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Antecedents and consequences of customer engagement on Facebook

An attachment theory perspective

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Abstract

Purpose – Marketing researchers have usually studied consumers' attachment to brands from an emotional bonding perspective. However, the purpose of this study is to show that attachment to objects is not only limited to bonding. Thus, the authors conceptualised the attachment theory from two perspectives: bonding-based and identity-based attachment. In addition, the study further seeks to identify the elements of each component and examine how these elements drive customer engagement on a brand's Facebook page while assessing some consumer-related outcomes of customer engagement on Facebook.

Design/methodology/approach – Using an online survey, the authors examined antecedents of customer engagement on Facebook and the outcomes of engagement behaviours among 649 respondents. Structural equation modelling was used in analysing the data.

Findings – The results of the study show that consumers' attachment to a brand drives them to engage the brand on the brand's Facebook page. The results also show that the consumer engagement of brands on Facebook results in positive user-generated contents and consumer involvement.

Practical implications – Managerially, the attachment theory provides value for marketers in terms of evaluating customer–brand relationships and how such a relationship can yield positive results.

Originality/value – This study expands how the attachment theory has been conceptualised and applied in the marketing literature. The study shows that consumer attachment to brands is identity-based in addition to being bonding-based.

Keywords Facebook, Social media advertising, Brand

Paper type Research paper



Introduction

The concept of engagement has received much attention from many scholars. For instance, many researchers have studied the concept of engagement in sociology, political science,

educational psychology, organisational behaviour and, in recent times, in the marketing discipline (Barger *et al.*, 2016; Chahal and Rani, 2017; Triantafyllidou and Siomkos, 2018; Kosiba, *et al.*, 2018a; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2018). The emergence and the exponential growth of social technologies like Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn has made it possible to understand this concept through the electronic ties that individuals choose to have with brands (Noë *et al.*, 2016), as it presents an opportunity for many firms and marketers to engage their customers. Amongst the social technological platforms, Facebook in particular has transformed the media landscape (Chester *et al.*, 2010; Ángeles Oviedo-García *et al.*, 2014). Facebook is the most widely used social network site worldwide, with about 2 billion active users globally (Facebook Newsroom, 2017). Many firms have therefore created brand fan pages on Facebook where they engage with their customers. For example, 85 per cent of Fortune 500 companies use Facebook (Barnes and Pavao, 2018). Research has shown that as of 2017, there were more than 65 million firms that were active on Facebook, and over 2.5 billion comments were made every month on the Facebook Pages of these firms (Kaplan, 2017). For consumer brands, the main purposes of utilising Facebook are to engage with customers, advertise special offers, and/or deliver an opportunity for consumers to have social interactions with other consumers and friends (Ng, 2013; Kabadayi and Price, 2014). These activities have catapulted researchers' interest in consumers' customer engagement on Facebook (Triantafyllidou and Siomkos, 2018).

According to Putnam (1995), individuals' need for bonding drives them to engage in community activities. This has implications for digital engagement as many consumers look for opportunities to connect emotionally with their favourite brands (Dessart *et al.*, 2015), leading to the formation of online brand communities. Some studies have found a relationship between Facebook users' level of usage and formation of identity, and engagement in civil society activities (Ji *et al.*, 2010; Valenzuela *et al.*, 2009). Following from these, we argue that consumers' engagement with brands on Facebook can be explained with the attachment theory. That is, for a consumer to engage a brand on Facebook, that consumer should have a sense of attachment to the brand. In the marketing literature, the attachment theory has been used to understand consumers' attachment to an object of interest (Wallendorf and Arnould, 1988). It has also been used partially to understand how consumers bond with some brands (Malär *et al.*, 2011; Frasquet *et al.*, 2017). However, Harper *et al.* (2007) posited that people's attachment to an online community is not limited to bonding but includes identity attachment. In this case, we argue that two forms of attachment – bonding-based attachment and identity-based attachment – drive consumers' engagement with brands on their Facebook fan pages.

The outcome of customer engagement has received much attention from researchers in the marketing discipline. Previous studies have identified enhanced customer experience, customer satisfaction, brand loyalty, customer participation, superior expected bottom-line performance results and electronic word-of-mouth as outcomes of customer engagement (Brodie *et al.*, 2013; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2018; Kosiba *et al.*, 2018b). In this study, we identified customer participation in brand building and consumer generated advertising as some of the outcomes of customer engagement on a brand's Facebook fan page. Our argument is premised on the idea that customer engagement on social media constitutes a "moment of truth" and this moment of truth informs the customer's disposition towards the brand and their "degree of activeness" (Demangeot and Broderick, 2016). Furthermore, the interactive features of social media platforms like Facebook enable customers' interactions with firms and create contents that are vital for value creation (Lomborg and Bechmann, 2012). Facebook also enables customers to often suggest how these brands can be improved and take part in decision-making, thus empowering consumers to be active participants in brand

building. The aim of this study is therefore to examine the relationship between attachment (identity and bonding) and customer engagement on Facebook. We ascertain the elements of identity-based and bonding-based attachment that facilitate customer engagement on Facebook. This study also seeks to ascertain the outcome of this engagement with respect to consumers' actions.

Our study contributes to the application of the attachment theory in marketing, identifying the elements of identity and bonding base-attachment that drives customer engagement on Facebook. This study also examines the mediating role of the elements of customer engagement in affecting customer participation and consumer generated advertising on Facebook. Practically, this study proposes the need for brands managers to interact, recognise, and build an enduring relationship with their customers on their Facebook page. The rest of the paper is divided as follows: the first part offers the theoretical and conceptual background of this study while the second part focuses of conceptual framework and hypotheses development. Part three contains the methodology and part four presents the findings of the study. Discussions of the findings are contained in part five. The theoretical and practical implications of the study are captured in part six and seven, respectively. Part eight focuses on the limitations and directions for future study.

Literature review

Attachment theory

The attachment theory assesses a person's sense of the finest "balance between closeness to and distance from key people in his or her life" (Ainsworth, 1967 cited in Miles, 2012, p. 49). It has been defined via the emotional bond between people (Ainsworth, 1969). People's attachment experiences affect their thoughts and their actions and inactions towards others. Ainsworth *et al.* (1978) noted three forms of attachment that infants create with their mothers: secure, resistant and avoidant. Riger and Lavrakas (1981) studied attachment from three perspectives; social structure, bonding, and social identity. In other words, there is social structure-based attachment, bonding-based attachment, and identity-based attachment. Social structure-based attachment relates to physical structures that bind an individual to a place or an object. Bonding-based attachment relates to long-enduring ties, and identity-based attachment relates to the inclusion of an object to an individual's self-concept. For the purposes of this study, attachment is conceptualised as having bonding and identity components. That is, consumers' attachment to a brand may be expressed in continual emotional bonding with the brand, and by identifying with the brand. We did not include structure-based attachment because Facebook features do not automatically bind a user to a particular brand's page. In a relatable theorisation, the brand attachment theory also delineates – homophily – which spells out that people with similar traits may be more likely to attach to each other than dissimilar ones (Lazarsfeld and Merton, 1954; Kim and Altmann, 2017). Homophily, which is a widely occurring human disposition (McPherson *et al.*, 2001), seems to be more popular with the advent of social media (Noë *et al.*, 2016; Ahmed *et al.*, 2018). Recent studies (Orben and Dunbar, 2017) have found this behaviour among Facebook users. Therefore we argue that the manifestation of homophily could also be seen in customers who associate themselves with brands on Facebook. These associations may create attachment between the customers and the brand on Facebook (Dessart *et al.*, 2015; Malär *et al.*, 2011), which results in engagement with these brands.

Customer engagement

Customer engagement has its theoretical roots in the expanded/transcending view of relationship marketing (Brodie *et al.*, 2013; Pansari and Kumar, 2017). According to

Vargo (2009), this transcending view sees consumer behaviour as being focussed on customers' "interactive experiences taking place in complex, co-creative environments" (Brodie *et al.*, 2013, p. 106). Customer engagement is regarded as a multi-dimensional concept, comprising either two or three elements which are clearly seen in the diverse, yet sparse, definitions scholars have given. Mollen and Wilson (2010, p. 5 in Brodie *et al.*, 2013), for instance, state that customer engagement is "the cognitive and affective commitment to an active relationship with the brand as personified by the website or other computer-mediated entities designed to communicate brand value". Bowden (2009 in Brodie *et al.*, 2013) views the concept as a psychological process comprising cognitive and emotional aspects. Van Doorn *et al.* (2010 in Hollebeek and Chen, 2014), on the contrary, perceive customer engagement as comprising cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions. Hollebeek (2011, p. 790) also views customer engagement as "the level of a customer's motivational, brand-related, and context-dependent state of mind characterised by specific levels of cognitive, emotional, and behavioural activity in brand interactions".

We concur with the latter two perceptions as the former fails to capture behavioural dimensions, which we contend result from cognitive and affective responses. This view seems to have gained wide acceptance in the literature on customer engagement (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014; Dessart *et al.*, 2015; Leckie *et al.*, 2016; Kunz *et al.*, 2017). Consequently, we view customer engagement as comprising cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions. Hence, we adopt Hollebeek and Chen's (2014, p. 154) definition of customer engagement as "a consumer's positively valenced brand-related cognitive, emotional and behavioural activity during or related to focal consumer/brand interaction". The cognitive dimension refers to an individual's level of engrossment in a brand, thus, the extent to which he/she is mentally focussed on the brand during interaction; emotional engagement refers to the customer's level of pride or positive feelings whilst interacting with the brand (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2002; Leckie *et al.*, 2016); and the behavioural dimension refers to the customer's interest in spending energy, time and effort on an activity related to the brand (Patterson *et al.*, 2006; Leckie *et al.*, 2016). Incorporating these diverse perspectives, we expose cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions as the three core conceptual dimensions of engagement.

Therefore, following the extant literature, we also conceptualise customer engagement as a multi-dimensional construct consisting of behavioural, cognitive and affective engagement. Our conceptualisation of customer engagement as a multi-dimensional construct composed of the aforementioned dimensions stems from the increasing manner in which customers and brands interact. Subsequently, the construct is highly interactive in nature, as espoused by early work (Hollebeek, 2011). It is evident that in their interactions with brands, customers are more likely to invest effort (behaviour) to maintain interaction, be mentally engrossed (cognitive) in the interaction, and enthusiastically inspired (affective) in the process of interaction (Dwivedi, 2015). Dwivedi (2015) has also used these elements to measure customer engagement, but with a different conceptualisation. We find support from the existing literature that demonstrate positive correlations among behavioural, cognitive and affective engagement (Habibi *et al.*, 2014; Brodie *et al.*, 2013; Patterson *et al.*, 2006; Leckie *et al.*, 2016). For example, a consumer's affective engagement with a brand can influence the consumer to engage in behavioural engagement activity such as spreading positive word-of-mouth (Patterson *et al.*, 2006). Jarvis *et al.* (2003) refer to this kind of measurement approach as reflective first-order and reflective second-order. Thus, we argue that customer engagement is a reflective second-order construct, with its first-order dimension as behavioural, cognitive, and affective engagement since these three dimensions of customer engagement are positively correlated. In line with these, we hypothesise that:

H1. Customer engagement is a second-order construct manifested in the first-order dimensions of cognitive, affective, and behavioural engagement.

Hypothesised model

Using the attachment theory, the study is anchored on the conceptual framework presented in Figure 1. The framework assumes that the antecedents of customer engagement are bonding-based attachment and identity-based attachment. In addition, the framework presents the consumer-related outcomes of customer engagement as customer participation and consumer generated advertising. The rest of this section is used to discuss the relationships among the elements of the framework. A possible hypothesis is formulated to guide the empirical investigation.

Bonding-based attachment

We define bonding-based attachment via social interaction ties and brand trust. This is consistent with Riger and Lavrakas (1981) “bondedness” which entails social ties. Wright and Perrone (2008), also noted that individuals form bonds with individuals they can trust.

Social interaction ties. Social interaction is the interpersonal relationship between a person and others (Wang and Wang, 2013). It was, for a while, limited to the offline context. However, with the surge in the use of the internet, in particular, social media, social interaction seems to have taken on another dimension, where people interact with others they probably have never physically met (Park and Chung, 2011). Thus, social interaction ties are now viewed as the transfer of social capital from offline to online (Zhang et al., 2017). These interactions, we maintain, create ties between an individual and others they may be interacting with, which we opine strengthen over time with the frequency of the interaction. It is these ties and their strength (or otherwise) that may or may not influence an individual’s actions (Riger and Lavrakas, 1981; Wang and Wang, 2013). In this study, therefore, we define social interaction ties as the strength of the relationships/bonds, amount of time spent and communication frequency between consumers and brands (Chiu et al., 2006). As consumers interact with their favourite brands, strong ties are developed (Dessart et al., 2015). Scholars (Chu and Kim, 2011; Shan and King, 2015; Phua et al., 2017) have found that users’ perceived tie strength positively influences engagement with brand communities. Consequently, it is these strong ties that propel them to engage with the brands. Thus, we

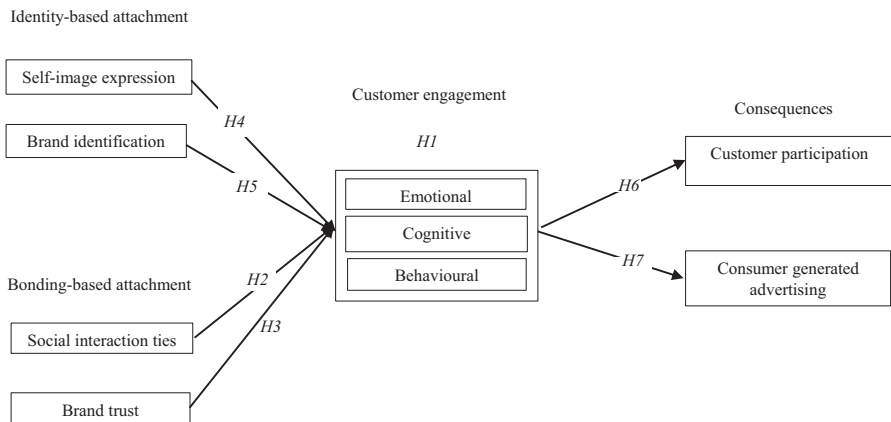


Figure 1.
A conceptual model of antecedents and consequences of customer engagement on Facebook

argue that consumers who have strong ties with their favourite brands will engage the brand on Facebook via affective, cognitive and behavioural means. Against this backdrop, therefore, we hypothesise that:

H2. Social interaction ties are positively associated with customer engagement.

Brand trust. Trust in the general sense of the word is the belief that something or someone will perform to expectations and not disappoint. The concept of trust brings with it the idea of relationships among people or brands. According to [Delgado-Ballester et al. \(2003\)](#), brand trust is the confident expectations of the brand's reliability and intentions. When a consumer trusts a brand, he/she will recommend it ([Eggers et al., 2013](#)), consider it when making product purchase decisions ([Luk and Yip, 2008](#); [Bhandari and Rodgers, 2018](#)), and use more of its products and services ([Eggers et al., 2013](#)). Consequently, if a customer does not trust a brand, it stands the risk of not being recommended, not being considered during purchasing decisions, etc. According to [Eggers et al. \(2013\)](#), if customers trust a brand, they will use more of its products and services and recommend it to others. Some studies argue that customer engagement outcomes may include brand trust ([Hollebeek, 2011](#); [Brodie et al., 2013](#)). Nonetheless, [Laroche et al. \(2012\)](#) found that social media based brand community engagement does not significantly predict brand trust. On the other hand, [Kosiba et al. \(2018b\)](#) found out that trustworthiness informs how customers engage with service brands. Similarly, [Kosiba et al. \(2018a\)](#) indicated that customer engagement within the banking sector is influenced by trust in the service provider and economy-based trust. Following this line of argument, we argue that brand trust will positively affect consumers to cognitively, affectively and behaviourally engage their favourite brands on Facebook. For example, consumers who trust a brand will fully support the brand by defending it and displaying a positive attitude on its Facebook fan page. Thus, we hypothesise that:

H3. Brand trust is positively associated with customer engagement.

Identity-based attachment

We define identity-based attachment via self-image expression and brand identification. This view is in line with existing literature that notes that identity attachment is symbolic ([Low and Altman, 1992](#)), and it relates to the inclusion of an object in a person's self-concept ([Clayton, 2003](#)). Our position is also supported by [Tajfel's \(1974\)](#) definition of social identity. According to [Tajfel](#), social identity refers to an individual's knowledge of being part of a group. Sharing of common identity makes people attached to each other. Therefore, identity-based attachment works through self-image expression and identification ([Chiu et al., 2006](#); [Chung et al., 2016](#)).

Self-image expression. According to [Khoo-Lattimore and Prayag \(2016\)](#), a consumer's self-image can be upheld, expressed, and augmented through the products they purchase and use. Contemporary consumers make choices based on whether a product fits their lifestyle or whether it represents an exciting new concept or a desirable experience ([Schmitt and Simonson, 1997](#) in [Murphy et al., 2007](#)). Additionally, [Caldwell and Freire \(2004\)](#) in [Murphy et al. \(2007\)](#) aver that a brand must fulfil self-expression needs, not just functional ones. The congruence between self-image and product image is also positively related to consumers' product evaluations ([Graeff, 1996](#) in [Jamal and Goode, 2001](#)). The self-image congruity facilitates positive behaviour and attitudes ([Sirgy et al., 1997](#)). For instance, [Kahn \(1990\)](#) in his study involving psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement at work, found that personal engagement is the "expression of a person's

“preferred self” in task behaviours that promote connections to work and to others, personal presence (physical, cognitive, and emotional), and active, full role performances” (p. 700). Social-image expression is also a central social value in online communities (Kim *et al.*, 2011) and, according to Park and Chung (2011), some individuals interact and chat with others on social network sites to satisfy self-image expression desires. Unsurprisingly, Islam *et al.* (2018) found that an individual’s self-brand image congruity positively influences their online brand engagement. That is, consumers who seek to satisfy this desire will engage their favourite brands online. Therefore, we hypothesise that:

H4. Self-image expression is positively associated with customer engagement.

Brand identification. The concept of identification originates from social identity theory (So *et al.*, 2013). Mael and Ashforth (1992) explain that individuals develop a social identity by grouping themselves and others into diverse social categories. An individual will identify with a social category when it (and its associated social identity) enhances their self-esteem, and is based on how psychologically intertwined the individual is with the characteristics of the category (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). Extending this to brands, Kuenzel and Vaux Halliday (2008) maintain that brands are pertinent to creating and communicating consumer identity, and can be meaningful categories with which to identify (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). This is because brands enable consumers to express their unique attributes and identity (McEwen, 2005). Brand identification, therefore, is the oneness a consumer perceives between a brand and himself (Stokburger-Sauer *et al.*, 2012). The stronger the perception of the overlap between the characteristics of the brand and the consumer, the stronger the identification and vice versa. Some of the ways that consumers may identify themselves with their favourite brands on Facebook are commenting on, liking, and sharing the brands’ pages (Cvijikj and Michahelles, 2013). Algesheimer *et al.* (2005) found that brand identification has a positive influence on brand communities’ engagement in the European car clubs context. As a result, Wirtz *et al.* (2013) in their study conceptualise a positive association between brand identification and customer engagement in brand communities. The findings of another study by Stephenson and Yerger (2014) show that brand identification can be used as a mechanism to increase the engagement of alumni and potential donors. Following this, the hypothesis below is proposed:

H5. Brand identification is positively associated with customer engagement.

Consumer-related outcomes of customer engagement

Customer participation. Customer participation is the degree to which customers contribute their effort, preference, knowledge, or other resources into the process of production and delivery (Chan *et al.*, 2010), hence taking an active part in consumption and production (Nysveen and Pedersen, 2014). It comprises the physical and mental inputs required for co-production (Flores and Vasquez-Parraga, 2015) and may be demonstrated in an active role through the application of knowledge and sharing of information with the firm (Ranjan and Read, 2016). Although it is unclear if a relationship exists between customer participation and customer engagement, the former is seen to be an antecedent of the latter (Ramawamy and Gouillart, 2010; Vivek *et al.*, 2012; Nysveen and Pedersen, 2014), whereby engagement arises from the customers’ application of efforts and resources in production and consumption (Solem and Pedersen, 2016). Alternatively, customer participation is argued to be a subset of customer engagement (Sawhney *et al.*, 2005).

Contrary to these, we view the relationship between the two as that in which customer engagement and the degree thereof influences customer participation. In other words, we posit that customer engagement is an antecedent of customer participation, the two being distinct from each other. Taking cognisance of our earlier stance on the multidimensional nature of customer engagement (cognitive, affective and behavioural), and premised on the fact that the intensity of customer engagement is based on brand stimuli (brand activities on the social media platform) (Solem and Pedersen, 2016), we contend that the greater the stimuli, the greater the affective, emotional, behavioural engagement and, consequently, the greater the engagement, the greater the participation. Thus, customer engagement creates deep connections with customers that drive participation over time. This is in line with Wirtz *et al.* (2013) who state that online brand customer engagement results in interactive participation in virtual communities. Pagani and Malacarne (2017) also found that personal engagement significantly influences active usage in mobile location-based social networks, which results in critics (react to the online content shared by other users giving feedback, ratings and reviewing products or services), a form of participation. Therefore, we operationalise participation not as a passive act (e.g. information seeking, reading comments), but as posting comments, which is regarded as active participation (Shang *et al.*, 2006). In other words, as the consumer engages with the brand on the social media platform, they are predisposed to exert their energies and contribute their preference, knowledge and other resources in consumption and production. Thus, we hypothesise that:

H6. Customer engagement is positively associated with customer participation.

Consumer generated advertising. Marketers for decades have employed consumers' feedback in the process of developing ads by way of communication ideas, slogan contests, testimonials, etc. (Lawrence *et al.*, 2013). However, there is an emerging phenomenon whereby consumers individually, either of their own volition or under some level of enticement by firms, create advertisements, known as consumer-generated advertising. This phenomenon is set apart from the traditional forms of advertising, in that access to multimedia software, the internet, and social media platforms now permit consumers to create, produce and disseminate adverts (Lawrence *et al.*, 2013). Hence, the outcomes of social media advertising rest on not only simply the fundamental advertising message but also co-created consumer-generated advertising in the background of the particular message (e.g. Facebook comments or likes associated to an advert) (Knoll and Proksch, 2017). These consumer-generated efforts, we opine, also tend to create greater perceptions of credibility than traditional advertising, being that they come from consumers and not the company. Social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook have given consumers the opportunity to actively engage with brands and create a huge amount of data about their experiences with brands and products (Liu *et al.*, 2017). Satisfied customers write blogs to praise their favourite brands, offer positive word-of-mouth online, and recommend the brand to others (Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011). Accordingly, Wei *et al.* (2013) in their study view customer engagement behaviours with a brand as the manifestation of user-generated hotel reviews as perceived by potential customers. Pagani and Malacarne (2017) found that personal engagement on mobile location-based social networks affect active content creation behaviour. From this, it can be inferred that customer engagement on Facebook may result in consumer generated advertising. Therefore, we hypothesise that:

H7. Customer engagement is positively associated with consumer generated advertising.

Method

Measures

The measuring scales used in this study were adapted from established measures (Table I). To ensure that there were higher response rates and the prevention of respondent fatigue and confusion, a pre-test as suggested by Malhotra *et al.* (2017) was carried out using 25 working professionals who are also students enrolled in the Executive Masters Programme in a leading Business School in Ghana to reduce ambiguity. Some items were revised according to their suggestions. All the final items were measured on a five-point Likert Scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

Sample and data collection

The present study engaged an online survey directed to Facebook users using LimeSurvey. LimeSurvey is an open source online survey tool that allows for the development, publishing, and collection of responses to surveys. The use of an online survey has become increasingly more popular since it decreases the expenses involved in locating suitable

Variable	Frequency (N = 649)	(%)
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	325	50.1
Female	324	49.9
<i>Age</i>		
Under 30 years	331	51.0
30-39 years	243	37.4
40-49 years	63	9.7
50-59 years	9	1.4
60 years	3	0.5
<i>Educational level</i>		
Vocational/high school	34	5.2
HND	22	3.4
University degree	379	58.4
Postgraduate degree	194	29.9
Other	20	3.1
<i>Number of brands followed</i>		
1-4	213	32.8
5-9	195	30.0
10-14	116	17.9
15-19	42	6.5
over 19	83	12.8
Total	649	100.0
<i>Country</i>		
Canada	3	0.5
China	4	0.6
France	9	1.4
Ghana	489	75.3
Namibia	9	1.4
Nigeria	9	1.4
South Africa	110	16.9
UK	4	0.6
USA	12	1.8

Table I.
Characteristics of the samples

respondents, boosts the response pace, and guarantees the instant readiness of the respondents. Admittedly, its popularity is not an indication that the method is inerrantly valid and dependable, as evidenced by some drawbacks that are linked to this sampling method (e.g. control and representativeness issues) (De Gregorio and Sung, 2010). Irrespective of these, this method was adopted for the study as the aim was to acquire a large sample containing a variety of demographic and socialisation features, such as norms, beliefs, and ideologies from across nations (De Gregorio and Sung, 2010). The link for the questionnaire was generated using LimeSurvey and was posted on various brands' Facebook fan pages and the researchers' Facebook walls to allow public participation. This was also to target Facebook users and allow participants to have a real feel of the environment while filling out the questionnaire. Respondents were asked to think of any brand (product) they have liked and still follow on Facebook in answering the question.

Subject profile

In all, 2,382 individuals clicked on the link; 986 respondents completed the item survey yielding a 41.39 per cent response rate after a 3 months period (23 January to 23 March 2017). From this sample, we analysed respondents who follow brands on Facebook and eliminated non-respondent engagement (thus responses with standard deviation equal to zero for the construct). A total of 649 responses, which represents 27.24 per cent of the sample, fit the criteria. Among the 649 respondents, 325 (50.1 per cent) were males and 324 (49.9 per cent) were females. The majority (51 per cent) of the respondents were under 30 years, followed by ages 30-39 (37.4 per cent), 40-49 (9.7 per cent), 50-59 (1.4 per cent) and 60 and over (0.5 per cent). Approximately 33 per cent follow 1-4 brand(s) on Facebook, followed by those who follow 5-9 brands (30 per cent), 10-14 brands (17.9 per cent), over 19 brands (12.8 per cent) and 15-19 brands (6.5). Ghanaians comprised 75.3 per cent of the sample, followed by South Africans (16.9 per cent), Americans (1.8 per cent), French, Namibians and Nigerians (1.4 per cent each), British and Chinese (0.6 per cent each) and Canadians (0.5 per cent).

Common method variance (CMV) is the most frequently cited methodological problem in quantitative studies and any self-report survey (Malhotra *et al.*, 2017), as it threatens the validity of the findings on the relationship between constructs (Campbell and Fiske, 1959; Reio Jr, 2010). Concerns of CMV were examined using Harman's one-test factor for this study (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). All the substantive variables were then entered into an exploratory factor analysis (EFA). Results showed that a single factor did not emerge from a factor analysis. Moreover, when all items were forced to load onto a single factor, it accounted for 35.72 per cent of the variance. This was an indication that there were no serious concerns of CMV.

Control variables

In this study, we controlled for a number of constructs that were not of direct theoretical interest, but could have an effect on the relationship among our variables (see in Tröster and Van Knippenberg, 2012). First, we controlled for demographics such as age and gender, as previous research has found an important effect between these variables and technology use. For examples, Pfeil *et al.*'s (2009) study shows that teenagers tend to make more use of different social network sites. Also, a study by Thelwall *et al.* (2010) shows that females are more successful social network site users partly because of their greater ability to textually harness positive affect. We also controlled for number of brands followed since we perceived that the number of brands an individual follows will affect the probability of participation and engagement with the brands' fan page.

Results

Measurement model analysis

Structural equation modelling using IBM Analysis of Moments of Structures (AMOS) software package (Version 22) was used for data analysis. We estimated our hypothesised measurement model using maximum likelihood estimation for confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The initial measurement model provided a good fit to the data; chi-square (i.e. χ^2 (524) = 1180.477, $p < 0.00$). Other fit indices suggest an acceptable fit to data (i.e. Normed χ^2 = 2.25; Goodness of Fit Index, GFI = 0.90; Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index, AGFI = 0.88; Comparative Fit Index, CFI = 0.94, Tucker–Lewis Index, TLI = 0.93; Root Mean Square Error of Approximation, RMSEA = 0.044). Also, all the items had standardised indicator loadings greater than 0.5. Nevertheless, following Hair *et al.*'s (2017) suggestion, we eliminated items for the standardised indicator loadings ≥ 0.70 . Thus, BI1, BI2, SIT2, SIT4, BT4, BT 5, EE3, CI4 and UG4 were dropped (Table I). Yet, BI3 When I post on the Facebook pages of these brands, I usually say 'we' rather than 'they', which had a loading 0.695, was retained since it was above the acceptable level suggested by Kline (2005). In addition, its deletion meant the construct brand identification would have to be eliminated. The adjusted measurement model provided a good fit to the data with chi-square χ^2 (288) = 563.215, $p < 0.00$, Normed χ^2 = 1.95; GFI = 0.94; AGFI = 0.92; CFI = 0.97, TLI = 0.96; RMSEA = 0.038. The measurement model results appear in Table II.

Construct reliability was evident as the Cronbach's alpha (CA) and composite reliability (CR) scores were above the ≥ 0.70 rules of thumb, the average variance extracted (AVE) for establishing convergent validity for each construct exceeded the suggested cut-off point of 0.5 (Hair *et al.*, 2017) as presented in Table III. We assessed discriminant validity using two approaches: first, we assessed whether the AVE for each construct was greater than the highest shared correlation, shown as maximum shared variance (MSV) in Table III, between the focal constructs (Fornell and Larcker, 1981); and second, whether the AVE of a latent construct was higher than the construct's highest squared correlation with any other latent construct (Hair *et al.*, 2017).

Test of hypotheses

The strong interrelationships among the three engagement dimensions (average $r \leq 0.64$) suggested a commonality indicative of a higher-order factor (Kline, 2005; Law *et al.*, 1998). Consequently, we specified an additional model in which we examined the second-order path loadings of customer engagement as in previous studies (see in Rich *et al.*, 2010; Dwivedi, 2015). After examining the fit of our measurement model (chi-square χ^2 (300) = 642.019, $p < 0.01$, Normed χ^2 = 2.14; GFI = 0.93; AGFI = 0.91; CFI = 0.96, TLI = 0.96; RMSEA = 0.04), we observed that customer engagement significantly explained the first-order dimensions: emotional (standardised beta coefficient, $\beta = 0.81$, t -values = 16.82, $p < 0.01$), cognitive ($\beta = 0.77$, t -values = 16.47, $p < 0.01$) and behavioural ($\beta = 0.84$, t -values = 18.09, $p < 0.01$). This result supports *H1*.

Main-effects only: Our remaining hypotheses were tested using the structural model maximum likelihood method (Hair *et al.*, 2017). The overall fit of the structural model 1 was good, with Chi-square χ^2 (21) = 69.568, $p < 0.000$, Normed χ^2 = 3.31; GFI = 0.97; AGFI = 0.94; CFI = 0.98; TLI = 0.97; RMSEA = 0.06. The results also suggest that the structural model has substantial explanatory power, as the R^2 was 0.85 for customer engagement, 0.54 for customer participation and 0.46 for consumer generated advertising. The coefficients, t -values and p -values for the structural paths are presented in Table IV (Model 1).

As we hypothesised, social interaction ties ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.001$) and brand trust ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.001$) exert significant positive effects on customer engagement, in support of *H2*

Item	Measures	Mean (SD)	Loading
<i>SIE</i>	<i>Self-image expression (Kim et al., 2011)</i>		
SIE1	Commenting about these brands on Facebook enhances my self-image expression	3.07 (1.10)	0.82
SIE2	Posting a brand-related contents improves my self-image expression	3.09 (1.10)	0.866
SIE3	A 'like' on these brands Facebook fan pages boosts my self-image expression	3.09 (1.17)	0.865
SIE4	Overall, interacting with these brands on their Facebook pages improves my self-image expression	3.03 (1.13)	0.849
<i>BI</i>	<i>Brand Identification (Mael and Ashforth, 1992)</i>		
BI1	I am very interested in what others say about these brands on Facebook (D)	3.69 (1.01)	–
BI2	I feel very proud when people 'like' my post on the Facebook pages of these brands (D)	3.87 (1.04)	–
BI3	When I post on the Facebook pages of these brands, I usually say 'we' rather than 'they'	3.07 (1.12)	0.695
BI4	These brands' successes are my successes	3.18 (1.18)	0.865
<i>SIT</i>	<i>Social interaction ties (Chiu et al., 2006)</i>		
SIT1	I feel very close to these brands via my interactions with them on Facebook	3.35 (1.05)	0.718
SIT2	These brands interact with me regularly on Facebook (D)	2.90 (1.07)	–
SIT3	Interacting with these brands on Facebook helps me maintain social relationships with them	3.37 (1.05)	0.787
SIT4	Interacting with these brands on Facebook makes me emotionally attached to them (D)	2.8 (1.11)	–
SIT5	Interacting with these brands on Facebook enhances my social relationships with them	3.26 (1.08)	0.825
<i>BT</i>	<i>Brand Trust (Gurviez and Korchia, 2003)</i>		
BT1	Interacting with these brands on Facebook helps me trust them	3.34 (1.02)	0.763
BT2	Interacting with these brands on Facebook makes me see them to be transparent	3.31 (1.02)	0.849
BT3	Interacting with these brands on Facebook makes me perceive them as reliable	3.4 (1.03)	0.812
BT4	Interacting with these brands on Facebook makes me perceive them as innovative (D)	3.67 (0.92)	–
BT5	I feel comfortable when interacting with these brands on their Facebook pages (D)	3.57 (0.90)	–
<i>EE</i>	<i>Emotional engagement (Solem and Pedersen, 2016)</i>		
EE1	I am enthusiastic in relation to these brands on their Facebook pages	3.23 (0.90)	0.78
EE2	I feel energetic when in contact with these brands on their Facebook pages	3.09 (0.94)	0.758
EE3	I feel positive about these brands on their Facebook pages (D)	3.48 (0.89)	–
<i>CE</i>	<i>Cognitive engagement (Solem and Pedersen, 2016)</i>		
CE1	On these brands' Facebook pages, my mind is very focussed on these brand	3.25 (0.97)	0.765
CE2	On these brands' Facebook pages, I focus a great deal of attention to these brands	3.25 (0.98)	0.837
CE3	On these brands' Facebook pages, I become absorbed by these brands	2.94 (1.01)	0.719
<i>BE</i>	<i>Behavioural engagement (Solem and Pedersen, 2016)</i>		
BE1	I exert my full effort in supporting these brands on their Facebook pages	2.95 (1.01)	0.763
BE2	I am very active in relation to these brands on their Facebook pages	2.91 (0.99)	0.835
BE3	I try my hardest to perform well on behalf of these brands on their Facebook pages	2.84 (1.01)	0.768

(continued)

Table II.
Operational
measures, descriptive
statistics and
standardised factor
loadings

Item	Measures	Mean (SD)	Loading
<i>CP</i>	<i>Customer Participation (Nysveen and Pedersen, 2014; Chan et al., 2010)</i>		
CP1	I often express my personal needs to these brands on Facebook	2.76 (1.09)	0.694
CP2	I often suggest how these brands can be improved on Facebook	2.90 (1.15)	0.784
CP3	I participate in decisions about how these brands offer their services/products on Facebook	2.73 (1.09)	0.779
CP4	I often find solutions of my problems together with these brands on Facebook (D)	2.84 (1.03)	–
<i>UG</i>	<i>Consumer generated advertising (Moon et al., 2014)</i>		
UG1	I post comments, videos, photos, to inform my Facebook friends about these brands I follow on Facebook	3.02 (1.20)	0.839
UG2	I post comments, videos, photos, to persuade my Facebook friends to use these brands I follow on Facebook	2.91 (1.19)	0.87
UG3	I post comments, videos, photos, to create awareness about these brands I follow on Facebook	3.12 (1.18)	0.864
UG4	I 'like' advertisements that these brands I follow on Facebook post on their fan pages (D)	3.51 (1.06)	–
UG5	Overall, I post brand-related contents (e.g. Product review, experience with the brand, etc.) on Facebook	2.94 (1.11)	0.751

Notes: Normed $\chi^2 = 1.95$; GFI = 0.94; AGFI = 0.92; CFI = 0.97; TLI = 0.96; RMSEA = 0.038; (D) indicates that the item was dropped as a result of scale purification

Table II.

Construct	Mean	SD	CA	CR	AVE	MSV	SIE	BI	SIT	BT	EE	CE	BE	CI	UG
SIE	2.889	0.869	0.912	0.913	0.723	0.508	0.850								
BI	2.452	0.711	0.750	0.760	0.616	0.508	0.713	0.785							
SIT	2.862	0.694	0.815	0.821	0.605	0.418	0.609	0.574	0.778						
BT	2.889	0.723	0.848	0.850	0.654	0.320	0.380	0.288	0.505	0.809					
EE	2.830	0.630	0.743	0.743	0.591	0.472	0.566	0.553	0.647	0.566	0.769				
CE	2.874	0.684	0.812	0.818	0.601	0.472	0.544	0.490	0.602	0.529	0.687	0.775			
BE	2.880	0.727	0.831	0.832	0.623	0.436	0.541	0.593	0.631	0.424	0.661	0.648	0.789		
CI	2.394	0.686	0.794	0.797	0.567	0.424	0.403	0.376	0.521	0.351	0.442	0.482	0.651	0.753	
UG	3.024	0.966	0.898	0.900	0.693	0.399	0.390	0.448	0.477	0.311	0.444	0.411	0.632	0.58	0.832

Note: Diagonal numbers are average variance explained by each construct (AVE)

Table III.
Construct descriptive statistics, reliability and validity measures and correlations

and H3, respectively, an indication that bonding-based attachment is significantly associated with customer engagement. In addition, as expected, identity-based attachment is positively associated with customer engagement. Thus, self-image expression exerted a significant effect on customer engagement ($\beta = 0.09, p < 0.001$) supporting H4; likewise brand identification exerted a significant effect on customer engagement ($\beta = 0.32, p < 0.001$) supporting H5. Furthermore, customer engagement exerted significant influences on customer participation ($\beta = 0.64, p < 0.001$) and consumer generated advertising ($\beta = 0.60, p < 0.001$) in support of H6 and H7, respectively.

We controlled for age, gender and number of brands followed on Facebook on customer participation and consumer generated advertising. This was done by treating the controls as independent variables, thus, having them regress on the endogenous variables (customer

Path	Standardized direct effects	Standard error	Critical ratios	p-value	Result
<i>Direction effect</i>					
Social interaction ties → customer engagement (H2)	0.383	0.016	17.922	***	Supported
Brand trust → customer engagement (H3)	0.313	0.012	18.79	***	Supported
Self-image expression → customer engagement (H4)	0.099	0.014	4.218	***	Supported
Brand identification → customer engagement (H5)	0.321	0.017	13.809	***	Supported
Customer engagement → Customer participation (H6)	0.645	0.037	22.586	***	Supported
Customer engagement → Consumer generated advertising (H7)	0.606	0.056	19.599	***	Supported
<i>Controls</i>					
Number of brands followed on Facebook → Customer participation	0.014	0.020	0.561	0.575	
Number of brands followed on Facebook → Consumer generated advertising	0.021	0.013	0.766	0.444	
Age → Customer participation	-0.025	0.022	-1.010	0.313	
Age → Consumer generated advertising	0.005	0.035	0.190	0.846	
Gender → Customer participation	-0.023	0.033	-0.948	0.343	
Gender → Consumer generated advertising	0.009	0.053	0.319	0.750	
Notes: Adjustment measures – Normed $\chi^2 = 3.31$; GFI = 0.97; AGFI = 0.94; CFI = 0.98; TLI = 0.98; RMSEA = 0.06; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.01$					

Table IV.
Hypotheses and
standardised
structural paths

participation and consumer generated advertising) and co-vary with other non-endogenous variables (social interaction ties, brand trust, self-image expression and brand identification) in AMOS, following the suggestion by [Gaskin \(2016\)](#). However, the control variables did not significantly influence the consequences of customer engagement.

Discussion of findings

Brand attachment and customer engagement are normally studied in isolation. To bridge this gap in the literature, we examined the relationship between brand attachment and customer participation and consumer generated advertising on a brand's Facebook page. We also ascertain the mediating role of customer engagement in this relationship. Drawing on the attachment theory ([Ainsworth, 1967, 1969](#)), we conceptualised brand attachment from two perspectives; bonding-based attachment and identity-based attachment. Identifying the elements of these two dimensions of brand attachment, we tested how these elements drive customer engagement on a brand's Facebook page. Our first hypothesis proposed customer engagement as a higher-order concept consisting of cognitive engagement, emotional engagement and behavioural engagement as some existing studies have defined customer engagement ([Dwivedi, 2015](#); [Hollebeek and Chen, 2014](#); [Brodie et al., 2011](#)). In support of this argument, we found statistically significant relationships supporting our higher-order concept. An indication of this was that customers in our study who were engaged with brands on Facebook not only spend their energy, time and effort on activities such as supporting these brands on their Facebook pages, writing comments and liking post, but were enthused and felt positive about these brands. The findings showed that they had the brand in mind and concentrate on the ongoing discussions about the brands they engage with on their Facebook fan page.

We ascertained whether consumers' attachment to brands has impact on their engagement with these brands on Facebook. Our findings show that customer engagement on a brand's Facebook page is driven by bonding-based attachment to the brands and identity-based attachment. The bond between consumers and their favourite brands, which is manifested in strong ties and the trust consumers have in the brands, had a significant impact on customer engagement. Our findings suggest that having strong ties and frequent interactions with consumers drive them to become enthused, attentive and active contributors to positive discussion about the brand on the brand's Facebook page. Additionally, as shown in our *H3*, which is supported, consumers' trust in a brand is necessary for them to engage the brand on its Facebook page. This trust is built through consistent interactions with the consumers on the brand's Facebook page. Such interactions on Facebook make consumers see the brand as transparent and innovative. These results are parallel with [Putnam \(1995\)](#) who argues that trust and emotional connection drive people to engage each other in community activities.

The findings from *H4* and *H5* show that identity-based attachment drives customer engagement on Facebook. That is, brand identification and self-image expression were positively related to customer engagement. What this means is that consumers who are proud of some brands and show interest in what people say about the brand engage the brand on the brand's Facebook page. As the existing literature has shown, consumers identify themselves with brands and use brands to improve their self-image ([Khoo-Lattimore and Prayag, 2016](#); [Jamal and Goode, 2001](#)), and this is a good basis to drive such consumers to engage the brands on Facebook as our study has shown.

In our study, we also examined the consequences of customer engagement on Facebook. The results show that customer engagement on Facebook results in customer participation in brand building and consumer generated advertising. Customers who engage their

favourite brands on Facebook express their needs and offer suggestions to the brands as to how the brand can be improved. These consumers also take active part in finding solutions to the problems they are facing with regard to using the brand. These results are consistent with [Kietzmann et al. \(2011\)](#) who argue that consumers who are satisfied with some brands sometimes create contents online to promote their brands. In our case, the consumers participate in solving their problems relating to the brand, and generate contents to create awareness about the brand and recommend the brand to others on the Facebook platform.

Theoretical contributions

Our primary theoretical contribution is that we extended the attachment theory and its application in the marketing discipline. This study seem to be the first in offering a useful model that explains customer engagement in brand building on Facebook by applying elements of bonding-based attachment and identity-based attachment. Our study shows that consumers' feeling of "bondedness" to a brand, and its inclusion into their 'self facilitates customer participation, and encourages consumer generated advertising via customer engagement. In other words, consumers' participation and creation of contents on a brand's Facebook page, which help in brand building, is driven by two dimensions of attachment, bonding and identity, when facilitated by engagement. Furthermore, our study indicates that customer engagement accounts for the relationship that exists between attachment (bonding and identity) and customer participation and encourages consumer-generated advertising.

Likewise, it identifies various elements that constitute bonding-based attachment and identity-based attachment that facilitate customer participation and consumer generated advertising on Facebook. For example, we identified self-image expression and brand identification as elements of identity-based attachment while social interactions, ties, and brand trust were identified as elements of bonding-based attachment that drive customer participation and consumer generated advertising on a brand's Facebook page through customer engagement.

Finally, our research supports previous conceptualisation of customer engagement as a higher-order construct even within the digital environment. We hypothesised customer engagement as a multi-dimensional model defined as a customer interactive experience taking place within an environment and characterised by cognitive, physical and emotional attachment. The results supported our arguments based on a three-dimensional factor structure.

Practical implication

We argued that the attachment theory provides for a more complete representation of a person's sense of the finest balance between closeness to and distance from brands on digital platforms such as Facebook, to affect digital engagement resulting in customer participation and consumer generated advertising. In support of this argument, we found statistically significant, direct relationships between each of the attachment theory antecedents and customer engagement. In addition, we found that customer engagement's statistical significance is directly associated with customer participation and consumer generated advertising. Therefore, when examining customer-brand relationship building, marketers should consider the ties consumers have with the brand and how consumers trust the brand.

Additionally, marketers should consider and project the elements of a brand that enhances the self-image of the target consumers. Again, what is worth considering in this relationship is the commonalities that consumers share with the brand. Our research suggests that the creation of bonding-based attachment and identity-based attachment on

digital platforms can enhance customer engagement, which results in customer participation and consumer generated advertising. This conceptual model provides managers with strategies for increasing customer participation and consumer generated advertising, which is key to online sales and business performance (Ye *et al.*, 2009).

Important managerial decisions therefore revolve around getting to know customers, interacting with them, and building a unique and enduring relationship with them. It also means that brands managers utilising Facebook to promote their brands must have closer relationships with targeted customers based on trust, social bonds, image, and identity on digital platforms. To develop the trust route of customer engagement, marketers can focus on innovation and be reliable. The advent of social technologies is an opportunity for marketers to show how innovative they are in terms of creating more touch points for their consumers. Marketers must also fulfil their promises to consumers; in this way, they instil trust and confidence in the consumers, which drive them to engage even more on the brand's Facebook page.

Instilling trust in consumers is a way of creating a strong tie with the consumers, which also drives them to engage the brand on its Facebook page. Furthermore, to drive and engage consumers on a brand's Facebook page, brand managers and marketers in general should create and communicate a brand image that is consistent with the self-image of their target market or the image their target aspires to attain. With this, brands will be able to drive their consumers to their Facebook pages for fruitful interactions. Similarly, communicating a brand's resemblance with the target market or consumers has the potential of driving consumers to engage brands on Facebook. Consumers have a need for association and identification and they seek such from brands.

Limitations and areas for further research

Although our study makes a substantial contribution to literature, there are some limitations that serve as an avenue for future research. We recognise that there is the possibility of limiting external validity, as the majority of our respondents are from Ghana. This might affect generalisation of the findings. Therefore, we recommend that future studies may consider other approaches such as the intercept approach, which can yield a higher response rate and capture responses from different geographical locations to improve generalisation. Again, our study was limited to only brands' Facebook fan pages; however, there are numerous social media platforms on which brands interact with their consumers. Therefore, we recommend that future studies should consider examining the impact of brand attachment on customer engagement on other platforms such as in brand communities.

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