs namely absorption, attention, endorsing, enjoyment, enthusiasm, influence, interaction, knowledge, learning and purchase. The trade show performance is a zero-order construct and measured with the help of seven statements included in the study. The following hypothesis is framed in the study Figure 1.

Hypothesis: “Customer engagement in trade show significantly improves the trade show performance”.

The results of the hypothesis testing is shown below table 1.

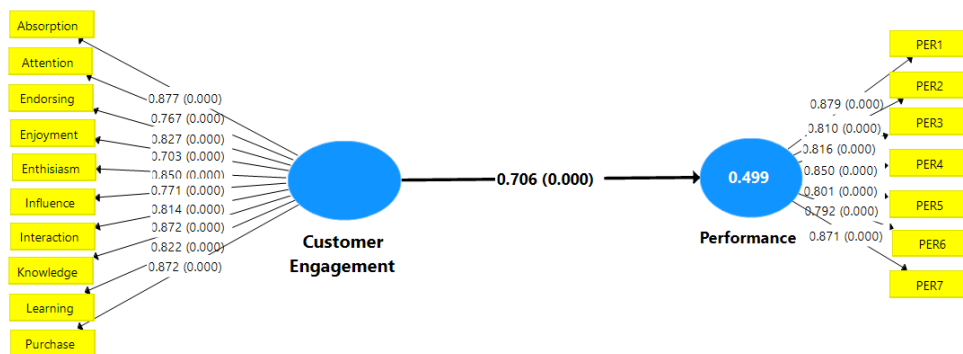


FIGURE 1
SEM MODEL BETWEEN CE & TSP

Source: PLS Software.

Table 1 HYPOTHESIS TESTING FOR CE & TSP							
Hypothesis	Endogenous Construct	Exogeneous Construct	Path Coefficient	Standard Deviation (SD)	T Stats	R square (Q)	Remark

						Square)	
CE → Trade show performance”	Trade Show Performance	Customer Engagement	0.706	0.030	23.167	49.9%	Supported

The results supported the hypothesis that “Customer engagement in trade show significantly improves the trade show performance” (path coefficient = 0.706, t stats = 23.167). The positive path coefficient indicates the positive impact of customer engagement on the trade show performance. The higher the level of customer engagement, the better will be the trade performance. The r square of the relationship is 50% indicating the explanatory power of the model. The trade show performance can be explained by 50 % with the help of customer engagement. This underscores the critical need to effectively engage exhibitors before, during, and after trade shows to optimize their impact and efficacy in shaping exhibitor performance (Rahman et al., 2022).

Mediating Role of Customer Engagement

The study investigates the mediating role of customer engagement in the relationship between three phases of marketing activities (namely, pre-show, at-show, and post-show marketing activities) and trade show performance. This mediation effect is analyzed utilizing the Baron & Kenny method (1986) in conjunction with Bootstrap (500 subsamples) Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) within the SMART PLS software. It is posited that the extent of customer engagement with trade show exhibitions serves as a significant mediator between pre-show, at-show, and post-show marketing activities and trade show performance. The diverse marketing efforts undertaken by trade show organizers not only exert a direct influence on trade show performance but also operate indirectly through the level of customer engagement Figure 2.

Hypothesis H_{A3i}: “customer engagement is playing significant mediating role between different levels of marketing activities (pre-show marketing activities, at show marketing activities and post-show marketing activities) and the trade show performance”.

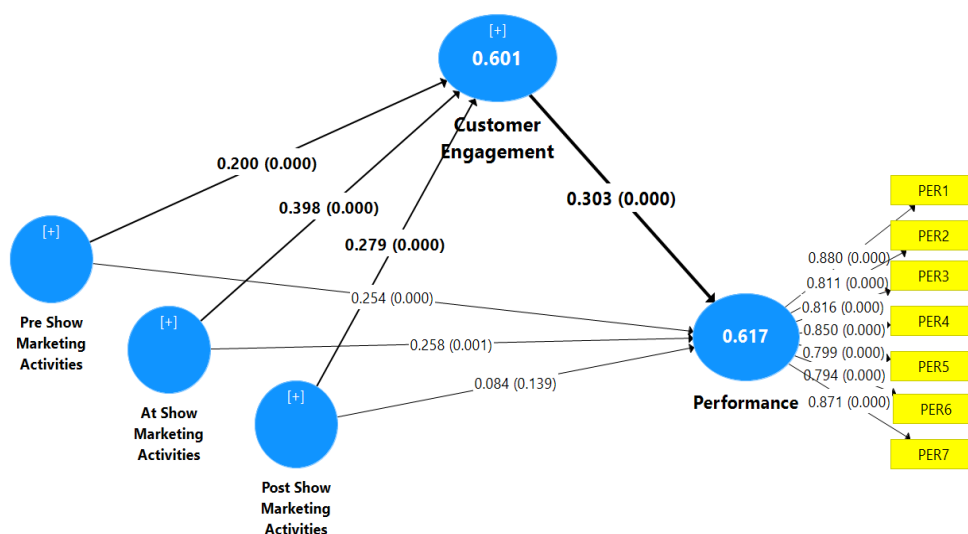


FIGURE 2
THE STRUCTURAL MODEL FOR MEDIATING EFFECT

Source: PLS Software.

Mediating role of customer engagement between pre-show marketing activities and the trade show performance

The mediating role of customer engagement is examined between pre-show marketing activities and trade show performance and the results of the mediation test is reported in table shown below Table 2.

Type of effect	Direction	Standardised Path Coefficient	T stats	Remark
Total Effect	Pre show activities → Trade Performance	0.315	5.759**	Significant
Indirect Effect	Pre show activities → Customer Engagement → Trade Performance	0.060	2.716**	Significant
Direct Effects	Pre show activities → Trade Performance	0.254	4.282**	Significant
Variance accounted for	0.060/0.315 = 19.05%			
Conclusion	Moderate partial mediation effect			

Hypothesis H_{A3i}: “customer engagement is playing significant mediating role between pre-show marketing activities and the trade show performance”.

The results supported the hypothesis that “customer engagement is playing significant mediating role between pre-show marketing activities and the trade show performance”. The result of the Bootstrap SEM mediation test indicates that the total effect of the pre-show marketing activities on trade show performance is found to be 0.315 with t stats 5.759 significant at 5 % level of significance. Thus, the total effect of the pre-show marketing activities on trade show performance is found positive and significant. The indirect effect of the pre-show marketing activities on trade show performance via customer engagement is also found to be significant (path coefficient=0.060, t stats=2.716**) indicating that the customer engagement plays a positive and significant mediating role between pre-show marketing activities and trade show performance. The direct effect of the pre-show marketing activities and trade show performance is found to be significant (path coefficient = 0.254, t value =4.282**). Since, the direct effect of pre-show marketing activities on trade show performance is found to be significant, hence the mediation effect of customer engagement is said to be moderate partial mediation effect. The variance accounted for (VAF) by the mediation effect of the customer engagement between pre-show marketing activities and trade show performance is found to be 19.09 %. Thus, it can be concluded from the result that the customer engagement plays a positive and partial mediation effect between the pre-show marketing activities and trade show performance.

Mediating role of customer engagement between at show marketing activities and the trade show performance

The mediating role of customer engagement is examined between at show marketing activities and trade show performance and the results of the mediation test is reported in table shown below Table 3.

Type of effect	Direction	Standardised Path Coefficient	T stats	Remark
Total Effect	At-show activities → Trade	0.379	5.452**	Significant

	Performance				
Indirect Effect	At-show activities → Customer Engagement → Trade Performance	0.121	2.733**		Significant
Direct Effects	At-show activities → Trade Performance	0.258	4.528**		Significant
Variance accounted for	0.121/0.379 = 31.92%				
Conclusion	Moderate partial mediating effect found				

Hypothesis H_{A3i}: “customer engagement is playing significant mediating role between at show marketing activities and the trade show performance”.

The results supported the hypothesis that “customer engagement is playing significant mediating role between at-show marketing activities and the trade show performance”. The result of the Bootstrap SEM mediation test indicates that the total effect of the pre-show marketing activities on trade show performance is found to be 0.379 with t stats 5.452 significant at 5 % level of significance. Thus, the total effect of the marketing activities on trade show performance is found positive and significant. The indirect effect of the marketing activities on trade show performance via customer engagement is also found to be significant (path coefficient=0.121, t stats=2.733**) indicating that the customer engagement plays a positive and significant mediating role between marketing activities and trade show performance. The direct effect of the marketing activities and trade show performance is found to be significant (path coefficient = 0.258, t value =4.528**). Since, the direct effect of marketing activities on trade show performance is found to be significant, hence the mediation effect of customer engagement is said to be moderate partial mediation effect. The variance accounted for (VAF) by the mediation effect of the customer engagement between marketing activities and trade show performance is found to be 31.92 %. Thus, it can be concluded from the result that the customer engagement plays a positive and moderately strong and partial mediation effect between the marketing activities and trade show performance.

Mediating role of customer engagement between post- show marketing activities and the trade show performance

The mediating role of customer engagement is examined between post-show marketing activities and trade show performance and the results of the mediation test is reported in table shown below Table 4.

Type of effect	Direction	Standardised Path Coefficient	T stats	Remark
Total Effect	Post-show activities → Trade Performance	0.169	3.223**	Significant
Indirect Effect	Post-show activities → Customer Engagement → Trade Performance	0.085	3.419**	Significant
Direct Effects	Post-show activities → Trade Performance	0.084	1.492	Insignificant
Variance accounted for	0.085/0.169 = 50.29 %			
Conclusion	Moderate partial mediating effect found			

Hypothesis H_{A3i}: “customer engagement is playing significant mediating role between post show marketing activities and the trade show performance”.

The results supported the hypothesis that “customer engagement is playing significant mediating role between post-show marketing activities and the trade show performance”.

The result of the Bootstrap SEM mediation test indicates that the total effect of the post-show marketing activities on trade show performance is found to be 0.169 with t stats 3.223 significant at a 5 % level of significance. Thus, the total effect of marketing activities on trade show performance is found positive and significant. The indirect effect of the marketing activities on trade show performance via customer engagement is also found to be significant (path coefficient=0.085, t stats=3.419**) indicating that the customer engagement plays a positive and significant mediating role between marketing activities and trade show performance. However, the direct effect of the marketing activities on trade show performance is found to be insignificant (path coefficient = 0.084, t value =1.492). Since the direct effect of marketing activities on trade show performance is found to be insignificant, the mediation effect of customer engagement is said to be a moderately strong full mediation effect. The variance accounted for (VAF) by the mediation effect of the customer engagement between marketing activities and trade show performance is found to be 50.29%. Thus, it can be concluded from the result that customer engagement plays a positive and full mediation effect between the post-show marketing activities and trade show performance Table 5.

Impact of Customer Engagement on Trade Show Performance

Studies have demonstrated that heightened levels of customer engagement correlate with superior trade show outcomes (Rahman et al., 2022). This underscores the necessity of effectively engaging exhibitors before, during, and after trade shows to optimize their impact and efficacy in shaping exhibitor performance. Engaged exhibitors are predisposed to exhibit favorable behavioral responses, such as heightened intention to purchase, revisit, and engage further, alongside elevated levels of trust and loyalty towards the organizing firms (Wang et al. 2017). These responses contribute to the overall success of trade shows by fostering increased attendance, enhanced exhibitor satisfaction, and augmented return on investment for exhibitors Figure 3.

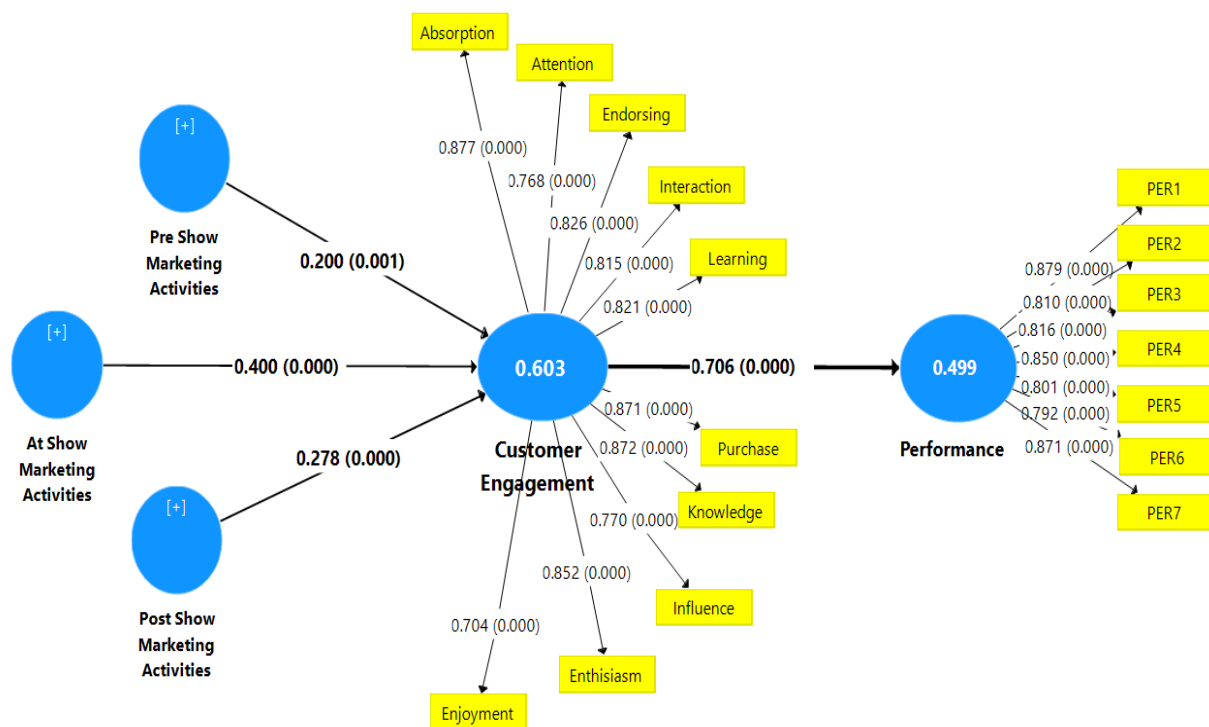


FIGURE 3
SOURCE: HYPOTHESIS TESTING BETWEEN CE & TSP

Source: Smart-PLS software.

Hypothesis	Endogenous Construct	Exogeneous Construct	Original Sample (O)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Stats	Q Square	Remark
	Customer Engagement	At Show Marketing Activities	0.4	0.059	6.739**	0.4	Supported
	Performance	Customer Engagement	0.706	0.032	21.855**	0.342	Supported
	Customer Engagement	Post Show Marketing Activities	0.278	0.046	6.059**	0.4	Supported
	Customer Engagement	Pre-Show Marketing Activities	0.2	0.059	3.373**	0.4	Supported

CONCLUSION

Trade shows offer an ideal platform for investigating engagement dynamics compared to existing research endeavours. However, there has been a noticeable scarcity of studies in this field that fail to establish a clear link between engagement and trade show effectiveness. This paper endeavours to fill this gap by proposing a comprehensive framework and research methodology aimed at understanding engagement and its various dimensions within the context of trade shows, particularly in the underexplored landscape of India.

This study primarily targets trade show organizers and exhibitors, who represent key stakeholders in the exhibition industry, along with the attendees. Trade shows thus present an optimal environment for scrutinizing customer engagement and discerning its impact on firm performance. It is increasingly recognized by firms that cultivating meaningful engagement with customers is vital for sustainable business growth. Building upon the insights of which underscore the significance of managing customer engagement at trade shows, firms must prioritize interactive communication with their customers as a fundamental aspect of their strategy. In a highly competitive setting, improved customer engagement can be achieved by the organizing firm's capacity to manoeuvre the intricacies of trade show marketing activities and contribute to enhanced customer engagement. In a rapidly evolving business landscape, staying ahead in the realm of trade show marketing requires adaptability, creativity, and a keen understanding of exhibitor preferences and industry trends. Through this exploration, we aim to equip organizers with the knowledge and strategies they need to not only organize in trade shows but to excel, leaving a lasting impact on their exhibitors and driving growth in the competitive B2B market. With the result of this research paper, organizers will be better able to organize trade shows that will offer insights into dynamics of marketing activities so that they can manage the shows more effectively. Nowadays, B2B companies have found ways to engage customers due to technological capabilities and social media that enhances firms to keep a track to retain the customers.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The study has certain drawbacks and presents research potential for the future. The first limitation is the sampling technique and geographical area. The study was conducted using a snowball sampling technique, a non-probability sampling technique that involves exhibitors from Delhi/NCR only. The second limitation is that the study is cross-sectional in nature. Future studies can apply other sampling methods, use longitudinal studies with

qualitative tools and validate the findings in different geographic industries that can affect the generalization of findings.

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Conflict of Interest

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