Online engagement:
Implications of the 'like' button

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ABSTRACT

The main purpose of the study is to explore the implications of online engagement from a behavioural engagement perspective within Facebook brand communities through a sense-of-community lens. Convenience sampling was used, and 381 questionnaires were collected through the use of an online consumer panel. The results of the structural equation modelling show that consumers experience a sense of belonging as an implication of online engagement and that it also holds financial and non-financial benefits for the firm. Unlike previous studies, which were either confined to a one-sided view of behaviour, or lacking a clear focus on the possible implications, or the benefits of online engagement, especially for firms, the current study investigated engagement from a behavioural perspective (including various engagement activities), as well as reflecting the affective component of engagement through a sense of belonging; and it included various implications for brands. Marketing practitioners/brands should realise that 'Lurkers' could be of more value to brands than their so-called 'Superfans'.

It is evident that Facebook brand communities have positive financial, as well as non-financial implications for brands. Consequently, Facebook brand communities can yield valuable information that could help create strategies to target different types of consumers more effectively. Although studies have been done on engagement in virtual communities, they lack a strong theoretical foundation. This paper contributes to engagement and virtual community research by underpinning the online engagement behaviour in Facebook brand communities with a sense of community theory.

Keywords: Online engagement, Facebook brand communities, Facebook brand fan pages, Sense of belonging, online engagement activities, shopping intention, WOM, online social interaction propensity, sense of community theory

INTRODUCTION

With the proliferation of e-commerce, Social Network Sites (SNSs) are increasingly seen as platforms where information about a specific company or brand can be disseminated to consumers (Ángeles Oviedo-García, Muñoz-Expósito, Castellanos-Verdugo, & Sancho-Mejías, 2014:328). However, social media create opportunities for brands, not only to disseminate information to customers, but also to actively engage with them (Schamari & Schaefers, 2015:20). One such engagement platform is virtual communities. Virtual communities have become popular in society and even more so for brands, resulting in a topic of interest for researchers (González-Anta, Orengo, Zornoza, Peñarroja, & Martínez-Tur, 2019:1).

Members of a brand community that share an interest (e.g. specific brand) form a bond, turning the community into an influential engagement platform (Sawhney, Verona, & Prandelli, 2005:5). Facebook is regarded as one of the

main driving forces of the online media revolution (Tsai & Men, 2017:2), and Facebook brand pages, which present a distinct form of online brand community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001:412), provide endless engagement opportunities for firms. Shiau, Dwivedi, and Lai (2018:60), postulate that social media platforms, such as Facebook, provide huge competitive advantages for brands, if used effectively. Consequently, digital marketers and companies are increasingly incorporating SNSs into their brand strategies, in order to drive engagement and to increase conversations around their brands.

People worldwide are largely engaged with social media platforms (Alalwan, Rana, Dwivedi & Algharabat 2017:1177). Consequently, online brand communities (OBCs) are receiving increased attention; as scholars and marketing practitioners have realised the impact of brand communities, especially for customer engagement. However, social media engagement research is still fragmented and incomplete (Chahal, Wirtz & Verma, 2019:191; Demiray & Burnaz, 2019:115, Tsai & Men, 2017:2). Kaur, Paruthi, Islam and Hollebeek (2020:1) emphasised that, specifically in virtual communities, empirical research pertaining to the drivers and outcomes (amongst others) of engagement is limited.

Online engagement (OE) in social media brand pages holds the promise of benefits for the customer, and more importantly, for the brand (Shi, Chen & Chow, 2016:578), such as increased purchases, recommendations, brand trust and loyalty (Pongpaew, Speece & Tiangsoongnern, 2017:262; Seller & Laurindo, 2018:191; Thakur, 2016:151). It is evident that engaging brand communities is regarded as the ultimate asset for firms (Radeke, 2015), and, consequently, brands are increasing their social media marketing spend. It is thus imperative for brands to determine the return on investment on social media spend, such as Facebook brand pages (Sitta, Faulkner, & Stern, 2018:18), and to understand customer engagement.

More specifically, it is essential that brands understand how to encourage customers to engage with their brand pages, in order to encourage meaningful interactions, and more importantly, which benefits, if any, they stand to gain from these engagements (Demiray & Burnaz, 2019:115-116; 121).

A considerable amount of knowledge has been generated on customer engagement, but Harmeling, Moffett, Arnold, and Carlson (2017:313) noted that varying "definitions, concepts and arguments" used to investigate engagement are creating confusion in the research community. Academics have yet to agree on what exactly engagement entails, with regard to its measurement and whether it should be investigated, merely from a behavioural perspective, as is evident in the research of Algesheimer, Dholakia, and Herrmann (2005:21), or from a psychological perspective, as for example by the research of Hollebeek, Glynn, and Brodie (2014:149).

In addition, some researchers have investigated engagement from both the behavioural and the psychological perspectives (Paruthi & Kaur, 2017:128; Thakur, 2018:48). While consumers' motivation to participate in OBCs have received much attention (Bushelow, 2012:1; Muntinga Moorman & Smit, 2011:13; Sung, Kim, Kwon & Moon, 2010:430), the influence of consumers' personal traits on online interaction or engagement (Online Social Interaction Propensity) in brand communities has been neglected.

Furthermore, only a limited amount of research has so far explored the implications of the 'like' button for brands (customers join an online brand community by clicking the 'like' button on Facebook) (Bushelow, 2012:1). It is clear that SNSs, such as Facebook brand pages hold benefits for consumers and companies alike (Hudson et al., 2016:28). The anticipated implications/benefits of engagement are starting to appear in literature (Carlson, Rahman, Voola & de Vries, 2018:83; Chen, Weng & Huang, 2018:410); but the empirical corroboration of these implications beyond satisfaction and loyalty is still scarce. In addition, Bushelow (2012:4) found that engagement with Facebook fan pages does not necessarily lead to loyalty or to purchase intention and this calls for further research, in order to explore what other implications these pages might have for a brand.

In the context of this study, engagement is operationalised, as the varying levels of brand-related behaviour whereby customers participate in Facebook brand pages (Lee, Hosanagar & Nair, 2018:5105), while the psychological perspective of engagement is captured in the sense of belonging (Brodie, Hollebeek, Jurić & Ilić, 2013:110) that community members experience. This connectedness is mainly reflective of the relational aspects of engagement (Blazevic, Wiertz, Cotte, de Ruyter, & Keeling, 2014:94), and this aspect is envisaged as an implication of behavioural engagement (Freitas & Almeida, 2017:87-88).

Furthermore, it should be noted that routine electronic interaction patterns can mistakenly be regarded as community behaviour (Blanchard & Markus, 2002:3567); and thus, merely participating in online activities has to be

supported by a sense of belonging, before it can justly be called an online community (van Doorn, Lemon, Mittal, Nass, Pick, Pirner & Verhoef, 2010:257).

Social media, as a communication tool, specifically Facebook, is not only interactive, but also simultaneously communal and participatory – suggesting thereby that consumers join Facebook brand communities, where they can interact and participate in online activities with other consumers. This has become a common occurrence on social media platforms - groups of people, who share similar interests create a virtual community, in which the members share a sense of community with other members.

This sense of community (SOC) refers to "members' perception of voluntary engagement and the sharing of information, ideas and opinions" (Lyu & JKim 2020:119). The sense-of-community (SOC) theory is an appropriate lens, through which to explore the antecedents and the implications of such relationships in Facebook brand pages, since it is widely applied in community research and, more recently, in social media (Zhang, 2010:225).

To advance the understanding of the complex concept of OE for both academia and industry, the purpose of this study is to investigate OE in the context of online communities, specifically Facebook brand pages, from a behavioural perspective. Consumers' Social Interaction Propensity is proposed as an antecedent to OE, while the implications/ benefits gained from OE are set to be the outcomes. Overall, this research will determine whether Facebook brand pages are indeed just another communication tool or whether the various brands can expect financial, as well as other non-financial benefits, from engagement in these communities.

The objectives are thus three-fold: (a) to determine the role of consumers' Social Interaction Propensity, as a driver of OE, (b) to determine the benefits, if any (financial and non-financial), that are gained by brands and consumers from OE in online brand communities, and (c) to determine the applicability of Consumers' Online Brand Related Activities (COBRAs), as a measurement of OE from a behavioural perspective.

The contribution of this study lies in investigating OE in Facebook brand communities from a behavioural perspective, using SOC theory. Our results offer a promising starting point for the understanding of OE in a Facebook brand community, as well as the implications thereof. The study offers several significant contributions. Firstly, OE is investigated, according to a typology of online engagement activities. By doing this, more detailed information can be provided regarding the different types of consumers, specifically Lurkers and Superfans, and how their engagement benefits the firm.Secondly, the study makes use of the SOC theory, which has hitherto been underutilised, thereby leading to a deeper understanding of OE. Thirdly, the findings extend the existing knowledge on engagement, by demonstrating that the affective commitment of engagement (psychological perspective), as operationalised in SOB follows from consumer-enacted engagement behaviour. The study's particular focus on the implications of the 'like' button on Facebook, and the concomitant financial and non-financial implications/benefits, has led to several interesting and unexpected practical discoveries. Structural equation modelling (SEM) has revealed that the non-financial benefits are the most prominent outcome of OE. Surprisingly, the main findings of the study show that users, who showed less active participatory-engagement behaviour could be of more value to firms than the so-called 'Superfans'.

BRAND COMMUNITIES AND ENGAGEMENT

Various terms are used to investigate engagement, such as customer engagement (Islam & Rahman, 2016:40; Thakur, 2018:48), consumer brand engagement (Hollebeek, 2011:790) and brand community engagement (Algesheimer et al., 2005:21). Since the current study investigates Facebook brand pages, it is thus appropriate to refer to it as online engagement (OE), as with Mollen and Wilson (2010:924) and Paruthi and Kaur (2017:128).

Brand communities came into existence before social media; and they are a particular type of social group that is centred around a brand (Rosenthal & Brito, 2017:383). The members of a brand community demonstrate their consciousness of a kind, they observe certain traditions, they practise certain rituals; and they have a sense of moral responsibility towards one another (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001:418-425). The Internet has created a space where non-geographically bound brand communities could be established spontaneously in cyberspace (Sung et al., 2010:431), and thus, firms are creating online or virtual brand communities, in which consumers can come together.

These virtual communities are recognised as a tool for consumer-brand relationship-building that helps firms to manage their brand(s) (Sung et al., 2010:431). Virtual communities are "social aggregations that emerge from the net,

when enough people carry on those public discussions for long enough, with sufficient human feelings, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (Rheingold, 2000:6).

In the setting of social media, community members generally join a firm or the brand's page, where they can join the conversation by, for example, asking and answering questions about the brand or firm, making comments about the brand's products or services, sharing the brand's posts, sharing their experiences, interacting with the company, and asking and answering other members' questions about the brand. Facebook initiated community pages in 2010, whereby Facebook users could opt in by 'liking' a specific brand page, which is dedicated to a topic or experience, with which the members of that community can connect (Radeke, 2015). Facebook brand pages allow brands to create an online community of brand users through the SNS (Bushelow, 2012:1).

Consumers can engage directly with a brand and other consumers by participating in online conversations that are embedded in a brand's SNS page, such as a Facebook-brand page or group (Tsai & Men, 2017:6).

On social media, brand pages have similar characteristics to those of brand communities, but some differences do exist (Seller & Laurindo, 2018:201). For instance, the brand pages on social media are also used to forward complaints and suggestions to the firm, whilst the brand communities often share a more intense consciousness of kind and moral responsibility (Seller & Laurindo, 2018:202) than do the Facebook brand pages. While researchers often prefer the term 'brand page', it is common to refer to these pages as 'fan pages' by practitioners. The two terms are used interchangeably for the purpose of this study, when referring to a special type of online brand community, namely Facebook brand fan pages.

With their helpful, interactive and relationship centric nature (Tsai & Men, 2013:76), OBCs form the ideal context within which to study engagement. Dholakia, Bagozzi and Pearo (2004:249-250) were the first to investigate virtual community participation by looking at how community members engage in certain online activities, in, for example, online chat systems and multi-player virtual games. The study by Dholakia et al. (2004:241-263) was executed before Facebook's appearance in 2004. Thereafter, as the interest in Facebook grew amongst the research community, various studies measured engagement through the use of liking, commenting and sharing posts on Facebook brand pages (Luarn, Lin & Chiu, 2015:506; Phua & Ahn, 2016:550). OE has evolved significantly since the study by Dholakia et al. (2004:241-263) was executed, as social media have become an irreplaceable aspect of human interaction.

Facebook enables interpersonal interaction via the social values that assist members in establishing long-term relationships on Facebook (Yang & Lin, 2014:24); but a gap exists to form a more contemporary understanding of how, from a behavioural perspective, OE in Facebook brand communities can lead to benefits for firms, while also taking into consideration the psychological perspective of engagement via the affective commitment of OE.

In the literature, customer engagement is generally defined as an interaction beyond a purchase transaction and it includes a "customer's and potential customers', or non-customers' interactions and connections with the firm's offerings" (Vivek, Beatty & Morgan, 2012:133). Another well recognised definition states that "consumer engagement in a virtual brand community involves specific interactive experiences between consumers and the brand, and/or other members of the community" (Brodie et al., 2013:107).

From these definitions, it can be deduced that some interaction needs to occur between the firm/brand and the consumer, in order for engagement to take place. More recently, Seller and Laurindo (2018:202) defined engagement as the interactions between firms' Facebook pages and their fans. Since this study uses a similar approach by operationalising interactions in the various levels of brand-related activities in which consumers participate on brand pages, OE is defined for the purposes of this study, as customers' online activities and behavioural manifestations that transpire in a specific online community that has a brand or a firm focus.

Engagement, as a construct, can be viewed, either from a behavioural perspective, which includes participation in activities related to the brand (Tsai & Men, 2017:6), or from a psychological perspective, which includes aspects, such as affection and conscious attention, related to a consumer's state of mind (Paruthi & Kaur, 2017:128). The behavioural perspective appears to be central in the literature (Brodie, Hollebeek, Jurić, Ilić, 2011:260) and, furthermore, brand pages not only create an online presence for a brand but they also allow the brand to actively engage with its consumers via various brand-related activities.

However, there is little consensus on the measurement of engagement from a behavioural perspective. It ranges from measuring engagement very simplistically, based on consumers 'liking' a brand on Facebook (Wallace, Buil & de Chernatony 2014:33) to more complex measures, based on the various behaviours, or those activities in which consumers participate (Muntinga et al., 2011:15-16). It has been argued that consumers are engaged, whenever they use the 'like' button on Facebook (Wallace et al., 2014:41); but there is a debate regarding whether 'likers' are truly engaged with the brand, or not (Wallace, Buil, de Chernatony, & Hogan., 2014:103).

The difference between the "interest to participate" should not be confused with "the desire to engage" (Freitas & Almeida, 2017:88). Consequently, this study will expand on measuring engagement only through the 'likes' on Facebook; and it will investigate engagement through the use of a range of different Facebook activities – reflecting not only the consumption behaviour of 'liking', but also the more-engaged behaviour, such as contributing and creating activities.

DEVELOPMENT OF A THEORETICAL MODEL

Theoretical foundation

Social media managers provide brand and product-related content on SNS, in order to engage with their customers, to trigger their interests, and to build relationships (Hudson et al., 2016:29). The nurturing of these relationships and the engagement of members in a brand community is reflective of a sense of community. The Sense of Community (SOC) theory has previously been used in the discussion of offline and online communities (Koh, Kim & Kim, 2003:75-94; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001:412-432). Since the existence of SNSs, online communities have been generating much interest in the academic arena.

A study investigating the sense of virtual community (SOVC) was conducted by Koh et al. (2003:75-94), who defined a virtual community as "a group of people with common interests or goals, interacting predominantly in cyberspace." This definition, as well as the work of Koh et al. (2003:75-94), is based on SOC theory, which is defined as "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another, and to the group, and that they share a faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment together" (McMillan & Chavis, 1986:9).

Membership, influence, integration and the fulfilment of needs, as well as the shared emotional connection is reflective of the four elements of SOC (McMillan & Chavis, 1986:9). These elements of the SOC theory are used to discuss the constructs under investigation.

Membership (the first element of SOC) speaks of "feelings of belonging or sharing a sense of personal relatedness, which has boundaries", meaning that you either belong to a community, or you do not (McMillan & Chavis, 1986:9). Membership is of the utmost importance; as a community could not exist without its members. Based on the brand as common interests, members create SOC via their perceived affiliation (membership) with the brand, and with other members (Swimberghe, Mahmoud, Brent & Astakhova (2018:175). The members in a community have the power to exert influence over other community members – thereby relating to the second element of SOC, influence.

Influence refers to a two-way relationship; members must feel that they matter and that they can influence the group; and furthermore, the group should add value to the members, who belong to it (McMillan & Chavis, 1986:9). Moreover, SOC motivates consumers to participate in social media brand communities (Swimberghe et al., 2018:171). The membership of community members will only continue, if they feel that they receive benefits for belonging to the community, or that their needs are being met through the group's resources and the members' participation (McMillan & Chavis, 1986:9).

This refers to the third element of SOC, integration and the fulfilment of needs. Shared emotional connection, the fourth element of SOC is the mutual commitment and belief among members, and the fact that they will share similar experiences (McMillan & Chavis, 1986:9). This shared emotional connection can also be tied back to the psychological perspective of OE, even though it is not the main focus of this study.

Although customers may be motivated to join Facebook brand pages for various reasons, such as entertainment or searching for information, they may have more needs met than they initially anticipated. When engaging with the Facebook brand page through participating in various activities, based on their membership, the shared emotional connection reinforced by the two-way influence from the brand and the community is the ideal situation in which to experience a sense of belonging (SOB).

The SOB in an online community is encapsulated in the element of membership. SOB indicates whether the members feel that they belong with other members of the OBC – whether they are socially connected and a part of the community; as they develop a shared consciousness, (Freitas & Almeida, 2017:90). In addition, the need to belong is often a motivator to visit SNS (Beyens, Frison, & Eggermont 2016:5). In this study, SOB is postulated as the benefit for consumers that "Like" (to belong to) a Facebook-brand page (community); but this could also result in benefits for the brands since that members that are socially connected may continue to remain members of the brand page.

OE activities (consuming, contributing, creating) in an online brand community (OBC) can be explained through

the element of influence, as influence indicates a two-way, reciprocal relationship between the individual member and the community (other members of the Facebook brand page and the brand). The members of a community can participate in activities (contribute, consume or create) initiated by the firm, or by other members, and this interaction can, in turn, lead to higher levels of enthusiasm from the member, which then have a positive influence on engagement (Ángeles Oviedo-García et al., 2014:334).

Consequently, the user participates in more activities, such as posting pictures, reading and writing reviews and liking content, thereby leading to continued involvement with the brand page.

Consumers that have a propensity for online social interaction may be driven by this need to "like" (join) Facebook brand pages, in order to have this need met. An on-line social interaction propensity can be explained through the integration and fulfilment of the needs' element of SOC. It links with consumers' willingness to interact online, such as when members of a community feel that their needs are being met through participating in the community, they might then be even more prone to engage with other members in the community.

The members of a community, as explained by SOC theory, have a shared emotional connection; and they influence one another by participating in various online activities. The shared emotional connection with the brand, with posts and comments from the brand, and with other consumers could influence consumers' intention to purchase the brand's products, which thereby creates a financial benefit for the brand. Word-of-mouth (WOM), a non-financial benefit of engagement, also relates to the element of shared emotional connection, which refers to members forming a bond when interacting with each other on similar experiences with the brand, thus sharing experiences with each other, and consequently resulting in WOM.

Following Lizzo and Liechty (2020:1), who confirmed the four elements of the SOC theory in a Facebook leisure-based community, we postulate that, according to the SOC theory consumers 'like' brand pages for various reasons, such as their need to interact online with others (OSIP), and by becoming members, they connect with the brand, as well as forming a connectedness with other community members (SOB). This shared emotional connectedness, and the fact members influence each other; and are also influenced by the brand's communication on the page, could influence members to purchase the brand (Lyu & Kim 2020:128-129; Yahia, Al-Neama, & Kerbache, 2018:16-18), and/or to spread positive word-of-mouth inside, but also outside the brand page community (Alalwan et al., 2017:1186).

As members' needs are fulfilled and as the brand page becomes integrated into their online presence, they should continue to use the brand page, and to remain involved with the firm's products and services that are offered on the brand pages.

Below is a depiction of the conceptual model for the study, which is underpinned by SOC theory, as explained above.

FIGURE 1
PROPOSED CONCEPTUAL MODEL
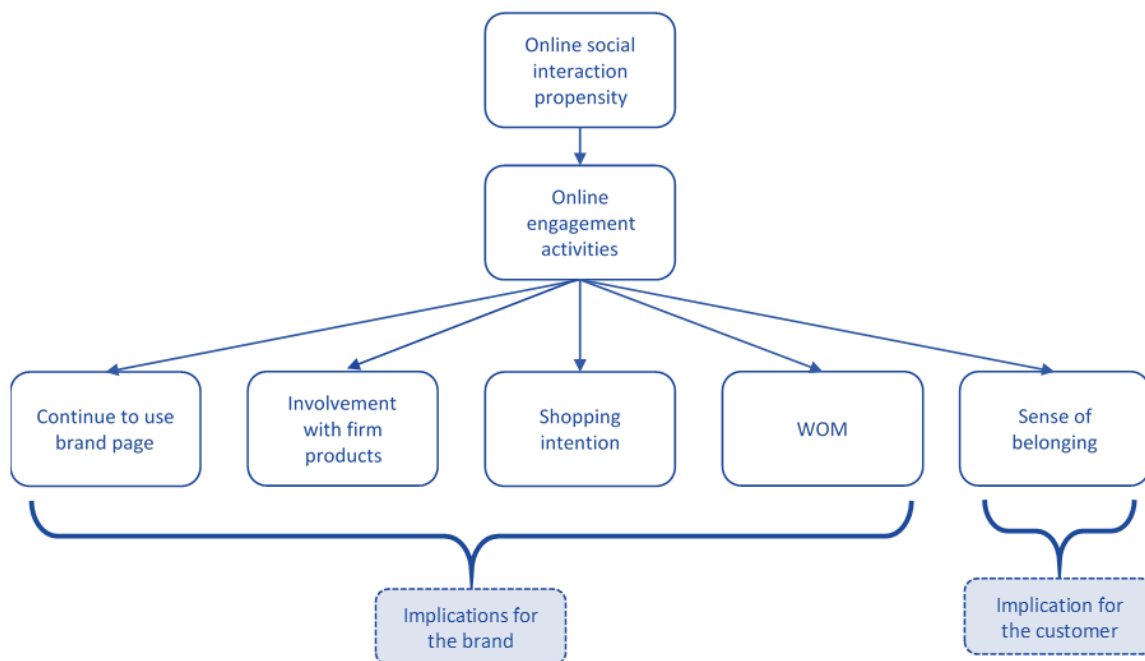
Online social interaction propensity as an antecedent of engagement

Despite the commercial relationships between brands and consumers in Facebook brand pages, consumers visit social media platforms to satisfy their own personal needs (Erkan & Evans 2018:617). A consumer's willingness to interact with others in an online environment can influence their behaviour with regard to how they engage and participate online (Blazevic et al., 2014:90); thus, the consumer's intention and willingness (social interaction propensity) to interact (engage) are of importance. Online social interaction propensity (OSIP) refers to an individual's trait-based predisposition to participate in online interactions (Wiertz & de Ruyter, 2007:358).

This means that OSIP is an individual characteristic, which is underlying to a consumer's preferences for online interaction, as well as their interaction behaviour in varying online contexts. OSIP illuminates consumers' need to and proneness to interact with other consumers online (Blazevic et al., 2014:87). Consequently, one could not investigate OE without taking OSIP into account.

It has been argued that OSIP is a different construct than, for example, the willingness to communicate offline (Blazevic et al., 2014:89). Also, it has an indirect influence on the intention to purchase social media commerce (s-commerce) (Bianchi, Andrews, Wiese & Fazal-E-Hasan, 2017:484), and consumers' willingness to interact with others in an online environment can influence their behaviour with regard to how they engage and participate online (Blazevic et al., 2014:97).

Online interaction by consumers is a valuable information source; and it has a positive impact on sharing experiences, resulting in higher levels of participation – meaning that OSIP has a positive association with engagement behaviour (Blazevic et al., 2014:87). When thinking about SOC theory, one of the four elements – integration and the fulfilment of needs – are strongly linked with OSIP. This implies that consumers with a strong need for online social integration would probably 'Like' a Facebook brand page, in order to become a member, and thereby fulfil this need.

Fulfilling this need implies interacting and participating in the community. When members of a community feel that their needs are being met through participating in the community, they might be even more prone to engage with other members in the community. Furthermore, a major contribution of OSIP is the explanatory power it has for online engagement (Blazevic et al., 2014:89). Therefore, it is hypothesised that:

H_1: Online social interaction propensity significantly predicts online engagement.

Consumers' willingness to interact with others in an online environment is also evident in the behavioural perspective of OE, since consumers interact or engage in certain activities on Facebook brand pages.

Online engagement activities

Participating in brand-related activities online, reflects the behavioural perspective of OE (Freitas and Almeida, 2017:88). Various studies have attempted to explain and create typologies related to consumers' online activities (Blazevic et al., 2014:87-100; Muntinga et al., 2011:13; Tsai & Men, 2013:77), depending on the level of involvement of consumers.

Consumers' online brand related activities (COBRAs) can be categorised into three dimensions or types, according to Muntinga et al. (2011:15-16). Each type has an increasing level of involvement with brand-related content on social media. The dimensions are (1) consuming (including activities, such as viewing pictures and videos, listening to audio, reading comments/reviews); (2) contributing (including activities, such as product ratings, joining a brand page, commenting on brand posts); and (3) creating (including activities, such as publishing brand-related weblogs, uploading video, audio, or images, writing brand-related articles and product reviews) (Muntinga et al., 2011:16). The commitment of members to specific social network site also influences them to create content (Wang, Cao, & Park, 2019:484).

Consumers' online Facebook activities can also be considered, according to a typology developed by Tsai and Men (2013:84), which asserts that online brand related activities can either be based on reactive consumption, or on proactive contributions. Tsai and Men (2013:80-82) based their study on the work of Muntinga et al. (2011:13), mentioned previously, and they were the first to empirically test the conceptual items and typology of Muntinga et al. (2011:35-36).

Instead of the proposed three factors, they only found proof of a two-factor solution: consuming activities and contributing activities (Tsai & Men, 2013:82). Another study also makes mention of a similar two category classification: lurking or observing behaviour (consumption activities) and posting or generating behaviour (contributional activities)

(Blazevic et al., 2014:88). Busalim, Razak Che Hussain and Fadhil Yusof (2017:6288) mention that CE can be described, according to an intensity level of, either user participation or involvement – which also suggests that online users can either actively participate or merely observe.

Creating activities are explained to be the "ultimate level of online brand-related activity" (Muntinga et al., 2011:17) – implying that when consumers create and even contribute content, it is more valuable to a brand, than when consumers merely consume information. Previous research indicates that brands should pay more attention to, and even reward, consumers who actively contribute to the online community, since these consumers are more beneficial to the brand than other consumers (Gummerus et al., 2012:870).

Consequently, consumers who engage in consuming activities are often neglected. Consumers engaging only in consuming activities are considered to be Lurkers; as they merely observe, and do not actively comment or create content on the brand page. Consumers engaging in contributing activities are considered to be Superfans, since they participate and are very visible on the brand pages.

OE on brand pages in social media, through the various activities, such as sharing or commenting, hold the promise of benefits for the customer as well as, and more importantly, for the brand itself (Shi et al., 2016:587).

Implications of online engagement

Engagement that is viewed from a behavioural perspective can be linked to communication through digital technologies, such as SNSs and how consumers interact with firms, including purchasing and non-purchasing behaviour and consumer-to-consumer interactions with the brand (Gummerus et al., 2012:858). Companies are increasingly using SNSs to create and grow brand communities to take advantage of the various potential benefits of brand communities that are based on social media.

Five implications or benefits were identified for the current study, that are reflective of the financial and non-financial implications for brands. These implications or benefits of OE are twofold and they can be divided into benefits for the customer (SOB) and benefits for the firm (financial value, social value and information value). Information value is divided into continuance of using the brand page and involvement with the firm's products.

For the customer, information pertaining to product details, promotions, price, availability and product, or brand-related aspects, can be used to optimise purchasing decisions (Lee et al., 2018:5107), and a brand page can also be a source of entertainment, when the brand related content employs humour, or any other emotional appeal. But, most importantly, Facebook is a platform where consumers can experience social interaction with other members of the Facebook brand community, when engaging in online activities (Phua, Jin & Kim, 2017:413), meaning that social ties and relationships are thereby formed. Consumers' SOB is, therefore, especially important, when considering the benefits for the consumer.

According to the existing research, there are several benefits of having engaged consumers on a Facebook brand page for the firm, since value co-creation is rooted in the fact that consumers are no longer merely passive participants; but they play an active part by creating value through engaging experiences. This means that value is no longer created merely inside the firm, but also outside of it, by the customers (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004:5).

Customers' intention to shop or buy relates to financial value, peer communication (WOM) – as an indirect financial benefit – it also relates to social value, as well as to consumers' intention to continue using the brand page and their involvement with the firm's products relate to information and relationship value.

Consumer benefits/implications

Consumers are innately social beings and they need access to relationships and groups (Sacco & Ismail, 2014:359), which relate to their need-to-belong. Whereas in the past, this need to belong was satisfied by face-to-face interactions, with the emergence of technology and social networks, this need can now be satisfied through computer-mediated-communication (Sacco & Ismail, 2014:359). Facebook is a platform where consumers experience social interaction with other members of the Facebook brand community, when engaging in online activities (Phua et al., 2017:413), meaning that social ties and relationships are formed, and thus SOB is especially important when considering the benefits for the consumer.

Virtual brand communities are receiving increased attention as scholars, and marketing practitioners have realised the impact of brand communities, especially on customer engagement (Tsai & Men, 2017:2). Facebook brand pages allow consumers to engage with brands and other consumers who 'liked' the same page or group, and

these consumers often 'like' or comment on each other's posts, creating thereby positive group dynamics, as well as a deeper sense of community, or of belonging to the group (Tsai & Men, 2017:17).

SOB indicates a consumer's feeling of attachment to, or identification with, a SNS, or, in this case, a brand page or group on Facebook (Lin, Fan & Chau, 2014:601). It is argued that SOB is developed and, more importantly, strengthened, when a consumer has a satisfactory usage experience with a SNS over a period of time (Lin et al., 2014:602). As mentioned previously, Facebook users or consumers can participate in various online engagement activities, such as commenting on the brand's, or on each other's posts or making updates and this type of communication helps to maintain and enhance social connectedness in an online environment. Thus, a stronger connectedness that is created through online participation, would be likely to increase consumers' SOB.

SOB in an OBC can be explained through the element of membership of SOC theory (McMillan & Chavis, 1986:9). Members of a community typically want to help other members; and they are interested in jointly participating in such activities (Algesheimer et al., 2005:21), in this manner, thereby creating a SOB for consumers. Consumers tend to focus on the benefits of being members of a community, rather than on the costs thereof (Zheng, Cheung, Lee & Liang, 2015:92).

The current research investigates SOB, as an outcome of OE activities, rather than as a predictor. The reasoning for this is because SNS users are reliant on the value they gain, when using SNSs; thus, the more value that is gained from using (participating in online activities), the more likely they would be to develop a SOB (Lin et al., 2014:602). SOB strongly relates to affective commitment, and Vivek et al. (2012:128) propose that customer engagement would positively associate with an individual's affective commitment. Therefore as Facebook fans are members of the brand pages, SOC theory posits that they would feel a sense of belonging, and it is hypothesised that:

H_2: Online engagement significantly predict a sense of belonging.

Firm benefits/implications

Consumers engage in a number of activities or behaviours that reinforce their relationship with a brand (Gummerus et al., 2012:858). They are inclined to go beyond merely purchasing products (financial implications/value) (Thakur, 2018:48), with several additional benefits for the firm (non-financial implications), such as recommendations, WOM, value co-creation, building and enhancing relationships, customer insights and information, brand trust and loyalty (Pongpaew, Speece & Tiangsoongnern, 2017:262; Seller & Laurindo, 2018:191; Thakur, 2016:151).

Khan, Hollebeek, Fatma, Islam, and Rahman, (2019:171) posit that consumers are increasingly making use of online services and purchases and therefore, research in this domain is imperative, in order to gain insight into the benefits that brands stand to gain.

During 2018, the use of online purchasing was on a steady rise, with almost 70% of adults that are active online, making use of some form of online purchasing (BusinessTech, 2018). Saygılı and Sütütemiz (2020:61) confirm that online purchasing should be treated and viewed differently to physical or traditional purchasing. With the growth in SNSs, it has been suggested that consumers are increasingly considering social media to make online purchases (Bianchi et al., 2017:467). Social commerce – when consumers make purchases through a firm's social media page – is still a relatively new and unexplored concept. Social commerce has evolved from, and is believed to be a subset of, e-commerce, combining the latter and social network sites (Algharabat, & Rana, 2020:1).

Consequently, social-commerce is more interactive and participatory than e-commerce, since it includes user generated content; the business goal is socially related; and it focuses on sharing information, collaborating and networking, where the consumer is part of an interactive community (Busalim et al., 2017:6288). Thus, it can be seen that s-commerce includes a wider range of activities, of which shopping is merely one.

According to Bhattacharyya, and Boseb, (2020:1) s-commerce is on the rise and research into this area is till unexplored. A strong association with a brand community suggests that group members are more likely to purchase and support the brand (Wilimzig, 2011:20), and as consumers get involved with the brand community, they are also more inclined to be influenced by, and to follow the purchasing behaviour, of other community members (Punjumiemi, 2009:77).

WOM marketing in an online context is defined by Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh and Gremler, (2004:39), 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." Due to the nature and advancement of technology, it is appropriate to look at WOM in an online context (Islam and Rahman, 2016:46). WOM also helps firms to increase sales (Romero, 2017:3). Social media has opened a dialogue between firms and its consumers that allows for information to be exchanged (Seller and Laurindo, 2018:191). This is of significance, as in the past firms had one-way communication channels via, for example, television and radio. Very little interaction, or none, took place between consumers and the firm.

Previous research indicates that consumers who engage with brands through SNSs experience a stronger connection with the brand and they would then, in turn, share information about the brand through WOM (Andrews, Bianchi, Wiese, Cuneo & Fazal-E-Hasan, 2018:33). Existing research also demonstrates that customer engagement leads to recommendations and brand advocacy (Potdar, Joshi, Harish, Baskerville & Wongthongtham, 2018:22). WOM that is consumer-created information is more credible than brand-created information, because of the trustworthiness of the information source (Thakur, 2018:50). This is evident from WOM, which is, to some extent responsible for consumers' purchasing decisions (Bughin, Doogan & Vetvik, 2010:2). Therefore, it can be considered as non-transactional financial benefits to the firm. For the purpose of this study, WOM is seen as peer communication about a brand, or brand community, or user generated content that translates into social value, or a non-financial benefit to brands.

Insights gained as a result of consumers' involvement with a firm's products on brand pages (for instance, product reviews or complaints) provide valuable information to help guide marketing and managerial strategies and decision-making. Increasing the interaction or involvement of consumers or community members assists in developing stronger relationships between members and the firm, which in turn also adds value to the brand.

Algharabat, Rana, Alalwan, Baabdullah & Gupta (2020:3) postulate that involvement can be explained as the extent to which a consumer feels that the brand aligns with their own interests and needs. This indicates that a consumer will be involved with a brand, engage with the brand; and that this will in the end lead to benefits for the brand.

For example, Starbucks, a firm with a strong online presence, with 37 190 027 likes, as of August 2018, uses information gathered from their OBC to inform strategy – with great results (Radeke, 2015). Starbucks designed their brand community with the consumers in the centre of it all – consumers sharing their passion for coffee, and other Starbucks products, thereby generating content that would inspire other potential customers, and creating information that the brand could use. Consequently, an engaged brand community with members, who are strongly involved with a firm's products online, is a valuable asset for a firm (Radeke, 2015).

It was found that involvement with a firm's products also has a positive effect on customer satisfaction (San-Martin & López-Catalán, 2013:156). Furthermore, Vivek et al. (2012:133) proposed that engagement is positively associated with involvement with the brand via the brand's community.

Consumers' intention to continue using the brand page refers to consumers' willingness to continue visiting, participating and interacting with the brand page (Shi et al., 2016:586-587). According to Verhoef, Reinartz, and Krafft (2010:), engagement is anticipated to contribute to retention and to repeat behaviour. It was found that consumers join fan pages quite easily, but they need valuable information and a fun and entertaining experience, in order to be satisfied and to inspire their loyalty, which ensures continued usage of the page (Huang & Chen, 2018:133).

Emotional reactions of consumers, which are linked to the shared emotional connection of SOC theory, also contribute to long-term usage of the brand page (Lin et al., 2014:601), implying that content evoking the correct emotion or emotional connection shared with other members could lead to continued usage, which connects members with each other (SOB), as well as to the brand in the OBC. Chahal et al., (2019:201) confirmed that engagement leads to loyal behaviour, such as continued usage.

When considering the SOC theory, all four elements (membership, influence, integration and the fulfilment of needs, as well as shared emotional connection) underpin the implications, or the benefits for the firm. Firstly, membership is needed, in order to be a part of the brand community, and this is initiated by 'liking' or joining a brand page. As long as the members of a community have a strong need to belong, they will remain members of the community, and therefore, their needs would thereby be fulfilled, by continuing to use the brand page. Their involvement with the firm's products would also mean that the community is integrated into their lives and this would be reinforced with continued usage. Shared emotional connection means that members share experiences not only with the brand, but also with one another, which relates to WOM (social value).

This indicates that members, through their various activities, would also influence one another, which could eventually lead members to buy the firm's products; and this relates to financial value. Members in a brand community are inclined to support the products and brands related to the community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001:9). Moreover, SOC drives consumers to participate in social online brand communities, as well as leading to positive word-of-mouth; since consumers enjoy sharing their experiences on social media platforms (Swimberghe et al., 2018:171; Alalwan et al. 2017:1181, 1186).

Consumers interact with other consumers on SNS, such as Facebook brand pages, in order to gather information about a brand and its offerings, and this interaction via engagement behaviour, influences purchase behaviour (Yahia, Al-Neama, & Kerbache, 2018:17). In addition, members of a SNS brand community have a more positive view of the brand and frequently, this causes an increased purchase intention (Beukeboom, Kerkhof, & de Vries, 2015:27).

Based on the above-mentioned discussion and the SOC theory, it is hypothesised that:

H3: Online engagement significantly predicts purchase intention.

H4: Online engagement significantly predicts WOM.

H5: Online engagement significantly predicts the continued intention to use Facebook brand pages.

H6: Online engagement significantly predicts online involvement with a firm's products through Facebook brand pages.

METHODOLOGY

Sampling, data collection and the measurement instrument will be discussed in this section.

Sampling and data collection

The target population from which the data that were collected consisted of adults (18 years and older), who belong to a Facebook brand community, residing in South Africa. A sample size of 381 useable responses was collected through the use of non-probability convenience sampling. The data were collected by a reputable market research firm through the use of a consumer panel that was utilised. Participation in a consumer research panel is done on a voluntary basis; and incentives are provided.

These incentives are based on the agreement between the panel member and the research company. Individuals who participate in consumer-research panels give their consent to participate in research studies upon their registration for the research panel. These individuals gave their consent again, before participating in the specific survey. This means that every consumer panel member goes through a double opt-in process before participating in the study.

The consumer panel members also have the option to opt out at any given in time during the survey. A link with the questionnaire was sent to the participants, who are panel members of the market research firm, in order to enable them to complete the questionnaire.

Measurement instrument

The scales used in the study were drawn from the existing literature; and they are reflective of the context of the study. All items, except for behavioural engagement activities, were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, which ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Behavioural engagement activities were measured by asking the consumers how frequently they participate in various Facebook activities on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (very regularly, i.e. all the time).

Behavioural engagement activities were measured by asking the respondents how often they participated in activities such as "viewing photos" and "reading user comments". The items were adapted from Tsai and Men (2013:80); and eleven specific activities were identified. Blazevic et al. (2014:92) contributed, from their findings, the concept of online social interaction propensity; and a four-item scale was used, which included items, such as: "I am someone who likes actively to participate in the online discussions". The scales adapted from Lin et al. (2014:603) included SOB – four items (for example, "I feel as if I belong with others involved in the firm's/brand's Facebook page").

Continuance intention – three items (for example, "I expect my engagement with the firm's/brand's Facebook pages to continue in the future) and the intention to engage in online shopping – three items (for example, "If it was available, I would plan to purchase products or services directly through the firm's/brand's Facebook pages"). San-Martín, López-Catalán, and Ramón-Gerónimo's (2013:362) three-item scale measures' involvement with the firms' products, and this included items, such as "My level of involvement with the products and services offered through the firm's/brand's Facebook pages to which I belong, is high".

The peer communication (WOM) five-item scale of Wang, Yu, and Wei (2012:203) included items, such as "I talk to my social media friends about the firm's/brand's- Facebook pages to which I belong".

Information of the frequency-of-use and the demographics were collected and there was also a screening question to ensure that the respondents belonged to Facebook brand pages. Dessart (2017:376) notes the benefits of investigating multiple-brand communities; since this does not limit the scope for generalisability. Therefore, the focus of this study was not merely on one brand's Facebook page, but rather it included numerous Facebook brand communities. Ethical clearance for the study was obtained, and the questionnaire was pre-tested with 20 members of the proposed sample population. No foreseeable problems were identified.

RESULTS

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used to validate the factor structure. This was followed by structural equation modelling (SEM) to test the hypotheses. The SEM analysis was conducted by using the IBM AMOS version 25. The purpose of this analysis is to evaluate the structural relationships of the variables specified in the conceptual model (Figure 1). The choice of IBM AMOS was motivated by its covariance approach, which provides more robust estimations of the model-fit indices, as well as by its visual representation of the measurement model.

Before presenting the CFA and the SEM results, the demographic profile and the descriptive statistics are provided, in order to give an overview of the sample.

Demographic profile of the respondents

The demographic data of the respondents in the sample are presented in Table 1.

From Table 1, it is evident that the sample was slightly skewed towards females and more mature respondents. Almost half of the respondents were 36 years and older. The reason for this could be that the demographics of a typical Facebook user are moving towards the older generations; while the younger generation are switching to other social media platforms, such as Snapchat (Chaffey, 2018).

The sample was fairly educated, with more than half of the respondents having a tertiary qualification.

The majority of the sample (58.2%) were serious social media users, spending more than four hours a week on social media, while 41.2% of the sample spent at least four hours or more on Facebook. As many as 4% of the sample were extremely heavy users of Facebook, spending more than 20 hours per week on Facebook.

TABLE 1
DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION FOR THE SAMPLE

	N	%
Gender		
Male	176	46.2
Female	205	53.8
Total	381	100
Age		
18-35	95	25.0
36-55	181	47.5
56+	105	27.6
Total	381	100
Education		
Schooling	94	24.7
Post-school diploma / university degree	178	46.7
Post-graduate university degree	105	27.6
Other	4	1.0
Total	381	100

The measurement model

CFA was performed to test the measurement model before using it in further analysis (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988:411). The factor structure of the items in the measurement model was validated by performing CFA. Based on the initial results, six items were excluded from further analysis, because of their high standardised residual covariance coefficients, which were above 2.4 (Hair, 2014:654); while the remaining 27 items were kept for further analysis. One item was deleted from OSIP (OSI1 - initiating dialogue), and another two items were deleted from the WOM construct (PC4 and PC5). One item was removed from the SOB (SB4), and two items were removed from the engagement activities (ACSU1 and ACSU5).

An exploratory factor analysis of engagement activities revealed a two-factor structure similar to that of Blazevic et al. (2014:93). While Tsai and Men (2013:80) divide the items into contributing activities and consuming activities. The decision was therefore made to distinguish between the two main types of activities, as suggested in the literature: consumption engagement activities (such as viewing photos or videos and reading comments and reviews) and contributing engagement activities (such as posting comments, asking questions and uploading content).

Consequently, each stated hypothesis was split into 'a' and 'b', in order to reflect the two factors. Those respondents who participate in consuming activities are named 'Lurkers'; while those consumers who participated in contributing activities are named 'Superfans'.

The measurement model indicates a significant Chi-square (χ2 =652,708; p value= 0.00; df =296). The overall model fit for the CFA model is deemed good, with the following fit indices (fit indices' thresholds adapted from Hair, 2014:654): Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = 0.953; Normed Fit Index (NFI) = 0.918; Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) = 0.944; while the Root Mean Square error of Approximation (RMSEA) = 0.056 (Hooper, Coughlan and Mullen, 2008:53-60; Hu and Bentler, 1999:1).

Reliability and validity assessment

Convergent validity and discriminant validity are assessed and reported in the following section.

Convergent validity

Convergent validity was assessed by investigating the average variance extracted (AVE) (Fornell & Larcker, 1981:42), as well as the factor loadings. All the factor loadings exceeded 0.5; and they were all significant (Malhotra, Nunan & Birks, 2017:361), except for OSI2 (involved in online discussions) (0.39). Factor loadings of 0.3 to 0.4 are also acceptable, should the sample size be at least 350; therefore, 0.39 is accepted as being significant (Hair, 2006:321). Cronbach's alpha was used to measure the internal consistency of the various constructs and Composite Reliability (CR) to make the reliability analysis more robust.

All the constructs had good internal consistency, as is evident in the CR; and they all had Cronbach's alpha values above the recommended 0.7 threshold (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988:82; Nunnally, 1978:244).

The information above, statistically confirms that there is convergent validity in all items in the final measurement model, meaning that all the items selected are good measures of their respective constructs.

From Table 2, it is evident that convergent validity was established in all instances.

Discriminant validity

Discriminant validity was assessed by using the Fornell and Larcker (1981:42) method, which refers to the square root of the AVE, which should exceed the shared correlations between each pair of constructs, in order to confirm that the constructs are indeed unique (Malhotra et al., 2017:362). Table 3 shows the results confirming the discriminant validity of the majority of the constructs. The diagonal element in bold represents the square roots of AVEs. The off-diagonal elements represent the correlation coefficients.

Table 3 suggests some discriminant validity concerns in the final measurement model. As the Fornell and Larcker (1981:42) criteria provide a rule-of-thumb, in which sampling errors are not taken into consideration, the constructs

TABLE 2
RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY ASSESSMENT

Construct	Items	Factor loadings	Cronbach	CR	AVE
Sense of belonging	SB1	0.83	0.890	0.890	0.729
	SB2	0.84			
	SB3	0.89			
Peer communication	PC1	0.80	0.842	0.846	0.647
	PC2	0.84			
	PC3	0.77			
Involvement	Inv1	0.75	0.847	0.850	0.654
	Inv2	0.83			
	Inv3	0.84			
Continue to use	Con1	0.89	0.923	0.923	0.801
	Con2	0.92			
	Con3	0.88			
Shop	Shop1	0.90	0.945	0.945	0.852
	Shop2	0.95			
	Shop3	0.91			
Online social interaction propensity	OSI2	0.39	0.748	0.791	0.582
	OSI3	0.89			
	OSI4	0.89			
Activities consume (Lurkers)	Acsu2	0.67	0.805	0.808	0.514
	Acsu3	0.77			
	Acsu4	0.73			
	Acsu6	0.68			
Activities contribute (Superfans)	Acon1	0.84	0.894	0.897	0.637
	Acon2	0.85			
	Acon3	0.86			
	Acon4	0.72			
	Acon5	0.71			

All factor loadings were significant at the 0.05 level

TABLE 3
DISCRIMINANT VALIDITY, CORRELATION AND SQUARE ROOT OF AVES MATRIX

	SOB	Act_cont	Peer com	OSI	Shop	Cont use	Involvm	Act_cons
SOB	0,854							
Act_cont	0,664	0,798						
Peer com	0,880	0,681	0,804					
OSI	0,049	0,084	0,025	0,763				
Shop	0,606	0,409	0,627	0,045	0,923			
Cont use	0,661	0,419	0,653	-0,007	0,620	0,895		
Involvm	0,807	0,601	0,775	0,019	0,652	0,802	0,809	
Act_cons	0,720	0,758	0,702	-0,016	0,487	0,726	0,759	0,717

that showed weak discriminant validity were subjected to further testing, by subjecting them to the test of Bagozzi and Phillips's (1982:465), which examines the differences in the Chi-square values between the unconstrained CFA model and the nested CFA model. A Chi-square value greater than 3.84 indicates that the two constructs are unique.

The results indicated in Table 4 confirm the discriminant validity for all the constructs; and therefore, no constructs were excluded in the following analyses. The relationships identified in the measurement model fit the data satisfactorily. All the instruments used in the measurement model were reliable and valid in the context of this study. The structural model is discussed next.

TABLE 4
DISCRIMINANT VALIDITY FOR CONSTRUCTS WITH WEAK DISCRIMINANT VALIDITY

	Chi-square difference tests				
	Constrained CFA model		Unconstrained CFA model		Chi-square difference
Constructs	Chi-square	Df	Chi-square	Df	
Peer communication & SOB	85.771	9	80.883	8	4.888 (df=1)
Consume activities & SOB	50.410	14	20.800	13	29.610 (df=1)
Consume activities & contribute activities	173.073	27	134.108	26	38.965 (df=1)
Consume activities & continue usage	66.619	14	20.725	13	45.894 (df=1)
Consume activities & involvement	70.721	14	39.536	13	31.185 (df=1)

The structural model

SEM was used to test the hypothesised paths, because of its ability to test the relationships in the model, as well as the overall model fit. The following satisfactory fit indices were displayed: (Chi-square =828,847; p value= 0.000; df= 304) (CMIN/DF=2.735; AGFI = 0.841; TLI = 0.920; CFI = 0.931, RMSEA = 0.068) (Hooper et al., 2008:53-60; Hu & Bentler, 1999:1).

It may be concluded that the structural model fits the data satisfactorily. Therefore, the structural model was used with confidence to test the research hypotheses of the study.

Results of hypotheses testing

The results of the hypotheses are provided in Table 5 below, followed by a discussion thereof. According to the results, only three out of the 12 proposed hypotheses were not adequately supported.

Based on the results in Table 5, the antecedent identified for online engagement, OSIP, was not significant: (β=0.01 p<0.05 for consumption) (β=0.09, p<0.05 for contribution); thus, the hypotheses H1a and H1b are not supported.

All five of the implications are significantly predicted by OE, except for continued intention (β=-0.02, p<0.05 for contribute), suggesting thereby that H5b is not supported. The rest of the hypotheses (H2a, H2b, H3a, H3b, H4a, H4b, H5a, H6a and H6b) are all supported. Surprisingly, all the consuming engagement activities had stronger relationships than the contributing activities, suggesting that consumers who participate in consuming activities (Lurkers) could be of more importance than was previously anticipated.

A high percentage of variance of the implications of online engagement is explained in the model by the various constructs, ranging from R2 = 0.45 (intention to shop), to R2 = 0.85 (involvement with the firm's products), with R2 = 0.65 (SOB) R2 = 0.71 (WOM) and R2 = 0.78 (continued usage).

It is apparent from the results that consuming engagement activities have a stronger positive effect on the various implications/benefits of OE than do the contributing activities. Of the various implications, continued usage and involvement with the firm's products are the strongest implications of consuming engagement activities. By contrast, SOB and WOM are the strongest implications for contributing engagement activities.

In direct opposition to the findings of the study of Shang, Chen, and Liao's (2006:412), this study found that continued

intention is not an outcome of the contributing-engagement activities. Furthermore, in contrast with the findings of Carvalho and Fernandes (2018:32), who found that WOM is one of the strongest implications of engagement, this was not the case for consuming- engagement activities in this study. Although WOM was significant, it was weaker than some of the other implications.

DISCUSSION

The aim of the study was to explore the implications of online engagement from a behavioural engagement perspective within Facebook brand communities, through a sense-of-community lens. Furthermore, the study set out to determine whether OSIP drives OE, the benefits for brands and the consumers of OE in Facebook brand communities, and the applicability of COBRAs as an OE behavioural measurement indicator.

The study's findings show support for most of the relationships between OE activities on the brand pages and the implications/benefits thereof for both the firms and the consumers. This, therefore, indicates that the SOC theory could justly be used to explain the various relationships proposed in this study; and that it is an applicable theoretical lens, through which to investigate OE.

However, contrary to previous research (Blazevic et al., 2014:97), this study found that OSIP is not an antecedent of OE. This could be due to the fact that social media have become so integrated into the daily lives of consumers that their willingness to share information online is no longer a relevant consideration for marketers. Another explanation could be that the results were due to this study being executed within the existing brand communities – implying thereby that it already addresses the need for online social interaction.

TABLE 5
HYPOTHESES' RESULTS

H	Hypothesised path	SRW	P value	Remark
H1a	Online social interaction Online engagement (Consume)	0.01	0.899	Not supported
H1b	Online social interaction Online engagement (Contribute)	0.09	0.136	Not supported
H2a	Online engagement (Consume) SOB	0.70	***	Supported
H2b	Online engagement (Contribute) SOB	0.41	***	Supported
H3a	Online engagement (Consume) purchase intention	0.66	***	Supported
H3b	Online engagement (Contribute) purchase intention	0.11	0.018	Supported
H4a	Online engagement (Consume) WOM	0.69	***	Supported
H4b	Online engagement (Contribute) WOM	0.48	***	Supported
H5a	Online engagement (Consume) continued intention	0.89	***	Supported
H5b	Online engagement (Contribute) continued intention	-0.02	0.711	Not supported
H6a	Online engagement (Consume) involvement with firm products	0.90	***	Supported
H6b	Online engagement (Contribute) involvement with firm products	0.21	***	Supported

Note: H=Hypothesis; SRW=Standardized regression weight; ***=Significant at $p<0.05$

This study attempts to fill the knowledge gap about what benefits, if any, can be derived by firms and consumers through OE in OBCs. It is evident that OE indeed has several positive implications/benefits. OE activities, which are categorised into consuming activities and contributing activities, had varying results, in relation to the implications/ benefits of OE. Consuming activities are an overall stronger predictor of the various implications/benefits of OE. Usually, brands tend to focus more on the Superfans (Gummerus et al., 2012:870); and they are inclined to neglect the Lurkers; but the results of this study have proved that this is not necessarily the best approach; and that there lies a lot of value in the lurking community (Barnes, 2018:27).

Regular posting and commenting behaviour do not mean that Superfans are the most beneficial to the brand; the consumers who log in regularly to visit the page, even though they do not actively contribute to the brand page, are far more likely to become beneficial fans. This indicates that two separate strategies should be executed by firms, in order to engage with both Lurkers and Superfans, making use of the particular activities, with which each group participates, in order to increase the benefits for the firm.

'Creating' activities are generally seen as the "ultimate level of online brand-related activities" (Muntinga et al., 2011:17) – thereby implying that when consumers create and even contribute content, it is more valuable to a brand, than when consumers merely consume the content. Previous research indicates that brands should pay more attention to and reward those consumers, who actively contribute to the online community, as they are more beneficial to the brand, than other consumers (Gummerus et al., 2012:870). This, however, is not supported by more recent research.

From this study, it is evident that both Lurkers and Superfans enjoy a sense of belonging; although the Lurkers experience a stronger SOB to the brand fan page. This might be due to the fact that the SOB is more of a passive feeling, than of active behaviour; and it is thus reflected in the consuming engagement activities, which include more passive behaviour than active-contributing participation. The reason why contributing engagement activities are, in fact, a weaker predictor of SOB than consuming engagement activities could be due to consumers' lack of trust in the community, and consequently increasing trust could lead to increased participation (Shang et al., 2006:412).

The study by Sacco and Ismail (2014:362) showed the positive effects of interacting with other consumers in a virtual environment; but this current study adds to the conversation, by dividing these interactions into two categories (consuming and contributing), thereby expanding the current knowledge available on SOB. These findings are in line with those of Blazevic et al. (2014:97). However, this reseach has failed to find the three factors (consume, contribute, create), as suggested by Muntinga et al. (2011:35-36).

When firms allocate marketing expenditure to social media, it is valuable to know whether consumers will purchase from the brand or firm, and which would then have an impact on future planning and strategies. Both Lurkers and Superfans are likely to purchase products or services from the brand, which means that the more engaged they are, the greater the likelihood that they will purchase. This is in direct contrast to the findings of Bushelow (2012:4), who found that engagement with Facebook brand pages do not necessarily result in purchasing intention or financial benefits.

This is positive news for brands because it is costly to create and maintain a brand page. When consumers purchase the brand because of the brand page, the firm generates a return on the investment.

Both consuming and contributing online engagement activities significantly predict social value (WOM), which is explained like the findings of Seller and Laurindo (2018:200). WOM spread by consumers is not only more credible than company generated content; but it also has the benefit of creating trusting relationships amongst customers, and the brand and being low-cost for brands (Romero, 2017:3; Thakur, 2018:50; Tsai & Men, 2013:79). Contrary to expectations, Lurkers are more likely to engage in WOM communication about the brand. This surprising result alludes to the idea that Lurkers could be 'under-cover' brand advocates, suggesting yet again that Lurkers are more beneficial for firms than the so-called Superfans.

Members' involvement with the firms' products could be illustrated by the following examples: when Superfans post a video of a specific product, or when Lurkers read the reviews of a product from other members of the brand community. Continued intention and involvement with firm products are regarded as valuable sources of information, which marketing managers can use to strategize and improve the decision-making of the firm (Radeke, 2015).

These two constructs are also the strongest implications/benefits of consuming online engagement. Consuming engagement activities significantly predict both continued intention and involvement with the firm's products. Thus, the more consumers are participating in consuming-engagement activities, the greater the likelihood that they will continue to use the Facebook brand page and be involved with the firm's products. Marketing strategists can derive great informational value from these outcomes, in terms of consumer feedback and user-generated content.

Consistent with previous research (Gummerus et al., 2012:868), contributing engagement activities also proved to predict the majority of the implications/benefits of online engagement, as discussed above, though with one exception. Interestingly, contributing engagement activities does not predict the continued usage of the Facebook brand page; since Superfans might stop engaging after their desired goal is reached. This casts a shadow on the possible loyalty of the Superfan, because of the non-significant results of contributing activities and continued usage.

A possible explanation for this result can be found in the study of Seller and Laurindo (2018;200-202), who alluded to the fact that brand pages on social media are also used to forward complaints and suggestions to the firm (indicating contributing engagement activities), whilst brand communities often share a more intense consciousness of kind and moral responsibility (consuming engagement activities). Thus, Superfans might only join the brand page to complain or to review; and they might then leave the page again, meaning that they are involved with the firm's products, and then discontinue usage of the brand page after a short period of time whereas Lurkers, are there for the long term, in order to build and maintain relationships. Firms should thus focus on Lurkers for long-term involvement and the use of their brand pages, while remembering that Superfans' use and involvement may be more fleeting and of less value to the brands.

Although the results confirm the applicability of COBRAs to measuring OE in Facebook brand pages, they did not reveal the suggested three-factor structure (Muntinga et al., 2011:15-16), but rather a simplified two-factor structure, similar to that of Blazevic et al. (2014:97). The anticipated creating and contributing factors merged into one.

The decision was consequently made to distinguish between consumption-engagement activities (such as viewing photos or videos and reading comments and reviews) as is evident from 'Lurkers' and their contributing engagement activities (such as posting comments, asking questions and uploading content), that are usually associated with the 'Superfans'. Surprisingly, in contrast with previous literature (Tsai & Men, 2013:84) and the common belief in the industry, which maintains that real marketing success can only be derived from the Superfans (Olenski, 2016) and that the contributing activities performed by Superfans or Fanatics are the be-all and the end-all, this study found that this is not necessarily the case.

It is clear that the often-overlooked stepchild of brand fan pages, Lurkers, should not be underestimated. The value of Lurkers is evident in the results of the study, which clearly show that Lurkers could be even more valuable than the so-called contributing Superfans. One can only speculate about the possible reasons for the weaker relationship between contributing engagement activities and the benefits for the brand. One explanation could be that Superfans have a short-lived self-gratification type of reasoning for actively engaging in brand pages. They engage in fulfilling egocentric and self-centred goals, such as solving their own short-term problems.

It could be possible that Superfans would visit brand pages less frequently; and that they are not in it for the community with other members, but for their own benefit. Lurkers might visit brand pages more regularly, which could indicate that they care about other members and are silently the brand's biggest fans. Therefore, visiting the page not only for their own gain, but also for the community – and firms can use this information to their own advantage (Chuah, 2014).

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Our findings are in-line with those of Demiray and Burnaz (2019:121), who stated that engaged brand community members are valuable to brands because of their WOM communication and purchase intentions. Marketing managers can manage consumers' perceptions of participating in brand communities more effectively; since they have real-time feedback from community members on social media platforms (Strong, 2017). Understanding OE can provide valuable insights for managers to guide them in crafting more effective social media campaigns and content strategies.

It would be worthwhile to develop two separate strategies to engage with Lurkers and Superfans, in order for firms to achieve the desired benefits.

Regarding the implications of OE, Lurkers are the heart and soul of firms, providing more benefits on the basis of their engagement efforts. Specific tactics should be used to target Lurkers, as they are only prone to consuming activities. Firms can encourage Lurkers to be more involved in their brand pages by motivating them to post product reviews (contributing activity), which are linked to competitions and an option, in which consumers vote for the most useful comment or review.

Firms should further motivate Lurkers by rewarding them with discounts or vouchers for future purchases, thereby also encouraging them to continue using the page. In addition, Lurkers might then be enticed to shop even more frequently. When it comes to purchasing decisions, 'decision simplicity' comes to the fore, which means that marketing managers should simplify the purchasing process, as far as possible; since this could increase purchase intention. Comparing different options and finding relevant information relating to potential purchases should be easy.

Firms could consider launching very simple yes/no polls, to determine what information on a Facebook brand page is perceived as valuable, and then to create content based on that information. A yes/no poll does not require Lurkers to create content, which is why it would probably be a successful tactic to use. As WOM is an implication of OE, care should be taken when trying to engage Lurkers with WOM. Because Lurkers do not create their own content, firms should be considerate of this and they should rather provide links to specific information or promotions, so that Lurkers can easily share it.

Photos, pictures or videos of products should be readily available for Lurkers to share. Firms should consider creating unique hashtags that are associated with the brand, in order for Lurkers to be able to share easily brand-related information. Opportunities should be provided to rate the firm's products on the Facebook brand page; since this could produce WOM and keep Lurkers involved with the products, without having to generate original content themselves.

Firms also need to develop tactics to engage Superfans; so that they would contribute more on the Facebook brand pages, because their contributions create content for Lurkers to consume, as well as providing feedback for brands. Firms should make sure that Superfans' needs are being met; and that they feel that the firm cares. Firms could do this by ensuring that Facebook brand pages are being actively managed and kept up to date with the latest information and promotions. This could also be done by answering queries with short lead times.

As Superfans may not necessarily continue to use a brand page, once their initial needs have been met, brands should encourage repeat visits by, for example, the earning of badges or rewards for various activities performed. Each new badge could be linked to a reward. It is possible that one of the reasons why Superfans belong to a Facebook brand page is for their own gain, and a tactic to employ in such a case could be rewarding Superfans for referring friends to also join the OBC: for each referral, they could earn a reward.

A points system, based on the various activities performed could also be implemented, so that Superfans can move up levels that would earn them new rewards for each level. Rewards can be linked to discounts for online purchases, or vouchers for in-store purchases, to also encourage purchasing behaviour. These visible rewards, such as badges or status updates, should appeal to Superfans' egocentric and self-centred goals. It is thus important for brands not to mistake Superfans' obvious contributing activities for loyalty, or even for brand appreciation. Loyalty and reward programmes could increase Superfans' intention to continue using the firm's Facebook brand page and to increase their emotional connection with a brand, thereby leading to greater experiences, and eventually, to long-term relationships with the firm.

The timing of company posts on Facebook brand pages should be done with care, as this would determine whether Superfans pay attention to them and share them with others, thereby increasing WOM. Firms should change and update the content on their Facebook pages regularly, in order to keep Superfans interested and involved with the firm's products. The latest trends and fads could aid in creating a buzz for the firm; but substantial and valuable content should also be available, in order to create repeat visits and particularly loyalty.

Consumers will not engage with brands if there is no value in it for them (Javornik & Mandelli, 2012:300), and

without consumers, who become members of Facebook brand communities, none of the financial or non-financial benefits of OBCs would be received by firms. Therefore, it is critical that firms should create content that consumers perceive as valuable; so that they would thereby become part of the community and remain members. It is also evident that both the consuming activities of Lurkers and the contributing activities of Superfans are needed, to ensure positive benefits for consumers and brands.

CONTRIBUTIONS

The results of this study are addressing the call for more research into the SNS brand communities and consumers' experiences in these communities (Huang & Chen, 2018:133), by exploring the concept of online engagement in brand communities by focusing on Facebook.

Our results offer a promising starting point for understanding OE in Facebook brand communities, as well as the implications or benefits of engagement. This study makes several significant contributions. Firstly, OE is investigated, according to a typology of online engagement activities, dividing it into consuming and contributing engagement activities. By doing this, more detail can be provided regarding the different types of consumers, specifically Lurkers and Superfans; and how their respective engagement benefits the firm and how brands can use this knowledge to their advantage, thereby complementing the existing research on SNS marketing (Alalwan, 2018:65-67).

Secondly, as is evident in the literature, theories, such as the uses and the gratifications theory and service-dominant logic, have frequently been overused in the investigation of engagement, but the SOC theory has to-date been underexplored and underused so, this study is thoroughly underpinned by the sense of community theory, thereby adding to the body of knowledge to assist in forming an overall deeper understanding of OE.

Thirdly, this study extends the existing knowledge on engagement, by demonstrating that affective commitment (the psychological perspective) of engagement as operationalised in the sense of belonging follows on from consumer-enacted engagement behaviour. This is in contrast with the findings of Paruthi and Kaur (2017:140), who argue that consumer-enacted behaviour follows from the psychological state of OE. There is thus support for both the psychological and the behavioural perspective of OE, but a deeper investigation of the psychological perspective is still needed.

Fourthly, the practical implications for firms lie in determining the type of consumer who engages online. This provides insights that are valuable to firms in determining how to engage with Lurkers and Superfans, as well as how these different types of consumers contribute to the OBC, and what value can be gained from these engagements.

Overall, the study's findings have confirmed the previous studies, showing that social media pages, such as Facebook brand pages serve successfully as a new form of brand community and that it is important for brands to develop these brand pages, in order to foster retention (Gonzalez-Anta et al., 2019:12).

It is apparent that 'liking' a Facebook brand fan page indeed has several positive implications for both consumers and firms, which underscores the fact that social media are more than just a communication tool for brands. Apart from being a communication tool for brands and firms, Facebook brand pages provide financial and non-financial benefits that should be exhausted.

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

A limitation of this study, as is the case with most similar convenience based sampling studies, is that it cannot be generalised to the broader population. Also, owing to the constraints, such as time and finances, only the limited geographical area of South Africa was covered. For future research, an international sample could be drawn. It is known that engagement can be viewed from either a behavioural, or from a psychological perspective; and this study is limited to the behavioural perspective of engagement. It only included SOB as a reflection of the psychological perspective, and it could be worthwhile to include a deeper investigation of the psychological perspective in future research.

This study also took a narrower interpretation of the antecedents of engagement and it is limited to investigating consumers' OSIP. Future studies could incorporate a broader array of antecedents of engagement, such as the motivational drivers for engagement.

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