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Digital Content Communication and Luxury Fashion Purchase Intention: The Mediating Role of Consumer Online Brand Engagement in Ghana's Growing Luxury Market

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Abstract

This study investigates how digital content communication, comprising firm created content (FCC) and user generated content (UGC), influences luxury fashion purchase intention through the mediating mechanism of consumer online brand engagement (COBE) among young consumers in Ghana. Grounded in the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and Social Learning Theory, the research positions FCC as a central route stimulus and UGC as a peripheral route stimulus, arguing that both content types influence purchase intention indirectly through their capacity to stimulate consumer engagement. A quantitative survey of 216 Generation Z and Millennial luxury brand followers was conducted in Accra, Ghana. Data were analysed using hierarchical regression and bootstrapped mediation analysis following the Baron and Kenny (1986) framework. Results demonstrate that both FCC ($\beta = .191$, $p < .01$) and UGC ($\beta = .255$, $p < .01$) significantly predict COBE, and COBE in turn strongly predicts purchase intention ($\beta = .537$, $p < .001$). Bootstrapped mediation tests confirm that COBE partially mediates both the FCC to purchase intention pathway (indirect effect = .191, 95% CI [.102, .306]) and the UGC to purchase intention pathway (indirect effect = .221, 95% CI [.122, .338]). The hypothesised gender moderation of the COBE to purchase intention relationship was not supported ($\beta = .053$, $p = .736$). The study extends the ELM to a Sub-Saharan African luxury context, demonstrating that consumer engagement operates as the critical mechanism through which digital content is translated into purchase behaviour, irrespective of whether the content originates from the brand or from peers.

Keywords: *consumer online brand engagement, digital content communication, Elaboration Likelihood Model, luxury fashion, purchase intention, Sub-Saharan Africa*

Introduction

The luxury fashion market in Sub-Saharan Africa is undergoing a structural transformation. Driven by demographic momentum, rising urbanisation, and deepening digital connectivity, Ghana has emerged as one of the region's most dynamic markets for premium and luxury fashion consumption (Deloitte, 2023). With over 60 per cent of Ghana's population under the age of 35 and mobile internet penetration exceeding 70 per cent, social media has become the primary arena through which young Ghanaian consumers encounter, evaluate, and develop preferences for luxury brands (DataReportal, 2025). Yet, despite the commercial significance of this trend, the academic literature on how digital content shapes luxury purchase intention in African markets remains remarkably thin.

The existing body of research on digital content and brand engagement has been overwhelmingly situated in Western and East Asian consumer contexts (Alalwan et al., 2017; Hollebeek et al., 2014). This geographical concentration is problematic for at least two reasons. First, the cultural meaning of luxury differs materially across contexts; in many African societies, luxury consumption is intertwined with communal identity signalling, aspirational mobility, and social prestige in ways that may alter the mechanisms through which content influences behaviour (Agyenim-Boateng et al., 2021). Second, the digital media ecology in Ghana, characterised by the dominance of Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp rather than Facebook and Twitter, creates distinct conditions for how consumers process brand related content.

This study addresses these gaps by developing and testing an integrated model of how two types of digital content, firm created content (FCC) and user generated content (UGC), influence luxury fashion purchase intention among young Ghanaian consumers, with consumer online brand engagement (COBE) operating as the mediating mechanism. Theoretically, the study draws on the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986) and Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) to provide a dual processing account of how consumers engage with and are persuaded by different content types. FCC, which comprises official brand communications, is positioned as operating through the central route of the ELM, providing systematic, information rich cues that facilitate deliberative evaluation. UGC, which comprises peer produced content, is positioned as operating through the peripheral route, leveraging social proof, parasocial identification, and observational learning mechanisms to influence attitudes and behaviour. The study makes three principal contributions. First, it extends the ELM to the understudied context of luxury consumption in Sub-Saharan Africa, demonstrating that both central and peripheral processing routes are operative but that their influence on purchase intention is contingent upon the engagement they stimulate rather than their direct persuasive effects. Second, it validates the mediating role of COBE as a composite construct encompassing consumption, contribution, and creation behaviours (Muntinga et al., 2011), showing that engagement functions as the critical translation mechanism between content exposure and purchase intention. Third, it examines whether gender moderates the engagement to purchase pathway, contributing to the conversation about gendered consumption in African luxury markets.

Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

The Elaboration Likelihood Model and Digital Content

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) provides a foundational framework for understanding persuasion in the context of digital marketing communications (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). The ELM posits that attitude change occurs through two qualitatively different processing routes: the central route, which involves careful, deliberative evaluation of message arguments, and the peripheral route, which relies on heuristic cues such as source attractiveness, social consensus, and familiarity. The route a consumer takes is determined by their motivation and ability to

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process the message.In the digital content environment, FCC and UGC can be mapped onto these two routes. FCC, produced by brands, typically comprises product information, brand narratives, aesthetic imagery, and promotional content that invites systematic processing of brand attributes (Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2016). Consumers engaging with FCC are processing substantive, brand controlled arguments about product quality, design, heritage, and value, characteristics associated with central route processing. UGC, produced by peers, operates differently. Peer content provides social proof, vicarious experience, and heuristic cues that reduce cognitive effort; consumers rely on the perceived authenticity, popularity, and aspirational quality of the content creator rather than on systematic analysis of brand attributes (Smith et al., 2012). This maps onto the peripheral route.

Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) complements the ELM by explaining the mechanism through which UGC operates. Bandura argued that individuals learn not only through direct experience but through observation of others' behaviours and their consequences. When consumers observe peers engaging with, reviewing, or creating content about luxury brands, they learn vicariously about the social rewards of luxury consumption, such as peer recognition, status enhancement, and community belonging (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004).

Direct Effects of Digital Content on Purchase Intention

Prior research has established that both FCC and UGC can directly influence purchase intention (Kim and Ko, 2012; Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2016). Brand controlled communications shape purchase intention by providing information that reduces uncertainty and builds brand credibility. Peer produced content shapes purchase intention through social influence and trust transfer mechanisms (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006). However, the ELM suggests that these direct effects may be attenuated when a mediating engagement mechanism is accounted for, because the persuasive influence of content may operate primarily through the engagement it stimulates rather than through direct attitude change. Nevertheless, to establish baseline effects:

H1: Firm created content positively predicts luxury purchase intention.

H2: User generated content positively predicts luxury purchase intention.

Digital Content as Antecedents of Consumer Online Brand Engagement

Consumer online brand engagement (COBE) encompasses the spectrum of behavioural activities that consumers perform in relation to brands in digital environments, ranging from passive consumption (browsing, viewing, reading) through moderate contribution (liking, sharing, commenting) to active creation (posting reviews, producing original content) (Muntinga et al., 2011). From an ELM perspective, both central and peripheral route processing can stimulate engagement, albeit through different mechanisms. Central route processing of FCC may stimulate engagement because consumers who systematically evaluate brand content develop stronger cognitive involvement with the brand, motivating them to seek further information (consumption), express their evaluations (contribution), and integrate the brand into their self expression (creation) (Dolan et al., 2016). Peripheral route processing of UGC may stimulate engagement through social contagion and modelling effects: when consumers observe peers engaging with luxury brands, they are motivated to emulate these behaviours (Bandura, 1977). Thus:

H3a: Firm created content positively predicts consumer online brand engagement.

H3b: User generated content positively predicts consumer online brand engagement.

Consumer Online Brand Engagement and Purchase Intention

The relationship between COBE and purchase intention is grounded in the behavioural involvement literature. Consumers who are behaviourally engaged with a brand through digital interactions develop stronger affective bonds, heightened brand salience, and increased purchase motivation (Hollebeek, 2011; Brodie et al., 2013). Engagement creates a psychological investment that increases switching costs and intensifies the desire to consummate the brand relationship through purchase. In the luxury context specifically, engagement may be particularly consequential because luxury purchase decisions carry high symbolic and financial stakes; the engagement process serves to reduce perceived risk and reinforce the aspirational identity associations that underpin luxury demand (Kim and Ko, 2012). Thus:

H4: Consumer online brand engagement positively predicts luxury purchase intention.

The Mediating Role of COBE

The ELM framework suggests that the persuasive effects of both FCC and UGC on purchase intention may operate, at least in part, through the engagement these content types stimulate. If content influences purchase intention primarily because it activates consumer engagement, then COBE should mediate the content to purchase intention pathways. This mediation hypothesis is consistent with the stimulus organism response (S–O–R) framework (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974), where content serves as the stimulus, engagement as the organismic processing mechanism, and purchase intention as the response. Baron and Kenny's (1986) conditions for mediation are tested:

H5a: Consumer online brand engagement mediates the relationship between firm created content and purchase intention.

H5b: Consumer online brand engagement mediates the relationship between user generated content and purchase intention.

Gender as a Moderator

Gender has been identified as a significant moderator of consumer behaviour in both the luxury and digital engagement literatures (Stokburger-Sauer and Teichmann, 2013). Research suggests that female consumers tend to exhibit higher levels of social media engagement, particularly in fashion related categories, and that the relationship between engagement and purchase intention may be stronger for female consumers due to higher fashion involvement and social comparison tendencies (Kim and Ko, 2012). In the Ghanaian context, where gender dynamics in luxury consumption may differ from Western norms, the moderating role of gender warrants empirical investigation:

H6: Gender moderates the relationship between COBE and purchase intention, such that the relationship is stronger for female consumers than for male consumers.

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework integrating the ELM routes, the COBE mediator, and the gender moderator.

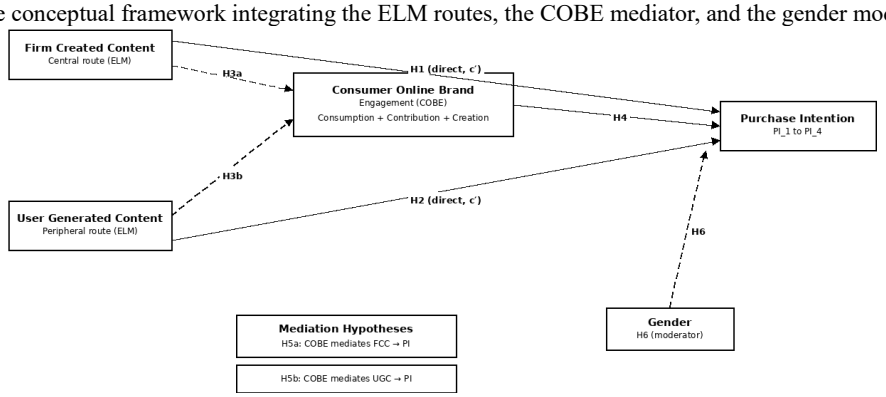

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework: ELM Routes, COBE Mediation, and Gender Moderation

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Research Methodology

Research Design

A quantitative survey design was employed to test the hypothesised relationships. The study was conducted in Accra, Ghana, targeting Generation Z and Millennial consumers (aged 18 to 40) who actively follow at least one luxury fashion brand on social media.

Sample and Data Collection

Respondents were recruited using a purposive sampling strategy through social media advertisements and university networks. The final sample comprised 216 valid responses after data cleaning. The sample was predominantly female (57.4 per cent, n = 124), aged 25 to 34 (75.9 per cent), and educationally diverse (48.6 per cent held a bachelor's degree). Nearly half were students (49.1 per cent), and the majority were single (88.0 per cent). Instagram (25.5 per cent), TikTok (23.6 per cent), YouTube (22.7 per cent), and Twitter/X (22.2 per cent) were the most popular primary platforms. Gucci (n = 32), Louis Vuitton (n = 17), and Fendi (n = 13) were the most frequently cited luxury brands.

Measurement

All constructs were measured using established Likert type scales from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). FCC (four items) and UGC (four items) were adapted from Schivinski and Dabrowski (2016). COBE was operationalised as a composite of 17 items spanning consumption (five items), contribution (six items), and creation (six items), adapted from Muntinga et al. (2011) and Schivinski et al. (2016). Purchase intention (four items) was adapted from Dodds et al. (1991). Demographic variables included gender, age, education, occupation, income, and social media platform use.

Analytical Strategy

Analysis proceeded in five stages: (1) reliability and validity assessment using Cronbach alpha, composite reliability, and exploratory factor analysis; (2) descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations; (3) simple regression for direct effects (H1, H2, H3a, H3b, H4); (4) mediation analysis following Baron and Kenny (1986) with Sobel tests and 5,000 iteration bootstrapped confidence intervals for indirect effects (H5a, H5b); and (5) moderated regression with an interaction term for gender (H6). All analyses were conducted using Python 3.12 with the statsmodels and scipy libraries.

Results

Measurement Validation

The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was .865 and Bartlett's test was significant ($\chi^2 = 3{,}905.39$, $p < .001$). Table 1 presents reliability and descriptive statistics. All Cronbach alpha values exceeded .70, ranging from .797 (UGC) to .902 (COBE composite). The COBE composite of 17 items demonstrated strong internal consistency ($\alpha = .902$), supporting its treatment as a unitary mediator. Variance inflation factors (VIF) in the mediation model ranged from 1.22 to 1.81, well below the conventional threshold of 5.0, indicating no multicollinearity concerns.

Table 1. *Reliability, Descriptive Statistics, and Multicollinearity Diagnostics (N = 216)*

Construct	Items	Mean	SD	α	Skew	Kurt	VIF
FCC	4	3.775	0.706	.815	−.925	2.16	1.786
UGC	4	3.779	0.638	.797	−.878	2.86	1.811
COBE (composite)	17	3.188	0.632	.902	−.068	0.61	1.224
Consumption	5	3.614	0.701	.796	−.925	2.34	—
Contribution	6	3.293	0.785	.859	−.294	0.40	—
Creation	6	2.729	0.844	.887	.212	0.20	—
Purchase Intention	4	3.752	0.795	.879	−1.28	2.35	—

Note. α = Cronbach alpha; VIF from the full mediation model (FCC + UGC + COBE → PI). COBE subdimension VIFs not applicable as they are components of the composite.

Correlation Analysis

Table 2 presents the Pearson bivariate correlation matrix. All correlations were positive and significant ($p < .001$). FCC and UGC were strongly correlated ($r = .650$), consistent with their shared focus on brand related content. COBE demonstrated moderate correlations with both FCC ($r = .380$) and UGC ($r = .396$), and a strong correlation with purchase intention ($r = .523$). The stronger association between COBE and PI relative to the FCC–PI ($r = .372$) and UGC–PI ($r = .370$) correlations provides preliminary support for the mediating role of engagement.

Table 2. *Pearson Correlation Matrix (N = 216)*

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. FCC	—			
2. UGC	.650***	—		
3. COBE	.380***	.396***	—	
4. Purchase Intention	.372***	.370***	.523***	—

Note. ***p < .001.

Direct Effects (H1 to H4)

Table 3 reports the direct effect tests. H1 was supported: FCC significantly predicted PI ($\beta = .419$, $t = 5.870$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .139$). H2 was supported: UGC significantly predicted PI ($\beta = .462$, $t = 5.834$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .137$). H3a was supported: FCC significantly predicted COBE ($\beta = .341$, $t = 6.019$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .145$). H3b was supported: UGC significantly predicted COBE ($\beta = .393$, $t = 6.306$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .157$). When FCC and UGC were entered simultaneously as predictors of COBE, both remained significant (FCC: $\beta = .191$, $p = .009$; UGC: $\beta = .255$, $p = .002$; combined $R^2 = .183$). H4 was strongly supported: COBE significantly predicted PI ($\beta = .658$, $t = 8.987$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .274$), confirming that engagement is a potent predictor of luxury purchase intention.

Mediation Analysis (H5a and H5b)

Mediation was tested using Baron and Kenny's (1986) four step procedure, supplemented by Sobel tests and bootstrapped confidence intervals.

H5a: COBE mediates FCC → PI. The total effect of FCC on PI was significant ($c = .419$, $p < .001$). The FCC to COBE path was significant ($a = .341$, $p < .001$). When COBE was included alongside FCC, COBE remained significant ($b = .561$, $p < .001$) and FCC's direct effect was reduced but remained significant ($c' = .228$, $p = .001$). The indirect effect ($a \times b = .191$) was significant by Sobel test ($z = 4.630$, $p < .001$). Bootstrapped 95% confidence interval: [.102, .306]. Since the CI excludes zero but the direct effect remains significant, the result indicates *partial mediation*. COBE mediated 45.6 per cent of FCC's total effect on PI. H5a was supported.

H5b: COBE mediates UGC → PI. The total effect of UGC on PI was significant ($c = .462$, $p < .001$). The UGC to COBE path was significant ($a = .393$, $p < .001$). When COBE was included, COBE remained significant ($b = .562$, $p < .001$) and UGC's direct effect was reduced but

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remained significant (c′ = .241, p = .002). The indirect effect (a × b = .221) was significant by Sobel test (z = 4.740, p < .001). Bootstrapped 95% CI: [.122, .338]. This indicates *partial mediation*. COBE mediated 47.8 per cent of UGC's total effect on PI. H5b was supported.

In the full mediation model with FCC, UGC, and COBE entered simultaneously as predictors of PI, COBE was the only significant predictor (β = .537, t = 6.792, p < .001), while FCC (β = .154, p = .073) and UGC (β = .140, p = .142) both became nonsignificant. The full model R^2 was .316, indicating that the three predictors collectively explained 31.6 per cent of the variance in purchase intention. This pattern is consistent with COBE functioning as the primary mechanism through which content influences purchase behaviour.

Gender Moderation (H6)

H6 proposed that gender moderates the COBE to PI relationship. An interaction model regressing PI on COBE, gender (coded: female = 1), and the COBE × gender interaction term was estimated. The interaction was nonsignificant (β = .053, t = 0.338, p = .736), indicating that the strength of the COBE to PI relationship does not differ significantly between male and female consumers. In subgroup analyses, the COBE to PI relationship was significant and similar in magnitude for both males (β = .636, p < .001, R^2 = .234) and females (β = .689, p < .001, R^2 = .306). H6 was not supported.

Table 3 summarises all hypothesis testing results, and Figure 2 presents the tested model with path coefficients.

Table 3. *Summary of Hypothesis Testing Results*

H	Path	β	t	p	R^2	95% CI	Result
H1	FCC → PI (total)	.419	5.870	<.001	.139	—	Supported
H2	UGC → PI (total)	.462	5.834	<.001	.137	—	Supported
H3a	FCC → COBE	.191	2.620	.009	.183	—	Supported
H3b	UGC → COBE	.255	3.158	.002		—	Supported
H4	COBE → PI	.658	8.987	<.001	.274	—	Supported
H5a	FCC → COBE → PI	.191	z=4.63	<.001		[.102,.306]	Supported
H5b	UGC → COBE → PI	.221	z=4.74	<.001		[.122,.338]	Supported
H6	COBE×Gender → PI	.053	0.338	.736	.281	—	Not supported

Note. H3a and H3b β values from simultaneous model (FCC + UGC → COBE). H5a and H5b report indirect effects with 5,000 iteration bootstrapped 95% CIs.

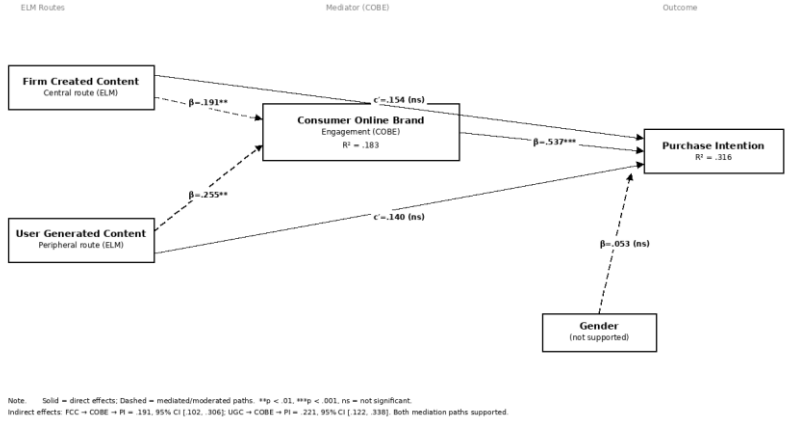

Figure 2. Tested Model with Standardised Path Coefficients and Bootstrapped Indirect Effects

Discussion

This study set out to test whether consumer online brand engagement mediates the influence of digital content on luxury purchase intention among young consumers in Ghana, drawing on the ELM and Social Learning Theory. The findings offer substantive contributions to both the consumer engagement and luxury marketing literatures.

The Mediating Primacy of Engagement

The most consequential finding is that COBE operates as a partial mediator of both the FCC to purchase intention and UGC to purchase intention relationships, absorbing approximately 46 per cent and 48 per cent of the respective total effects. When all three variables were entered simultaneously, COBE was the only predictor to retain significance, while both FCC and UGC became nonsignificant. This pattern strongly suggests that content does not persuade consumers to purchase luxury goods directly; rather, content influences purchase intention primarily by stimulating behavioural engagement with the brand. The practical implication is clear: the value of digital content lies not in its direct persuasive power but in its capacity to activate and sustain consumer engagement.

This finding aligns with the S–O–R framework (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974) and extends the ELM by demonstrating that both central route (FCC) and peripheral route (UGC) processing converge on the same mediating mechanism, engagement, before influencing purchase intention. In other words, regardless of whether consumers are processing brand content deliberately or relying on peer cues heuristically, the behavioural consequence of that processing, active engagement, is what ultimately matters for purchase behaviour.

Dual Route Processing in an African Luxury Context

Both FCC and UGC significantly predicted COBE, with UGC demonstrating a marginally stronger effect (β = .255 vs .191). This finding is consistent with Social Learning Theory's emphasis on observational learning and suggests that, in the Ghanaian luxury market, peer produced content may be more effective than brand produced content at stimulating engagement. This makes theoretical sense: in a market where luxury consumption is still emerging and carries significant social signalling value, consumers may be particularly attentive to how peers interact with luxury brands, using peer behaviour as a model for their own engagement (Bandura, 1977). Luxury brands operating in Ghana and the broader Sub-Saharan African market should therefore invest not only in producing high quality brand content but, critically, in cultivating user generated content through influencer partnerships, community platforms, and cocreation campaigns.

Gender Does Not Moderate the Engagement to Purchase Link

The hypothesised gender moderation was not supported. The COBE to PI relationship was strong and significant for both male (β = .636) and female (β = .689) consumers, with no significant difference between the two groups. This finding diverges from some Western studies that have reported gendered differences in fashion engagement (Stokburger-Sauer and Teichmann, 2013) and may reflect the particular cultural context of luxury consumption in Ghana, where aspirational consumption and social media engagement around luxury brands transcend

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traditional gender boundaries. Alternatively, the finding may suggest that in digitally native generational cohorts (Gen Z and Millennials), gendered differences in social media engagement have converged to the point where they no longer materially influence the engagement to purchase pathway.

Conclusion and Implications

Theoretical Contributions: This study makes three contributions to the marketing literature. First, it extends the Elaboration Likelihood Model to an understudied Sub-Saharan African luxury context, demonstrating that both central route (FCC) and peripheral route (UGC) processing stimulate consumer engagement, which in turn drives purchase intention. The finding that engagement fully absorbs the direct effects of content in the simultaneous model advances the theoretical understanding of how digital content operates in emerging luxury markets. Second, by validating COBE as a composite mediator, the study bridges the consumer engagement and persuasion literatures, showing that engagement is not merely an outcome of content exposure but the critical translation mechanism between exposure and behavioural intention. Third, the null finding on gender moderation contributes to the emerging body of evidence suggesting that gendered differences in digital consumption behaviour may be less pronounced among younger generational cohorts and in non Western cultural contexts.

Managerial Implications: For luxury brand managers operating in Ghana and the broader Sub-Saharan African market, the findings yield clear strategic guidance. First, content strategy should be evaluated not by reach or impressions but by the engagement it generates. The data demonstrate that content's influence on purchase intention is almost entirely mediated through engagement; high reach, low engagement content is unlikely to convert to purchase. Second, UGC is slightly more effective than FCC at stimulating engagement, suggesting that brands should invest in strategies that catalyse peer produced content, including influencer partnerships, hashtag campaigns, and community features that encourage consumer participation. Third, engagement strategies should be gender neutral; the data provide no basis for differentiating engagement strategies by gender within this generational cohort.

Limitations and Future Research: Several limitations should be noted. First, the cross sectional design precludes causal inference; longitudinal designs are needed to establish temporal precedence. Second, the sample was drawn from Accra and may not generalise to other Sub-Saharan African markets. Third, COBE was treated as a composite variable; future research using structural equation modelling could decompose the mediating effects of consumption, contribution, and creation individually. Fourth, mediation was tested using regression based approaches; future studies should employ more robust methods such as PROCESS macro or SEM based mediation with latent variables. Fifth, the study focused on luxury fashion; future research should examine whether these patterns hold for other luxury categories (watches, automobiles, experiential luxury) and for non luxury product categories. Despite these limitations, the study provides compelling evidence that consumer engagement is the linchpin between digital content and luxury purchase intention in Sub-Saharan Africa, and that the ELM provides a productive theoretical lens for understanding dual route content processing in this context.

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