

The role of customer brand engagement in the use of Instagram as a ‘shop window’ for fashion-industry social commerce

Structured Abstract

Purpose: To analyze how fashion consumers behave when they make purchases using social media platforms—specifically, Instagram. In particular, the work examines the role played by consumer–brand involvement and self–brand connection as predictors of customer brand engagement (CBE).

Design/methodology/approach: Social commerce-adoption is modeled, using three variables: customer engagement, self–brand connection, and fashion-consumer brand-involvement. Using a personal online survey, data on social media users classified as Millennials and Generation Z were collected. The model is analyzed using structural equation modeling (SEM).

Findings: Consumer involvement in fashion has a positive effect on cognitive processing and activation, but not on affection. Self–brand connection has a positive effect on all three dimensions analyzed. Finally, gender is found to exert a moderating effect on the relationship between the ‘CBE activation’ dimension and brand loyalty.

Originality: The present study contributes to addressing the scarcity of studies dealing with CBE and social commerce in the fashion sector and, in particular, fashion-consumer behavior on social media (specifically, Instagram).

Research limitations/implications

The research was conducted during the lockdown imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have influenced the responses. Other limitations and potential lines of research for the future are presented at the end of the paper.

Practical implications

Some of the results of this study can directly inform the social media strategies of fashion companies that use Instagram as a channel of communication with their customers. They can also contribute to incentivizing co-created content and increasing consumption among both men and women.

1. Introduction

Both society and consumption have experienced a gradual shift toward more digital habits and behaviors. Internet-based information and communication technologies (ICTs; see list of abbreviations in TABLE A1 of the Appendix 2) enable online platforms to facilitate interaction and communication between consumers and businesses, creating brand communities (Brodie *et al.*, 2013). But the way in which individuals consume, communicate, express themselves, share with, and relate to others is changing due to opportunities offered by the digital world.

While, prior to the pandemic, the data were already pointing to a change in consumer habits, toward greater online purchasing and the development of social commerce, the COVID-19 crisis has only accentuated this behavioral change. The fashion sector has been gravely affected by the pandemic, witnessing a slump in sales and income. According to Gonzalo *et al.* (2020), the purchase intention of fashion consumers in April 2020 fell by between 70% and 80% in offline purchases and by between 30% and 40% in online purchases in Europe and North America, compared to 2019—even in countries that were not under complete lockdown. Although, judging by these data, electronic commerce (e-commerce) is not entirely offsetting the drop in sales in physical stores, it has proven to be a lifesaver for fashion brands (Gonzalo *et al.*, 2020).

At the same time, the imposition of social distancing has highlighted the importance of digital channels more than ever, as well as the urgency with which firms need to scale and strengthen their digital capabilities in order to recover from the crisis. This is because consumers will continue to demand more from this online space and brands must therefore act quickly to meet consumer demand (Amed *et al.*, 2020; Balis, 2020; Mason *et al.* (2021).

At the height of the e-commerce boom, the recent arrival of ‘social commerce’ is a primary example of the digital transformation of society. However, in the case of Spain—the focus of the present study—there are fears over digital privacy (how firms store and use consumers’ personal data), the security of payment methods, and the veracity of online information, which have held back the progress of social commerce in terms of becoming fully established among the country’s consumer habits. In the European Union as a whole, more than 70% of Internet users made online purchases in 2019, a percentage that continues to rise, especially in the 16–24 and 25–54 age brackets—currently at 78%

and 76% of Internet users, respectively (Eurostat, 2020). The subsectors that account for the most online purchases are clothing and sports goods (65% of e-buyers), followed by travel and holiday accommodation (54%).

Lin *et al.* (2017) define social commerce as “a phenomenon rooted in social media practice and Web 2.0 technologies, which have become popular consumer tools to socialize and share commercial-related information” and as “any commercial activities facilitated by or conducted through the broad social media and Web 2.0 tools in consumers’ online shopping process or business’ interactions with their customers” (p. 191). However, social commerce should not be understood solely as a way to gain recommendations, achieve a good digital reputation, or obtain the maximum possible number of positive reviews, but also as a means to generate value through content. Social commerce has provided new channels that improve communication between firms and customers, bringing an innovative approach to business practices.

Social networking platforms (SNPs) have thus made a marked impression on marketing activities and are now among the main tools used by firms to reach, share with, and interact with customers (Chappuis *et al.*, 2011; Hudson *et al.*, 2016). The fashion sector, for instance, among other sectors, has invested in creating a presence on SNPs over the years, in a bid to take advantage of the evident potential of the two-way exchange offered by online interactions between brand and customer (Kim and Ko, 2012; Helal *et al.*, 2018).

Meanwhile, customer engagement has attracted the attention of researchers and academics in the marketing field (Algharabat *et al.*, 2020). Specifically, customer brand engagement (CBE), an aspect of customer engagement, has featured heavily in the marketing literature in recent years (e.g., Hollebeek *et al.* 2014). In the context of SNPs, Hollebeek *et al.* (2014) developed a CBE measurement scale but noted that it is yet to be validated in different cultural contexts. Furthermore, recent studies, such as that of Halaszovich and Nel (2017), call for further research into CBE on SNPs.

Against this challenging backdrop, our work takes on special relevance by advancing toward a better understanding of consumer behavior in light of social commerce and purchases made via social networks.

The work of Read *et al.* (2019) further underlines the value that the present study may

contribute. On the one hand, these authors identify an increase among brands in the use of social networks, but note that this entails the need for firms to make better progress in their customer engagement. On the other hand, the authors justify their focus on Twitter, since most other studies to date have focused on Facebook, but insist that future lines of research should focus on Instagram.

Studies that analyze CBE and social commerce in the fashion sector are particularly scarce. To address this lacuna in the academic literature, the present work seeks to study the online behavior of fashion consumers who make their purchases via SNPs—in particular, on Instagram, this being a highly popular network among influencers. We develop a model of social commerce-adoption with three variables: customer engagement, self-brand connection, and fashion-consumer brand-involvement. The results and conclusions of our analysis point to valuable management recommendations, while the limitations of the study indicate potential research directions for the future.

2. Literature review

2.1. Customer engagement and value co-creation

In recent years, the customer engagement concept has generated several studies and reflections among the academic, professional, and marketing consultancy fields (Haumann *et al.*, 2015; Precourt, 2016). Of the different conceptualizations found in the academic literature, the present study focuses on the concept of customer brand engagement (abbreviated here as CBE) developed by Hollebeek *et al.* (2014). These authors conceptualize CBE as “a consumer’s positively valenced brand-related cognitive, emotional and behavioral activity during or related to focal consumer/brand interactions.” (p. 154). According to these authors, the concept of ‘brand interactions’ refers to customers’ direct interactions with the brand that are based on physical contact, rather than indirect interactions that may occur, for example, through observing a brand as a result of mass communications (Brakus *et al.*, 2009). Hollebeek *et al.* (2014) propose three dimensions of CBE:

1. “Cognitive processing” refers to an individual’s level of knowledge of a consumer brand: “a consumer’s level of brand-related thought processing and elaboration in a particular consumer/brand interaction.”

2. “Affection” refers to a consumer’s degree of positive brand-related affect in a particular consumer/brand interaction.
3. “Activation” refers to the level of effort, intensity, and time devoted by the consumer to a brand in a particular consumer/brand interaction.

The use of SNPs, on the other hand, has witnessed something of a change as firms endeavor to implement strategies that foster interaction between brands and their consumers (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2017). This dynamic has brought with it a new concept that mirrors CBE: social brand engagement (SBE) (Osei-Frimpong and McLean, 2017)—that is, CBE in the context of social media (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014).

SBE is also an important feature of the present study. Online engagement usually occurs when the consumer shares their experience of a brand with the firm and with other potential consumers. The notion of value co-creation recognizes that consumers exert influence and power in the brand-development process (Atwal and Williams, 2009), and this concept shifted the focus of marketing (Millspaugh and Kent, 2016). It is now understood that brand value is jointly created via an interaction that acts as a dialogue between the firm and the brand’s consumers (Tynan *et al.*, 2010; Grönroos, 2011; Grönroos and Voima, 2011). Within the marketing academic research sphere, co-creation is understood to be a function of relationship marketing, which is used to facilitate and encourage active consumer participation in the creation of brand value (Payne *et al.*, 2008). This emphasis on the consumer has changed scholars’ understanding of exchange, from tangible to intangible goods, and the use of service-dominant logic (SDL) within marketing activities (Vargo and Lusch, 2004).

SDL favors consumer participation at each stage of product development (Ind and Coates, 2013) or in the value-creation process (Grönroos, 2011; Grönroos and Voima, 2011). However, in the fashion sector, this broad application of marketing recommendations brings with it a series of challenges for firms, according to Millspaugh and Kent (2016). These authors contend that a fashion brand—and more specifically, a designer brand—is often defined by the underlying aesthetics of each collection, which change from season to season. It is the designer’s unique vision, then, that acts as the brand’s point of differentiation within the fashion sector. However, this approach differs significantly from the SDL paradigm, holding that fashion brands must (i) actively listen to their consumers and make creations that reflect consumer demand; (ii) allow consumers to

choose and share SNP content; (iii) consider consumer participation to be important; and (iv) reward consumers (Domingo, 2013). Participation in this context refers to the brand involvement that customers develop in suitable environments, forming communities and openly participating in them.

2.2. Social networks, influencers, and CBE

Until relatively recently, firms typically took advantage of the fame and social status of celebrities to promote their brands. Now, however, advances in SNPs have led to a much greater profile among influencers (Xu and Pratt, 2018, cited in Chetioui *et al.*, 2020).

An influencer is a new kind of social actor that enjoys a high level of popularity, a high number of online followers, and extensive reach, thanks to the publicity they are able to give to any given topic and their capacity to influence the decision-making of potential consumers in relation to a product or service (Park and Kim, 2016; De Mesa and García, 2017; Ge and Gretzel, 2018; Chetioui *et al.*, 2020). Influencers constitute the perfect point of contact between a firm, its product or service, and its target audience.

Generally, influencers share their everyday activities, skills, and opinions with their online followers, along with their recommendations based on their knowledge or previous experience (Freberg *et al.*, 2011). The significant growth in the number of followers enjoyed by influencers has led to the emergence of ‘influencer marketing’—a fast-growing marketing approach that has been adopted in many industries (Chetioui *et al.*, 2020). According to these latter authors, fashion is one of the industries in which influencer marketing has been widely adopted in recent years.

The progressive growth in demand in the fashion sector is reflected not only in the greater volume of shoppers but also their greater interest in all things fashion-related, with purchasing behaviors being highly influenced by fashion trends (Lang and Armstrong, 2018). These trends are usually led by fashion influencers, who act as opinion leaders and are considered the new players in the fashion sector (Park and Kim, 2016). Indeed, the percentage of professionals hiring the services of influencers via SNPs as a marketing tool increased by 46% between 2017 and 2018, representing 58% of those interviewed (IAB Spain, 2019).

The particular public that is most likely to be open to being influenced by these online networks and influencers is that of Millennials, although members of Generation Z are

increasingly joining this trend (Curiel and Ortiz, 2018). Followers from these collectives spend more time than other age groups on the platforms where these influencers are to be found (Urrutikoetxea, 2020). Furthermore, SNP users belonging to these generations are the epitome of the so-called “prosumer”—individuals who consume *and* produce information online. Their habits, familiarity with the networks, and particular traits as consumers render users from these generations the perfect followers.

For brands that work with influencers in their advertising campaigns, engagement sits at the critical intersection between follower and influencer and has become a key element in the quest to increase sales or improve promotional effectiveness. The co-creation experiences that influencers so successfully generate with their respective communities are a source of significant profitability for the brands in question. In addition, in the online social media context, the concept of engagement can help us better understand consumer behavior, while, for the influencer, it can be translated into a metric that gives them brand value as individuals. This metric is based on the number of times their content is shared (diffusion), the number of times a follower mentions or shares the influencer’s message with their immediate circle, and the number of comments or responses the influencer receives as a result of that message (social impact) (Urrutikoetxea, 2020). Engagement is sometimes regarded as a metric that merely symbolizes an influencer’s relevance in a given sector, but, in fact, the concept goes much further. It also reflects the degree of commitment a consumer makes to a brand, or a follower makes to an influencer.

Among SNP users in general, 68% report following these content-creators via SNPs—particularly women, who account for 77% of respondents. By age, the main age-group among followers is that of people under 46 years of age, 85% of whom are between 16 and 30, and 71% between 31 and 45. In terms of expansion in the use of SNPs among followers of influencers, in 2018 Facebook presented growth of 45% on the previous year and Instagram 40%, albeit the latter platform has witnessed the highest growth in user numbers overall in recent years—a 35% increase on 2017 (IAB Spain, 2019). Instagram, along with YouTube, is the SNP that makes the most use of influencers.

Meanwhile, Instagram accounts for the highest proportion of influencers contracted by firms via SNPs (70% of the total) and has also enjoyed the greatest growth (59%) (ibid.). This network is highly visually-orientated, with photographs and short videos constituting its most typical content (Lee *et al.*, 2015). Unlike other consumers of SNPs, the main

motivation for Instagram users is social interaction around brands (Blight *et al.*, 2017), which explains the higher level of brand community commitment and engagement among its users (Casaló *et al.*, 2017). High levels of interaction are important because they can foster a word-of-mouth effect and the building of a community of fans—of influencers or the brands themselves—who contribute significantly to the success of social network-based campaigns (Nanda *et al.*, 2018). Furthermore, according to the literature, the innovation process of SMEs should focus on customer engagement—and here, interaction plays a critical role.

From the scholarly perspective, despite the major presence of influencers on Instagram and their influence on the consumer decision-making process, very little is known about the factors that shape the success of brand-related actions on the platform to generate more sales. In the business realm, however, firms actively harness social commerce to support their brands, to incentivize a closer relationship with consumers, and to promote high-quality relational brand communication that leads to increased sales and greater online brand loyalty (Jin and Ryu, 2020).

Read *et al.* (2019) indicate that brands' increasing use of social networks to connect with consumers has given rise to an emerging body of literature dealing with customer engagement. This shift reflects the growing sense of connection that consumers feel with a given brand based on an on-going relationship with it via social networks. According to these authors, empirical studies have also been conducted showing the development of instruments to measure customer engagement in social networks, such as that of Hollebeek *et al.* (2014) and Schivinski *et al.* (2016), or the analysis of the customer engagement process, such as that of Brodie *et al.* (2013), among others. However, according to Read *et al.* (2019), despite these important contributions, significant research gaps persist. On the one hand, each of the various social media channels (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.) is quite distinct and thus calls for its own focused scholarly study. On the other hand, customer engagement depends on the context in which the commercial transaction takes place (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2016); therefore, once again, these different contexts require specific investigation.

Based on all of the aforementioned factors, in the following section, we justify a series of hypothesized relationships that link customer engagement with other antecedents such as brand involvement and self-brand connection, and with outcomes such as loyalty.

3. Antecedents and consequences: Proposed research hypotheses

3.1. Consumer involvement

According to Zaichkowsky (1985) and Mittal (1995), involvement is the relevance that individuals find in products or brands, based on their needs, values, and/or interests. Kapferer and Laurent (1985, p. 49) define involvement thus: “Involvement is an unobservable state of motivation, arousal or interest. It is evoked by a particular stimulus or situation. It has drive properties: its consequences are types of searching, information processing and decision making.” As a result, consumers undertake information-searches on SNPs and process the information they find, which helps them in their decision-making.

According to Hollebeek (2011), the concept of involvement is an antecedent of CBE, as demonstrated by Leckie *et al.* (2016) in the context of mobile telephony services, Harrigan *et al.* (2017) in the context of tourism, and Dwivedi (2015) in the context of cellphones.

In light of the findings of this literature, we propose the following research hypotheses for each of the dimensions of CBE:

H1. *Consumer involvement with fashion brands exerts a positive effect on the cognitive-processing dimension of CBE.*

H2. *Consumer involvement with fashion brands exerts a positive effect on the affection dimension of CBE.*

H3. *Consumer involvement with fashion brands exerts a positive effect on the activation dimension of CBE.*

3.2. Consumer self-brand connection

Self-brand connection (SBC) is “the extent to which consumers have incorporated the brand into their self-concept” (Escalas, 2004; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014). We adopted the consumer SBC scale developed in the latter work and premised our study on the finding of these authors that the SBC construct is a consequence of CBE (CBE explains most of the variance observed for this construct). The authors also found cognitive processing,

affection, and activation to all exert a positive effect on SBC. In particular, of all the CBE dimensions, they found affection to have the greatest effect.

According to some authors, such as Escalas (2004), brands can be used to build one's self-concept and can help to express who we are, as an integrating social tool or a means of self-realization. This creation of consumer identity depends, in part, on the connection or 'contact' generated between consumers and brands.

When Hollebeek *et al.* (2014) examined CBE in longitudinal research designs, they questioned the nature of specific constructs and opened a debate on whether these might act as antecedents or consequences of CBE. Longitudinal investigation of CBE over multiple consumer-brand interactions (for instance, a consumer's repeat brand usage) may yield evidence of the relevance of activation, cognitive processing, affection, and self-brand connection as CBE antecedents—that is, consumer dynamics based on previous brand experience, which occur prior to the undertaking of a focal brand interaction. Therefore, focusing on the repeated use of Instagram and consumer attitudes based on previous experience with this platform, we propose that SBC is an antecedent of CBE.

Meanwhile, it has been shown that there is a positive relationship between SBC and the likelihood that consumers buy or intend to pay for a product or service repeatedly, and that this will lead to a high degree of engagement with the brand in question (Moliner *et al.*, 2018).

We therefore propose the following research hypotheses:

H4. *The self-brand connection has a positive effect on the cognitive-processing dimension of CBE.*

H5. *The self-brand connection has a positive effect on the affection dimension of CBE.*

H6. *The self-brand connection has a positive effect on the activation dimension of CBE.*

3.3. CBE and loyalty

According to Aaker (1991) and Agrawal (1996), loyalty is a measure of the relationship or bond between the customer and a product or its brand, and it constitutes the core of brand equity. Aaker (1991) defined loyalty as “a measure of the attachment that a

customer has to a brand.” It therefore indicates the degree to which a consumer is likely to switch to another brand, especially when that brand presents a change in price or product features.

Oliver (1999) defines brand loyalty as “a deeply held commitment to rebuy or repatronize a preferred product/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand or same brand-set purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior” (p. 34). Dick and Basu (1994) hold that loyalty is established by favorable attitudes toward a brand and by fully-realized and repetitive purchasing behavior.

Scholars consider the CBE concept to have predictive and explanatory power regarding consumer behavior, including brand loyalty (Hollebeek, 2011; Van Doorn *et al.*, 2010). In his study on customer engagement and loyalty in the context of the use of mobile devices to make purchases, Thakur (2016) finds that customer engagement has a positive effect on consumer brand loyalty. According to Li *et al.* (2020), customer engagement is an essential determinant of brand loyalty. In this vein, Kaur *et al.* (2020) empirically show that customer engagement has a positive effect on brand loyalty.

In light of the above findings, we propose the following hypotheses:

H7. The cognitive-processing dimension of CBE has a positive effect on fashion-brand loyalty.

H8. The affection dimension of CBE has a positive effect on fashion-brand loyalty.

H9. The activation dimension of CBE has a positive effect on fashion-brand loyalty.

In consumer behavior research, sociodemographic variables are often found to exert a moderating effect on other relationships in the proposed model. Gender, for example, has been found to influence social interactions in commerce (Peña-García *et al.*, 2018), the acceptance of mobile payment methods (Kalinić *et al.*, 2019), and satisfaction with electronic banking (Liébana-Cabanillas *et al.*, 2012). It was therefore deemed of interest in our study to analyze the moderating effect of the user’s gender on the relationship between CBE and loyalty in the context of fashion.

According to some authors (e.g. Peña-García *et al.*, 2018), women, for example, are less objective and are guided more by their emotions than men, while their purchasing decisions are more impulsive and less suited to new technologies. In contrast, men are less likely to gather information prior to making a purchase than women, yet are less inclined to make impulsive or compulsive purchases. The gender variable is therefore expected to exert a moderating effect on the relationships between the dimensions of CBE and its inherent construct: product or brand loyalty.

On this premise, we propose the following research hypotheses:

H10a. *Gender moderates the relationship between cognitive processing and brand loyalty.*

H10b. *Gender moderates the relationship between affection and brand loyalty.*

H10c. *Gender moderates the relationship between activation and brand loyalty.*

Figure 1 shows the theoretical model, which includes the research hypotheses to be tested in the data analysis.

INSERT TABLE 1

4. Methodology

4.1. Data-collection

Information was gathered from a sample of young people through an online personal survey. Participation was voluntary and the fieldwork was conducted between May 27 and June 29, 2020. A questionnaire was emailed to women and men between the ages of 15 and 39, using the snowballing technique (in our specific case, a “snowball” of contacts on the researchers' social networks), or non-probability convenience sampling. In the questionnaire (see Appendix 1), a question was included for the respondents to denote their age-range. In our study, we considered Millennials those born between 1981 and 1995 (Skinner *et al.*, 2018), and Generation Z, those born between 1995 and 2005 (Bassiouni and Hackley, 2014; Park and Chun, 2020). In order to embrace them, two age ranges were offered on the questionnaire: between 15 and 24 years (covering Generation Z) and between 25 and 39 years (covering Millennials). According to Curiel and Ortiz (2018), these cohorts are large consumers of SNPs and prime customers of

social commerce. Therefore, the population under study comprised Internet users aged between 15 and 39 with an Instagram profile, which is the most common profile among Instagram users (Statista, 2020; GlobalWebIndex, 2020). Participants in this age-range are the most knowledgeable about this social network and are also those who make the most frequent purchases as a result of interacting with Instagram (GlobalWebIndex, 2020). A filter question removed from the sample any individuals whose preferred (usual) platform was a social network other than Instagram. Therefore, based on non-probability convenience sampling, 118 valid questionnaires were obtained after removing incomplete or duplicate questionnaires.

4.2. Measurement scales and software used

The measurement scales used in the present study were based on scales already validated by the academic literature and adapted to this particular context. To measure the involvement variable, we used a 10-item, 5-point scale adapted from Zaichkowsky (1985) (see all items in Table A2 of the Appendix 2). For cognitive processing (3 items), affection (4 items), activation (3 items), and self-brand connection (7 items), we adapted scales from the work of Hollebeek *et al.* (2014). Finally, for the brand loyalty variable, we used a 3-item scale adapted from that of Zeithaml *et al.* (1996). In particular, the marker of loyalty to the purchase of fashion items was taken to be the user's decision to exit Instagram in order to buy a product they had just seen on this platform.

We used AMOS v22 software for the structural equation model (SEM) analysis. To measure the moderating effect, we conducted a multigroup variance analysis (ANOVA), following an interaction-based strategy, using SPSS v24.

5. Data analysis

5.1. Quality of the measurement scales

Prior to testing the proposed hypotheses, we examined the validity and reliability of the multi-item scales, by means of confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) (Hair *et al.*, 2010; Del Barrio and Luque, 2011), average variance extracted (AVE), and composite reliability (CR) (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). The CR and AVE values for each construct of the model are shown in Table 1. In all cases, the CR and AVE indicators were above 0.80 and 0.50, respectively.

INSERT TABLE 1

When assessing the measurement model's discriminant validity, three criteria are generally employed: the Fornell–Larcker criterion (Fornell and Larcker, 1981); cross-loadings (Chin, 1998; Hair *et al.*, 2010); and, more recently, the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT).

According to the Fornell–Larcker criterion (1981), the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) for each latent variable should be greater than the correlation with any other latent variable. Furthermore, the AVEs were greater than 0.5, and the CRs were well beyond the cutoff value of 0.7 (see Table 2). According to Chin (1998), the loading of each indicator should be greater than all of its cross-loadings (see Table A4). In the present case, all the constructs presented values for the loadings greater than their cross-loadings (Hair *et al.*, 2010). The third criterion for assessing the discriminant validity of the proposed model was the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT). The HTMT measure has become popular in recent scholarship as a more rational technique for assessing discriminant validity (e.g., Lebdaoui and Cheioui, 2020). Table A5 shows that all values are below the recommended threshold of 0.9.

In general terms, we can observe that the scales presented adequate psychometric properties, therefore being deemed reliable and valid for our research purposes. The parameters for the six scales were significant, with a high magnitude and R^2 values, above 0.50, for each of the parameters (see Table A2 in the Appendix 2), thereby fulfilling the recommendations of the academic literature (Del Barrio and Luque, 2012).

As the sample did not present a multivariate normal distribution, we corrected the Chi-square value based on the Bollen–Stine p-value, which obtained a value lower than the typical significance level of 5%. The corrected Chi-square was 465.63. The model presented a good overall fit ($RMSEA = 0.02 < 0.05$; $RAGFI = 1.29 > 0.80$) according to the recommended thresholds (Del Barrio and Luque, 2011).

In sum, the construct reliability, convergent validity, and indicator reliability all yielded satisfactory results, indicating that the constructs are suitable for testing the conceptual model.

INSERT TABLE 2

5.2. Hypothesis-testing: Analysis of the structural model

Once the validity and reliability of the measurement scales had been verified, an SEM was estimated to test the proposed hypotheses. The coefficients of the overall model, the standardized errors (SE), the critical ratio (CR), and the p-value associated with each coefficient are shown in Table 3.

INSERT TABLE 3

First, we note that consumer involvement with fashion has a positive and significant effect (p-value = 0.05) on the cognitive-processing dimension of CBE, with an estimated coefficient of 0.196 (see Figure 2). Therefore, there is empirical evidence indicating that H1, which supports this positive relationship between these two constructs, cannot be rejected. Involvement with fashion is also shown to exert a positive effect on the activation dimension of CBE (coefficient = 0.42; p-value = 0.00). H3 is therefore empirically confirmed.

However, involvement was found not to have any effect on the affection dimension of CBE, as postulated in H2 (p-value = 0.179).

Regarding the effect of SBC on the cognitive-processing dimension of CBE, the data point to a positive and significant effect (coeff. = 0.69 significant; p-value = 0.000). Therefore, H4 cannot be rejected and the empirical evidence confirms the hypothesized direction of the relationship.

Turning to the effect of SBC on the affection dimension of CBE, we found it to present a positive and significant effect (coeff. = 0.87; p-value = 0.000), leading us to confirm H5. The effect of this construct on the activation dimension of CBE was also significant and in the expected direction (coeff. = 0.41; p-value = 0.007), confirming H6.

Regarding the effects of CBE on loyalty, the cognitive-processing dimension showed no significant effect (coeff. = -0.003; p-value = 0.969). Therefore, there is no empirical basis on which to confirm H7. In contrast, the affection (coeff. = 0.314; p-value = 0.004) and activation (coeff. = 0.596; p-value = 0.000) dimensions both had a positive effect on loyalty to the fashion brand. Therefore, H8 and H9 were confirmed.

INSERT FIGURE 2.

Following a strategy of comparison of alternative models, it was confirmed that, in this field of study, a model with SBC as a consequence, as originally proposed by Hollebeek *et al.* (2014) did not obtain adequate fit values (GFI = 0.696; AGFI = 0.638; CFI = 0.881; RMSEA: 0.099). This confirms, analytically, that the SBC construct should be regarded as an *antecedent* of CBE.

To analyze the moderating effect of gender on the relationship between cognitive processing, activation, and affection (respectively) and loyalty, it was necessary to verify compliance with the invariance hypothesis at the level of the measurement scales. To this end, we performed a multigroup CFA in which different nested models were compared, adding restrictions compared to the baseline model (that is, the configural model, on which no restrictions were imposed). Taking into account the sensitivity of Chi-square to sample size and the non-normality of the sample, Cheung and Rensvold (2002) propose an increase in the CFI (Δ CFI) as a criterion to determine whether the models being compared are equivalent. When the difference between the CFIs of the two models is greater than 0.01, the less restrictive restricted model is accepted and the other rejected—that is, the more restrictive model does not hold. If the change in the CFI is equal to, or less than, 0.01, all the constraints are considered to hold and, therefore, it can be inferred that there is invariance between groups.

In both cases, GFI and CFI, the difference between the models was < 0.01 ; hence, there was deemed to be invariance between groups (Barrera-Barrera *et al.*, 2015) (see Table A3 in Appendix 2).

The multigroup analysis showed that, among the women in the sample, involvement ($\beta = 0.268$; signif. = 0.054) and self-brand connection ($\beta = 0.348$; signif. = 0.086) exerted a quasi-significant effect on the activation dimension; by contrast, it was significant among the men (see Table 4). Likewise, self-brand connection had a positive and significant effect on the affection dimension ($\beta = 0.919$; signif. = 0.000) and cognitive processing ($\beta = 0.898$; sign. = 0.000). In particular, the effect of self-brand connection on processing was significantly higher in the case of men ($\beta = 0.489$; signif. = 0.021). Finally, we observed a positive and significant effect of activation and affection on loyalty among both genders, although the affection dimension was greater in the case of men ($\beta = 0.541$; signif. = 0.025).

INSERT TABLE 4

To compare the mediating effect of gender on the relationship between cognitive processing, affection, and activation (respectively) on loyalty, we used the critical ratio difference method (AMOS). If the critical ratios exceed $|1.96|$, the parameter is significantly different between the two groups compared to a level of $p < 0.05$ (Barrera-Barrera, *et al.*, 2015). In the present case, only the relationship between activation and loyalty presented significant differences between men and women (difference in weights = 0.144). We therefore rejected H10a and H10b, while H10c was confirmed.

These findings are complemented with a variance analysis that was applied to the summary values (averages) of the constructs. High levels of reliability or internal consistency, such as those achieved here, enable summary variables in the data analysis to be obtained that are good indicators of the constructs, while they also capture the variability of the data (Rifon *et al.*, 2005, cited in Muñoz-Leiva *et al.*, 2010). In line with the recommendations of these authors, before continuing with the analysis, we calculated the summary variables of each construct and recoded the independent variables (cognitive processing, affection, and activation) into two categories: low (values < 3 ; median value) and high (values ≥ 3).

The results of the ANOVA are shown in Table 5.

INSERT TABLE 5.

According to Baron and Kenny (1986), in a variance analysis (ANOVA), a moderating effect also can be represented as an interaction between an independent variable and a factor that specifies the appropriate conditions for its operation. In the ANOVA analysis we performed, the results showed that, in this case, too, gender did *not* moderate the relationships between cognitive processing or affection and brand loyalty, meaning that, once more, H10a (p-value = 0.506) and H10b had to be rejected. This variable did, however, confirm the moderation of the relationship between activation and brand loyalty (H10c), as demonstrated by the interaction between these variables.

Figure 3 shows the average values for loyalty, depending on the level of activation and the individual's gender. We can observe that, when activation (in terms of the effort, intensity, and time a consumer devotes to Instagram) is high, men present greater brand loyalty than women. In contrast, when activation is low, women show greater loyalty.

INSERT FIGURE 3

6. Conclusions

The present study examines the processes of interaction (engagement) between Instagram and fashion consumers. In particular, it analyzes the role of customer brand engagement (CBE) as a determinant of brand loyalty, along with two other variables: self-brand connection (SBC) and involvement.

In terms of the principal conclusions that can be drawn, our findings show that consumer involvement in fashion exerts a positive effect on the cognitive-processing and activation dimensions of CBE (in line with Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014). However, we detected no such influence of that construct on the degree of positive affect (affection) experienced by a ‘social buyer’. This may be due to the fact that, despite the mass consumption of the Instagram application in the quest for fashion ideas and inspiration and to follow influencers, the effect of involvement is felt more as a motivation, a ‘need’, or an interest, or even as cognitive processing, rather than as attraction or enthusiasm toward the network itself.

The results also show that SBC has a positive effect on the different dimensions of the CBE concept (in line with the findings of Brandão *et al.*, 2019). In their study dealing with high-end customer engagement with luxury brands on SNPs, SBC was found to be an antecedent of CBE.

Regarding brand loyalty, the effect of the cognitive-processing dimension of CBE could not be proven, which counters Oliver’s (1999) affirmation of the deeply-ingrained engagement that brand loyalty generates in the consumer. Our result may be due to a lack of cognitive maturity on the part of the population segment we studied.

We were able to confirm, however, that the level of affection and activation (in terms of effort or intensity devoted to the social network) within CBE has a positive effect on loyalty in fashion social commerce. Dick and Basu (1994) indicate that this loyalty is determined by favorable attitudes toward the brand and fully-realized and repetitive purchasing behavior. These are some of the characteristics that define the consumer in the age ranges that we analyzed in this study.

Finally, the study sought to address the moderating effect of gender on the different dimensions of brand loyalty (the reference brand being Instagram). We found that gender only moderated the relationship between activation and loyalty. Men registered greater loyalty due to the higher levels of effort, intensity, and time they invested in following a given brand on Instagram. As suggested in the literature review, gender roles influence social interactions in commercial contexts, and behavior will differ between the sexes in terms of repetitive behaviors and information-search (Peña-García *et al.*, 2018).

7. Theoretical and practical implications

First, regarding the theoretical implications, our work contributes to the academic literature, covering a research gap already identified by other authors including Read *et al.* (2019). In particular, we address this existing gap by focusing on social commerce—specifically, on Instagram, a social network that, as noted in the text, is growing in popularity and is the preferred SNP among the age range selected for the study. Second, we analyze customer brand engagement based on the consumer's interaction with this social network. And, third, we add value to a specific sector: fashion.

Social commerce firms active in the fashion field could use these findings as part of their social media strategies to encourage interaction between users on different digital platforms. This would intensify use, increase the content co-created by the user and the brand, and, ultimately, improve sales.

In view of the involvement–activation relationship, it is recommended that, when creating new fashion products, firms implement actions that involve the user, on platforms such as Instagram, in the processes of (co)creation, design, and innovation.

Turning to self–brand connection and its influence on the dimensions of CBE, it is recommended that the digital marketing strategies of fashion firms include actions that target the different types of consumer behavior: both promotion, with a ‘push’ strategy, and prevention, with a ‘pull’ strategy. In the latter case, firms should work with product lines that, on the one hand, fulfill the needs of consumers and, on the other hand, deliver added value along with SNP content and address the need for security among more prevention-oriented consumers.

Elsewhere, taking steps to highlight the affective aspect of communication campaigns and to heighten the intensity or the length of time during which users consult the online

catalogs of the different fashion brands—in particular, among Millennials and Generation Z—will have a positive effect on their loyalty. As Dick and Basu (1994) indicated, such actions help generate repetitive purchasing behaviors and ensure sales of other products from the same brand that are advertised on SNPs.

Finally, regarding the moderating effect of gender, firms should aim to provide simpler, more accessible branded-product information with the male public in mind, especially when the level of intensity of use or activation is low. Simpler purchasing processes will also facilitate greater immediacy in this segment.

Given the moderating effect of gender that we identified, it is important that fashion brands' social media strategies reflect a gender-sensitive perspective and that their commercial objectives are expressed in inclusive language.

It is also advisable for firms to constantly offer new or innovative products and to present designs based on the needs of their female public. This segment presents greater loyalty at high usage levels. It would be interesting to take advantage of the new Instagram Shopping feature to adapt the sales channel for the brand in question to this medium, thus enabling the public to purchase directly from the application.

8. Limitations and future research directions

As with all research, the present study has certain limitations that should be noted, but which may point to new research themes for the future.

The main limitation of the study is the size of the sample we employed. The small scope was due to the very specific nature of the segment at which our survey was aimed: Instagram users and followers of fashion aged between 15 and 39 years. In addition, non-probabilistic convenience sampling was applied; therefore, the results should be generalized with caution.

A further limitation is the timing of the research, which coincided with the lockdown imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and which may have influenced the responses for some dimensions. For example, it could explain why the use of social commerce via Instagram presented such a clear cognitive component—more as a need or an interest than as an enthusiastic state of mind. This could constitute a future research direction, to return to the study of customer behavior and engagement in social commerce in this sector via

Instagram, post-pandemic, and analyze the consequences of lockdown for this purchasing behavior.

Despite the growing importance of influencers, ultimately, our model did not include any variables capturing the effect of influencers on the decision-making of the ‘social buyer’; rather, their influence was included in the use of the Instagram network itself. In the academic literature to date, there have been no studies dealing with the relationships between the influencer–leader of fashion and the purchasing behavior of the end-consumer (Lang and Armstrong, 2018).

Future research could include other mediating variables in the model, such as the cultural dimension or advertising involvement, among others. A cross-cultural analysis could identify differences in the influence of customer engagement depending on the participant’s culture, taking into account the cultural dimensions developed by Hofstede (1991). Finally, it would be interesting to consider, as moderating variables, the frequency of use of mobile devices or how the combined use of several SNPs may influence such aspects.

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire text and items

From the Department of Marketing and Market Research of the Faculty of Economics and Business at the University of Granada, we are conducting a study on customer engagement in purchasing via social networks in the fashion sector.

We would like to invite you to participate in the study by completing a questionnaire on this topic. Please answer the following questions honestly, since the success of our research depends on your true opinions and thoughts. All of your responses will remain in the strictest confidence and will be used solely for research purposes.

First, please rate the following aspects of your interaction via social networks with the online content posted by fashion brands and their social network advertising, as well as with the activity of fashion influencers, where 1 is “totally disagree” and 5 is “totally agree”.

(Consumer involvement)

	Totally disagree				Totally agree
It matters a lot to me (inv01)	①	②	③	④	⑤
It is highly relevant to me (inv02)	①	②	③	④	⑤
It is of great value to me (inv03)	①	②	③	④	⑤
It means a lot to me (inv04)	①	②	③	④	⑤
It is very necessary to me (inv05)	①	②	③	④	⑤
It is of great interest to me (inv06)	①	②	③	④	⑤
It is really appealing to me (inv07)	①	②	③	④	⑤
It is fascinating (inv08)	①	②	③	④	⑤
It is really exciting (inv09)	①	②	③	④	⑤

As you know, the social network Instagram is one of the most popular. Thinking of Instagram specifically, please, indicate the degree to which you totally agree (5) or totally disagree (1) with the following statements:

(Cognitive processing)

Please rate the following statements from 1 to 5	Totally disagree				Totally agree
Using Instagram makes me think about Instagram (cepc1)	①	②	③	④	⑤
I think about Instagram a lot when I use it (cepc2)	①	②	③	④	⑤

(Affection)

Please rate the following statements from 1 to 5	Totally disagree				Totally agree
I feel really positive when I use Instagram (ceaf1)	①	②	③	④	⑤
Using Instagram makes me happy (ceaf2)	①	②	③	④	⑤
I feel good when I use Instagram (ceaf3)	①	②	③	④	⑤
I feel proud to be an Instagram user (ceaf4)	①	②	③	④	⑤

(Activation)

Please rate the following statements from 1 to 5	Totally disagree			Totally agree	
	①	②	③	④	⑤
I spend a lot of time following fashion on Instagram compared to other social networking platforms (ceac1)	①	②	③	④	⑤
When I use social networking platforms, I usually choose Instagram to follow fashion before possibly purchasing it (ceac2)	①	②	③	④	⑤
Instagram is one of the brands I typically use when I use social networking platforms to follow fashion before possibly purchasing it (ceac3)	①	②	③	④	⑤

(Self-brand connection)

Please rate the following statements from 1 to 5	Totally disagree			Totally agree	
	①	②	③	④	⑤
Instagram reflects who I am (SBC1)	①	②	③	④	⑤
I can identify with Instagram (SBC2)	①	②	③	④	⑤
I feel a personal connection to Instagram (SBC3)	①	②	③	④	⑤
I use Instagram to communicate who I am to other people (SBC4)	①	②	③	④	⑤
I think Instagram (could) help(s) me become the type of person I want to be (SBC5)	①	②	③	④	⑤
I consider Instagram to be 'me' (it reflects who I consider myself to be or the way that I want to present myself to others) (SBC6)	①	②	③	④	⑤
Instagram suits me well (SBC7)	①	②	③	④	⑤

(Brand loyalty)

Please rate the following statements from 1 to 5	Totally disagree			Totally agree	
	①	②	③	④	⑤
I would be prepared to purchase fashion directly via Instagram (loyal1)	①	②	③	④	⑤
There is a very high probability that I would purchase fashion directly via Instagram (loyal2)	①	②	③	④	⑤
I would be prepared to recommend purchasing fashion directly via Instagram to friends or family (loyal3)	①	②	③	④	⑤

To conclude this questionnaire, please provide the following details about yourself:

Gender	<input type="checkbox"/> Male <input type="checkbox"/> Female
Age	<input type="checkbox"/> 15–24 years <input type="checkbox"/> 25–39 years
Level of studies	<input type="checkbox"/> No school education <input type="checkbox"/> Compulsory Secondary Education <input type="checkbox"/> Non-compulsory Secondary Education <input type="checkbox"/> Degree <input type="checkbox"/> PhD / Master's <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____
Approximate monthly income	<input type="checkbox"/> Less than 500€ <input type="checkbox"/> Between 500€ and 1,000€ <input type="checkbox"/> Between 1,000€ and 1,500€ <input type="checkbox"/> Between 1,500€ and 2,000€ <input type="checkbox"/> More than 2,000€

Approximate number of hours you spend on social networks per day	<input type="checkbox"/> < 1 hour <input type="checkbox"/> Between 1 and 2 hours <input type="checkbox"/> Between 2 and 3 hours <input type="checkbox"/> Between 3 and 5 hours <input type="checkbox"/> > 5 hours
Number of influencers you follow	<input type="checkbox"/> None <input type="checkbox"/> Between 1 and 10 <input type="checkbox"/> More than 10
How many fashion purchases do you make online per month?	<input type="checkbox"/> None <input type="checkbox"/> Between 1 and 2 times a month <input type="checkbox"/> 3 or more times a month

Appendix 2: Tables

INSERT TABLE A1

INSERT TABLE A2

INSERT TABLE A3

INSERT TABLE A4

INSERT TABLE A5