

# Consumer engagement on Twitter: perceptions of the brand matter

Consumer  
engagement on  
Twitter

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to develop and empirically test a theoretical framework of consumer engagement with brands on Twitter.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Depth interviews were conducted to gain initial insights into consumer engagement on Twitter. Using a blend of the extant literature and interview findings, a theoretical framework, including antecedents, outcomes and moderators, was developed and empirically tested using cross-sectional survey data.

**Findings** – Brand customer service and brand intimacy positively influence consumer engagement on Twitter, and consumer engagement mediates the relationship between these antecedents and consumer co-promotion intentions. Consumer perceptions of a brand account's popularity on Twitter and their likelihood of adding value to a brand are found to be moderators within the conceptual framework.

**Research limitations/implications** – Caution needs to be exercised in generalising these findings beyond the Twitter context, and the use of a cross-sectional survey means causality cannot be inferred.

**Practical implications** – Brands need to be perceived as providing excellent customer service and intimate brand knowledge on Twitter to drive consumer engagement and co-promotion. Brands are recommended to develop strategies to increase their Twitter following, including rewarding consumers for their contributions on the brand's Twitter account to signal that they are valued.

**Originality/value** – The authors add to the emerging literature on consumer engagement on social media in two key ways, by developing and testing a theoretical framework of consumer engagement in the Twitter context and by identifying moderators in the consumer engagement process on Twitter.

**Keywords** Twitter, Consumer engagement

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Much of social media, or the collection of platforms that enable users to engage in communications, e.g. Twitter (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2011), is about connecting with others (Labrecque, 2014). This includes facilitating online conversations between consumers and brands (Islam and Rahman, 2017; Pansari and Kumar, 2017), which can grow their relationships (Labrecque, 2014). Brands are, therefore encouraged to leverage the power of social media to drive consumer engagement (Ibrahim *et al.*, 2017).

This is showcased by a brand like Wendy's, the USA fast-food chain. Wendy's is recognised for its active engagement with consumers on Twitter and other social media (Elmas, 2018), which has led to a tweet exchange between Wendy's and a customer being claimed the most retweeted post of all time (Stratton, 2017). Carter Wilkerson asked Wendy's, "How many retweets for a year of free nuggets?" The fast food chain's immediate and humorous reply? Eighteen million. This witty exchange rapidly went viral, receiving more than 3.6 million retweets and almost a million likes (Koman, 2018).



Given the increasing use of social media by brands like Wendy's to connect with consumers like Carter, an emerging body of research has subsequently focused on consumer engagement, i.e. a psychological state that reflects consumers' sense of connection to a brand based on an ongoing relationship with it (Brodie *et al.*, 2011, 2013; Hollebeek, 2011a, 2011b; Mollen and Wilson, 2010) on social media. This evolving literature has included empirical work on developing instruments to measure consumer engagement on social media (Baldus *et al.*, 2015; Dessart *et al.*, 2016; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014; Schivinski *et al.*, 2016), and examining the consumer engagement process (Brodie *et al.*, 2013), including the antecedents and consequences of consumer engagement on social media (Islam and Rahman, 2016; Dessart *et al.*, 2016), along with consumer engagement behaviours (Wallace *et al.*, 2014; Oh *et al.*, 2017).

Despite these contributions, important research gaps persist. First, different social media channels, e.g. Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, are unique (Halaszovich and Nel, 2017; Chan *et al.*, 2014; Dessart *et al.*, 2016). Therefore, as it is widely agreed that consumer engagement is context-dependent (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2016), a gap in this emerging literature is apparent. Past studies on consumer engagement have been set often in the context of Facebook (Chan *et al.*, 2014; De Vries and Carlson, 2014; Dessart *et al.*, 2016; Yang *et al.*, 2016; Halaszovich and Nel, 2017). In line with the call for a greater understanding of consumer engagement based on empirical evidence from diverse contexts (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014; Dessart *et al.*, 2016; Leckie *et al.*, 2016; van Doorn *et al.*, 2010), our study addresses this gap via its primary purpose of developing and testing a theoretical framework of consumer engagement in the Twitter context.

Twitter is a popular micro-blogging social media platform that enables rapid short message dissemination (Walker *et al.*, 2017). Twitter is distinct from other social media such as Facebook in several important ways: Twitter encourages real-time conversation, making it far more popular for consumers to engage with brands (unlike Facebook which tends to be a broadcasting medium) (Parmar, 2015), including for customer service (Ibrahim *et al.*, 2017), such as in the opening example of Wendy's; Twitter is about what is happening now (trending) and immediacy of information sharing with anyone (Huff, 2015; Valos *et al.*, 2017), e.g. Wendy's responded to Carter instantly and the tweet rapidly went viral (versus Facebook being about ongoing conversations with family and friends); and content is primarily public on Twitter, e.g. Wendy's Twitter account gained a huge amount of new followers during the #nuggsforcarter campaign (Stratton, 2017) (versus Facebook where content is mostly private).

As one marketing leader well summed up the difference between Facebook and Twitter (Mueller, 2018):

Facebook is your living room where you catch up with friends (but still guard your privacy). And Twitter? Well, Twitter is the bar scene where people let loose and talk to strangers, drop one-liners (or pick-up lines), and engage with personalities from all walks of life. It is this bar-like atmosphere that makes Twitter the ultimate platform for customer engagement.

Given Twitter's unique public (Walasek *et al.*, 2018), immediate (Valos *et al.*, 2017) and customer service-oriented (Misopoulos *et al.*, 2014) character, we argue that it is the ideal backdrop to examine consumer engagement with brands, relative to other social media. Therefore, based on the academic literature and practitioner examples such as Wendy's, the need for an empirical study that is Twitter-specific is warranted. Hollebeek *et al.* (2014) examined consumer engagement in the social media context, treating Facebook and Twitter as brands (focal objects) that consumers (subjects) engage with. Our study rather examines

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consumer (subject) engagement with brands via their Twitter accounts (focal objects) that they follow, so that Twitter is the context, not the focal object.

Second, a further gap that is evident in the consumer engagement literature is that potential moderators of the relationship between the antecedents and outcomes of consumer engagement are yet to bear empirical scrutiny. A moderator is a construct that affects the direction and/or strength of the relationship between an independent construct and a dependent construct (Baron and Kenny, 1986). This lack of research is surprising because the inclusion of moderators can help to determine the effectiveness of the drivers and benefits of consumer engagement under certain conditions. We argue that the consumer engagement literature in general and more specifically in the social media context has progressed to a point that requires the examination of specific conditions under which the direct or indirect effects of consumer engagement work.

As a result of addressing these gaps, our contributions are as follows. Our first contribution is the theoretical framework that we advance that draws on the inherent characteristics of Twitter. Such fine-grained research in the Twitter context helps to reveal the relevant antecedents and consequences of consumer engagement in this distinctive social media setting. Our framework is based on a review of the extant literature on consumer engagement, relationship marketing and social media as advocated by Venkatesan (2017) in combination with the findings of depth interviews with participants who followed brands on Twitter; for a similar approach, see Kemp *et al.* (2013) and Wittkowski *et al.* (2013).

We identify and hypothesise several antecedents of consumer engagement, as facilitated by the brand's Twitter account. The first antecedent is brand customer service (i.e. a brand's customer service). Customer service is well-established in both the practitioner (Huff, 2015; Smith, 2017) and academic literature (Zhu and Chen, 2015) as the top reason for brands' presence on Twitter, with more than double the number of customer service-related conversations being witnessed on Twitter in the last several years (Smith, 2017). Previous work has suggested a related concept of brand responsiveness (Hollebeek and Chen, 2014) is also important as an antecedent to consumer engagement. However, responsiveness appears to be entirely reactive, defined as the degree to which consumers feel a brand is approachable and receptive to their queries or feedback, as well as showing an ability to resolve issues. We rather define brand customer service as a consumer's perception that a brand is proactively responding to enquiries and complaints and pre-empting problems via its Twitter account. Proactive customer service in addressing potential customer issues is critical on Twitter given its immediacy (Huff, 2015).

The second antecedent is brand interactivity that refers to consumers' perception of a brand's willingness and genuine desire for integration with them (France *et al.*, 2016). Brand interactivity is highly relevant to Twitter given its potential for personalised communications with consumers who follow a brand's Twitter account, with Twitter increasing the scope for interactive communications by brands (Burton and Soboleva, 2011). Brand interactivity has been empirically supported as an antecedent to consumer engagement in previous work (France *et al.*, 2016), however not in the social media context where other forms of interactivity have been the focus, i.e. consumer-machine (Fang, 2017), and consumer-consumer (Islam and Rahman, 2017), but not consumer-brand interactivity.

The third antecedent is brand intimacy, which concerns how well consumers understand a brand (Aaker *et al.*, 2004; Guesse and Haelg, 2009). Brand intimacy is again enabled via Twitter where followers can directly communicate with brands so that they feel like they can get to know them closely (Stever and Lawson, 2013). Brand intimacy has not been advanced previously as an antecedent to consumer engagement to our knowledge.

Finally, consumer co-promotion, a type of consumer co-creation of value (CCoV) that is broader than word of mouth, is highly relevant to Twitter as an amplification tool that diffuses behaviours among followers' existing networks, e.g. retweets (Harmeling *et al.*, 2017). Consumer co-promotion is the beneficial outcome of consumer engagement studied here.

Our second contribution lies in the inclusion of moderators within our theoretical framework to provide a more complete picture of consumer engagement in the Twitter context. We advance and empirically test two moderator effects: consumer perceived popularity of the brand's Twitter account (determined by the perceived number of followers) on the relationship between brand customer service and brand interactivity and consumer engagement, respectively; and consumer perceived likelihood of adding value (their brand-related inputs on Twitter add value to the brand) on the relationship between consumer engagement and co-promotion.

Our final contribution is to marketing practice. While brands on Twitter recognise that engaging consumers is vital for their long-term viability, the extant academic literature provides scant practical advice for management with regard to how to engage consumers on Twitter and the value of doing so. Based on the findings of our study, such advice can be derived.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The next section provides the conceptual background, details of a small-scale qualitative study and hypotheses development. The quantitative research method is then described, followed by the presentation of the empirical findings. It concludes by discussing this study's theoretical contributions, practical implications, limitations and future research directions.

## Conceptual background

### *Consumer engagement*

Consumer engagement research continues to emerge, dominated by conceptual and exploratory studies (Hollebeek and Chen, 2014). Brodie *et al.* (2011) that provided the foundations for this domain, but there remains a lack of consensus on how consumer engagement should be defined (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2016; Pansari and Kumar, 2017). Consumer engagement definitions include Brodie *et al.*'s (2011, p. 260) service-dominant logic-based focus: "a psychological state that occurs by virtue of interactive, co-creative customer experiences with a focal agent/object in a focal service relationship". In contrast is the practitioner-oriented definition by Sashi (2012, p. 260): "turning on customers by building emotional bonds in relational exchanges with them". In the social media context, Dessart *et al.* (2016, p. 409) defined consumer engagement as "the state that reflects consumers' individual dispositions toward engagement foci, which are context-specific." Furthermore, the dimensionality of consumer engagement is hotly contested (Dessart *et al.*, 2016); it has been determined as both uni-dimensional (Van Doorn *et al.*, 2010) and multi-dimensional, often including affective, cognitive and behavioural dimensions (Brodie *et al.*, 2011).

Notwithstanding such debate, growth in consumer engagement research reflects the importance of it to the success of brands (Venkatesan, 2017). It elicits intimate bonds between brands and consumers (Sashi, 2012) and is an imperative to enhance organisational performance (Brodie *et al.*, 2013). This rise in such research runs parallel to the increasing importance of social media as a tool to connect consumers and brands (Dessart, 2017; Sashi, 2012). An emerging literature has examined the consumer engagement process (Brodie *et al.*, 2013), including the antecedents and consequences of consumer engagement on social media (Islam and Rahman, 2016; Dessart *et al.*, 2016), along with consumer engagement behaviours (Wallace *et al.*, 2014; Oh *et al.*, 2017); the bulk of this research is set in the context of

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Facebook. However, consumer engagement is well-established to be context-dependent (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2016) and is thus expected to vary across social media platforms, with Facebook being distinct from Twitter (Dessart, 2017). No prior research that we are aware of has empirically examined a theoretical framework of consumer engagement with brands that they follow on Twitter.

Conceptual work by Sashi (2012) argued that consumer engagement and relationship marketing are interrelated, and that social media is a highly effective tool to foster engagement in relational exchanges (for a more detailed discussion, see, Sashi, 2012). Our study consequently adopted a relationship marketing lens to examine consumer engagement, which shaped the definition of consumer engagement used in our study: a psychological state that reflects a consumer's sense of connection to a brand based on their ongoing relationship (Brodie *et al.*, 2011; Hollebeek, 2011a, 2011b; Mollen and Wilson, 2010). This definition also aligns with recent work that described consumer engagement as a relationship between a consumer and a brand with an emotional underpinning (Pansari and Kumar, 2017). While consumer engagement has previously been studied from a behavioural perspective (Harmeling *et al.*, 2017), particularly in the online context, psychological engagement has been excluded in some studies (Wallace *et al.*, 2014), which has been criticised (Dessart *et al.*, 2016). As a result, our study has focused on the psychological engagement that consumers have with brands via their Twitter accounts, which can lead to positive behavioural outcomes (Cheung *et al.*, 2015), such as CCoV. CCoV is an interactive process involving at least two willing resource-integrating actors engaged in forms of mutually beneficial collaboration, resulting in value creation for those actors (Frow *et al.*, 2011; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2016).

In our study, this psychological consumer engagement construct sits within a broader framework (Brodie *et al.*, 2011), where it is a mediator of antecedents and outcomes. Earlier literature presented a variety of constructs potentially related to consumer engagement. Hollebeek (2011a, 2011b) suggested that more established constructs, such as commitment, satisfaction and rapport could be both antecedents and consequences of consumer engagement depending on the context. However, while various antecedents and consequences of consumer engagement have been raised, some of them have not been quantitatively tested (see Table I for exceptions).

Two key takeaways emerge from Table I, which align with the aim of our study. First, the antecedents often reflect consumer characteristics such as involvement, while Hollebeek (2013) suggested that contextual and organisational characteristics, such as the management of brand accounts on Twitter also influence consumers' level of engagement. Second, consumer engagement is often treated as a mediator between relationship qualities (e.g. trust) and strength indicators (e.g. loyalty), yet potential moderators of these relationships have not been examined. Our study subsequently examines a Twitter context-driven theoretical framework of consumer-brand engagement, including moderating effects.

### Qualitative study

The qualitative component of this study involved depth interviews ( $n = 10$ ) with regular Twitter users (i.e. those who checked Twitter six or more times per week) (Sensis, 2013) who followed at least one brand account. Recruitment was via snowball sampling as no lists or other obvious sources for locating Twitter account holders were available. Initial participants known to the lead researcher were used to recruit other participants. The electronically recorded interviews lasted around one hour each and involved a series of open-ended questions regarding consumer engagement with brand accounts on Twitter, to uncover potential antecedents, outcomes and moderators. Any follow-up questions stemmed

**Table I.**  
Quantitatively supported antecedents and consequences of consumer engagement

Authors	Type of engagement	Context	Antecedents	Consequences
Baldus <i>et al.</i> (2015)	Online brand community engagement	Online brand communities	Not applicable	Intention to participate in a brand community
Blasco-Arcas <i>et al.</i> (2016)	Consumer engagement	E-commerce	Emotions	Brand image; purchase intentions
Calder <i>et al.</i> (2009)	Online engagement	Online/social media advertising	Not applicable	Usage and attentiveness; affective responses; reactions to an ad
Carlson <i>et al.</i> (2017)	Consumer engagement	Branded social media	Flow	Not applicable
Chan <i>et al.</i> (2014)	Consumer engagement	Online brand communities	Community value; freedom of expression; rewards and recognition; system support	Brand purchase intention; word-of-mouth
Cheung <i>et al.</i> (2015)	Consumer engagement	Online games industry	Game satisfaction; game customisation; social interaction	Online sales
Claffey and Brady (2014)	Consumer engagement	Virtual environment	Not applicable	Co-created value; commitment
Dessart (2017)	Social media engagement	Branded community pages on Facebook	Attitude towards community; online interaction propensity; product involvement	Brand commitment; brand trust
De Vries and Carlson (2014)	Consumer-brand engagement	Brand Facebook pages	Value (hedonic, social, functional, co-creation); brand strength; usage intensity	Consumer engagement behaviour; brand loyalty
France <i>et al.</i> (2016)	Consumer-brand engagement	Firm- and customer-led engagement	Brand interactivity; brand involvement; brand self-congruity; brand quality	Brand loyalty; brand value
Gummerus <i>et al.</i> (2012)	Engagement behaviours: community and transaction	Online brand communities on Facebook	Not applicable	Perceived benefits (social, entertainment, and economic); satisfaction; loyalty
Habibi <i>et al.</i> (2016)	Community engagement	Online brand communities on social media	Rituals and traditions; obligations to society	Brand relationship quality
Hakozovich and Nel (2017)	Customer-brand engagement	Facebook	Not applicable	"Like" intentions
Harrigan <i>et al.</i> (2017)	Consumer engagement	Tourism brands on social media	Customer involvement	Loyalty intentions

(continued)

Authors	Type of engagement	Context	Antecedents	Consequences
Hollebeek <i>et al.</i> (2014)	Consumer–brand engagement	Social media platforms	Involvement	Brand usage intention; self-brand connection
Hsieh and Chang (2016)	Brand co-creation engagement	Online consumer-brand co-creation via contests	Brand self-connection; perceived autonomy; perceived competence; perceived relatedness	Feedback intention; purchase intention
Islam and Rahman (2016)	Customer engagement	Online brand communities on Facebook	Involvement	Trust; word-of-mouth
Islam and Rahman (2017)	Consumer engagement	Online brand communities on Facebook	'Big five' personality traits	Purchase intention
Leckie <i>et al.</i> (2016)	Consumer–brand engagement	Mobile phone service providers	Involvement; participation; self-expressive brand	Brand loyalty
Marbach <i>et al.</i> (2016)	Online consumer engagement	Online brand communities	Personality traits	Perceived value
Martinez-Lopez <i>et al.</i> (2017)	Consumer engagement	Online brand communities	Experience; identification; trust	Participation
Oh <i>et al.</i> (2017)	Consumer engagement behaviours	Cinema box office	Not applicable	Economic performance
Sprott <i>et al.</i> (2009)	Brand engagement in self-concept	Consumer self-image/clothing	Not applicable	Brand attitude
Vivek <i>et al.</i> (2014)	Consumer engagement	Various retail brands	Not applicable	Value perceptions; benevolence perceptions; future patronage intentions; affective commitment
Yang <i>et al.</i> (2016)	Consumer–brand engagement	Multiple industries	Not applicable	Search engine advertisement performance

Table I.

from participants' individual responses (Creswell, 2007). An equal number of males and females were interviewed, the average age was 28 years, and participants had been using Twitter for two years on average. Sample size determination in qualitative studies is generally a subjective judgment made as the research proceeds (Sandelowski, 1995). Data collection stopped when theoretical saturation was reached (Creswell, 2007), that is no new perspectives or insights emerged. This indicated that adequate data had been collected for a detailed analysis to occur.

The interviews were transcribed and reviewed by the two lead authors. Collectively, the transcripts counted 139 single-spaced pages. Data analysis was conducted based on the process outlined by Creswell (2007) for phenomenological research. The two lead authors highlighted major statements, developed clusters of meaning, and created structural descriptions of the Twitter experience of each participant. Further systematic and iterative rounds of analysis enabled the researchers to move from lower level interpretations towards an integrated theoretical framework (Spanjol *et al.*, 2015; Corbin and Strauss, 2008). During the process, individual interviews were revisited and passages recoded. At various points in this process, the researchers discussed the findings and the emerging conceptual model. Any differences were debated and collectively resolved. An independent researcher then reviewed the completed data analysis to confirm the reliability of the findings. The independent researcher and the two lead authors were able to reconcile through discussion any additional discrepancies that were evident (Garrison *et al.*, 2006).

The conceptual model advanced here (Figure 1) is derived based on a combination of these interview participants' insights and a review of the existing literature. A similar approach was adopted by Kemp *et al.* (2013) and Wittkowski *et al.* (2013). This approach required the researchers to alternate between the data and the literature, with the objective of developing a coherent and theoretically viable conceptual framework (Spanjol *et al.*, 2015; Adkins and Ozanne, 2005).

### Hypotheses development

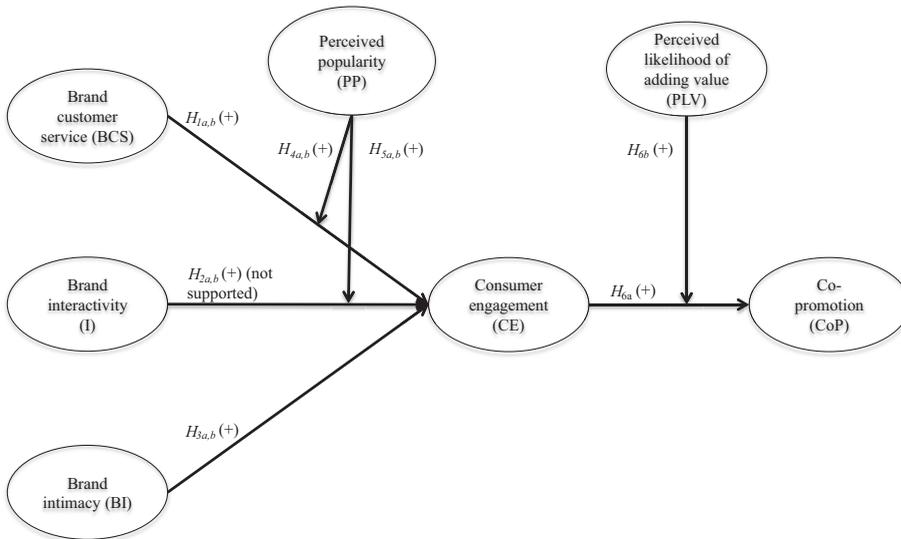
First, it is noted that the interview findings supported consumer engagement on Twitter as a psychological state (Brodie *et al.*, 2011, 2013; Hollebeek, 2011a, 2011b) facilitated by the platform's interactive character (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014). The following example interviewee quotes highlight this:

Following a brand on Twitter enables you to feel closer to the brand. (Charlie)

Following a brand on Twitter isn't necessarily the start of a relationship, but it is the continuation of it. It is an extension of a brand relationship, and it allows you to foster it. (Joel)

Second, based on the findings of the depth interviews and the literature review, several antecedents of consumer engagement with brands on Twitter were identified. These are brand customer service, brand interactivity and brand intimacy, which are argued to be antecedents relevant to brands within the Twitter environment.

Finally, in regard to the outcomes of consumer engagement, the relationship between consumer engagement and CCoV has been identified as a priority research area (Hsieh and Chang, 2016; van Doorn *et al.*, 2010; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2016). However, of the 12 types of co-creation outlined by Frow *et al.* (2011, p. 3), only three were mentioned by our study's participants. Co-promotion, i.e. "two or more actors collaborating on promotional activities related to a specific product, brand or entity" was by far the most commonly declared, with all of the interviewees referring to co-promotion as an outcome of their engagement with brands on Twitter. On the other hand, co-conception, i.e. "two or more actors collaborating



**Figure 1.**  
A theoretical  
framework of  
consumer  
engagement on  
Twitter

on a product concept innovation” was referred to by only one participant, which is perhaps unsurprising as it is a rarer form of CCoV witnessed on Twitter. Co-experience, i.e. “two or more actors integrating their resources over time and across multiple encounters creating a shared experience, with different outcomes than those occurring in more discrete individual interactions” was also raised by just two participants as Twitter is less about having ongoing conversations and more about one-off real time interactions (Valos *et al.*, 2017).

This finding that co-promotion is the prominent outcome of consumer engagement on Twitter intuitively makes sense and is supported by the extant literature. Twitter is about spreading an immediate brand message among the right people (Misopoulos *et al.*, 2014). Prior research by Nagy and Midha (2014) found that 80 per cent of Twitter users mentioned brands in their tweets regularly. Ibrahim *et al.* (2017) further indicated that most consumer brand mentions on Twitter are either neutral or positive, suggesting that many such tweets are an opportunity for co-promotion. Therefore, the key consumer engagement outcome examined in our study based on the findings of the depth interviews, prior literature and that which intuitively made sense was consumer co-promotion.

Although conceptually similar, co-promotion is broader than traditional positive word-of-mouth, which has been defined as positive informal communications between consumers about the ownership, usage and/or characteristics of particular brands (Berger, 2014). Such co-promotion on social media reflects the joint efforts of two actors – consumer and brand – where one creates a brand-related message and the other shares it with their followers (Frow *et al.*, 2015; Frow *et al.*, 2011). For example, when consumers tweet about their brand experiences, the brand can then retweet this message, using it as a promotional tool to amplify the message (Harmeling *et al.*, 2017). Similarly, if a brand makes an announcement on Twitter, a consumer follower could retweet it to their followers. Co-promotion is thus an expansion of more traditional word-of-mouth (Oh *et al.*, 2017). The following participant quotes elucidate further co-promotion on Twitter:

I go to a café (Pint of Milk) regularly, and every time I have had a good coffee, I tweeted them. You know “consistently good coffee, every time” and they saw the tweet, and they retweeted it, and the

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brand [of coffee beans] they use, Gridlock coffee, saw that tweet as well and they retweeted it, and both followed me, so Gridlock followed me and the Pint of Milk they followed me as well. So, I think it is good because they get positive feedback, and they can retweet that to the people that follow them. Also, the people that follow me, that don't follow them (Pint of Milk), saw that I tweeted that, and they can become interested in the Pint of Milk café. (Charlie)

At least twice a week I repost something. If I think that it is important information, or if I find it really interesting, I will retweet it. I think it is getting out the message, but it is also advertising [the brand's] name and potentially getting them more followers. (Evelyn)

### *Brand customer service*

Twitter is mostly used by consumers and organisations for information seeking and sharing, and for making and handling complaints (Ibrahim *et al.*, 2017; Harmeling *et al.*, 2017), which is subsumed within brand customer service and confirms the importance of studying it in the Twitter context. A lack of brand customer service has been conceptualised to generate consumer disengagement (Hollebeek and Chen, 2014). However, although there is anecdotal evidence to support the arguably obvious association between brand customer service and consumer engagement on Twitter, this has not been empirically tested previously, which makes it novel to study here. Furthermore, brand customer service on Twitter reflects perceptions of customer service provided to not only the focal consumer, but to other consumers, which again adds to the originality of examining its influence on consumer engagement. Indeed, the interview participants noted the importance of feeling that brands were responding to other followers on Twitter.

As there is more transparency and public scrutiny of customer service on Twitter relative to other social media such as Facebook, many organisations have designated teams to effectively monitor consumer posts (Ibrahim *et al.*, 2017), often assisted by automated software (Labrecque, 2014), as illustrated by the following participant:

I have seen customers complain to Telstra [telecommunications provider] about a problem with their phone and Telstra always replies. They have set up a Twitter account exactly for that. I have seen conversations on Twitter where customers get their problems resolved just by using the app on their phone, which is pretty cool. Something like that makes us feel cared about as customers. (Boris)

The service recovery literature highlights that the effective resolution of consumer problems leads to strengthened consumer-brand relationships (Hess *et al.*, 2003), as well as increased consumer positive word-of-mouth intentions (Maxham, 2001). A practitioner study claims that where consumers have a “friendly experience” with a brand’s customer service via Twitter, over 80 per cent of consumers would recommend that brand to others (@sarapics, 2016). On digital platforms, consumers’ word-of-mouth is strongly affected by their online engagement (Kumar *et al.*, 2010), with recent research suggesting that positive consumer-brand interactions on Twitter increase consumer engagement as consumers’ feel more valued (Zhang *et al.*, 2018), or “cared about as customers” as one interviewee (Boris) expressed. Prior studies thus suggest that perceptions of high-quality brand customer service will foster increased levels of consumer engagement, resulting in consumer positive word-of-mouth (Baldus *et al.*, 2015; Zhang *et al.*, 2017). In the context of Twitter, however the focal consumer does not need to be the recipient of the brand customer service, rather the focal consumer can also appreciate how the brand is servicing other consumers, as highlighted by the interview participants.

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Based on this evidence, it is subsequently argued here that positive consumer-brand interactions, in this case with brand customer service via Twitter will increase consumer engagement with a brand (Cambra-Fierro *et al.*, 2016). This in turn increases consumer intentions to co-promote a brand (Van Doorn *et al.*, 2010; Kumar *et al.*, 2010). The following hypotheses were, therefore advanced here:

- H1a.* There is a positive relationship between brand customer service and consumer engagement on Twitter.
- H1b.* Consumer engagement mediates the positive relationship between brand customer service and consumer co-promotion on Twitter.

#### *Brand interactivity*

France *et al.* (2016) define brand interactivity as consumers' perception of a brand's willingness and genuine desire for integration with them. This conceptualisation of brand interactivity is based on two key principles:

- (1) that consumers feel that the brand has the functional ability to interact with them (e.g., via their brand account on Twitter); and
- (2) that the brand demonstrates a genuine desire for connectedness with consumers.

During this study's depth interviews, nine out of 10 participants indicated infrequent interaction with brands on Twitter; they were passive observers of brands. This supports Kaplan and Haenlein (2011) who argued that Twitter is the perfect medium to keep people updated without feeling obligated to respond; and reported that 10 per cent of Twitter users account for over 90 per cent of tweets. Most of this study's participants, therefore perceive interactivity based on the experiences of other brand followers that they witness on Twitter, rather than their own personal interactions. Perceptions of interactivity can be developed when brands regularly respond to followers' tweets, retweet and like others' tweets, as the following participant confirmed:

If someone speaks casually, in a way that a lot of people can connect with, it makes it feel more like a conversation, and one in which you can be included [ . . . ] I would be more inclined to interact with a brand like this. I think this is because it would feel closer to being like a friendship, if that makes sense? (Holly)

Past research indicates that perceptions of interactivity are important in developing consumer-brand relationships (Cyr *et al.*, 2009), including strengthening consumer and brand relationships (Labrecque, 2014), as supported by the following participant:

If the brand is not going to be interactive, then I would probably tend to be less engaged as well, and then it would probably lead to me unfollowing the brand because you look at them two months later and think "wow, I haven't even read most of their tweets, so there is no point following them". (Felicity)

In line with this, it has been suggested that brand interactivity is an antecedent to consumer engagement (France *et al.*, 2016; Mollen and Wilson, 2010), with Brodie *et al.* (2011) contending that consumer engagement arises from interactive experiences. The relationship between interactivity and consumer engagement from a consumer-brand perspective was empirically established by France *et al.* (2016) in the offline context, while the relationship between other forms of interactivity and consumer engagement, such as consumer-machine

(i.e. interactivity of online platforms, e.g. Fang, 2017), and consumer-consumer (e.g. interactivity of other online community members, e.g. Islam and Rahman, 2017) has been the focus in the online environment.

It has also been suggested that perceptions of interactivity influence consumers' positive word-of-mouth via social media (Barreda *et al.*, 2015). However, as interactivity is often regarded as the norm in an online platform like Twitter (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2011), consumers can unquestionably perceive a brand as highly interactive on this medium. It is, therefore argued in this study that this will not necessarily translate into increased co-promotion if consumers do not feel engaged with the brand. Thus, the following hypotheses were raised here:

*H2a.* There is a positive relationship between brand interactivity and consumer engagement on Twitter.

*H2b.* Consumer engagement mediates the positive relationship between brand interactivity and consumer co-promotion on Twitter.

#### *Brand intimacy*

Brand intimacy refers to how well consumers understand a brand (Aaker *et al.*, 2004; Guese and Haelg, 2009). Intimacy is important to relationship development between people in general, as well as for consumer and brand relationships (Guese and Haelg, 2009). On Twitter, such intimacy is reflected in the specific knowledge consumers accumulate via a brand's Twitter account, e.g. via the sharing of personal information, images, etc. It is contended that Twitter in particular is the form of social media where "personal disclosure and intimacy are normative" (Marwick and Boyd, 2011, p. 149). Consumers are also increasingly engaging with Twitter to access real-time brand information (Ibrahim *et al.*, 2017), as highlighted by the following participant:

You can get real insight into what's going on in a company and on certain celebrities as well. You can get an insight into what's going on whether you follow your favorite musician; you can get an insight into when the album is coming out, the development of the album, and so on. So, you really get a keen sort of look; you feel closer to a certain brand or a musician. (Charlie)

Despite this, brand intimacy has not previously been connected with consumer engagement that we are aware of, including on social media. Our study has uncovered that by following a brand on Twitter, consumers can gain unique insights into it:

I am not having to go to individual websites to search, so [Twitter] saves me time in getting information, but it is also keeping me up-to-date with new information, like Apple and their new products. (Evelyn)

The official Twitter account of a brand provides me with something that is unique and interesting that I can only get from [Twitter]. (Daniel)

Although the relationship between brand intimacy and consumer engagement has not been advanced previously, Esch *et al.* (2006) identified the association between brand knowledge (image and awareness) and key consumer-brand relationship constructs (satisfaction, trust and attachment). We, therefore argue in this study that the more intimate their brand knowledge, facilitated via the unique information provided via a brand's Twitter account, along with information available from other sources, the more engaged consumers are likely to be with the brand. It has also previously been suggested that the more familiar consumers

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are with a brand, the more likely they are to partake in positive word-of-mouth (Söderlund, 2002). It is, therefore also suggested here that even when consumers have high levels of brand intimacy, if they are not engaged with the brand, they are unlikely to co-promote. The following hypotheses were subsequently raised:

*H3a.* There is a positive relationship between brand intimacy and consumer engagement on Twitter.

*H3b.* Consumer engagement mediates the positive relationship between brand intimacy and co-promotion on Twitter.

#### *Moderating role of perceived popularity*

Within the consumer engagement literature, researchers such as Hollebeek *et al.* (2016) have emphasised the need to better understand the factors that moderate the relationship between consumer engagement and its antecedents. Popularity on Twitter is generally quantified as the number of brand account followers (Garcia *et al.*, 2017). This implies that it does not matter why consumers follow a brand on Twitter, or how important the brand is, rather popularity only measures the size of a brand's follower base (Garcia *et al.*, 2017). Our depth interviews suggested that such perceived popularity of a brand account on Twitter might be a potential moderator. It is noted that the interview participants did not refer to actual numbers of brand followers on Twitter; consumers are unlikely to know such information, particularly as they continually follow and unfollow brands (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2011).

Past Twitter-specific studies indicate that people rely on cues such as the number of Twitter followers to judge an individual's popularity (Garcia *et al.*, 2017; Sheldon *et al.*, 2017). Such a heuristic simplifies consumer evaluations on social media as information overload makes it difficult for consumers to determine value (De Veirman *et al.*, 2017). This has also been identified as relevant to brands on Twitter (De Veirman *et al.*, 2017). Rutter *et al.* (2016) argued that Twitter followers are a proxy for brand strength. Consumers endorse brands by following their Twitter accounts (Rutter *et al.*, 2016). This was further echoed by one of our study's participants:

Having many followers really says something about your credibility and how good you are. The more followers you have, then obviously, the more people like you, so it is a positive thing [ . . . ] It suggests quality. If they follow you, they like you; otherwise they wouldn't follow you. (Charlie)

Half of this study's interview participants indicated that brands perceived to have a substantial number of Twitter followers (i.e. higher levels of perceived popularity) would offer superior value, including being better at resolving consumer problems and enquiries. This is in line with the finding that brand popularity on Twitter, induced by the number of brand account followers, positively influences consumer brand evaluations (Jin and Phua, 2014). As such, we suggest that this in turn will have an effect on improving consumers' disposition toward a brand's customer service, being a key reason for brands having a Twitter account (Zhu and Chen, 2015), which subsequently should result in higher levels of consumer engagement. Based on this argument, the following moderation hypotheses are raised:

*H4a.* As the perceived popularity increases, the positive effect of brand customer service on consumer engagement is stronger.

*H4b.* As the perceived popularity increases, the positive indirect effect of brand customer service on co-promotion through consumer engagement is stronger.

Furthermore, in one of the few studies on retweeting behaviour in the marketing domain, it was found that developing a large network of Twitter followers is fundamental to generating a high retweet rate (Walker *et al.*, 2017). Some of this study's interviewees believed that where brands were perceived as popular, brand interactivity increases:

I think that if [the brand] has a lot of followers because people are interested in it and are engaging with it, and it is getting a lot of replies and it is retweeting a lot of people, and it is an active Twitter platform and active Twitter conversation, I think it can be very interactive and a useful thing (Daniel).

Brand interactivity is a size-induced phenomenon (Garcia *et al.*, 2017). An escalating volume of interactions between consumers and brands is more likely as the perceived number of Twitter followers increases. Against this backdrop, we argue that greater perceived popularity leads to a change in consumers' mindset, in that they perceive the brand account to be "more active" and that others are interested in what the account offers, e.g. "on the pulse" conversation, hence leading to the perception of greater interactivity that subsequently drives consumer engagement. As such, the following moderation hypotheses are advanced:

*H5a.* As perceived popularity increases, the positive effect of brand interactivity on consumer engagement is stronger.

*H5b.* As perceived popularity increases, the positive indirect effect of brand interactivity on co-promotion through consumer engagement is stronger.

#### *Moderating role of perceived likelihood of adding value*

Previous researchers have called for a better understanding of the relationship between consumer engagement and co-creation, including moderators of this relationship (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014; van Doorn *et al.*, 2010). This is due to a common belief that once consumers are engaged with a brand, they will co-create with it (Schivinski *et al.*, 2016). Yet our study's qualitative findings suggest otherwise; that is, consumers' perceived likelihood of adding value, i.e. their brand-related inputs on Twitter add value to the brand, could instead moderate the relationship between consumer engagement and co-promotion, as a form of CCoV. For example:

For a brand like the Environmental Protection Agency, it is funded on really stingy government grants and is trying to do advocacy for a good cause, and newspapers very rarely pay any attention to it. Then I feel like maybe my retweeting adds to what they are trying to do, even in its own little way. (Anthony)

I remember feeling like "hey, this would be of interest to the people running this brand". It was a joke that followed on from another joke that they had been making earlier, so I tweeted that at them. I don't necessarily feel like I have created value, but I certainly have tried to. (Daniel)

The perceived likelihood of adding value strengthening the relationship between consumer engagement and co-promotion of brands was expressed by nine out of ten of this study's participants:

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And often I will actually think “do they even want my input” or “does my input matter to them”. I might think “what is the point when other people are saying the exact same thing as me”, and then I might not pass things on. (Holly)

The interview findings align with past research on consumer engagement in the social media setting, which indicates that consumers are often being motivated by wanting to support brands (Marbach *et al.*, 2016) by creating value for them (Wasko and Faraj, 2005). We argue that when consumers feel that they can add something to a brand that is deemed to be worthwhile (i.e. when they can make a difference to the brand), they consider that they can partner with the brand, increasing their engagement to drive co-promotion with the brand. Thus, the following hypotheses were advanced here:

*H6a.* There is a positive relationship between consumer engagement and co-promotion on Twitter.

*H6b.* As consumers’ perceived likelihood of adding value increases, the positive effect of consumer engagement on co-promotion becomes stronger.

## Quantitative study

### *Multi-phased design*

A multi-phased design comprising a pre-test, pilot and main study via an online survey were used for the quantitative component of this research. To ensure face validity and clarity of the questionnaire, it was initially pre-tested with ten marketing academics, and the updated survey then piloted via a sample of 260 business students determined as regular Twitter users that followed at least one brand on Twitter. This ensured that respondents would clearly understand the questions, including the appropriateness of their wording and sequencing, and provided an initial check of the internal consistency, means, variances, inter-item correlations and factor structure of the constructs (Dessart, 2017).

### *Sampling procedures*

As per the qualitative and pilot phases, the main quantitative study involved users of Twitter who checked it regularly and followed at least one brand on Twitter. The sampling frame for this main data collection consisted of 223,899 members of an online panel with access to an overview of this study’s main purpose. While 1,517 of these members accessed the survey, 62 per cent of them did not meet the screener criteria, resulting in 400 useable responses. The average respondent was aged between 25 and 44 years (58 per cent) and had a bachelor’s degree or higher qualification (52 per cent), and the sample was evenly split between males and females. These sample characteristics are consistent with past research on Twitter users (Duggan *et al.*, 2015).

### *Measurement instruments*

All of this study’s measurement instruments were adapted from past research, with the exception of the perceived number of Twitter followers and perceived likelihood of adding value moderators, where no established measures could be located. Based on our study’s qualitative findings, a single item was used to measure the perceived number of Twitter followers (i.e. I think the brand has a lot of followers), while consumers’ perceived likelihood of adding value was measured via three items. Three items were also used to measure brand customer service, adapted from Wolfenbarger and Gilly (2003), with an additional item

created based on this study's qualitative findings concerning proactive customer service. Our study identified that in addition to consumers who have previously made enquiries or reported problems on Twitter forming perceptions of a brand's customer service are those who scrutinise brand customer service capabilities via the transparency of Twitter.

In addition, brand interactivity was measured via six items adapted from Song and Zinkhan's (2008) website interactivity instrument, while brand intimacy was measured using Aaker *et al.*'s (2004) instrument comprising six items. Consumer engagement was adapted from Blasco-Arcas *et al.*'s (2016) measure of perceived engagement, with two additional items developed to reflect the sense of connection between consumers and brands on Twitter. Finally, co-promotion was measured using an adaptation of Jayawardhena and Wright's (2009) positive word-of-mouth instrument, with two items added to better reflect co-promotion of the brand.

After the pre-test and pilot purification process, all instruments included at least three items (Hair *et al.*, 2010), except for the perceived number of Twitter followers. All measures were presented on seven-point Likert-type scales.

#### *Analyses and measurement models*

The factor loadings and composite reliabilities for each variable are shown in Table II. Factor loadings assess item reliability, and loadings of 0.50 or more suggest adequate reliability (Hair *et al.*, 2010). In this study, the composite reliabilities of the measures ranged between 0.91 and 0.95; well above the recommended cut-off value of 0.70, providing support for convergent validity (Hair *et al.*, 2010). Discriminant validity was tested by comparing the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) values with the inter-construct correlations. Given that the square root of the AVE values for each construct was greater than the inter-construct correlations, there was evidence of discriminant validity (Hair *et al.*, 2010). Table III presents these inter-construct correlations, with the square root of the AVE shown in bold on the diagonal.

After these preliminary tests, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed using AMOS 24. All constructs and their respective measures were included in an overall CFA (measurement model), as per their theoretical conceptualisations. Applying the guidelines set by Hair *et al.* (2010), the CFA model fit was acceptable:  $\chi^2(282) = 655.09$ ;  $\chi^2/df = 2.32$ ;  $p < 0.000$ ; confirmatory fit index (CFI) = 0.97; Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) = 0.96; root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.058; standardised root mean residual (SRMR) = 0.049.

Despite attempts to minimise common method variance (CMV) in the questionnaire development, the use of same source data facilitated the need to assess its presence (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). A common latent factor (CLF) approach was subsequently adopted, which re-runs the measurement model with and without a single CLF and then assesses the chi-square difference (Marinova and Singh, 2014; Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). These results indicated the chi-square difference was significant when the CLF variable was introduced, suggesting the data was influenced by CMV ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 159.5$ ,  $df = 22$ ,  $p = 0.00$ ). CMV corrected factor score weights were consequently used to create composites by accounting for the CLF, which were then applied to estimate the path effects (Marinova and Singh, 2014; Menguc *et al.*, 2017).

#### *Results of the direct and mediating effects*

The structural model demonstrated acceptable fit ( $\chi^2(221) = 631.90$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 2.86$ ,  $p < 0.00$ , CFI = 0.96, TLI = 0.95, RMSEA = 0.068, SRMR = 0.068). We tested the hypotheses shown in Figure 1 in two stages. First, we examined the direct relationships and the mediation effects

Measures	Standardised Factor Loadings	Cronbach's $\alpha$	Consumer engagement on Twitter
<i>Brand customer service (BCS)</i>		0.94	
The brand demonstrates that it is willing and ready to respond to customers' needs via its Twitter account	0.85		
The brand shows a sincere interest in solving customer problems via its Twitter account	0.90		
Customer inquiries are responded to by the brand via its Twitter account	0.90		
The brand demonstrates that it is proactive in addressing potential customer issues via its Twitter account	0.91		
<i>Brand Interactivity (I)</i>		0.91	
The brand gives me the opportunity to respond via its Twitter account	0.77		
The brand facilitates real-time communication with its followers via its Twitter account	0.87		
The brand enables conversations with its followers via its Twitter account	0.90		
The brand encourages followers to respond via its Twitter account	0.85		
<i>Brand Intimacy (BI)</i>		0.91	
I feel more confident that the brand understands its customers	0.77		
I feel that I would be more comfortable describing the brand to someone who was unfamiliar with it	0.87		
I feel that I am more familiar with the range of goods and services that the brand offers	0.86		
I feel that I have become more knowledgeable about the brand	0.87		
I feel that I am likely to be following the brand's Twitter feed one year from now	0.74		
<i>Consumer Engagement (CE)</i>		0.96	
My interaction with the brand via its Twitter account makes me feel valuable	0.82		
I feel that I have a special bond with the brand via its Twitter account	0.91		
I feel that I have a close personal connection with the brand via its Twitter account	0.94		
I feel that I have a special relationship with the brand via its Twitter account	0.93		
If the brand were a person, I would consider the brand to be a friend	0.82		
Seeing a post by the brand via its Twitter account feels the same as seeing a post from a good friend	0.88		
<i>Co-promotion (CoP)</i>		0.93	
Because of my connection to the brand through Twitter, I say positive things about it to others	0.85		
Because of my connection to the brand through Twitter, I encourage friends and relatives to do business with it	0.86		
Because of my connection to the brand through Twitter, I help promote it	0.90		
Because of my connection to the brand through Twitter, I recommend it to others	0.90		
<i>Perceived Likelihood of Adding Value (PLV)</i>		0.92	
I can make a difference to the brand	0.86		
My posts help the brand	0.97		
The brand would read my posts	0.86		

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**Table II.**  
Latent construct  
factor loadings and  
reliability

(i.e. *H1a* through *H3b* and *H6a*) using AMOS 24. Second, SPSS PROCESS was used to test the hypothesised moderation and moderated mediation effects (i.e. *H4a* through *H5b*, and *H6b*) (Nyadzayo *et al.*, 2016).

As shown in Table IV, these results support the hypothesised relationship between brand customer service and consumer engagement (*H1a*) ( $\beta = 0.48, t = 8.68, p < 0.001$ ). However, the relationship between brand interactivity and consumer engagement (*H2a*) is not supported ( $\beta = 0.09, t = 1.56, p > 0.05$ ). The positive effect of brand intimacy on consumer engagement (*H3a*) is also confirmed ( $\beta = 0.25, t = 5.62, p < 0.001$ ), while a positive relationship was also found between consumer engagement and co-promotion (*H6a*) ( $\beta = 0.53, t = 13.47, p < 0.001$ ).

Mediated relationships were next tested using non-parametric bootstrapping ( $n = 5000$  at 95 per cent confidence interval) (Nyadzayo *et al.*, 2016) via AMOS 24. Bootstrapping helps to address issues related to non-normal distribution (Kline, 2011) and enables AMOS to calculate the standard error for indirect and total effects (Blunch, 2013). The results of these mediation tests are also presented in Table IV.

In support of *H1b*, a positive indirect relationship was found between brand customer service and co-promotion via consumer engagement ( $\beta = 0.27, p = 0.000$ ), as well as support for *H3b* which predicted an indirect relationship between brand intimacy and co-promotion via consumer engagement ( $\beta = 0.16, p = 0.000$ ). These results are supported by the bootstrapped confidence intervals, which do not contain zero. However, *H2b* (indirect effect of brand interactivity on co-promotion via consumer engagement) is not supported, as the lower and upper confidence intervals contain a score of zero (Blunch, 2013; Nyadzayo *et al.*, 2016).

*Moderation and moderated mediation results*

To test for moderation (i.e. *H4a, H5a* and *H6b*) and moderated mediation (i.e. *H4b* and *H5b*), we used SPSS PROCESS. This involves evaluation of moderation and mediation and also combines mediated moderation and moderated mediation, with the latter being tested here (Hayes, 2013).

**Table III.**  
Descriptive statistics  
and inter-construct  
correlations

Constructs	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Brand customer service (BCS)	0.89					
2. Brand interactivity (I)	0.83***	0.85				
3. Brand intimacy (BI)	0.62***	0.68***	0.82			
4. Consumer engagement (CE)	0.71***	0.64***	0.63***	0.88		
5. Co-promotion (CoP)	0.71***	0.66***	0.74***	0.83***	0.88	
6. Perceived likelihood of adding value (PLV)	0.59***	0.57***	0.48***	0.73***	0.66***	0.90
Mean	4.93	5.11	5.18	4.47	4.63	4.23
Standard deviation	1.3	1.19	1.12	1.44	1.42	1.64
AVE	0.79	0.72	0.68	0.78	0.77	0.81

**Notes:** \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; AVE = average variance extracted; Correlations are not CMV adjusted

**Table IV.**  
Results for direct and  
indirect relationships

Hypothesis no.	Direct relationship	$\beta$	SE	$t$	Conclusion	
<i>H1a</i>	BCS → CE	0.48	0.06	8.68***	Supported	
<i>H2a</i>	I → CE	0.09	0.07	1.56	Not supported	
<i>H3a</i>	BI → CE	0.25	0.06	5.62***	Supported	
<i>H6a</i>	CE → CoP	0.53	0.04	13.47***	Supported	
CI						
Hypothesis No.	Mediated Relationship	$\beta$	SE	Lower	Upper	Conclusion
<i>H1b</i>	BCS → CE → CoP	0.27***	0.05	0.19	0.36	Supported
<i>H2b</i>	I → CE → CoP	0.06	0.07	-0.02	0.13	Not supported
<i>H3b</i>	BI → CE → CoP	0.16***	0.04	0.10	0.23	Supported

**Notes:** BI = Brand intimacy; CE = Consumer engagement; CoP = Co-promotion; BCS = Brand customer service; I = Brand interactivity; CI = Bootstrapped confidence interval, estimated at 95%; significant at \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

As shown in Table V, these results provide support for H4a (perceived number of Twitter followers moderates the relationship between brand customer service and consumer engagement) ( $\beta = 0.08, t = 2.12, p < 0.001$ ). The effect of the perceived number of Twitter followers on the indirect relationship between perceived customer service and co-promotion, via consumer engagement (H4b) was next tested, and the results indicate this hypothesis is also supported. The results show that perceived customer service has a stronger effect on consumer engagement (and indirectly to co-promotion) when consumers perceive the brand to have a larger number of followers on Twitter (mean + 1SD = 6.95,  $\beta = 0.50$ , Boot SE = 0.06) than when they are perceived to have a smaller number (mean - 1SD = 4.32,  $\beta = 0.36$ , Boot SE = 0.06). The nature of this relationship was next evaluated via simple slope analysis (Figure 2).

The hypothesised moderating effect of the perceived number of Twitter followers on the direct relationship between brand interactivity and consumer engagement was not supported (H5a and H5b) ( $\beta = 0.03, t = 0.66, p > 0.05$ ).

Finally, the results in Table VI provide support for the moderating effect of the perceived likelihood of adding value on the relationship between consumer engagement and co-promotion (H6b) ( $\beta = 0.05, t = 2.24, p < 0.01$ ). Simple slope analysis was also used here to illustrate the nature of this relationship (Figure 3).

**Discussion**

Our study addresses the call to examine consumer engagement across a range of contexts, especially in the increasingly prevalent social media setting (Chan et al., 2014; Dessart, 2017; Leckie et al., 2016). The dynamic environment of Twitter is a highly suitable setting to study

Moderation	$\beta$	SE	t score	p	Confidence level (95%)		Conclusion
					Lower	Upper	
Constant	4.4	0.05	80.75***	0.00			Supported
BCS → CE	0.70	0.05	16.26***	0.00	0.63	0.81	
PP → CE	0.09	0.05	1.41	0.09	-0.03	0.17	
PP*BCS → CE	0.08	0.03	2.12**	0.01	0.01	0.13	

*Moderated mediation*

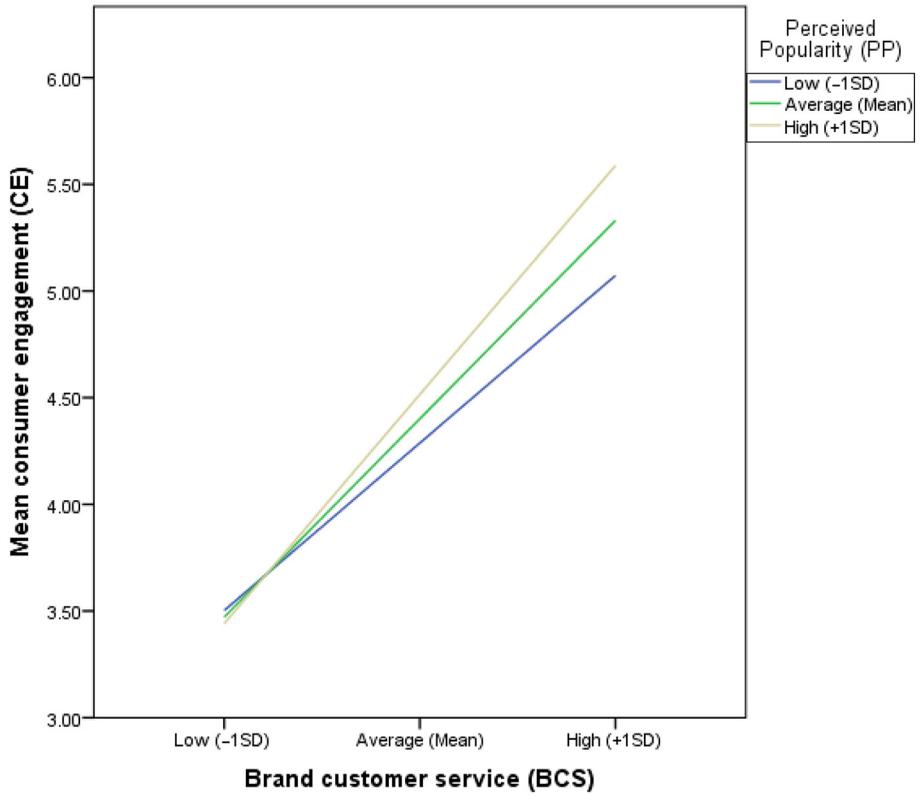
	$\beta$	SE	t score	p	Confidence level (95%)	
					Lower	Upper
Constant	1.912	0.28	6.88***	0.00	1.36	2.46
CE → CoP	0.62	0.06	10.26***	0.00	0.5	0.74
BCS → CoP	0.26	0.07	3.82***	0.00	0.12	0.39

*BCS on CoP via CE at different levels of PP*

	$\beta$	SE (Boot)	Confidence level (95%)	
			Lower	Upper
Small	0.36	0.06	0.26	0.48
Medium	0.43	0.05	0.33	0.53
Large	0.5	0.06	0.39	0.62
Index of moderated mediation	0.05	0.02	0.01	0.09

**Notes:** CE = Consumer engagement; CoP = Co-promotion; BCS = Brand customer service; PP = Perceived popularity; significant at \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$

**Table V.** Conditional indirect effects of brand customer service on co-promotion through consumer engagement at specific levels of perceived popularity



**Figure 2.** Brand customer service-consumer engagement relationship at different levels of perceived popularity

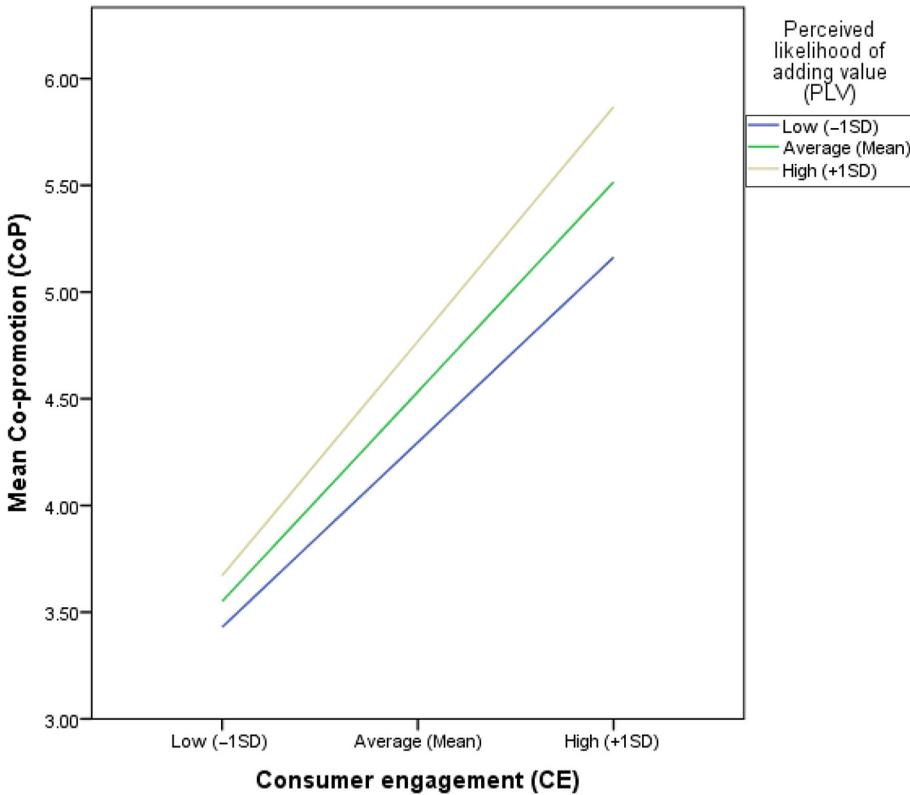
**Table VI.** Conditional effects of consumer engagement on Co-Promotion at specific levels of perceived likelihood of adding value

	$\beta$	SE	<i>t</i> score	<i>p</i>	Confidence level (95%)		Conclusion
					Lower	Upper	
Constant	4.53	0.05	85.02***	0.00	4.43	4.64	Supported
CE → CoP	0.67	0.05	13.12***	0.00	0.57	0.77	
PLV → CoP	0.15	0.05	3.16***	0.00	0.05	0.24	
PLV*CE → CoP	0.05	0.02	2.24**	0.01	0.01	0.09	

**Notes:** CE = Consumer engagement; CoP = Co-promotion; PLV = Perceived likelihood of adding value; significant at \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$

consumer engagement as it affords brands unique opportunities to develop and maintain meaningful consumer relationships (Dessart, 2017). Our study included consumer engagement antecedents relating to the inherent characteristics of Twitter. Consumer engagement was found to mediate the positive relationship between brand customer service and brand intimacy, respectively, and consumer co-promotion on Twitter.

Our findings also revealed that the more brands are perceived to provide high-quality customer service and disclose unique brand insights to their Twitter followers, the more



**Figure 3.** Consumer engagement-co-promotion relationship at different levels of perceived likelihood of adding value

consumers feel engaged with and inclined to co-promote brands (e.g. share brand tweets). In line with this, providing intimate brand knowledge, identifying and addressing consumer enquiries and complaints (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2011) and handling crisis situations (Gruber et al., 2015) on Twitter are important in fostering consumer-brand relationships (Aaker et al., 2004; Cambra-Fierro et al., 2016; Guese and Haelg, 2009; Hess et al., 2003). Furthermore, the public nature of Twitter means that all brand followers can see how brands deal with issues faced by other followers, which possibly explains why consumer engagement increases when a brand is perceived as attempting to help others on social media.

Furthermore, our study addresses calls for research on moderators of the relationship between consumer engagement and its antecedents (Hollebeek et al., 2016; van Doorn et al., 2010). While the size of online brand communities has previously been linked to consumer engagement (Dessart et al., 2016), this is the first time that perceived popularity has been empirically examined as a moderator. Popular brands thought to have a large number of followers on Twitter and perceived as offering high-quality customer service appear to facilitate stronger consumer engagement than those with a lower perceived number of followers, irrespective of the same levels of customer service. The effect of perceived customer service on co-promotion via consumer engagement is also stronger when consumers perceive a brand to have a larger number of followers. This is because followers of popular brands will likely be exposed to more customer service tweets.

Our study's interviews and the extant literature also established that brands with more Twitter followers are perceived to have more robust protocols around responding to consumers, including dedicated staff monitoring Twitter. The increased traffic flow of customer-service-related tweets on more popular Twitter accounts, coupled with brand responsiveness, likely makes followers feel closer to these brands. Such engaged consumers who have a strong attachment to a brand will be more inclined to act as brand ambassadors. These findings are in line with analogous past research that has suggested high levels of service quality and effective complaint resolution increase consumer-brand relationship strength (de Ruyter and Wetzels, 2000).

According to our findings, consumer engagement does not mediate the positive relationship between brand interactivity and co-promotion. This is in contrast with Cyr *et al.* (2009) who argued that brand interactivity strengthens the consumer-brand relationship, based on their investigation of different website features. Instead, the features that enable interactivity on Twitter appear common to all brand accounts. Furthermore, consumer expectations of the interactivity of brands on Twitter have escalated over time, indicating they view such interactivity as a hygiene factor that does not drive engagement; it is simply expected.

Finally, co-promotion as a form of CCoV is a key outcome of consumer engagement on Twitter. This aligns with former research that suggests that brands can receive positive exposure when Twitter followers collaborate on promotional activities with them (Jansen *et al.*, 2009). Our study also identified perceived likelihood of adding value as a moderator of the relationship between consumer engagement and co-promotion, which addresses calls for research on moderating effects of the relationship between consumer engagement and CCoV (Hollebeek, 2014; van Doorn *et al.*, 2010). However, past research has suggested that once consumers are engaged with brands on social media they are more likely to promote brand-related information to their own followers (i.e. co-promote) (Chan *et al.*, 2014; Chu and Kim, 2011). Our study found that consumers' perceived likelihood of adding value moderates this relationship. In line with this, Hennig-Thurau *et al.* (2004) reported that company helping is a key motivation for positive word-of-mouth among consumers.

Helping to promote a brand is a key theme that emerged in the qualitative phase of our study. The results indicate that if consumers feel they will not be heard or cannot add value to the brand, they are less likely to collaborate in brand promotional efforts. This aligns with the common observation in the extant literature that most Twitter users are observers rather than active contributors (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2011).

#### *Practical implications*

This section provides managerial guidelines for strengthening consumer-brand relationships via Twitter. Consumers are increasingly using social media to make enquiries or air their grievances, and the instantaneous nature of Twitter increases their expectations of immediate brand responses (Wright and Hinson, 2008). This study's findings suggest that when brands help to resolve consumer problems and respond to their enquiries quickly and reliably, i.e. perceived high-quality customer service, they also strengthen consumer engagement and ultimately encourage consumer co-promotion. Therefore, brands need to leverage followers' interactions on social media to strengthen their image, foster consumer engagement and encourage co-promotion. However, brands also need to establish clear protocols (e.g. hours of operation) for responding to consumer issues on Twitter to help manage consumer expectations.

Brands are also encouraged to give consumers access to intimate and unique insights that are unavailable elsewhere. This brand content could include behind the scenes information,

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insights into the creative process, future plans of the brand, product demonstrations and stories about the brand's employees. Through this increased information disclosure, consumers will have a greater sense of relationship with the brand and higher levels of engagement.

This study's findings also indicate that brands perceived to have a larger number of Twitter followers can better engage with consumers than those with less followers, irrespective of customer service levels. This suggests that less popular brands need to formulate strategies to increase their Twitter following, including being more active on Twitter and targeting influencers who frequently retweet and are open to connecting with smaller accounts (Bulygo, 2012). Once brands gain popularity on Twitter, there is a greater chance that some of their tweets will go viral (Moreau, 2018). Twitter messages can be retweeted exponentially, which means any useful or interesting brand tweets can be passed on to other Twitter users in a short space of time. The buzz this generates can be rewarding for brands, adding credibility and providing validation for the brand.

Finally, this study's findings indicate that engaged consumers are more likely to co-promote brands if they feel their actions will add value. Co-promotion is about consumers and brands working together to promote brands, which can foster and nurture a positive emotional connection between the two. It is, therefore, important for brands to highlight that consumer feedback is listened to and acted on, and to publicise instances where consumer input has helped them. Brands should also publicly thank followers for such support, including rewarding their efforts and tweeting about them to other followers. This will signify the value the brand places on consumer ideas and feedback. Similarly, when brands ask consumers questions via a Twitter poll, this conveys they value their input.

#### *Limitations and future research directions*

Our findings need to be considered in the light of several limitations. First, as consumer engagement is context-specific, caution needs to be exercised in generalising these findings beyond Twitter. Future research could extend this study to other social networks such as Instagram. This supports Dessart *et al.*'s (2016) questioning of whether different social media platforms have varied functionality and are used by consumers for different reasons; that is, do different levels of platform functionality influence a brand's ability to engage consumers?

Second, while data saturation was achieved in the qualitative phase of this study, a larger more diverse sample of participants using a variety of social media platforms could produce further insights into consumer engagement, particularly in this context. Third, this study's cross-sectional data meant it was unable to infer causality. As consumer engagement is often dynamic (Brodie *et al.*, 2011), future research could examine consumers across multiple encounters to understand the "ebb-and-flow" of their engagement (Hollebeek, 2011a).

Third, given that brands on Twitter proactively endeavor to connect with consumers in a personal and emotional way, we join the call by France *et al.* (2016) for additional research to provide more insight into the psychological state of engagement. Our initial interview findings also support this call, and coupled with a behavioural view of engagement increasingly being taken in the social media context at the expense of a psychological perspective, this a valid avenue for future research. Finally, while this study's depth interviews indicated that consumers co-promote with brands on Twitter if they believe they can add value to brands – also confirmed in the quantitative phase – further testing of this new construct of "perceived likelihood of adding value" would be worthwhile. This novel construct was measured via three items generated from the depth interviews, so its further testing and potential refinement is warranted.

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