

# Decoding the Branded App Engagement Process: A Grounded Theory Approach

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## ABSTRACT

The study aims to explore the nature, drivers of BAE. In particular, how and why consumers engage with branded mobile apps. Since consumer engagement is a multi-dimensional and complex phenomenon, the authors took an interpretivist paradigm and used a grounded theory approach by interviewing 24 participants. The findings reveal that branded app engagement (BAE) is triggered by mainly three aspects, i.e., media characteristics (Privacy and security, customization, and convenience), brand-related aspects (brand image and product/service quality), and benefits sought (inherent and derived). More importantly, we uncover the underlying mechanism for each factor. Furthermore, the study explains the BAE process in its entirety from an app-centric perspective rather than the brand powering the app. Thus, the study offers a fresh perspective and novel insights into the BAE process.

*Keywords:* BAE, mobile marketing, grounded theory, Consumer behavior

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## I . Introduction

In this omnichannel environment, marketers are using several digital platforms to provide highly customized and interactive experiences to the consumers, wherein mobile apps have become a go-to tactic (Heerde et al., 2019; Kumar, 2021). The total number of downloads of the mobile apps was US \$218 billion in 2020, and the total revenue generated through them was US \$463 in 2019<sup>1</sup>. In addition, recent re-

search has shown that almost 80 percent of the digital minutes on average globally are spent via mobile apps, and it is growing at the rate of 28 percent annually<sup>2</sup>. Thus, new ways to communicate and engage with the customer through mobile apps have become significant for brands.

Branded apps are free to download and use, used primarily to engage the customer with the brand. Mobile apps offer greater convenience and emotional bonds with the consumers, which drive them towards

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engagement (Moliner et al., 2018). Due to its ability to create “portable touchpoints” for consumers, mobile apps have become a powerful tool (Newman et al., 2018). Higher penetration and the ability to customize and adapt to an individual’s needs make people prefer and spend more time on mobile apps than the mobile web (Lorca-Cabrera et al., 2020). Particularly in the engagement aspect, mobile apps are vivid and novel tools to engage the customers (Kim et al., 2013). The branded apps have significantly changed the retail (Hinsch et al., 2016) and relationship marketing (Kaiser et al., 2020; Wang and Gutierrez, 2018) landscape. The literature suggests that branded apps not only lead to more favorable attitudes towards the brand (Bellman et al., 2011) but also instill purchase intention and satisfaction (Alnawas and Aburub, 2016); willingness to pay and recommend (Stocchi et al., 2018); and loyalty towards the brand (Mclean, 2018).

The existing literature on mobile apps focuses mainly on adopting the mobile apps (Gupta and Arora, 2017; Mclean, 2018). Since technology adoption is considered the initial stage of engagement, the two must not be used synonymously. Adoption refers to the stage where an individual selects an app for usage, whereas engagement occurs with the continuous interaction with the app after its adoption (Fang et al., 2017). Moreover, in studies on post-adoption behaviors, drivers of engagement are considered about the organization or the brand powering the app rather than the app itself (Stocchi et al., 2018). Furthermore, a major chunk of the literature on customer engagement originates from developed countries (Rosado-Pinto and Loureiro, 2020) and is highly quantitative. Even after the high degree of adoption of mobile apps as a marketing device to instill consumer engagement by the brands, there is a dearth of research in the app engagement domain (Gupta

and Arora, 2017; Mclean, 2018). Flaherty et al. (2019) also signified the need to understand engagement in the mobile app context better. Next, customer engagement being a context-specific construct (Hollebeek, 2017), there are no well-established pieces of evidence about the dimensionality of mobile app engagement in the literature. To overcome the stated shortcomings of the current body of literature and counter the complex and dynamic underpinning of the consumer engagement process, the present study adopts a grounded theory approach to comprehend the dynamics of BAE in an emerging market, India. The objective of this study is to understand and explore:

1. The dynamics of BAE focusing on the how and why of user app engagement.
2. The prominent factors of BAE and the resultant dimension of engagement.

Mobile apps lose 90 percent of their daily users within 30 days of installation, with even the top 10 apps being able to retain only 50 percent of the users (Quettra, 2020). Hence, it becomes critical for marketers to find the factors which instill mobile app engagement. Furthermore, even after the significant penetration of smartphones globally, the retention rate of apps has decreased, with one-fourth of the downloaded apps never used after their first use (Statista, 2021). This data clearly demands investigation into mobile app engagement. However, an extensive literature review showed that the current literature on BAE is quite fragmented, and a certain degree of ambiguity exists among the findings. Investigation of mobile app engagement firstly as a process and secondly as a multi-dimensional phenomenon is rare. However, understanding the proc-

ess of BAE in its entirety has significant practical and theoretical value. Hence, this paper explores mobile app engagement as a process and proposes a conceptual model in branded mobile apps. The following section explores what has been done in the field of brand and mobile app engagement, which is succeeded by a grounded theory methodology employing a semi-structured interview approach to propose a conceptual framework. Finally, the last section explains the overall findings and the general discussion stating the inherent limitations of the study and providing the avenues for future research.

## II. Conceptual Background

### 2.1. Consumer Brand Engagement (CBE)

A significant amount of work in consumer engagement began in 2010 after the digitalization took place, and a major influence on decision making being observed due to the shift from “word of mouth” to “word of mouse” (Dincer and Alrawadieh, 2017). The consumer engagement literature prominently categorizes the engagement with these digital technologies into three categories: social media engagement (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Mishra, 2019; Santini et al., 2020); engagement with online brand communities (Balduş et al., 2015; Brodie et al., 2013; Hollebeek et al., 2017) and mobile app engagement (Parker and Wang, 2016; Stocchi et al., 2018; Tarute et al., 2017). The literature on CBE establishes it as a multi-dimensional phenomenon with cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions (Hollebeek, 2011). However, since significantly major research has been published after 2010, most of the researchers follow the definition provided by Brodie et al. (2011), who defined consumer engagement as “a psychological

state that occurs by virtue of interactive, co-creative customer experiences with a focal agent/object (e.g., a brand) in focal service relationships”. However, even with a great amount of research in the domain, there is no clear consensus on the definition of CBE. While some posit it as a cognitive phenomenon (de Villiers, 2015), others indicate it as a behavioural manifestation (Verhoef et al., 2010). In line with this, digital technology became an important tool for engagement as the customer became the co-creator of the value for the company (Verhoef et al., 2010).

For the purposes of this research, we follow the work of O’Brien and Toms (2008), where engagement with technologies is defined as “a quality of user experience characterized by attributes of challenge, positive affect, durability, aesthetic and sensory appeal, attention, feedback, variety/novelty, interactivity, and perceived user control.” which is in line with the works of Calder et al. (2009) that states consumer engagement is influenced by the perception and belief of people about how well the medium fits well into the customers lives as they help in satisfying their utilitarian and hedonic motives. On similar lines, other prominent studies also argue that consumer engagement reflects the individual’s motivational experience, which originates from their rich experiential feelings and thoughts to satisfy their personal goals (Calder and Malthouse, 2016; Hollebeek, 2011).

Since consumer engagement is a context-specific, complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon, brand engagement with different platforms (social media, online brand communities, mobile apps) has other antecedents, drivers, and consequences, as evident in the existing literature (Brodie et al., 2013; Hollebeek, 2011a; Hollebeek et al., 2014; Stocchi et al., 2018). <Table 1> depicts the various findings from the stud-

&lt;Table 1&gt; Brand Engagement in the Digital World

Domain	Authors	Constructs	Methodology
Social Media	Hollebeek et al. (2014)	Self-brand connection and usage intent	Mixed
	Algharabata and Ranab (2019)	Consumer involvement, Consumer participation, and Self-expression	Quantitative
	Dolan et al. (2019)	Emotional, Rational and Appealing domain	Quantitative
	Mishra (2019)	Interaction, Consumption, Contribution, Creation	Quantitative
Online Brand Communities	Brodie et al. (2011)	Sharing, Learning, Co-developing, Socializing, and Advocating	Netnography (Qualitative)
	Baldus et al. (2015)	Brand influence, Brand passion, Reward, Seeking assistance	Mixed
	Dessart et al. (2015)	Enjoyment, Absorption, Attention, Sharing & Learning	Quantitative
	Hollebeek et al. (2017)	Procedural sub-process, Achievement sub-process, Social sub-process	Netnography (Qualitative)
	Marbach et al. (2019)	Openness to Experience, Extraversion, Altruism, Social and Aesthetic values	Quantitative
	Gurtner et al. (2014)	Convenience, Perceived Quality, Enjoyment, Perceived Ease of Use & Perceived Usefulness	Quantitative
Mobile Apps	Parker and Wang (2016)	Efficiency & Convenience	Qualitative
	Tarute et al. (2017)	App Features, Design & Information Quality	Quantitative
	Stocchi et al. (2018)	Security, Usefulness, Ease of use, Attachment & Enjoyment	Mixed
	McLean and Wilson (2019)	Ease of use, Usefulness & Enjoyment (Augmented Reality)	Quantitative

ies of brand engagement in the digital realm. Thus, this study considers engagement with branded apps as a multi-dimensional phenomenon driven by the psychological state.

## 2.2. Consumer Engagement with Branded Mobile Apps

Investigation of consumer engagement with mobile apps is in its infancy and offers enormous possible landscapes for future research (Kim et al., 2013; Kumar, 2021). Previous literature has touched upon

various facets of mobile apps, for example, its use in retailing (Shankar et al., 2016), mobile advertising (Andrews et al., 2016), mobile shopping (McLean and Wilson, 2019), and mobile marketing (Shankar and Balasubramanian, 2009) among others. Kim et al. (2013) defined engagement with mobile technologies as “the state of being involved, occupied, retained, and intrinsically interested in something”. Kim and Baek (2018) explained consumer engagement, conceptually to a branded app, as satisfying consumers’ functional, experiential, and social expectations. Mobile apps as tools differ from other

media platforms in terms of interaction and consumers' perception of social presence (Garzaro et al., 2020). Mobile apps provide enhanced brand experience and attitude compared to other online platforms such as social media and brand communities (Rezaei and Valaei, 2018). This explains the rising interest of brands to use mobile apps to represent themselves and choose this particular medium to enhance consumer engagement.

The existing literature on branded apps has made the use of prominent theories and frameworks such as the technology acceptance model (TAM) to understand how and why users adopt mobile apps technology (Alnawas and Aburub, 2016; Kim, 2016; McLean and Wilson, 2016; Stocchi et al., 2018) to determine the efficiency of the medium. They posited that technology that is easy to use could be regarded as more useful, resulting in broader adoption of the technology. User experience, composed of system and user variables, determines engagement, generating enduring outcomes (O'Brien, 2017). Thus, comprehending the technological attributes alongside the user motivations is equally imperative. Therefore, the literature is reviewed to explore these attributes to understand the various dynamics that lead to engagement with a branded a

Additionally, the literature provides evidence that the system variables that instil engagement are contextual. For instance, an interesting study found that in the case of hedonic apps, users' evaluation of apps is higher if the app popularity is high. In the case of utilitarian apps, user evaluation is high if the users' experience is rich (Shen, 2015). Similarly, security and privacy features are considered essential factors for the pre-adoption and adoption stage of m-health apps (Baig et al., 2015). Finally, perceived ease of use and usefulness positively impact continued intention to use mobile services in the banking sector

(Zhang et al., 2018).

In the existing literature, which is primarily categorized into adoption (Bellman et al., 2011; Peng et al., 2014) and post-adoption (Kim and Yu, 2016) stages, research on mobile services considers various perceptions and motivations of the users that drive their engagement with a branded a For instance, in the pre-adoption stage, security and technical quality aesthetics are the most significant factors for an app adoption (Sohn, 2017). At the adoption stage, compatibility and enjoyment positively influence perceived usefulness for young mobile app users in India (Mehra et al., 2020). On the other hand, perceived risk can negatively affect consumers' risk perception (Balapour et al., 2020). On the same lines, Jeong et al. (2017) found that customers who have a high degree of innovativeness are more inclined to adopt wearable technology.

At the post-adoption stage, lack of awareness, training, appropriateness, and lack of skills and knowledge were significant factors for smartphone users while accessing or using mobile apps (Mansour, 2016). Another study confirmed that innovativeness directly influences the use of mobile apps (Kim et al., 2010). Kim et al. (2016) explored ease of use, usefulness, and app reviews as essential factors for smartphone users in mobile app usage. Similarly, Newman et al. (2018) confirmed perceived ease of use as an important factor for mobile app purchase and recommendations. Finally, Stocchi et al. (2018) is one of the most significant works done on post-adoption of branded mobile apps and investigated several utilitarian motives (security, usefulness, and ease of use) and hedonic motives (interpersonal utility, entertainment, and attachment with the device) that drive mobile app engagement resulting into positive outcomes such as willingness to pay and recommend.

Although the existing literature has been diverse

in depicting the role of numerous systemic and user characteristics on the engagement process, it fails to develop a holistic understanding of both these factors on the BAE process. The literature has established that user experience, shaped by the technological features, is an antecedent to the user motivations and perceptions about a branded app that instills engagement (Stocchi et al., 2018). Thus, the technological features, user perceptions, and motivators interact to encourage engagement and resultant positive outcomes for the brand. The shortcomings in the existing literature point towards the research in the domain being contextual and concentrating on a single aspect. A substantial amount of literature has focused on the behavioural manifestations of BAE (Chung, 2015; Vasconcelos et al., 2019), which limits the focus on the psychological facet of the engagement process. This lack of attention to the psychological dimension calls for immediate redressal of this dearth of research to explore the multi-dimensional nature

of customer engagement (Brodie et al., 2013; Hollebeck, 2011).

Additionally, with a few exceptions, significant literature on branded mobile apps has solely focused on the brand instead of the app (Stocchi et al., 2018). In their study, Boyd et al. (2019) state that mobile app features are primarily accountable for consumer app engagement in terms of entertainment, information, transactions, the privacy of transactions, productivity, personalization, and reviews. With the introduction of free branded apps, most of the revenues are dependent on these mobile apps as they create multiple touchpoints in the consumer journey. This implies that engagement with the branded apps leads to positive outcomes for the brand and the app, but the existing literature fails to acknowledge this aspect. Thus, the present study attempts to examine the engagement process of the consumers influenced by both the systemic and user characteristics generating outcomes for the branded app usage. Since

<Table 2> Definitions of Branded Apps

Author	Year	Definition	Nature of engagement
Kim, Lin & Sung	2013	A set of branded app experiences motivates consumers to make it happen repeatedly in their lives.	Experiential state
Kim, Kim & Wachter	2013	The state of being involved, occupied, retained, and intrinsically interested in something	Psychological state
Chen	2017	User's behavioral interactions with corporations on their mobile SNS platform	Behavioral state
Viswanathan, Hollebeck, Malthouse, Maslowska, Kim, & Xie	2017	Customers' interactive experience with the focal branded mobile a	Behavioral state
Kim & Baek	2018	The quality of consumers' motivational experiences when connecting with a mobile app and how those experiences satisfy their functional, experiential, and social expectations.	Motivational state
Wang and Gutierrez	2018	A psychological state by the emotional connection, sustained attention, brand relevance, and commitment to a brand.	Psychological state
Roy and Mandal	2020	Smartphone application attachment construct (app attachment) is defined as an emotion-laden bond that connects the smartphone user and the smartphone application brand.	Emotional state

engagement is a multi-dimensional construct that is complex and dynamic, an attempt has been made to explore different drivers and outcomes of BAE with a qualitative methodology employing a grounded theory approach. This approach is necessitated as the previous studies have been predominantly conducted using quantitative research methods that result in statistical verification but generate a lack of users' specific and empirical reasoning (Chung, 2015). <Table 2> presents the various contexts in which the branded apps have been studied so far with the derived definitions.

### III. Methodology

When the phenomena being studied are dynamic, emergent methods are recommended (Charmaz, 2004). These methods have merit as they enable the new properties as well as the contingencies and outcomes of the phenomena to emerge. Thus, the systematic method of theorizing as proposed by Gioia et al. (2013) was used wherein the research commences with a particular question. Then, the further inquiry is probed from the inputs provided by the respondents. Since consumer engagement is a complex phenomenon, it needs to be understood in depth. Thus, the paper employs an interpretivist approach and takes an inductive approach employing grounded theory to conduct in-depth interviews of 24 respondents using branded apps frequently (Gioia et al., 2013).

The individuals who have been using mobile apps continuously for at least two years were included in the study. Due to the conceptual nature of consumer engagement regarding mobile apps, grounded theory is deemed fit as it is done 'with' people rather

than 'on' people (Cassell and Symon, 2004). Though not a theory in itself, Grounded theory is believed to play a significant role in theory building and development (Glaser and Strauss, 2017). The interview started with the fundamental questions about the consumer's usage of the branded apps, such as *how often do you use the apps on your phone? What is your favorite mobile app? Why do you prefer this app over others?* The following questions being more specific in nature.

#### 3.1. Data Collection

The authors collected the data from January 2021 to March 2021 using 24 in-depth interviews from branded mobile app users. Following theoretical sampling, data was collected in three rounds until data saturation (Braun et al., 2021). Participants from different profiles and age groups were included in the study to have a cross-sectional coverage.

The sample included people studying in a business school located in Delhi- NCR (National capital region), a mix of rural-urban areas. The business school was chosen to maintain the homogeneity of the demography to produce more reliable results while simultaneously acknowledging the diversity that exists by including respondents pursuing different courses and faculties. Being India's economic and industrial hub, Delhi-NCR spreads across three states of India and contributes to 8 percent of Indian GDP alone, with different industries (primary, secondary and tertiary sector) operating. In addition, people from other parts of the country are employed and studying there. The age of the interviewees ranged between 21 to 51 years, with the average age being 30 years. The demographic information of the respondents is presented in <Table 3>.

&lt;Table 3&gt; Participants' and their Demography

ID	Age	Gender	Location	Occupation
#R1	23	Female	Gurugram	Student (MBA)
#R2	25	Male	Delhi	Student (MBA)
#R3	23	Male	Gurugram	Student (MBA)
#R4	31	Male	Gurugram	Research scholar
#R5	37	Male	Gurugram	Research scholar
#R6	24	Male	Gurugram	Student (MBA)
#R7	22	Female	Gurugram	Student (MBA)
#R8	43	Male	Gurugram	Research Scholar
#R9	30	Male	Gurugram	Research Scholar
#R10	31	Female	Gurugram	Research Scholar
#R11	25	Male	Gurugram	Research Scholar
#R12	47	Male	Gurugram	Associate Professor (Marketing)
#R13	35	Female	Manesar	Professor (Marketing)
#R14	29	Male	Faridabad	Research scholar
#R15	23	Female	Delhi	Student (MBA)
#R16	21	Female	Gurugram	Student (MBA)
#R17	26	Male	Delhi	Student (MBA)
#R18	49	Female	Gurugram	Associate Professor (Economics)
#R19	51	Male	Gurugram	Professor (Statistics)
#R20	21	Female	Gurugram	Student (MBA)
#R21	28	Female	Gurugram	Research scholar
#R22	20	Male	Manesar	Student (MBA)
#R23	34	Male	Gurugram	Research scholar
#R24	22	Female	Gurugram	Student (MBA)

### 3.2. Interview Process

Interviews were conducted in three rounds using compare and contrast method. In the first round, we interviewed 6 participants, transcribed and coded using compare and contrast method. We found compatibility, ease of use and usefulness, and convenience as prime categories. In the next round, we further interviewed 9 participants. It became clear that brand-related aspects, media characteristics, and benefits sought were the main themes for cognitive and

affective engagement. To ensure we don't miss out on any aspect, we did the third round of interviews wherein we reached saturation at the 20<sup>th</sup> interview. Still, to ensure we have reached theoretical saturation, we interviewed four more participants, but no new codes emerged. Therefore, we ensured theoretical saturation (Charmaz, 2004).

The interviews included open-ended questions to have a deeper understanding of various aspects of consumers' engagement with BAE. The duration of the interviews ranged between 40-70 minutes.



### 3.3. Data Analysis

Following the grounded theory approach, three steps (open, axial, and selective codes) were followed for data analysis which began from the first interview (Glaser and Strauss, 2017). These interviews' recordings were manually transcribed and analyzed. In the first level coding, similar intending responses were grouped as presented by the interviewees. Further, we synthesized and condensed a large amount of data into relevant themes in the axial coding process. The constant comparison method was used to compare the data at each stage as an iterative process. Their interconnectedness and patterns were identified at the axial coding stage. The relevant literature was referred for specific context for this process. At the selective coding stage, we regrouped the first-order categories into 4-second order categories. Finally, we established theoretical codes and identified the core categories to which they belong.

### 3.4. Reliability and Validity Check

For this purpose, we requested two research scholars from other allied areas to review the coding process and the results. After their review, the inter-judge reliability was 0.86, well above the threshold limit of 0.70 (Rust and Cooil, 1994). Secondly, we invited the scholars to comment on the proposed categorization and conceptualization for content validity by sharing the transcripts and codes drawn from that. It resulted in minor changes in the concepts and categorization.

### 3.5. Theoretical Modelling

In the open coding process, the codes hinted us towards the answers to generally pondered questions

of why the users use mobile apps despite other media platforms to engage with the brand, what motivates them to interact with the app continuously, what benefits do they seek while using a mobile app and the like. Below is an example:

*"I can access documents from anywhere through [branded app], which helped me during my coursework as it takes me less than 2 minutes to access it. It is very simple to use, and the best part is that the interface of its mobile app and the desktop version is similar. So you have the same experience, you have the same display and but the app is really handy, and it meets all the complex requirements of the users."*

For the coding process, the existing literature on branded apps was referred to. It was decided that the quote mentioned above falls under the category of perceived usefulness which was found to be inter-related with the ease of use and interactivity of the app. Based on the definition of perceived usefulness, i.e., "the degree to which an individual believes that using a particular system would enhance his or her job performance" (Davis et al., 1989), the quote was found to fit with the definition and hence, was coded the same way. The inter-relation with the two other constructs was also found by referring to the definitions of ease of use and interactivity and finding their presence in the aforementioned quote. The existing literature has shown these constructs as the benefits that the user seeks and obtains from a branded app (e.g., Stocchi et al., 2018; Tarute et al., 2017); thus, they were categorized under the benefits sought code.

Similarly, the other constructs were coded, and the prominent themes and constructs that emerged are discussed in detail below.

## IV. Findings

The analysis of the data provided some novel insights into the BAE process. First, engagement happens as a result of the subjective systemic features of the app, the brand-specific aspects, and the various inherent and derived benefits that a user obtains from the app. Second, these factors collectively induce psychological app engagement among the users.

### 4.1. Subjective Media Characteristics

Participants consistently narrated that they continuously use a particular mobile app despite other similar apps and other media platforms due to its characteristics such as customization, convenience, privacy, and security. It was evidenced that they engage with the mobile apps due to these different features perceived subjectively by varying users, although the underlying characteristic remains the same. A factor the interviewees unequivocally prioritized was security and privacy concerns. Participants pointed out that they are often skeptical about how certain apps handle and protect their data. The more personal information the apps sought, the more the users hesitated to provide it. The subjectivity in this aspect was observed when the users talked about the skepticism around the privacy provided by the apps and how much they rely on outside information. The following comments illustrate this:

*“My personal information is very important for me. But, as you can see, there are many controversies about personal data in the digital world. So, I only use the app which has some credibility and brand value. Secondly, it does not ask me for much of my personal information” [Male, 35- 40 years].*

The respondent here is skeptical, relies on the information from outside sources, and engages with one app more than the others that address his concerns. The term credibility is subjective and may mean different things to different users, although the brand-related aspects might still be relatively static. On the other hand, a few respondents did acknowledge the privacy/security concerns that exist online. Still, their reliance on outside information and the resultant issues with the privacy and security feature of the app is limited and, in some cases, minimal. This doesn't mean that these respondents did not prefer the privacy coverage that the app provides; instead, they demand it, but they are more aware and less influenced by the outside information and instead believe that the associated brand is mindful of the user demands, which corroborates the static nature of the brand-related aspects stated above.

*“I do hear the rumors flying around the social media sites, using the personal information of the users, but these are just rumors. I agree that there are certain privacy concerns in this aspect, but big brands put up relevant measures to tackle such issues. I am careful while posting content or information about myself through my account” [Male, 21-25 years].*

Mobile apps were preferred when they were convenient to use and were relevant in a particular situation. In the mobile app context, consumers try to relate it with their ability to perform a task anywhere, which enhances its usefulness and satisfaction, enabling mobility in social relationships as people engage with mobile apps because it gives them the autonomy to perform the task on the go. The convenience of the app, though, is found to be a cumulation of prior experience and user skills. The prior experience allows a user to get equipped with the

app, which converts into the comfort of using it and engaging with it.

*“With [branded app], I have the habit of saving all my research notes and documents because once my system got corrupted and thankfully my documents were saved in my drive so, I could access them. It even allows for editing them from anywhere and at any time” [Male, 40-45 years].*

The participants also mentioned the role of the skills in the convenient usage of the apps. A skilled user finds an app convenient to use and is generally comfortable with the interface. In contrast, a less technologically skilled user will engage with an app that provides the most mentally and behaviorally effort-free interface. This implies that an individual who is skilled enough might not be as significantly engaged with an app as they may find other apps somewhat equally convenient to use. In contrast, a less skilled user will become engaged with an app that conveniently reduces their efforts.

*“See, for me, convenience is a for-granted feature but for my mother, her app choice largely depends on how much it reduces her efforts and how much it allows her to use it without any space or time restrictions” [Female, 21-25 years].*

Customization was also stated to be a prominent reason for continuously interacting with an app rather than opting for alternative apps or other media platforms, as stated by the respondents. This feature deems to fit the affective component of the consumers’ attitude. The interviewees in this study seem to favor customization in their apps as it helps fulfill their usage motive in a much better way and are primarily concerned about the degree of control over

the customization of the app and the quality of the customized recommendations. While some respondents preferred a higher degree of control over the personalized recommendations and/or notifications that the app provided, others emphasized the quality of recommendations or notifications that a customized app provides.

*“The apps should have the provision of providing settings through which you can customize your needs and preferences, i.e., whether you want to get notified or not, or whether you want to prioritize some things over others. But the problem that might arise is that normally people do not give that much time in understanding the functionality of these apps, but I think in most of these apps there is a provision to customize as per your requirements.” [Male, 45-50 years].*

*“There are many things in the hustle-bustle of the daily life so; we tend to forget things about our health so there is a female hygiene app that keeps on reminding you that this is the time when you should be careful, what should be done, what should not be done, along with the videos and health consultants’ advice based on your bodily requirements which is an important feature” [Female, 30-35 years].*

## 4.2. Brand-related Aspects

Along with certain app-related features, the brand-related aspects also play a significant role in inducing BAE. Brand-specific factors are generally ignored, or rather, taken for granted when it comes to engagement with the mobile app, but respondents were found to emphasize the importance of such factors on their choice to engage with an app out of the other alternatives available. The two prominent aspects observed are: the image of the brand and

the product/service quality. Simply put, the brand image refers to how the consumers perceive or see a brand. This brand image is a cumulative formulation of the popularity and reputation of the brand. The brand's popularity and good reputation transfer to the branded app and inculcate the resultant engagement with it. This is evident by:

*"The popularity of [branded app] is quite high so, you find it with everyone. This helps me in networking" [Female, 20-25 years].*

*"[Branded app] as far as I am concerned is linked quite well, if you see the number of people who use [branded app] is still the highest so, it is easier. Also, if you transfer money from one account to another, it is more reliable, and the payments get through most of the time. The misuse of the [branded app] account is also less if you go by the number of misuses" [Female, 35-40 years].*

The second aspect relates to the quality of the product or service that the brand is associated with. The consumers are cognizant of and particular about the service experience of the brand and the value that they obtain from using the product or the service of the brand. As fundamental as these aspects are, the respondents highlighted their significance while engaging with a particular app. In one instance, as mentioned below, the respondent was willing to overlook the other shortcomings of the app if the service provided by the brand and its associated app creates value for him.

*"Sometimes, the apps ask for unnecessary inputs and providing irrelevant outputs. If they keep on doing this then, I may change the app; however, if the service of that particular app, I mean the product which*

*I get from it, if that is to my satisfaction then I may tolerate this nonsense also" [Male, 30-35 years].*

Additionally, the service experience is equally important in keeping the consumer engaged with the app. The worse the experience, the more likely the consumer will shift from the app to the competitors' branded app. This is illustrated by:

*"I found that [branded app] in rush hours, is not providing the service well, or many times, the cab driver cancels the booking, and they are not interested in going to a particular location so, I downloaded [alternative branded app] and am still using it as their services are better and I have never faced such a problem" [Female, 25-30 years].*

### 4.3. Benefits Sought

A user engages with a branded app when it gives the user the benefits sought. The data suggest two types of benefits sought: inherent and derived. Inherent benefits for this purpose refer to the benefits sought and expected from a mobile app by all users alike. These benefits were also found to be inter-related with each other. On the other hand, derived benefits refer to the benefits that differ from user-to-user and might not be inherent in the app itself instead; the user extracts those benefits by using the app. These are discussed in detail below.

#### 4.3.1. Inherent Benefits

The respondents were found to engage with an app for a few inherent benefits that it provides to them. Respondents were generally found to be engaged with those apps which are easy to use and have a better interface. Perceived ease of use is also

referred to as the effort expectancy, i.e., when the users perceive an app to reduce their burden of action or efforts, they find it easy to understand and operate. As evident, ease of use of an app also contributes to the app's usefulness and interactivity benefit.

*"For me, how easily I can navigate inside the app to get what I want, that makes the difference" [Female, 20-25 years].*

*"It is very useful as whenever you need to send money to someone, you don't need to ask for the bank account details, and the app itself verifies the details by the phone number with which their account is linked. It does all the background work itself quickly and reduces my efforts, so that's why I find it easy to use" [Male, 35-40 years].*

Consistent with the conventional theories of technology acceptance, perceived usefulness was also found to be lent weightage by the respondents. Perceived usefulness refers to the degree to how much the app will add value to the consumer. The findings also support that the app's utility increases with the interface-friendliness (ease of use) and the interactive experiences provided by the a

*"When you cancel or modify your order so, in the chatbot, they don't accept these changes. Often, the delivery person is yet to pick up the order, and there is a provision to make a change, but the chatbot does not respond to it so, I have to call their customer care, which is available only on their website. So, the app should make the changes that whenever such an issue arises, it should be directly passed on to the customer care" [Female, 35-40 years].*

*"Suddenly, if there is an urgent message or some-*

*thing, you will get to know immediately; it has means and ways by which it is communicated to you immediately. If you use the desktop version, then you have to get inside and start looking for what is there, is there any unknown notification, something like that" [Male, 30-35 years].*

A motivator that influenced engagement among the participants was the level of interaction the app permitted. Interactive experiences have been defined as an important characteristic of engagement and are also claimed to separate engagement from involvement. The more specific and effortless the interaction is, the more it induces a user to engage. The significance of interaction can be observed by:

*"I think it is a very powerful tool for the company to get in touch with their customer and of course for the customer to get in touch with the company for before, during and after the purchase of any item. The advantage of mobile apps is since they are designed in a very simplistic way, it's very easy to communicate" [Male, 45-50 years].*

#### 4.3.2. Derived Benefits

Respondents concurred with how the frequency and quality of the information provided by an app facilitate decision-making. People tend to engage with the mobile app as it provides them with the requisite knowledge and information about the things they choose and prefer in one place. In fact, numerous users consider the informativeness of the app as one of the substantial reasons to engage with it, primarily when the app is used for high-involvement tasks. For example:

*"I use [branded app] as it basically connects me*

*to people and my interests and gives me the information about what is happening in my field and what kind of things are coming up, it gives a lot of information on my interest area” [Male, 25-35 years].*

*“Investment apps give us a lot of information about what is happening; they give us the expert’s opinion, so these things matter a lot [···]. So they help me in making better decisions” [Male, 30-35 years].*

Compatibility was found to be another benefit derived from the branded app usage. Broadly speaking, when an app matches with and fulfills a user’s needs, it is said to be compatible with the user. Respondents were generally found to use a branded app when they required a service; hence, at that point in time, the app that was most compatible in fulfilling the user’s need in the most effective way was chosen.

*“I open a mobile app when I think I need a particular service. See if I want to book a ride urgently. I do it through a website, then I have to wait for a confirmation email from the company and this and that but, booking a ride through [branded app] app, gives me all the details immediately and I don’t have to go anywhere for confirmation or for checking the booking amount. So in case of urgency, I always use [branded app] as the service is fast” [Male, 30-35 years].*

#### 4.4. Psychological Engagement

Psychological engagement is the psychological manifestation that occurs while the user uses and interacts with a branded app. These manifestations were found to occur both cognitively and affectively. When a user’s mental state activities are triggered by an app that results in some materializing behavior

towards the app, the user is believed to be cognitively engaged. This cognitive engagement was found to affect the various media-specific, brand-related and beneficial qualities of the branded apps.

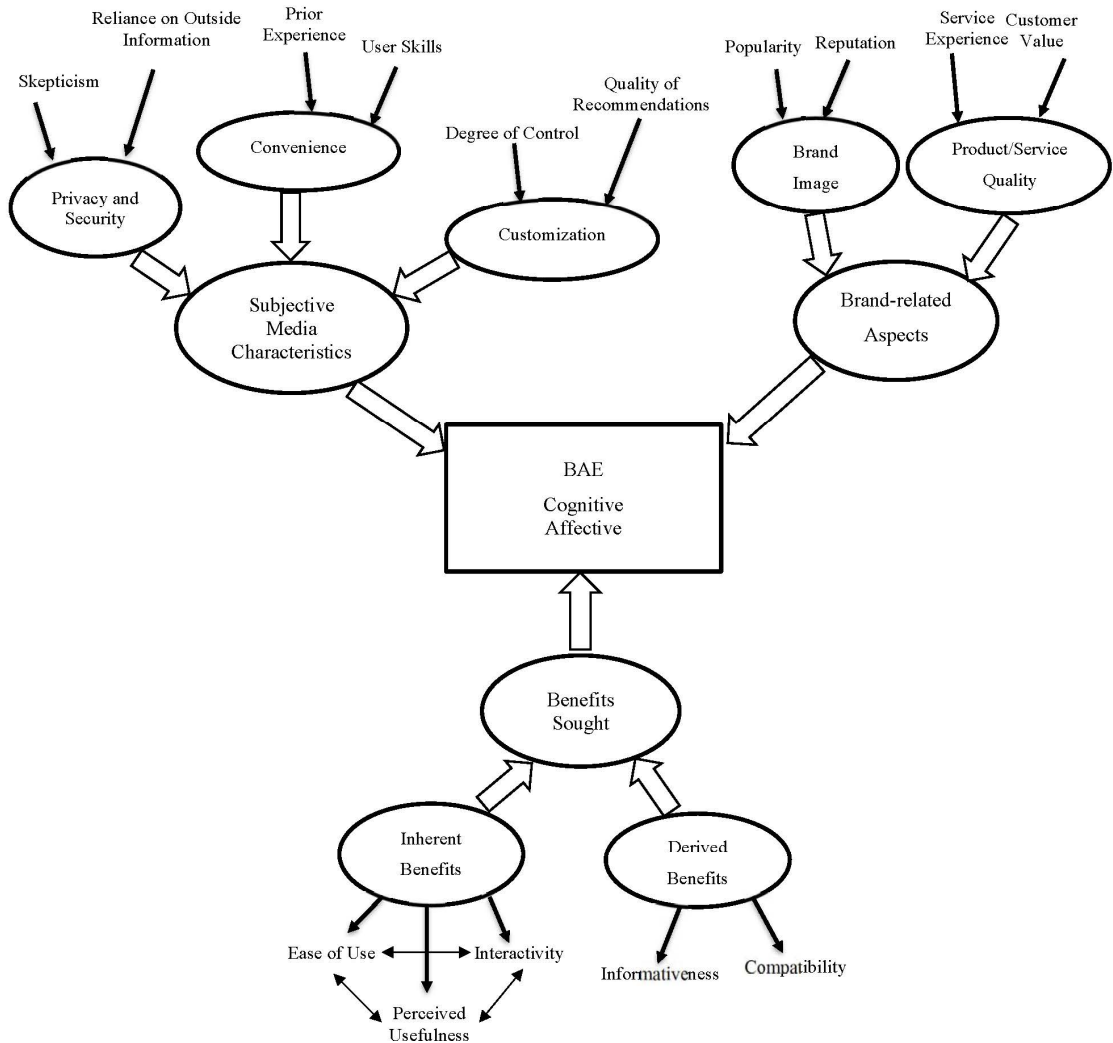
*“There were certain limitations earlier as to some features due to some technical reasons, but since they overcame those limitations, I stick to [branded app] because there are a lot of things to explore and it gives new dimensions” [Female, 25-30 years].*

The affective aspect of engagement occurs when the app appeals to the attitudinal or feeling part of the user. When the affective valence is positive, the consumer engages with an app, but the app may be dropped when it is negative. The respondents in the study were found to have a positive valence with the app due to the various technical, brand and benefits related aspects of the branded app, thus resulting in engagement with the a

*“Every time I want to go for online shopping, I prefer my [branded app] app because it understands my needs and gives me personalized suggestions as per my requirements” [Male, 30-35 years].*

Although the data was not clear and indicative of the behavioral dimension of the engagement, the literature has established psychological engagement to result in the behavioral manifestations of the consumers. Thus, we define BAE as **“Consumer’s continuous cognitive, affective and behavioral involvement and interaction with the app induced by the subjective systemic features and brand-related aspects to obtain inherent and derived benefits.”**

Combining the findings, <Figure 1> demonstrates the conceptual model.



<Figure 1> Proposed Conceptual Framework

## V. Discussion

This study aimed at demystifying the BAE process using a grounded theory approach. We found three main categories accountable for engagement with mobile apps, i.e., subjective media characteristics, benefits sought, and brand-related aspects. The study’s novelty lies in the fact that no study has considered the brand-related factors, benefits sought,

and subjective media characteristics. Furthermore, we also demystify the relevant variables aggregating subjective media characteristics, brand-related aspects, and benefits sought.

In all, we found that BAE is a dynamic process aggregated by the media characteristics of customization, convenience, and privacy that are subjective in nature, along with the brand image and quality of the offerings and the various inherent and derived

benefits sought by the consumers. Thus, the findings corroborate the context-specificity of consumer engagement in the mobile app context. Additionally, the study conceptualizes mobile app engagement as a multi-dimensional phenomenon concerning the cognitive and affective facets. Although the behavioral engagement could not be measured explicitly using the grounded theory methodology, psychological engagement has been found to lead to behavioral engagement (e.g., Fang et al., 2017); hence, it can be implied that the cognitive and affective states will result into the behavioral engagement state. This conceptual model further validates the prior findings in the literature of engagement with other platforms that explains consumer engagement as a multi-dimensional phenomenon proposed by authors in various contexts such as brand engagement, online brand community engagement, social media engagement, and advertising engagement (Brodie et al., 2014; Dwivedi, 2015; Vivek et al., 2012). This way, the study broadens the current understanding of BAE. Since most of the mobile app literature is focused on adopting mobile app technology, this study contributes to the body of knowledge by conceptualizing why, how, and in what ways the consumers get motivated to use a branded app and engage with it. This study provides a comprehensive list of factors that instill engagement with an app among consumers. Thus, the depiction of this dynamic process as a part of the consumer's psychological frame is rare in the existing literature. Hence, this study is bound to enhance the development in the branded app domain.

### 5.1. Implications

The findings of the study have various theoretical and managerial implications. Theoretically, this study extends the literature on BAE by introducing

brand-related aspects such as brand image and product/service quality as significant factors for BAE. Second, we classify the benefits sought into the inherent and derived benefit that motivates individuals to engage with branded apps. Third, we also found that the media characteristics such as personalization, convenience, customization are perceived subjectively and are significant for BAE. Additionally, we corroborate the multi-dimensional nature of consumer engagement in the mobile app context and highlight the consumer's perspective on the BAE process. The inclusion of the brand-related aspects, previously ignored in the literature, is another contribution that extends the BAE theory. It is proposed that these aspects be included in future studies of the app engagement process.

Moreover, these theoretical implications extend to the managers looking to increase consumer engagement with their branded apps and their brand. Therefore, this study provides a prerequisite of a branded app that instils BAE to the managers. Thus, they can exercise control over the engagement behavior of the consumers by catering to these aspects. By exploring the different constructs and factors which are accountable for consumer engagement with the branded apps, marketers will be able to comprehend the consumer's underlying perceptions and behavior in an enhanced manner. The brands will be in a better position to engage the consumers with their apps and generate positive outcomes for their brands. This is especially useful when the low retention rates of the apps have posed a challenge to this effective tool of brand promotion (Statista, 2021). Since, majority of the branded apps are free which absolutely zero substitution cost for the consumers, this study plays its part by guiding the brands towards identifying the numerous aspects which motivate the users to stick to their branded apps.



## 5.2. Limitations and Future Research

Although the findings advance the understanding of the process of BAE, there are certain limitations to this study that may be seen as future research avenues. Firstly, this study is conducted in a single cultural context and on the population that uses mobile apps daily. Thus, to enhance the generalizability of the proposed framework, future researchers are urged to corroborate the model in a different cultural setting with the lower penetration of mobile apps and varying consumer idiosyncrasies.

Secondly, the data collected was highly self-reported, which may be inaccurate and retrospective. Future researchers are required to employ different qualitative methodologies such as focus groups or diary accounting. It will be interesting to see whether the results will align with the current study or differ. Future research may also devote efforts to validate the proposed framework to enhance its credibility statistically. This will aid in further development and validation of the consumer engagement scale in the context of branded apps.

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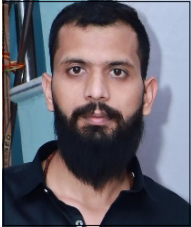
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