

# **Examining Online Social Brand Engagement: A Social Presence Theory**

## **Perspective**

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## **Examining Online Social Brand Engagement: A Social Presence Theory Perspective**

### **ABSTRACT**

The increasing use of social media has changed how firms engage their brands with consumers in recent times. This triggered a need for this research to further our understanding of the influence of social presence on social brand engagement (SBE) and the moderating effects of firm-generated content and consumer commitment. Employing a quantitative survey design, 738 consumers with prior experience in following or engaging with brands on social media were randomly interviewed using an online questionnaire. While social presence positively influence social brand engagement, this relationship is significantly moderated by firm-generated content and the consumers' level of commitment in engaging with the brand. The findings also indicate that SBE encourages consumers to increase their intention to use the brand as well as engage in electronic word of mouth. Further, this study provides insights into the potential role of SBE and social presence in advancing the broader understanding of brand relationship management, brand engagement and social media research. Our conceptualisation of SBE suggests a need for managers to adopt creative strategies that will arouse consumers' interest and attention to participate in such interactions.

### **Keywords:**

Social Presence Theory; Social Media; Social Brand Engagement; e-WOM; Firm Generated Content.

## 1.0. INTRODUCTION

Recent technological advancements and the buzz surrounding the use of social networking sites by consumers have changed the media landscape and how firms engage with their customers (Felix et al., 2017; Hammedi et al., 2015; Kumar et al., 2016; Pagani and Malacarne, 2017). Studies have reported over one billion social media users globally in the last decade (Anderson et al., 2016; Karikari et al., 2017), which have contributed to the transformations observed in information acquisition, online brand engagement, usage, lifestyles and experiences of consumers (Brodie et al., 2013; Chang et al., 2015; Kim, 2016). This socio-technological change enterprise brings to bare how people make sense of themselves, others and the world at large (Veitas and Weinbaum, 2017). It therefore comes as little surprise to see many firms incorporating social media metrics into their marketing communications and customer relationship management activities in the quest of reaching and engaging with customers (Ashley and Tuten, 2015; Malthouse et al., 2013). In view of this, it is essential for firms to gain deeper consumer insights on what influence their participation in online brand engagement (Baldus et al., 2015), which has the potential to enhance brand performance through electronic word of mouth and brand usage intent (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Hollebeek et al., 2014).

The adoption of information technology by firms to engage with customers has been extensively researched (Hajli, 2014), however, these studies have mainly focused on how user-generated content (UGC) influence market outcomes in a number of contexts (e.g., Laroche et al., 2012; Stephen and Galak, 2012; Toubia and Stephen, 2013). Ashley and Tuten (2015) emphasise that despite the increasing interactive use of social media to engage customers, there is a need to zoom out how the creative message aspects of branded social content influence online consumer brand engagement (social brand engagement). Further, the effect of firm-generated content (FGC) on online consumer engagement from the social media perspective has received little attention. To this end, Kumar et al. (2016) call for further research to examine

the level of influence of FGC (e.g., informative and transformative) on social brand engagement. They explain FGC as messages posted by firms on their social media platforms, which could lead to social interactions with their customers. In a related study, Hudson et al. (2016) call for a need to further examine the connection between social media interactions and consumer brand relationship. This study therefore, responds to these calls to investigate firm-customer social brand engagement from the social presence theory (SPT) perspective. A new theoretical perspective (i.e., SPT) is introduced to shed light on actors' social media presence and the moderating effects of FGC and consumer's level of commitment on social brand engagement.

Social presence theory asserts that, the social presence of a medium influences the recipients' understanding of contents generated from senders (Chang and Hsu, 2016; Cui et al., 2013). This in turn enhances the user's feelings in participating in social interactions (Dunlap and Lowenthal, 2009; McLean and Osei-Frimpong, 2017; McLean and Wilson, 2016), which is likely to enhance their participation in online brand engagements generated from the firm. The important role of social presence in social interactions cannot be undermined, and this has often been used to explain user behaviours (Shen et al., 2010). Primarily, social presence demonstrates that online social content is informative and allows users to evaluate content that attracts them to engage in these social interactions (Chang and Hsu, 2016; Herring, 2001). In this vein, social media use is not limited to just sharing content (e.g., pictures), networking with friends and strangers, but also provides avenues to continuously interact with brands and share experiences to deepen consumer-brand relationships (Ashley and Tuten, 2015; Muntinga et al., 2011).

Tsai and Men (2017, p. 3) explain "social media communication is not only interactive but also participatory, collaborative, personal, and simultaneously communal", which provides an avenue for firms to engage with customers and build "meaningful relationships". Consequently,

social media serves as a powerful tool to mediate the firm-consumer brand engagement practices. For the purposes of this work, we adopt Brodie et al. (2013, p. 107) working definition of consumer engagement as “a multidimensional concept comprising cognitive, emotional, and/or behavioural dimensions, and plays a central role in the process of relational exchange where other relational concepts are engagement antecedents and/or consequences in iterative engagement processes within the brand community”. It is also worth noting that consumer brand engagement and brand relationship practices require some level of commitment on the part of the consumer (Hudson et al., 2016). Taking into account the multidimensionality of the brand engagement construct (including psychological, social and behavioural), it is imperative on the part of the firm to capture the strategic intent of social brand engagement and enhance customer relationship, brand knowledge, brand usage intent, and electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) (Abrantes et al., 2013; Habibi et al., 2014; Hollebeek et al., 2014; O'Brien et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2016).

Thus, the objectives of this study are three-fold. First, the study examines the influence of social presence on social brand engagement. Second, to examine the moderating role of firm-generated content and consumer commitment on social brand engagement. Finally, to establish the relative effects of social brand engagement on brand usage intent and e-WOM. This study makes a number of significant contributions to the body of literature on social media and interactive marketing. First, we make a significant contribution to the literature on social presence, social brand engagement (SBE) and firm generated content (FGC), and shed light on the application of social presence theory to understand social brand engagement and its consequences. Second, this study contributes to the social media literature by establishing the moderating impact of FGC on social brand engagement and how this integrates with UGC to influence e-WOM and brand usage intent of consumers. Third, this study provides new perspectives into the conceptual understanding of brand engagement and contends that

commitment on the part of the consumer moderates social brand engagement practices. Finally, the findings provide insights into the potential role of SBE and social presence in advancing the broader understanding of brand relationship management, brand engagement and social media research.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows: first, we provide a review of the theory related to social presence, consumer brand engagement and firm generated content leading to model and hypotheses development. Next, we describe the research methodology and discuss the statistical results. Finally, the findings are presented, followed with discussion and implications for theory and practice, and conclude with limitations and future research directions.

## **2.0. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **2.1. Social Presence Theory**

Social media networks are social-virtual environments where individuals and groups communicate and share experiences. The social presence theory (SPT) evolved from the use of telecommunications and outlines how individuals engage in the use of social media as they see it as a form, behaviour, or sensory experience that projects some form of intelligence and social acceptance (Tu, 2000). Tracing its roots in the “social psychological theories of interpersonal communication and symbolic interactionism”, the theory has been applied in the “context of mediated communication” (Cui et al., 2013, p. 662), which is also extended to social media research to explain the social presence concept (Chang and Hsu, 2016; Nowak, 2013). Social presence, originally used to assess how social context affects media choice, is defined as “degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships” (Short et al., 1976, p. 65). This suggests social presence bridges the perceived distance and projects some level of closeness between participants, which also depends on the media information richness (Cui et al., 2013). The social presence projects the

feeling that one has some level of access or insight into the other's intentional, cognitive, or affective states (Biocca and Nowak, 2001; Nowak, 2013).

Although, social presence theory embodies social interactions, it is not a general theory of social cognition, rather it is a theory that sheds light on how technology could affect, distort, and enhance certain aspects of social cognition (Biocca and Harms, 2002). On this premise, Short et al. (1976) highlight two concepts associated with social presence to include: concept of "intimacy;" and concept of "immediacy". While "intimacy is a function of eye contact, proximity, topic of conversation ...immediacy is the psychological distance between communicator and recipient" which is "generated verbally and nonverbally" (Tu, 2000, p. 28). This suggests that social presence contributes to the level of intimacy as a result of the social interactions, which allows consumers to convey immediacy or non-immediacy nonverbally (physical proximity, pictures, and facial expression) as well as verbally (Gunawardena, 1995).

Social presence has also been used to study user behaviours in social-virtual environments (Shen and Khalifa, 2008; Shen et al., 2010). Accordingly, Biocca and Harms (2002) conceptualise social presence into three levels that include; the perceptual level of awareness of co-presence with others, social presence typified by the subjective judgement which elaborates the psycho-behavioural accessibility of others, and the mutual social presence or the inter-subjective social presence that illuminates the dynamic interactions between participants. This conceptualisation aligns well with Short et al.'s (1976) unidimensional consideration of social presence as a subjective quality of the medium, which is determined by the perceptions of the social participants. While the subjective quality of the medium makes interactions more social and salient, this increases social presence on the part of the customer (Nowak, 2013), which is likely to enhance their brand engagement practices on social media.

## **2.2. Consumer Brand Engagement via Social Media**

Consumer brand engagement (CBE) has generated an increased attention in both practice and research in recent times. Various authors have defined brand engagement as a multidimensional construct comprising cognitive, emotional, and/or behavioural dimensions (Brodie et al., 2013; Dessart et al., 2015; Dwivedi, 2015; Hollebeek et al., 2014). Hollebeek et al. (2014, p. 154) conceptualise consumer brand engagement as “a consumer's positively valence cognitive, emotional and behavioural brand-related activity during, or related to, specific consumer/brand interactions”. This definition is eclipsed in Brodie et al.'s (2013) definition of consumer engagement in which case, they highlight the prominence of the multi-dimensionality, and the relational exchange nature of the construct. The relational exchange also features prominently in Vivek et al.'s (2012, p. 127) definition as the “intensity of an individual's participation in and connection with an organization's offerings and/or organizational activities, which either the customer or the organization initiate”. These definitions suggest that engagement is behavioural which goes beyond the purchase and places much focus on the firm or brand (Hsieh and Chang, 2016; Van Doorn et al., 2010).

From the social exchange theoretical perspective, firms focus much on relationship building which transcends beyond the transaction (Donaldson and O'Toole, 2007; Lambe et al., 2001). This implies series of interactions which are interdependent and contingent on the firm and customers involved (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). Applying social exchange theory in the context of brand engagement, scholars argue the specificity of the construct to involve ‘specific subjects’ (e.g., consumers, customers) and ‘objects’ (e.g., brands, products, firms, etc.) (Dwivedi, 2015; Hollebeek et al., 2014; Solem and Pedersen, 2016), depicting the consumer-brand relationship dimension of CBE. Consequently, CBE includes the concept of dedication and commitment on the part of the ‘subject’ (Hsieh and Chang, 2016), which transcends beyond the involvement concept (Hollebeek et al., 2014), and sheds light on the compelling interactive experiences and commitment to the brand (Hudson et al., 2016; Mollen and Wilson, 2010).



From the social/relational exchange and social presence theoretical perspectives, we introduce the term social brand engagement (SBE) taking into account the increasing and critical role of social media in consumer brand engagement practices (Laroche et al., 2012).

Social brand engagement could be associated with the subject's self-image, which is driven by their level of belongingness to a social group (Escalas and Bettman, 2005; Hammedi et al., 2015). SBE is a full social act without boundaries that allows participants to engage in social interactions with brands and other consumers. Drawing from Kozinets (2014) and Laroche et al. (2012), we define social brand engagement as:

*The connection, creation and communication of the brand's story between the firm and consumers (both existing and prospects), using brand or brand-related language, images and meanings via the firm's social networking site*

In such associations, SBE may include an interdependence of the consumer, brand and other consumers, and more significantly, the consumer's level of commitment to engage in such practices. This also enables them to share their experience with the brand, integrate it in their expressions, and to some extent signify the brand as part of themselves (Hammedi et al., 2015). In view of this, it is essential to establish some critical factors that influence how consumers engage with a brand via social media given the psychosocial perspective of the construct (Kumar et al., 2010; O'Brien et al., 2015).

Effectively, social media brand engagement is dependent on customer needs, motives and goals, which in essence defines the rules of their participation (Felix et al., 2017; Keller, 2009). In light of this, customers build brand knowledge and associations (Hammedi et al., 2015), brand usage intent, and motivation to engage in electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) (Abrantes et al., 2013; Habibi et al., 2014; Relling et al., 2016). Accordingly, actors' behaviours relative to communication and level of interactions to a large extent are influenced by the degree of social

presence of the selected medium (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Karikari et al., 2017). Consequently, the increasing use of social media (e.g., amount of time and frequency of use) (Rosen et al., 2013) presents a good avenue for firms to engage with their customers. This is in consonance with Dessart et al.'s (2015) assertion that engagement does not only transpire along a singular consumer brand nexus, but rather supported by a complex interactions involving multiple sites. Furthermore, while the social presence of the consumer is likely to drive SBE, it is critical to examine the moderating effects of FGC (Kumar et al., 2016), which distinguishes this study from previous works that have focused mainly on user-generated content (UGC).

### **2.3. Firm-Generated Content (FGC)**

Firm-generated content (FGC) has mainly been prominent in the traditional media of advertising, in which case, the firm in a non-personal means directly communicates its messages to the target audience (Keller, 2016). Technological advancements in recent times have empowered both firms and consumers via increased access to information (Osei-Frimpong et al., 2016), which has also changed the nature or process of communication between the firm and the consumer (Gensler et al., 2013; Hudson et al., 2016; Labrecque, 2014). Gensler et al. (2013) reiterate the importance of social media, which has provided a platform for direct firm-consumer interactions, and note the ultimate changes in consumer brand engagement practices. These interactions aided by social media platforms allow for sharing explicit and tacit knowledge with both internal and external customers of the firm (Leon et al., 2017). As a result, the role of FGC becomes increasingly essential in online CBE via the social media. Kumar et al. (2016, p. 9) explain FGC as “the messages posted by firms on their official social media pages”. These messages are critically important, as they could enhance corporate credibility and trust on the part of the firm through their direct interactions with customers (Lee et al., 2006).

Kumar et al. (2016, p. 9) further explain FGC as a “multifaceted construct” likely to affect the target audience taking into account the “message sentiment, customers’ response to the message, and customers’ innate disposition” toward the firm’s social media platform. Through this means, firms develop one-on-one relationships with their customers depicting the relational exchange needed in SBE practices. This social/relational exchange influenced by social presence is dependent on the richness of information and quality of communication provided by the firm (Chang and Hsu, 2016; Keller, 2016). It should be noted that, customers’ decision to engage with brands on social media is a choice, however, firms must actively interact with consumers on their product and brand development (Keller, 2016). Kumar et al. (2016, p. 9) enumerate three cogent reasons why FGC is likely to have a positive affect on customer behaviour. First they note that, “FGC can help firms tell customers about their current product offerings, prices, and promotions. Second, interactions with and virtual presence of other brand aficionados or fans can help in reinforcing favourable brand attitudes”. Finally, they assert that, “when firms post content in social media, customers can respond by ‘liking’ or commenting on the content, which can generate more positive brand evaluations”.

Communication effectiveness is considered critical in an attempt to win the attention of the audience, which is also largely dependent on the content and perhaps how the creative message is expressed (Kotler and Keller, 2016; Pagani and Malacarne, 2017). Broadly, a creative strategy is categorised into informational or transformational appeals (Aaker and Norris, 1982; Hwang et al., 2003). While informational appeal amplifies peculiar brand attributes or benefits, transformational appeal projects non-product-related benefits or image (Kotler and Keller, 2016). In other words, informational messages provide clear and detailed information about a product or brand in a more logical manner to enhance consumers’ cognition. Transformational on the other hand, relates to the consuming experience and a set of psychological traits that may not be logically linked to the brand (McMillan et al., 2003). This suggests that, FGC can focus

on the unique brand attributes superior to competing brands (informational) or match brand to consumer aspirations, insights and experiences, and feelings (emotional including love, sexual desire, fear, guilt) (transformational) (Ashley and Tuten, 2015).

As firms social media platforms enhance a more personal level communication and interactions (Huotari et al., 2015), creative strategies in relation to FGC is considered essential in influencing brand engagement practices and obtaining desired outcomes (such as brand awareness, increased usage intent, e-WOM) (Chi, 2011; Kumar et al., 2016). In view of this, the firms' social media platforms are dominated with informational message strategies (Hwang et al., 2003). Hence, social media activities on the part of the firm with emphasis on the generated content that is gratifying to the consumer's needs (Chi, 2011) is more likely to moderate firm-consumer social brand engagement.

#### **2.4. Model Development and Hypotheses**

Social presence is considered an important perception in the social context (Cui et al., 2013), which provides an avenue to enhance communication or social interactions between the firm and among consumers (Tu, 2000). Cui et al. (2013) further consider social presence as a behavioural engagement in which case the actors' actions are interdependent, connected to, or responsive to the other. Proponents of social presence theory assert that perceptions of social presence are subjective, which depends on the medium's objective quality (technological social presence) (Biocca and Harms, 2002; Gunawardena, 1995; Short et al., 1976; Tu, 2000; Walther, 1992). The intimacy resulting from interactions propagated by social presence enhance consumer's feelings and also provide a platform for learning (Dunlap and Lowenthal, 2009), which could influence their preparedness to participate in brand engagement practices. Hence, social presence encourage online social interactions fundamental to person-to-person communication (Nowak, 2013; Shen and Khalifa, 2008; Tu, 2000).

Social media consumer brand engagement requires an active participation from the involved actors, which is also fuelled by the richness of the information provided (Hajli et al., 2017). The authors found that firm-customer social interactions via social media develop brand relationships, trust and satisfaction. These elements are more likely to enhance social brand engagement practices on the part of the firm. This also suggests that, the manner in which customers are engaged through social presence by firms is considered important, which also makes some people feel a sense of connection with the brand (Kozinets, 2014; Nowak, 2013). Similarly, Escalas and Bettman (2005), Hammedi et al. (2015) and Dessart et al. (2015) associated individual's belongingness to a social group, strong networking or information value as factors that could also promote or influence social brand engagement. Further, Shen and Khalifa (2008) found a direct relationship between social presence and community participation by members in such social interactions. On this premise, we hypothesise that:

H1: Social presence is likely to positively influence social brand engagement

SBE tends to motivate the consumer taking into account their interactive experience with the brand (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Van Doorn et al., 2010). This in turn builds customer brand knowledge and associations (Hammedi et al., 2015), which is likely to influence brand usage intent, and motivation to engage in electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) (Abrantes et al., 2013; Habibi et al., 2014). Online SBE influenced by social presence, FGC and commitment could encourage such consumers to share their experiences with others via social media. The increasing use of social networking sites and the continuous sharing of information among consumers (Anderson et al., 2016) provides an avenue to promote e-WOM (Relling et al., 2016). e-WOM is explained as "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet" (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, p. 39). In effect, e-WOM results from consumers sharing their views and experiences on brands through the Internet and

more significantly, the social media platforms, which also greatly influence consumer decisions (López and Sicilia, 2013). The advantage of e-WOM over the traditional WOM is the faster information dissemination to several people (both known and unknown) within the shortest possible time (Abrantes et al., 2013; Stephen and Lehmann, 2016).

Drawing from the social presence theory, online social interactions among consumers are more likely to promote e-WOM, in which case consumers tend to share their experiences or knowledge of a brand to others (Chu and Kim, 2011). Abrantes et al. (2013) found that consumers' familiarity with brands enabled by some cognitive activities and experiential learning encourages them to engage in e-WOM. Following their finding, it could be argued that social brand engagement enhances consumers' familiarity with brands (e.g., brand knowledge, brand experience, emotional attachment etc.) (Solem and Pedersen, 2016). These in turn generate interactive experiences that include consumer-to-consumer interactions in brand-related chat rooms or on their social media platforms (Brodie et al., 2013). We therefore, argue that SBE is more likely to encourage consumers engage in e-WOM, thus we hypothesise:

H2: Social brand engagement practices is positively related to positive e-WOM to others

As earlier noted, social brand engagement includes the concept of dedication and commitment on the part of the consumer (Hsieh and Chang, 2016), and their compelling interactive experiences with the brand (Mollen and Wilson, 2010). In this vein, SBE could serve as a means to build and strengthen consumer relationships with brands, which is likely to influence their brand usage intent (Brodie et al., 2013). Further, use of social media platforms enshrined in the firm's activities could increase brand awareness and improve brand image (Felix et al., 2017). Consequently, the cognitive, emotional, and/or behavioural dimensions of social media CBE (Brodie et al., 2013; Dwivedi, 2015; Hollebeek et al., 2014) enhances the value of the brand to customers (Rangaswamy et al., 1993), which is likely to encourage consumer brand usage intent. For the purpose of this study, we explain the term 'brand usage intent' as *a consumer's*

*intention to purchase and use a particular brand (compared to others with similar attributes) for her good self, with others or for others.* Previous researches have found a significant positive relationship between CBE and loyalty intentions (e.g., Algesheimer et al., 2010; Dwivedi, 2015) and consumer purchase intention (Algesheimer et al., 2010; Hsieh and Chang, 2016). Similarly, in a related study, Hollebeek et al. (2014) found a significant relationship between the affection and activation dimensions of CBE and consumer brand usage intent. We therefore, argue that SBE is more likely to encourage consumers' brand usage intent, thus we hypothesise:

H3: Social brand engagement practices is positively related to consumer brand usage intent

Similar to the above discussion, we argue that engaging in positive e-WOM will help create brand awareness to others, which in a way could excite brand usage intent from other consumers. Past studies have alluded to a possible increase in sales of brands/products as a result of positive WOM (e.g., Duan et al., 2008). López and Sicilia (2013) admonish firms to engage in early WOM marketing to generate conversations on social media among others to speed up the product adoption process. In addition, Chevalier and Mayzlin (2006) note a potential effect of e-WOM on brand performance. This seems to suggest that e-WOM resulting from SBE is more likely to arouse other consumers' interest and increase their brand usage intent. Thus we hypothesise that:

H4: Positive e-WOM is positively related to consumer brand usage intent

## **2.5. Moderating Effects of FGC and Commitment**

From the above discussions, we argue that even though social presence is likely to provide a platform for social brand engagement, this process could be moderated by the firm generated content (FGC) (Kumar et al., 2016) as well as their behavioural ties (e.g., commitment to the brand) (Hudson et al., 2016; Sung and Campbell, 2009). As FGC reflects messages posted by firms on their social media platforms (Kumar et al., 2016), Lee et al. (2006) particularly reiterate

the critical importance of these messages in enhancing direct interactions with customers. Again, Anderson et al. (2016) note that marketing communication should reflect consumer's sentiments, which is likely to attract their attention and arouse interest in participating in such activities (Keller, 2009; Kotler and Keller, 2016). While there have been calls to further examine the level of influence of FGC on SBE (e.g., Kumar et al., 2016), Hudson et al. (2016) add credence to this call pointing out a need to further understand the association between social media interactions and consumer brand relationship.

Hudson et al. (2016) consider consumer level of commitment as a behavioural tie that could have a significant effect on a person's engagement with a brand. Commitment is considered a key variable that influences a number of behaviours on the part of the consumer, especially with regard to engagement practices and on-going relationships (Hsieh and Chang, 2016; Sharma and Patterson, 2000; Sung and Campbell, 2009). Consumer's brand engagement commitment is conceptualised as a consumer's belief that an on-going brand engagement and relationship is worth investing (Sharma and Patterson, 2000). Further, Kang et al. (2014, p. 148) define consumer brand commitment as "the strong and positive psychological attachment of consumers to a specific brand". Tuškej et al. (2013) assert that the emotional attachment exhibited on the part of the consumer projects the degree of brand acceptance. Given consumer commitment as an attitudinal construct (Tuškej et al., 2013), such consumers are more likely to display high levels of interest in the brand and update their knowledge on the brand activities through online platforms such as the social media (Kang et al., 2014). Consequently, consumer's commitment to a brand is likely to enhance or reinforce their brand-relational exchange (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2002), which is also more likely to moderate their SBE.

Again, social media also allow firms to use content and pictures to communicate with customers to help build some mental thoughts about their brands even before use (Laroche et al., 2012). In addition, healthy brand engagements are rife with interesting contents that arouse consumers'



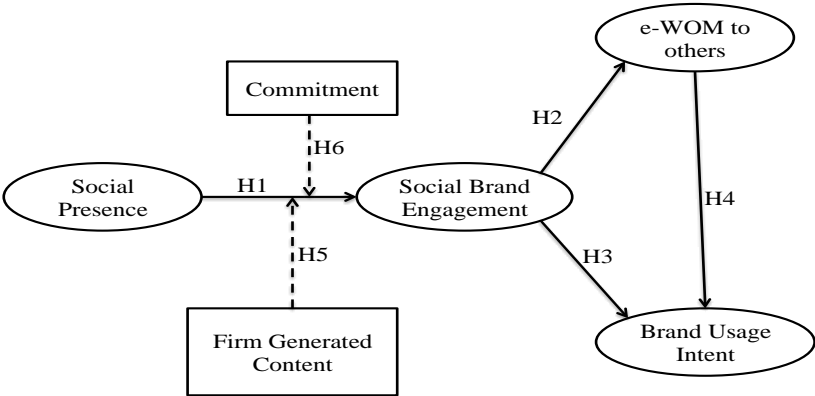
interest and excite them to actively interact with the brand (Dessart et al., 2015). Essentially, creative strategies with regard to FGC aided by social presence and or social media that is gratifying to the consumer’s needs (Chi, 2011) and the consumer’s level of commitment (Hsieh and Chang, 2016) are more likely to strengthen the effects of social presence on social brand engagement, thus we develop the following hypotheses:

H5: FGC strengthens the effects of social presence on social brand engagement

H6: Consumer’s level of commitment reinforces the effects of social presence on social brand engagement

Following the above discussions, a hypothesised model is presented in Figure A.1. The model shows the various path relationships as explained in the model development above.

**Figure A.1: Hypothesised Model**



**3.0. METHODOLOGY**

To evaluate our hypothesised model, we employed a quantitative survey design using an online questionnaire with inclusion/exclusion criteria to only involve respondents with some prior experience with social media brand engagement. We did not limit ourselves to one particular social networking site (see, VanMeter et al., 2015) and also did not focus on any particular brand. We randomly recruited 1250 consumers of social media in Ghana, who have experience following and engaging with brands on social media. This target population was selected given that they are technology savvies, follow social media activities with avidity, and are inclined toward brands. Given the recent increasing use of social media globally, the trend is no different in Ghana. For instance, it is estimated that out of the 8 million of the population found online (representing about 28.4% of Ghana's population), about 3 million are active social media users (Cliqfrica, 2017). StatCounter.com (2017) reports that over 90% of the social media population in Ghana are Facebook users. Prior to the main study, the research instrument was pretested with 25 respondents from the population of interest. The clarity and understanding of the questionnaires ensured the reliability and content validity of the scale items in this particular research context (Osei-Frimpong, 2017). A preliminary analysis of the pilot study indicated all scales satisfied the internal consistency recording a Cronbach Alpha  $\alpha > 0.7$ . In addition, all scale items measured a corrected item-total correlation of  $> 0.3$ , which justified their inclusion in the questionnaire used in the main study (Osei-Frimpong et al, 2016).

### **3.1. Data Collection**

In the main study, consumers of the following social media: Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn were interviewed using an online questionnaire. The questionnaire had an inclusive and exclusive question that excluded some recruited respondents. As a result, only respondents who have followed and engaged with brands on social media for a minimum of six months were included in the study. In all, 775 (out of 1250) qualified respondents completed the questionnaire. An initial screening of the completed questionnaires resulted in 738 useable

questionnaires, after discarding responses with missing values of three or more (cf, Hartline et al., 2000). Hence, the valid completed questionnaires used in the analysis represented a response rate of 59.04%.

The respondents were made up of 47% males and 53% female. All respondents use social media more than twice a day. Out of this, about 60.3% follow or engage with brands daily, 30.1% does it at least once a week, with the remaining 9.6% doing this at least once a month. The detailed respondent characteristics are presented in Table A.1.

**Table A.1: Characteristics of Respondents**

<b>Respondent Characteristics</b>	<b>Frequency (n)</b>	<b>%</b>
<b><i>Gender</i></b>		
Male	345	46.7
Female	393	53.3
<b><i>Age (in years)</i></b>		
20 – 29	289	39.2
30 – 39	222	30.1
40 – 49	137	18.6
50 – 59	90	12.2
<b><i>Education</i></b>		
Senior High School	87	11.8
Higher National Diploma	100	13.6
Professional Qualification (e.g., ACCA, CIM, etc.)	118	15.9
Bachelor’s Degree	282	38.2
Post-graduate Qualification	151	20.5
<b><i>Frequency of visit to brand social networking page</i></b>		
Multiple times daily	310	42.0
Once daily	135	18.3
Multiple times weekly	113	15.3
Once weekly	109	14.8
At least once a month	71	9.6
<b><i>Most used social networking site for brand engagement</i></b>		
Facebook	534	72.4
Twitter	103	13.9
LinkedIn	89	12.1
Instagram	12	1.6

### 3.2. Measures

Scale items employed in this study were drawn from the existing literature. These validated scales were slightly modified to suit the context of this research to enable us measure the various constructs in the hypothesised model in Figure A.1. All scales were measured on a five-point

Likert scale that ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Social presence was measured using an eight-item scale adapted from Nowak (2013). The original seven-item scale was modified and added on. For instance, “*I feel out of touch when I do not log onto a social media platform*” was added. Adapting from Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004), a modified four-item scale was used to measure e-WOM. Again, we modified a five-item scale adapted from Habibi et al. (2014) and Laroche et al. (2012) to measure Social Brand Engagement. Also, a four-item scale adapted from Hollebeek et al. (2014) was employed to measure Brand Usage Intent, whereas, a five-item scale drawn from Sharma and Patterson (2000) and Hudson et al. (2016) was used to measure Commitment. Firm-Generated Content was measured with a four-item scale we developed from Kumar et al. (2016). All modifications were done with caution not to change the original meaning of the items. All measures with their factor loadings are presented in Appendix A1.

### **3.3. Analysis and Results**

Preliminary analysis was conducted using SPSS 23.0 to assess the normality of the data and the level of interrelatedness among the items to measure a single construct. All scale items measured a Cronbach alpha  $> 0.7$  with a correlation significance at the level of  $\rho = 0.05$ . In addition, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted using the principal component analysis and Varimax rotation (Osei-Frimpong et al., 2016). This was deemed necessary as the original scale items were modified and in some cases added on. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was 0.874, exceeding the cut-off value of 0.6 with a  $\rho$ -value  $< .0001$  for Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity (Kaiser, 1970). All Items loaded well on constructs they were intended to measure and there was no evidence of cross loading. We further conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using AMOS 23.0, employing the maximum likelihood estimation. The factor loadings (see Appendix A1) and the fit indices indicated a reasonably fit to the data ( $\chi^2_{(382)} = 1124.716$ ,  $\rho = .0001$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 2.944$ ; GFI = .919;

CFI = .961; RMSEA = .051). Byrne (2010) note that RMSEA values of  $< .05$  indicate a good fit, and values as high as  $.08$  indicate a reasonable fit, which suggest that our RMSEA value of  $.051$  is acceptable.

Before the structural model estimation, other important tests were conducted to ensure there was no possible confounding influence on the results. First we checked for common method bias, which if present could result in misleading conclusions (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Hence, following Ranaweera and Jayawardhena (2014) approach, Harman's one factor test was conducted. The results showed the presence of model factors and confirmed that the most variance explained by one factor was  $24.62\%$ , which suggests that common method bias was controlled. We also checked for multicollinearity using variance inflation factor (VIF) of the variables including the interaction terms. The highest value recorded among the variables was  $2.672$  suggesting that the assumption of multicollinearity was not violated when compared to a cut-off point of  $10$  (Hair et al., 2006).

### **3.4. Validity and Construct Reliability**

Following Fornell and Larcker's (1981) criterion, we assessed the discriminant and convergent validity of the measures. The results presented in Table A.2 indicate convergent validity was satisfied following the average variance extracted (AVE) values above  $.50$  and construct reliabilities  $> .70$ . In addition, discriminant validity was supported since the AVE values for each construct was greater than the square of their correlations (Hair et al., 2006; Pagani and Malacarne, 2017). Further, there was no evidence of cross-loadings. Satisfying validity and reliability concerns of the measures indicate their acceptability for hypothesis testing (Mathieu and Taylor, 2006).

#### **Table A.2: Validity and Construct Reliability Measures**

	CR	AVE	SBE	COM	FGC	BUI	e-WOM	SOP
<b>Social Brand Engagement (SBE)</b>	0.920	0.697	<b>0.835</b>					
<b>Commitment (COM)</b>	0.889	0.729	0.247	<b>0.854</b>				
<b>Firm Generated Content (FGC)</b>	0.906	0.707	0.410	0.280	<b>0.841</b>			
<b>Brand Usage Intent (BUI)</b>	0.885	0.660	0.360	0.207	0.302	<b>0.812</b>		
<b>e-WOM</b>	0.826	0.542	0.310	0.495	0.348	0.210	<b>0.736</b>	
<b>Social Presence (SOP)</b>	0.967	0.788	0.269	0.240	0.405	0.240	0.262	<b>0.888</b>

*CR – Construct Reliability; AVE – Average Variance Extracted*

### 3.5. Structural Model Estimation

The full structural model evaluation (without the moderating variables) was done using AMOS 23.0, and the results suggest an acceptable model fit to the data. The model evaluation presented the following fit indices ( $\chi^2 = 474.864$ ,  $df = 178$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $GFI = .944$ ,  $AGFI = .927$ ,  $CFI = .968$ ,  $RMSEA = .048$ ). A detailed list of the standardized path coefficients with their respective t-values and  $R^2$  are presented in Table A.3.

**Table A.3: Structural parameter estimates (standardized coefficients)**

Paths	Focal Model			Rival Model		
	B	t-value	R <sup>2</sup>	$\beta$	t-value	R <sup>2</sup>
Social Presence → Social Brand Engagement (H1)	.434***	9.845	0.189	.450***	10.175	.203
Social Brand Engagement → e-WOM (H2)	.401***	8.302	0.161	.306***	6.865	.094
Social Brand Engagement → Brand Usage Intent (H3)	.198**	2.266	0.082	.171**	2.262	.029
e-WOM → Brand Usage Intent (H4)	.123**	2.107		-	-	-
Goodness-of-fit statistics	$\chi^2_{(178)} = 474.864$ , $p < .0001$			$\chi^2_{(179)} = 552.191$ , $p < .0001$		
	GFI = .944			GFI = .936		
	AGFI = .927			AGFI = .918		
	CFI = .968			CFI = .960		
	TLI = .962			TLI = .953		
	RMSEA = .048			RMSEA = .053		
	PCLOSE = .774			PCLOSE = .145		
	AIC = 580.864			AIC = 656.191		

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$

A rival model was developed and estimated using AMOS 23.0 to assess the robustness of the

focal model, which is considered acceptable (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988). The literature suggests the appropriateness of model trimming particularly in an exploratory research of this kind (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). Hence, following Anderson and Gerbing (1988), some parameters were constrained from a theoretical perspective to develop an alternative model by removing one or more parameters from the nested focal model. The focal and rival models were then compared taking into account the Goodness-of-fit indices including; the RMSEA (root mean square error of approximation), CFI (comparative fit index) and AIC (Akaike Information Criteria) and Chi-square difference test (Osei-Frimpong et al., 2016). Hu and Bentler (1999) assert that the model with the smallest AIC value is deemed to have a better fit. As presented in Table A.3, the focal model fits and explains the data better as compared to the rival model. For instance, the RMSEA of the focal model was 0.048 compared to 0.053 of the rival model. The literature suggests that a model with  $RMSEA < 0.05$  indicates good fit, although,  $RMSEA > 0.05$  and  $< 0.8$  are considered reasonable fit (Byrne, 2010). In addition, the AIC of the focal model (i.e., 580.864) was lower than that of the rival model (i.e., 656.191). Further, an assessment of chi-square difference statistics test between the focal model and the rival model was significant at  $p < 0.05$ , suggesting that the two models are different. Drawing from the above, the results suggest that the focal model explains the data better, hence, this model was maintained.

### **3.6. Results**

From Table A.3, all hypotheses (thus, H1-H4) are supported. The results suggest that Social Presence significantly influence Social Brand Engagement. Supporting hypothesis H1 ( $\beta = .434, p < .0001, R^2 = .189$ ) implies that consumers not only use their online social presence to share personal pictures, videos and messages, but also spend a considerable amount of time to follow brands on social media. In addition, consumers' social brand engagement practices also have a significant positive effect on the potential of engaging in electronic word of mouth

activities. Supporting hypothesis H2 ( $\beta = .401, \rho < .0001, R^2 = .161$ ) indicates the critical effects of social brand engagement. Given the viral nature of messages or user comments posted on their social media pages or platforms, this finding should be given some prominence as consumer experiences in participating in social brand engagement practices could have dire consequences on the brand, especially in situations of negative experiences. With regard to hypothesis H3 ( $\beta = .198, \rho < .05, R^2 = .082$ ), though supported, social brand engagement had a weak influence on brand usage intent as compared to the effect on e-WOM. Though the level of influence is weak, which also reflects in a weaker  $R^2$  value (indicating the strength of association between the variables), the consequence of the finding suggests consumers are likely to increase their intentions to use brands they engage on social media. Similarly, the level of influence on brand usage intent resulting from e-WOM is weak, though the hypothesis H4 is supported ( $\beta = .123, \rho < .05, R^2 = .082$ ). This finding also implies that, e-WOM is more likely to arouse potential customers to develop an intent of using a brand as a result of shared experiences or information from friends on social media. Likewise, existing customers could also be excited in increasing their brand usage rates given the positive influence of e-WOM on brand usage intent.

### **3.7. Interaction Effects**

Following the model evaluation to test the various hypotheses (thus, H1-H4), moderating effects were examined hierarchically using moderated SEM with AMOS 23.0 (Xanthopoulou et al., 2007). Following Ranaweera and Jayawardhena (2014) and McLean and Osei-Frimpong (2017), additional variables were created to test the interactive effects. First the continuous independent (Social Presence) and moderating variables (FGC and Commitment) were changed through mean centring, then created an interactive term by multiplying the independent variable and the moderating variable. This resulted in creating the following interactive terms: ‘Social



Presence X FGC’ and ‘Social Presence X Commitment’. The dependent variable (Social Brand Engagement) was regressed on the independent variable (Social Presence), the moderator (FGC or Commitment), and the interactive term.

As earlier noted, we conducted the interaction test hierarchically with AMOS 23.0 by first examining the moderating effects of ‘Firm Generated Content’ on the dependent variable. A significant interactive effect was examined supporting hypothesis H5, and the analysis also indicates the model fitted the data well as presented in Table A.4. The results indicate that FGC significantly moderate the influence of Social Presence on SBE. The effects are pronounced given the measures and respective R<sup>2</sup> as presented in Table A.4. For instance, with 29.4% explained variance, the effects were much stronger compared to the main effects on the path Social Presence → SBE in Table A.3.

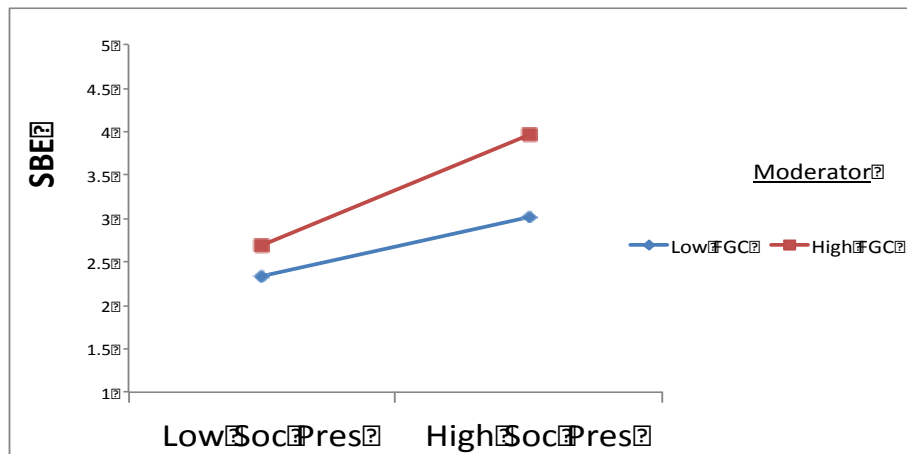
**Table A.4: Results of moderated SEM interactions of Firm Generated Content**

Path	Unstandardized Path Coefficient $\gamma$	t-value	Standardised path coefficient $\beta$	R <sup>2</sup>
Social Presence → Social Brand Engagement	.487	6.549	.553***	.294
FGC → Social Brand Engagement	.326	3.391	.356***	
Social Presence X FGC → Social Brand Engagement	.150	4.016	.198***	
Model fit indices	$\chi^2 = 260.876$ , $df = 97$ , $\rho < 0.001$ , GFI = .960, AGFI = .943, CFI = .978, RMSEA = .048, PCLOSE = .680			

\*\*\*  $\rho < 0.001$

Further we plotted the interaction effects to illustrate the extent of the effects in support of hypothesis H5 in Figure A.2. The plot suggests that from a low moderating effect of FGC, there is not much effect on the path. However, when FGC is added to the model, there is a positive slope, which suggests that Social Presence has a stronger effect on SBE when there is firm generated content that seek to engage with consumers.

**Figure A.2: Moderation effect of FGC on Social Brand Engagement**



*Note: Soc Pres – Social Presence; SBE – Social Brand Engagement*

Following the steps outlined above, the interaction effects of Commitment on SBE were also examined. We examined a significant interaction effect, hence supporting hypothesis H6, and the analysis also indicates the model fitted the data well as presented in Table A.5. From Table A.5, there was a significant positive moderation effect of Commitment on the influence of Social Presence on SBE. With 32.7% explained variance, the effects were much stronger compared to the main effects on the path Social Presence → SBE in Table A.3.

**Table A.5: Results of moderated SEM interactions of Commitment**

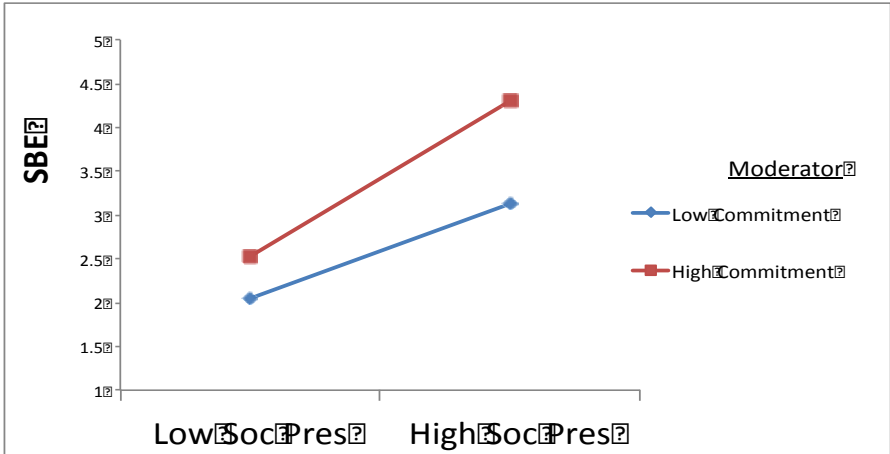
Path	Unstandardized Path Coefficient $\gamma$	t-value	Standardised path coefficient $\beta$	R <sup>2</sup>
Social Presence → Social Brand Engagement	.548	4.615	.596***	.327
Commitment → Social Brand Engagement	.412	2.680	.472**	
Social Presence X Commitment → Social Brand Engagement	.169	2.817	.238**	
Model fit indices	$\chi^2 = 257.507$ , $df = 97$ , $p < 0.001$ , GFI = .960, AGFI = .943, CFI = .979, RMSEA = .047, PCLOSE = .721			

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$

Further, we plotted the interaction effects to illustrate the extent of the effects in support of hypothesis H6 as presented in Figure A.3. The plot suggests that the consumer's level of Commitment reinforces the positive influence of Social Presence on SBE. This is evident in the

stronger positive slope examined with high Commitment in Figure A.3. This implies that on the consumer’s level of commitment is critical with regard to their participation in social brand engagement.

**Figure A.3: Moderation effect of Consumer Commitment on Social Brand Engagement**



*Note: Soc Pres – Social Presence; SBE – Social Brand Engagement*

The above interaction effects of Commitment and the Firm Generated Content (FGC) were both positive and significant. In addition, these potential moderating variables had a significant positive influence on the dependent variable (Social Brand Engagement). Matear et al. (2002) note that a potential moderator becomes rather an antecedent to the dependent variable when the interaction term’s effect is not significant, but the moderator is significantly related to the dependent variable. In our results, we found both significant effects of the interaction terms and moderating variables, which suggest that FGC and Commitment duly moderates SBE.

**4.0. DISCUSSION**

The study proposes a framework for integrating social presence, social brand engagement and the moderating effects of firm generated content and commitment on the part of the consumer. Our results shed light on the need for firms to engage in social brand engagement practices with their consumers and other prospects. As social media use is on the ascendancy, social presence

becomes a prerogative of most consumers given the psychosocial influence from others. In line with Gensler et al. (2013), our finding suggests that social presence provide a platform for the firm's social brand engagement practices. This implies that while consumers spend a considerable amount of time on social media, there is a high possibility of engaging in social brand engagement practices as indicated in our results. In support of other studies (e.g., Kozinets, 2014; Laroche et al., 2012), this study argues a strong relationship between social presence and social brand engagement. Gensler et al. (2013) note that though branding is not limited to the online or virtual environment, but the buzz surrounding social media and the easier mobilization of consumers increase reach and visibility, which is established in our findings.

In advancing our knowledge, we examined the moderating effects of firm generated content (FGC) on social brand engagement practices. Our results indicate the effects of social presence on SBE are strengthened by FGC. Unfortunately, most studies have focused rather on the effect of user-generated content (UGC) on brand engagement via social media (e.g., Laroche et al., 2012; Stephen and Galak, 2012; Toubia and Stephen, 2013). It is worth noting that social presence demonstrates that online social content is informative and allows users to evaluate content that attracts them to engage in these social interactions (Chang and Hsu, 2016; Herring, 2001). This suggests that firm generated contents on their social media platforms are essential to attract and engage consumers to interact with their brands. While UGC is important and well integrated in SBE (Gensler et al., 2013), this study extends on previous work arguing for the criticality of FGC in such brand engagement practices as reported in our findings.

In a similar vein, we found consumer's level of commitment to moderate social brand engagement practices. Whereas social presence encourages social interactions among participants on social media, their level of commitment to a particular brand is essential to incite them to build brand relationships (Hudson et al., 2016) and engage in SBE. Previous research

has acknowledged consumer commitment to brands as an antecedent to brand engagement and brand relationship (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2002; Sharma and Patterson, 2000). While this work corroborates these studies, we take a different perspective in examining the influence of consumer commitment in SBE. Our results indicate both significant effects of the interaction term (Social Presence X Commitment) and Commitment as a moderating variable suggesting that Commitment duly acts as a moderator as well as an independent antecedent of SBE. In a related study, Gensler et al. (2013) include consumer brand relationship characteristics as a moderating variable in their integrated framework of social media's impact on brand management. Although the authors failed to highlight consumers' commitment as one of the characteristics, we focused on this consumer characteristic on the premise that customers' decision to engage with brands on social media is a choice, and therefore, consumers' level of commitment is considered critical in moderating their engagement practices. This study provides an empirically tested moderation effect of commitment on SBE to build and extend on Gensler et al.'s (2013) conceptualisation of consumer's brand relationship characteristics as a moderating variable in brand engagement.

In examining the consequences of SBE, we found a significant relationship between SBE and brand usage intent. These findings are not surprising as social brand community research reports that such engagements or participation of consumers have several beneficial outcomes for the brand. For instance, online social CBE is found to influence customer loyalty intentions (e.g., Dwivedi, 2015), consumer purchase intention (Algesheimer et al., 2010; Hsieh and Chang, 2016), and brand usage intent (Hollebeek et al., 2014). The finding suggests that firms should actively engage their customers and prospective customers on social media to increase their intention to use the brand either for their own selves or for others. Similarly, SBE had a significant positive relationship on e-WOM. Effectively, social media platforms help create networks of consumers making information sharing easier and faster (Chu and Kim, 2011). Our

finding suggests that consumers engaged in SBE are more eager to share their brand knowledge and experiences with other friends on their respective social media platforms as well the brands social networking site.

Further, the potential effect of e-WOM on brand usage intent was examined, and the finding confirms a significant positive effect. This finding adds to the prominence and relevance of e-WOM on brand performance or sales as reported in previous research (e.g., Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006; Duan et al., 2008). This also implies that customers' eagerness to engage in positive e-WOM influenced by SBE is a precursor of customer's increased intention to use particular brands. However, we mainly focused on positive e-WOM in this study on the assertion that a good brand knowledge, awareness and experience resulting from SBE is more likely to encourage positive e-WOM.

#### **4.1. Theoretical Implications**

This paper contributes significantly to the literature on social presence theory, social brand engagement (SBE), social media and firm generated content (FGC). The model in Figure A.1 and the results shed light on the application of social presence theory to understand social brand engagement and its consequences. Most studies on social presence have focused on other perspectives, for instance, as an antecedent to social capital (Chang and Hsu, 2016), antecedent to community participation (Shen and Khalifa, 2008), and as an indirect consequence of instant messaging (Nowak, 2013). This work however, departs from these previous studies by establishing its positive influence on SBE practices when used as a vehicle in this regard. We conceptualise social presence as a unidimensional construct (e.g., Nowak, 2013) and establish its relevance and application in SBE.

In order to better understand the dynamics of the influence of social presence on social brand engagement, the moderating effects of FGC and consumers' level of commitment were

examined. While user-generated content has dominated studies on social interactions, very few have focused on FGC (e.g., Kumar et al., 2016), this paper projects the critical importance of FGC in promoting SBE. This work supports the importance of SBE and why it matters in social media discourse. First, FGC as a moderator enhances firm-consumer interactions as well as building consumer-brand relationship through social brand engagement practices. An approach where firms provide brand related stories or information creates an avenue to manage brands, communicate and leverage brand awareness with customers. Hence, we contribute to the social media literature by establishing the moderating impact of FGC on SBE and how this integrates with UGC to influence e-WOM and brand usage intent of consumers.

Further, the conceptualisation of consumers' level of commitment as a moderating variable in SBE differentiates this study from previous studies that have attributed commitment as an antecedent to consumer brand relationship and engagement practices. For instance, commitment has been considered as a key variable that influences a number of behaviours on the part of the consumer with regard to engagement practices and on-going brand relationships (Hsieh and Chang, 2016; Sung and Campbell, 2009). Considered as a behavioural tie (Hudson et al., 2016) and attitudinal (Tuškej et al., 2013), consumer commitment serves as a moderator in SBE as established in this study. We provide new perspectives into the conceptual understanding of brand engagement and contend that commitment on the part of the consumer moderates SBE practices.

Our conceptualisation integrates social presence theory, brand engagement, FGC, commitment and other consequences of SBE (i.e., e-WOM and brand usage intent), which presents a new dimension in social media research. We have provided a strong theoretical perspective to shed light on social media and brand engagement. The findings present insights on the potential role of SBE and social presence in advancing the broader understanding of brand relationship management, brand engagement and social media research.

## **4.2 Managerial Implications**

In addition to the theoretical contributions highlighted above, this study also provides implications for practice or managers. Our findings suggest social presence as a vehicle for social brand engagement practices. In this regard, as social presence depends on the media information richness (Cui et al., 2013), managers should take into account the consumer's intentional, cognitive, or affective states and provide the necessary tools and practices on their social networking sites that could enhance the mutual understanding and psychological attachment among consumers. Firms should employ techniques that could arouse consumers' interest and curiosity to excite them to participate in the brand social interactions.

As social presence matters in brand engagement, managers should embrace the use of social networking sites to build brand relationship and engagement with consumers. Firms must significantly strengthen their consumer-brand relationship using social media interactions on their social networking sites. In effect, firm messages posted on their social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter etc.) should be informative, and constantly updating FGC. To keep the social community interactive and interesting, messages should be varied in ways that could appeal to consumers, and generate discussions that would allow consumers to openly share their views and experiences.

As firms social media platforms enhance a more personal level communication and interactions (Huotari et al., 2015), creative strategies in relation to FGC should be considered critical to win the attention of the consumer and one that would lead to repeat visits to interact. For instance, sharing interesting information about their brands, or on upcoming and on-going brand activities on social media platforms, could initiate discussions among members of the social media community. In addition, with regard to transformative creative appeal, managers should use positive emotional appeals (that portray humour, love, joy, etc.) to attract consumers, excite



and arouse their interest to participate in such social brand interactions. This could be through the use of images, short videos as well as creative messages. In effect, since social presence promotes interactions, organisations should seek ways to understand and leverage social media phenomenon to engage well with consumers.

Further, while these interactions are on going, for instance, continuous update of FGCs in addition to consumers' reactions, which could be positive or negative, managers should devote time and effort to monitor and manage these interactions. In this regard, managers should be able to better coordinate their brand stories (FGC) with that shared by consumers (UGC). Our findings indicate that consumers' participation in SBE could encourage e-WOM and brand usage intent. This suggests that inclusion of consumers in social media interactions with brands should be seen as enjoying, motivating, and providing a sense of belongingness. Hence, firms must make every effort to attract consumers on their social networking sites, and encourage them to be involved and engage productively in the creation of the firm's offering.

#### **4.3 Limitations and Future Research**

The findings of this study provide robust support for the theoretical model and predicted relationships. However, like any research, this study was not without limitations. First, we took a general view of FGC as messages posted on the firm's social networking site by the firm. As a result, the study did not examine whether there are any differences between informative and transformative creative strategies adopted by firms in engaging their customers on social media. Future research could examine the potential impact of these creative strategies (informative versus transformative) on SBE, which could provide interesting insights to build on our current work.

Given the conceptual difference between social brand engagement and brand community engagement, further research is encouraged in this endeavour to provide deeper understanding

of SBE by exploring other possible moderators (other than FGC and commitment) and other potential consequences of SBE. While this study focused mainly on positive e-WOM, it is possible that SBE could also result in negative e-WOM, and therefore, future research is encouraged to explore this further to establish the potential effects. Finally, this study used Ghanaian consumers on social media to test our proposed model. Although, interesting findings are reported, future research is suggested to extend this scope to test this model in other geographical locations with different cultural settings to conduct cross-cultural comparison of our results.

## **5.0 CONCLUSION**

This research provides empirical evidence backing the relationships between social presence and SBE, consequences of SBE, and the moderating effects of FGC and commitment in SBE practices. The results provide important insights into the application of social presence theory in SBE. The study established that FGC and consumers' level of commitment moderate SBE, which also encourages consumers to increase their intention of using the brand and as well engage in e-WOM.

This research provides a strong theoretical perspective to shed light on social media and brand engagement. The findings present insights on the potential role of SBE and social presence in advancing the broader understanding of brand relationship management, brand engagement and social media research. Hence, this study proposes a framework that integrates social presence, social brand engagement and the moderating effects of firm generated content and commitment on the part of the consumer. Accordingly, the increasing use of social media partly suggests social presence has become a prerogative of most consumers given the psychosocial influence from others. The results also suggest a need for firms to engage in social brand engagement

practices with their consumers and other prospects. In this vein, managers are encouraged to engage with their customers via their social networking sites with informative and interesting messages that will arouse consumer interest and attention.

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## Appendix A1. Scale Items and Factor Loadings

Item	Factor Loading	CR	AVE
<b>Brand Usage Intent (Hollebeek et al., 2014)</b>		<b>0.885</b>	<b>0.660</b>
It makes sense to use brand X following my engagement with the brand	0.704		
Even if another brand has the same features as brand X, I would prefer to use brand X	0.872		
If there is another brand as good as brand X, I prefer to use brand X because of my experience with brand X	0.913		
If another brand is not different from brand X in any way, it seems smarter to use brand X because of my knowledge on the brand	0.743		
<b>Social Presence (Chang and Hsu, 2016; Nowak, 2013)</b>		<b>0.967</b>	<b>0.788</b>
My presence on social media gives others a good idea of who I am	0.863		
Social media interactions are a part of my everyday activity	0.936		
Provides a sense of realism and belonging	0.916		
Helps others better understand me	0.907		
Social media presence makes it seem more like my communication partners and I are in the same room	0.874		
Makes it seem more like we are having a face-to-face conversation	0.842		
Would allow others to know me well even if I only met them online	0.864		
I feel out of touch when I do not log onto a social media platform.	0.895		
<b>Electronic Word of Mouth (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004)</b>		<b>0.826</b>	<b>0.542</b>
Through social media, I can express and share my joy about a brand with others	0.729		
I feel good when I share with others on social media about brands I engage with	0.749		
I tell others about a great experience with a brand I have engaged with on social media	0.758		
My contributions with others on social media show my level of knowledge about the brand	0.708		
<b>Social Brand Engagement (Habibi et al., 2014; Laroche et al., 2012)</b>		<b>0.920</b>	<b>0.697</b>
I follow companies and their brands using social media	0.767		
I participate in the brand engagement activities on social media because I feel better afterwards	0.798		
I participate in the brand engagement activities on social media because I am able share my experiences with others	0.909		
I participate in the brand engagement activities to enable me reach personal goals	0.858		
I participate in the brand engagement activities on social media because of the emotional attachment I develop for the brand	0.835		
<b>Firm Generated Content (Kumar et al., 2016)</b>		<b>0.906</b>	<b>0.707</b>
I follow information posted by firms on their social media platform about their brands	0.843		
I follow brand related messages on the firm's social networking site to know more about the brand	0.903		
I share information and contribute to the firm's social media platform when the message posted relating to the brand is interesting	0.835		

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I follow brands social media platforms to learn of any on-going or upcoming brand activities	0.778		
<b>Commitment (Hudson et al., 2016; Sharma and Patterson, 2000)</b>		<b>0.889</b>	<b>0.729</b>
I am very committed to my engagement with the brand	0.752		
I am willing to make sacrifices to engage with the brand	0.855		
I should put maximum effort to maintain the relationship with the brand	0.943		
I have a strong sense of loyalty toward the brand	0.955		
I have unique feelings for the brand and therefore, keep me committed to engaging with it on social media	0.780		

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