

**DURBAN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY**

**THE ROLE OF INFLUENCER MARKETING ON SOUTH AFRICAN GENERATION Y CONSUMERS**

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# THE ROLE OF INFLUENCER MARKETING ON SOUTH AFRICAN GENERATION Y CONSUMERS

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**APPROVED FOR FINAL SUBMISSION**

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## **DECLARATION**

I, Paballo Patience Ntobaki, hereby declare that the work in this dissertation except where indicated, represents my own work. To the best of my knowledge, all references in this dissertation have been accurately reported.

I further give consent for my work to be digitalised for the Institutional Repository and photocopied for inter-library loan, and for the title and summary to be made available to outside organisations and other students.

**Signed:**

**07/12/2023**

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**Paballo Patience Ntobaki**

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**Date**

## DEDICATION



This Doctoral Degree is dedicated to my late parents Mantai Rosina Ntobaki and Teboho Joseph Ntobaki, whose memory and legacy fuelled my pursuit of this degree. It was my late mother, Mantai, who planted a seed in me to embark on this journey and my late father, Teboho, who dedicated himself tirelessly, ensuring the realisation of this cherished dream until his final moments. Mme le Ntate, you may not be here with me today, but your guidance, principles, and enduring values have been my guiding light, shaping every step I've taken. This achievement stands as a testament to your dedication and sacrifices. Thank you both for the aspirations you instilled in me, your love, and the invaluable lessons that will forever live on through me.

**This is for you!!!**

***Romans 8:28***

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### *Deuteronomy 1:31*

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## **ABSTRACT**

In the contemporary landscape, the evolution of consumer-brand relationships has seen a remarkable shift catalysed by the surge of social media. Formerly unidirectional, the relationship now incorporates interactive elements, fostering identification and proximity between consumers and brands. Social media's pervasive integration within modern society, empowered by technological advancements, has rendered it a scalable conduit for information exchange among millions of users. Notably, it has unveiled the private lives of influential individuals to the public eye, facilitating consumer access to brand-related content through these personalities. This exposure engenders endorsement-like effects, shaping consumer perceptions of brands affiliated with these influencers. Crucially, it has redefined consumer-brand interactions and behaviors. Recognising the significance of brand recognition among South African consumers, especially the Generation Y cohort renowned for its brand loyalty, brands strive to tailor strategies that resonate with these distinct segments. However, marketers face challenges in aligning with evolving customer preferences within limited budgets, while consumers increasingly rely on social media for purchasing decisions. Amidst this backdrop, influencer marketing emerges as a crucial strategy in marketing, yet gaps persist in understanding its efficacy relative to other communication channels.

This study aims to investigate the role of influencer marketing on Generation Y consumers in South Africa. Specifically, it seeks to address the following research question: What is the role of influencer marketing in shaping the brand perceptions and purchasing intentions of Generation Y consumers in South Africa? Employing a mixed-method approach, the research comprises an exploratory qualitative phase to illuminate the phenomenon, subsequently informing a quantitative phase as the primary investigation. Ten South African social media influencers constitute the qualitative sample, while the quantitative segment aimed for 500 respondents yielding a 95% response rate from 475 respondents. Interviews with influencers were conducted via online platforms, while the survey encompassed various social media platforms, emails, targeting computer literate Generation Y individuals comfortable with social media. Qualitative data underwent thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's iterative process, while quantitative data underwent analysis encompassing descriptive and inferential statistics such as factor analysis, ANOVA, and structural equation modeling. SPSS and AMOS version 29 were utilized for analysis and interpretations at  $\alpha=0.05$ . This integrated methodology endeavors to unravel the intricate dynamics between influencer marketing and Generation Y consumer behaviors in South Africa's evolving market landscape.

The study's qualitative findings detailed how influencers strategically used different social media platforms, tailoring content to match specific audience tastes. This helped them build stronger connections and engage better with their followers. Knowing who their audience was and tailoring content became crucial for making relatable and engaging posts. Different influencers had unique ways of captivating audiences through diverse niches and content strategies. Keeping up with changing trends and platforms was key, showing the need for a flexible approach in influence marketing. In the quantitative analysis, it became clear that influencers need to be active across various social media platforms to meet the diverse preferences of South African Generation Y consumers. Generation Y prefers electronic communication, especially on social media, for networking, decision-making, and staying connected. They highly rely on influencers, engaging actively with different post types and considering their opinions when making purchases.

Influencers have a strong impact on how Generation Y sees brands, making endorsed brands more trustworthy and appealing. This study firmly establishes the substantial influence of social media influencers on the behavior and brand perceptions of Generation Y consumers. The influential role of influencers in shaping opinions and purchase behaviors confirms the trust and reliance placed on them by Generation Y. Studies from various regions have shown that influencers who maintain a transparent and authentic relationship with their audience tend to have higher engagement and credibility. Factors like authenticity, perceived honesty, and prior product experiences shaped trust in influencers, underscoring their influential role in driving Generation Y's opinions and purchasing behaviors, aligning with insights from qualitative data. Additionally, the study developed a theoretical framework and proposed recommendations for both marketers and academic circles. It also identified avenues for future research, highlighting areas that warrant deeper exploration within the realm of influencer marketing and Generation Y consumer behavior.

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

This chapter provides a background to this research, its contribution, and a statement of the problem. The aim, objectives, and rationale of this study will be presented in this chapter. This is followed by the scope and delimitations of the study. It also gives a brief theoretical background on the study and indicates the research methodology that will be followed in the study. The chapter ends by outlining the structure (chapter organisation) of the study.

#### **1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE RESEARCH**

In the pre-digital era, consumer–brand relationships were one-way communications that excluded reciprocal interactions, yet consumers were yearning for identification and closeness with brands (Kupfer, von der Holte, Kubler and Hennig-Thurau 2018:26). However, the previous decade brought significant change in the advertising industry. Digital advertising spending first overtook print advertising spending in 2008, and it has since increased while spending on other media has decreased (Childers, Lemon, and Hoy 2019: 258). This result of the emergence of social media has transformed the one-way interaction between brands and consumers into a two-way communication long needed together with a mass information broadcasting (Teng, Khong and Goh 2015:43). Social media has become progressively popular as a way of communication in today's age (Gumpo, Chuchu, Maziriri and Madinga 2020:1) and with the help of the Internet and technology, social media networks are fundamentally scalable and accessible, where millions of users disseminate, receive, and generate information content (Teng Khong and Goh 2015:43). This has given consumers an opportunity to form relationships with one another and with brands as social media's interactive and real-time nature empowers consumer-brand relationships to grow, marked by intimate connections, direct exchanges, and para-social relationships (Kupfer et al. 2018:26)

Social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest, or Google + allow consumers to express their preferences and opinions, communicate their brand associations, share their consumption and lifestyle choices with their subscribers and interact with brands (Dimitrui and Guesalaga 2017:580). Social media has given visibility to the private lives of influential people to the public, affording consumers information about brands they consume. These public presentations of brand consumption create endorsement-like effects on the way consumers perceive brands associated with these influencers (Russel and Rasolofoarison 2017:762). Most importantly, social media has transformed how consumers relate to and behave toward brands (Dimitrui and Guesalaga 2017: 580). The emerging power of influencers on their followers has become a novel communication opportunity for brands. As a result, brands considering social media as a strategic

communication approach have also acknowledged the power of influential consumers who repeatedly share their brand experiences in this environment. With the effect that these influencers have on consumers who are of similar interest, it is vital that brands engage with them to gain a trustworthy and authentic presence amongst social media consumers (Uzunoglu and Kip 2014:592). Thus, social media influencers are predominantly attractive to brands. Moreover, marketers have begun to build a new communication practice termed, influencer marketing to benefit from social media influencer's content. Influencer marketing is then defined as the act of promoting brands using specific key individuals who exert influence over potential buyers (Audrezet, Keviler and Moulard 2018:1). This influencer marketing technique involves the promotion and selling of products or services through influencers (social media personalities) who have the power to affect the character of a brand (Smit, Buijjs, Wounderberg, Beverlander and Buijzen 2020:1).

South Africa has several high-profile social media influencers who have active social media profiles with hundreds of thousands of followers. Their profiles increasingly serve as platforms for punting brands and commodities, although they are deemed to offer a visual diary of their glamorous lives (Iqani 2019: 230). These influencers carefully create content focused on building intimacy that earns them good relationships with their followers (Coco and Eckert 2020:1). Given that South African consumers, like many other emerging consumer markets in Africa, are savvy and brand loyal, as they often refer to products by an associated brand name, brand recognition is of utmost importance to them (Signe and Johnson 2018:15). Ladhari, Gonthier, and Lajante (2019:113) suggest that brands may potentially achieve greater success by directing their efforts towards meeting the specific needs and preferences of distinct consumer segments such as Generation Y consumers, also referred to as the millennial generation, which is recognised as a crucial market segment for brands. The considerable purchasing power and exceptional technical proficiency exhibited by Generation Y are pivotal factors in determining the success of brands. This consumer segment is of significant interest due to its consistent connectivity and potential inclination towards online purchasing, facilitated by their constant and widespread internet accessibility. More importantly, South African Generation Y consumers are extremely image-conscious, which has resulted in noticeable consumption, although they are not self-obsessed and care about their prospects. Hence, their activities in new media will continue to increase along with their discretionary income, thereby making them a lucrative target market owing to their sheer purchasing power (Duffet 2017:22). Thus, these young consumers seem to trust these influencers more as they promote brands in real-life settings that are authentic and result in improved perceptions of trustworthiness compared to other platforms (Schouten, Janssen and Verspaget 2020: 262). This then results in a high volume of consumption-related acts on social media (Dimitrui and Guesalaga 2017:580). It is therefore vital that companies thoroughly consider what the consumers' perceptions of their brands are in the social media environment (Duffet 2017:244). As a result, this study will examine the construct of social media

influence on consumers' perceptions and purchase intentions, grounded in both media ecology and social influence theories.

## **1.2 RESEARCH PROBLEM**

The use of social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook has greatly changed how people perceive and think about brands (Khan and Siddiqui 2013:222). In South Africa, marketers are facing the challenge of countering consumer misconceptions about their brand value and scepticism in fully embracing these brands (Beneke 2010: 215). Moodley and Machela (2022:75) mention that South African marketers are struggling to strike a balance between addressing customer needs and adapting to their changing preferences while working with their limited marketing budgets. On the other hand, consumers now rely more than ever on social media when making purchasing decisions, which poses challenges for brands because social media interactions significantly influence buying decisions (Hutter, Hautz, Dennhardt, and Füller 2013:343). This is particularly true for Generation Y consumers, who are considered a valuable market, often seen as trendsetters, active on digital platforms, and expected to have a high standard of living (Pentz, du Preez, and Swiegers 2020:3). Social media has empowered consumers to become active content distributors or influencers, transforming the advertising model (Hutchison 2019: 2). Given the abundance of these influential information sources, consumers find it challenging to assess the value of information. It's crucial to effectively convince consumers that the influencer they are considering is a reliable source of information that can influence their buying decisions (Ramela, De Villiers, and Chuchu 2022:76). However, many South African marketers lack a full understanding of the effectiveness of influencer marketing compared to other communication channels (Duffet 2017:244). One of the major challenges for marketers today is engaging customers effectively on the right platform, at the right time, with personalized content. Customers seek interactions that are empathetic and valuable, precisely when and where they need them. South African brands also grapple with integrating diverse customer data sources and striking the right balance between personalization and customer comfort. Initiating meaningful and engaging conversations with customers remains a challenge for these brands (CNBCAFRICA 2023). Deng, Hine, Ji, and Wang (2021:2) note that social media marketing often presents the challenge of creating brand posts that genuinely engage customers.

Furthermore, with the increasing deployment of social media influencers for brand endorsement, a knowledge gap exists about their current performance. When observed holistically, the literature has several limitations, as the existing advertising research is limited primarily to advertising spread within one step of the original source, while information on social media often spreads beyond a single step from the original source (Himmelboim and Golan 2019:1). Previous research has largely focused on brand information, brand attributes, and brand authenticity (Oh, Keller, Neslin, Reibstein and Lehmann 2020:153) as well as the authenticity of traditional brands and has more recently

extended to the authenticity of human or personal brands comprising social media influencers (Audrezet, Kerviller and Moulard 2018:3). However, the effect of influencer marketing on brand responses and purchase behaviour is subtly understudied (Schouten, Janssen and Verspaget 2020: 259). This implies that it is not known whether it is enough to perceive the brands advertised through social media as useful and the influencer as credible to generate purchase intention, or if all the perceptions need to be present. It is further not known if influencer adverts triggering emotional or rational assessment generate purchase intention (Muller, et al. 2018:2) making it critical to investigate the perceptions of consumers to better understand how influencers maintain relationships with followers, gain prominence, and how these activities affect the success of sales so that advertising can be effectively injected into these relationships (Coco and Eckert 2020:4). Hence, it is fitting to examine the effect of social influence on consumers' attitudes and perceptions on social media platforms (Naqvi, Jiang, Miao, and Naqvi 2020:2). Although there has been a considerable amount of research on various aspects of influencer marketing in developed countries, there has been significantly less research conducted in South Africa, particularly in relation to its persuasiveness on Generation Y consumers. This is supported by Duffet and Wakeham (2016:1) who maintain that not much is known about the attitudes of South African Generation Y towards advertising on social media. Moreover, there has been inadequate scholarly exploration of how influencer marketing influences elements of brand equity and consumer buying decisions. As a result, there is a gap in the literature regarding the role of influencer marketing among South African consumers. This study responds to these knowledge gaps in existing research about the role of influencer marketing on South African consumers, especially those from Generation Y. The objectives include understanding influencer strategies, examining changes in brand-consumer interaction, and assessing the impact on brand perception and purchasing decisions. Additionally, the study looks at brand awareness, and consumer trust in influencers, and aims to provide a framework for effective influencer marketing. These objectives address specific areas where research in South Africa has been limited.

### **1.3 RESEARCH AIM:**

The study aims to analyse the role of influencer marketing on Generation Y consumers.

#### **1.3.1 Research Objectives:**

To fulfil the above aim, this research will address the following objectives:

- To identify current influencer marketing strategies used to engage Generation Y consumers in the social media environment.
- To determine if influencer marketing has changed how brands interact with Generation Y consumers.
- To determine the extent to which influencer marketing sways Generation Y consumer brand perceptions and purchase intentions.
- To identify the level of brand awareness created through brand influencers.
- To evaluate the degree of Generation Y consumers' trust in brand influencers.

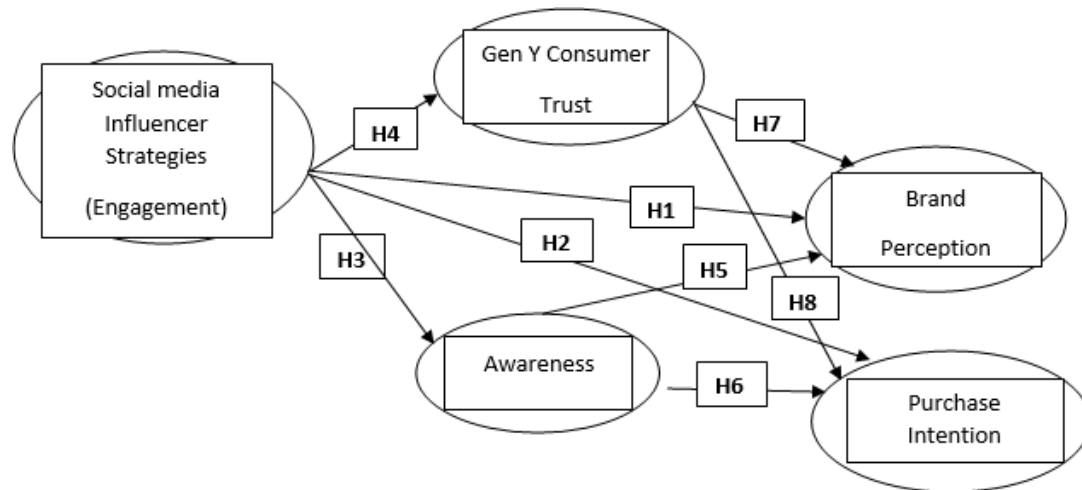
#### **1.3.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

- To develop a framework for optimising influencer marketing when engaging consumers on social media platforms.
- What are the current influencer marketing strategies employed to engage Generation Y consumers on social media platforms?
- Has influencer marketing changed how brands interact with Generation Y consumers?
- To what extent does influencer marketing sway Generation Y consumers' brand perceptions purchase intentions?
- To what extent is brand awareness created through brand influencers?
- To what degree do Generation Y consumers trust brand influencers?
- What framework can be used to enhance the effectiveness of influencer marketing in engaging Generation Y consumers on social media platforms?

#### **1.4. RESEARCH HYPOTHESES**

This study will investigate and analyse the following hypotheses, which are devised to guide the research. The following hypotheses focus on exploring relationships between influencer marketing, brand perception, purchase intention, brand awareness and Gen Y consumer trust. The use of positive relationships indicates the direction of the expected effects the findings will hope to achieve. The development of the objectives intentionally corresponds with the research objectives to show a logical connection between the proposed hypotheses and the purpose of the study. The hypotheses created in line with the objectives of this study are:

- H1: There is a positive relationship between influencer marketing and brand perception.
- H2: There is a positive relationship between influencer marketing and purchase intention.
- H3: There is a positive relationship between influencer marketing and brand awareness.
- H4: There is a positive relationship between influencer marketing and Generation Y consumer trust.
- H5: There is a positive relationship between brand awareness and brand perception.
- H6: There is a positive relationship between brand awareness and purchase intention.
- H7: There is a positive relationship between Generation Y consumer trust and brand perception.
- H8: There is a positive relationship between Generation Y consumer trust and purchase intentions.



**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework**

### 1.5. RATIONALE

Brands hold immense value for both large and small organizations, offering a host of benefits that underpin relationships between consumers, businesses, stakeholders, and owners (Centeno, Hart, and Dinnie 2019:555). The idea that the relationship between brands and consumers mirrors interpersonal connections is not a novel concept in the field of marketing. Over time, marketers have strived to understand the concept of humanizing brands (Argawal 2014:27). However, the advent of social media has ushered in a transformation in consumer behavior and their interaction with brands (Dimitriu and Guesalaga 2017:580). Social media provides a dynamic platform for electronic word-of-mouth, significantly influencing consumer behavior and positioning influencer marketing as a compelling alternative to traditional advertising (Schwemmer and Ziewiecki 2018:2). Social media influencers infuse brands with meaning and impact by engaging with consumers on emotional, affective, and communicative levels (Iqani 2019:234). In addition, Generation Y, a substantial segment of the consumer market with considerable purchasing power, takes on the role of distributing valuable information about products, services, and brands (Vukmirović, Kostić-Stanković, and Domazet 2020:99). This makes them an attractive target for marketers (Knittel, Beurer and Berndt 2015:31).

In South Africa, brands identify a significant market in a cohort of well-educated, high-income consumers, drawing both local and international companies, including manufacturers, retailers, and e-commerce, due to their substantial size and trendsetting influence (Muller 2020:3). This group often demonstrates materialistic and brand-conscious tendencies, accompanied by a high consumption status and a strong sense of public self-awareness, making them reliant on the influence of opinion leaders in their purchase decisions (Giovannini and Xu 2014:25). In this context, consumers shape

each other's perceptions through shared experiences with their followers (Botha, Donga, du Toit, Ehlers, Jacobs, Maree, Mugobo, and Shambare 2019:82). Evans, Phua, Lim, and Jun (2017:138) also note that influencers play a pivotal role in enhancing consumers' positive brand attitudes and purchase intentions due to their ability to reach a large audience at a relatively low cost and in a short time compared to conventional media. Alongside these developments, the global surge in investments in influencer marketing has laid the foundation for this research (Reinikainen et al. 2020: 280).

This study is motivated by the desire to advance our understanding of influencer marketing on social media platforms. It is designed to serve as a guide for marketers and brand managers, aiding them in selecting the most effective strategies for humanizing brands within the realm of social media. Additionally, it will assist marketers and brand managers in shaping the perceptions of South African consumers about their brands and influencing their purchase intentions. This, in turn, is expected to enhance brand attitudes, perceptions, and purchase intentions, ultimately boosting profitability. Effective implementation of influencer marketing through appropriate channels is expected to yield a positive impact on consumer purchasing decisions and, subsequently, the growth of brands. It is anticipated that the findings of this research will be used by brand managers to enhance the performance of their brands.

Notably, this study stands out by embracing and integrating five critical theories: Communication Accommodation Theory, Generational Cohort Theory, Social Influence, and Source Credibility Theory. While many influencer marketing studies may focus on one or two theories, this research adopts a comprehensive approach, combining multiple theoretical frameworks to provide a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon. This inclusive approach allows us to explore the intricate interplay between communication dynamics, generational influences, social interactions, learning processes, and source credibility in the context of influencer marketing.

Through this comprehensive theoretical framework, the study aspires to contribute to contemporary knowledge about influencer marketing on social media platforms, offering insights that can guide marketers and brand managers in making more informed decisions. By addressing the multidimensional aspects of influencer marketing, the research seeks to enhance South African consumers' perceptions of brands and their purchase intentions, ultimately resulting in improved brand attitudes and increased profitability. Given the uniqueness of the South African market with its distinctive consumer demographics and cultural dynamics, this study has the potential to not only enrich marketing practices within the country but also to contribute to academic theory within the field.

## **1.6 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **1.6.1 Research design**

Research design serves as a logical framework that guides the researcher in conducting the research project and collecting evidence that will address the research question (David and Sutton 2011: 205). This study will employ a mixed research method that is mainly quantitative in nature. According to Ary, Jacobs, and Sorenson (2010:561), a mixed method is an approach whereby qualitative and quantitative approaches are combined so that different perspectives gathered from both qualitative and quantitative data can be compared (Creswell 2014:218).

This study uses an exploratory design to apply research methods. Exploratory research incorporates an introductory problem or situation evaluation to determine the constraints to be studied further (Clow and James 2014:27). When little is known about the problem, exploratory research helps to strengthen an understanding of the problem (Churchill, Brown and Suter 2010:81). An exploratory sequential design, therefore, seeks to develop an intervention design based on the initial qualitative findings, which are then used to conduct a quantitative study on a larger sample. The primary purpose of the exploratory design is to draw contextualised inferences from outcomes by improving the success of one method with the other (Creswell 2015: 45). Considering the above assertions, this study will be carried out in two phases in which a preliminary qualitative study will be conducted to explore the phenomenon and the results of which will be used to develop a quantitative phase which is the main and the second phase of this research.

### **1.6.2 Phase1-Qualitative phase:**

The first phase is an introductory phase utilises a qualitative approach, while the second, or main, phase applies a quantitative approach. A qualitative approach focuses on understanding human behaviour, while a quantitative approach is based on the explanation of human behaviour (Bryman 2012: 28). This approach involves the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data through assessment, which allows a deep understanding of subjects' behaviour as well as observing what a subject does and says (Burns & Bush, 2014:146). The purpose of employing qualitative research is to provide opinions while lowering the effects of the researchers' bias, which may result in subjective reporting (Finnegan, 2014:136). Instead of breadth, qualitative research is about depth, as it helps researchers gain a deep understanding of a concept (Neuman, 2014:71). Consequently, a qualitative approach will be utilised to fully comprehend the issue and increase knowledge. Clow and James (2014: 41) support the idea that a qualitative approach is suitable for an exploratory study as it explores deeper into the subjects' minds. This study will utilise an exploratory sequential approach.

#### **1.6.2.1 Target population and sampling method:**

A target population is a collection of subjects that the research project aims to produce findings on. The basic elements of a population are usually people, housing units, households, or parts of an organisation. These elements are definitive and can be counted (Fricker 2017:3). Delost and Nadder (2014:237) add that a population is the whole set of objects or individuals with similar characteristics related to the research project. These characteristics determine how the research participants are selected to partake in the study, and this is done through an inclusion criterion that the researcher defines.

This study will obtain the opinions of South African social media brand influencers with the hope of acquiring a full picture of all opinions and attitudes regarding the issue being investigated. There are 152,791 verified influencers on Instagram and 69,488 on Twitter, and of these statistics, South Africa has 63 influencers on Instagram with over 1 million followers and 53 on Twitter. However, there is also over 200 000 unverified South African influencers on these social media platforms (Utian-Preston 2019). In a qualitative study that focuses on an exploratory study, a smaller sample size is more representative than a larger sample size (David and Sutton 2011:234). Therefore, ten of these South African social media brand influencers will form the sample size for this study. This population will be chosen using a non-probability method but based on judgement, which is a purposive sampling method (Zikmund and Babin 2010: 424). In line with the aforementioned sampling methods, the researcher will select potential participants who meet the requirements of this study from Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. They will be informed about the purpose of the study, and informed consent will be obtained. In-depth semi-structured interviews will be used to collect data in this study.

#### **1.6.2.2 Measuring Instrument**

A personal invitation to take part in this study is sent out to social media influencers through emails, and in these emails, the purpose of the study will be explained, confidentiality will be assured, and their consent will be requested. In-depth semi-structured interviews will be used to collect data from the social media influencers to explore issues that were potentially relevant to incorporate in the questionnaire and, more importantly, to obtain qualitative knowledge in everyday language instead of numerical data. Hawkins (2018:493) further suggests that face-to-face interviews have been the primary way to collect data, but with technological advances, various options such as email, text message, telephone, and videoconference can now be used for data collection.

Internet platforms such as electronic interviewing with Zoom, Skype, or other computer-assisted techniques have mutually beneficial results for both researcher and participants due to their respective affordances (Brown and Danaher 2017:77). In this study, data will be collected through online interviews conducted on Zoom and Microsoft Teams with selected South African social media

influencers to make sense of their role in influencer marketing. One of the advantages of online collection is increased accessibility to a geographically diverse population. Online interviews also provide an opportunity for face-to-face communication with body language and other non-verbal communication that other online methods cannot afford, as well as decreased chances of social desirability bias because of the researcher's physical absence (Heath, Williamson, Williams, and Harcourt 2018:31). In-depth, semi-structured questions will make up the interview guide.

#### **1.6.1.1 Trustworthiness**

According to Creswell (2013: 145) in order to gain trustworthiness, it is essential to be familiar with participants beforehand as well as conduct a random screening of potential participants. Moreover, data triangulation plays a very critical role in ascertaining trustworthiness in a qualitative study. Moon, Brewer, Januchowski-Hartley, Adams, and Blackman (2016:3) maintain that establishing trustworthiness in research can be showcased by employing strategies such as data and method triangulation using various data sources and methods, engaging in peer debriefing sharing research-related questions and findings with colleagues to gain additional perspectives on analysis and interpretation, and conducting member checking returning findings to participants to verify if they align with their experiences. Both credibility and dependability pertain to all aspects of the research design, including the research focus, the context, participant selection, data collection, and the quantity of data gathered. These factors collectively influence how accurately the research questions can be addressed. The qualitative component of this study seeks to purposefully interview social media influencers. As a result, emailing and telephonic techniques will be used to perform screening tests to ensure that potential participants are eligible to take part in the study before data collection. This will help ensure trustworthiness. Cross-referencing the details provided during interviews will ensure data triangulation.

#### **1.6.1.2 Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis is the process of segmenting and categorising data for the purpose of identifying relevant patterns for data interpretation (Mathews and Ross 2010:373). It is a highly flexible method that can be customised to the needs of a study, affording the researcher an in-depth yet complex amount of data. It is also a comprehensible method of analysis that does not necessarily need the technological and theoretical expertise of other qualitative methods. It is further beneficial for comparing different insights and cultivating unforeseen perspectives as well as reviewing important elements of extensive data by using a well-structured technique to handle data, which results in an organised and straightforward report (Nowell 2017:2). As a result, the qualitative data in this study will be analysed using thematic analysis.

When analysing the data for this study, the researcher followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) iterative thematic analysis process, which includes the following six steps:

- Data transcription,
- Generation and categorising of codes,
- Themes development,
- Themes review,
- Themes characterisation and labelling, as well as
- Locating exemplars (Scharp and Sander 2018:118).

## **1.6.2 Phase2-Quantitative phase:**

This study will also adopt a quantitative approach to address its objectives through a realistic assessment that comprises numerical measurement and analysis (Zikmund and Babin 2010:133). The tradition of quantitative methods is based on the idea that the study of society is similar to the study of science because there is a need to examine hypotheses, objectivity, deductive logic, and quantification value (O'Leary 2017: 134). To identify statistical relationships between variables, this study is a deductive process of research that involves the gathering and analysis of numerical data.

### **1.6.1.1 Population\target population**

Zikmund and Babin (2010:415) state that a population must be well defined in order to yield good outcomes. This study will be carried out online, strictly focusing on South African Generation Y consumers who have an active social media presence. According to Duffett and Wakeham (2016:6), Generation Y, also referred to as millennials, are aged from eighteen years old to early thirties and there are over 10 million Millennials in South Africa, with majority owning a feature phone or smartphone, and three out of four access the Internet and social media via mobile devices.

### **1.6.1.2 Sampling method**

While a population is any set that has members who share similar common attributes, a sample is a part of or a subset of a greater population whose characteristics are targeted (Zikmund and Babin 2010:412). Blumberg, Cooper, and Schindler (2014:174) state that the fundamental idea of sampling is to conclude the whole population by picking some of its elements. This study will adopt a non-probability sampling technique. Non-probability sampling relies on the researcher's subjective judgment instead of the chance to choose sample units (Maholtra 2010:376).

Convenience sampling and purposive sampling are the two types of non-probability sampling that this research will use. Convenience sampling is the collection of data from available members of the population (Sekaran and Bourgie 2010:276). Purpose sampling is a technique that allows a researcher to purposefully select sample units based on their judgement of the sample's ability to address the research problem (Leedy and Ormrod 2010:213). The rationale for choosing these methods is to ensure that respondents in the quantitative study are strictly South African Generation Y consumers who have an active social media presence. Sample units for this study also need to be conveniently available to participate.

## **Sample size**

According to Burns and Bush (2014:266), a sample size is the total number of samples that the study will comprise. The size of a sample affects the accuracy and generalizability of the research outcomes (Hair, Celsi, Oritinau, and Bush 2013:38). In addition, Sekaran and Bougie (2010:296) state that a very large sample size (over 500) can be problematic, proposing a sufficient sample size for a population of 75 000 to 1 000 000 to be 384. Therefore, with over 10 million Generation Y consumers in South Africa, a sample size of 500 consumers is projected for this study.

### **1.6.1.3 Measuring Instrument**

After reviewing the literature that applies to this research area and exploring the data presented in the preliminary qualitative phase, a questionnaire will be developed with questions that will explain the findings of the qualitative data and address the objectives of this study. The questionnaire will consist of Likert-scaled response questions, as this will allow respondents to specify the level to which they agree or disagree with the statements. A questionnaire affords respondents great anonymity, and the chances of collecting accurate data when sensitive questions are asked are greater with this instrument. A questionnaire is also less costly and convenient, as the researcher gets to save time and economic and human capital by not interviewing a large number of people (Kumar 2011:140). Pretesting is a trial procedure in which a group of respondents is used to identify potential hitches with a questionnaire (Zikmund and Babin 2010:238). The questionnaire will be pre-tested with 20 consumers before it can be used to collect data to establish whether the sequencing and content of the questions are accurate. Should there be any errors, amendments will be made before the survey can be conducted. The survey will be conducted through various social media platforms, comprising Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, and through emails to the researcher's online contacts, on respondents who have a representative profile of Generation Y consumers residing in South Africa, each of whom is computer literate and comfortable with social media platforms.

### **1.6.1.4 Data analysis**

Data analysis is the systematic synthesis and arrangement of research data (Neuman, 2011:487). The nature of the research problem, the research design, and the datasets all influence the choice of pertinent analytical techniques. These analytical techniques vary depending on the depth of the research problem (Babin and Zikmund 2013:59). On the other hand, quantitative data will be analysed by means of frequencies and chi-square tests using the latest version of the statistical package for social science (SPSS) version 28.0 for Windows. This particular software was chosen because it is intensively used and has been viewed as the most user-friendly statistical software in the past. The results will be presented using bar and pie charts.

### **1.6.1.5 Validity**

Validity is the judgement of the correctness of a measure for specific decisions or inferences that result from the generated scores. In other words, validity is a situation-specific concept that is evaluated depending on the population, environmental characteristics, and purpose for which the measurement takes place (McMillan and Schumacher 2006:179). Validity can be categorised into different types, including content validity, criterion validity, and construct validity (Almanasreh, Mole, and Chen 2018:215). Face validity examines whether each item accurately represents the construct under study, based on its apparent relevance. Content validity, on the other hand, gauges how well the instrument encompasses all the necessary or essential items to measure the construct of interest (Roy, Sukumar, Philip, and Gopalakrishna 2023:4). In contrast, construct validity assesses the extent to which a test measures the theoretical concept it intends to evaluate. In simpler terms, the construct validity of a measurement or operation reflects the extent to which it genuinely measures what it claims to measure (Hajjar 2018:51). The effectiveness and precision of measuring a theoretical construct depend on how well the items within the measure accurately represent the content and breadth of the construct. Questionnaire measurement items usually consist of two parts: the statement to which a participant responds and the response scale on which the participant conveys their response. Both components contribute to content validity (Johnston, Dixon, Hart, Glidewell, Schroder, and Pollard 2014:242). To maintain the validity of this study, efforts will be made to ascertain that both questions in the questionnaires are in line with research objectives, research literature, and theoretically sound results acquired by other scholars who conducted research about influencer marketing and consumer perceptions of brands in the social media environment. Additionally, factor analysis will be to assess the relationship between items and their alignment with the theoretical construct.

### **1.6.1.6 Reliability**

Reliability refers to the consistency of measurement, the degree to which the research outcomes are similar over various forms of the same instrument or instances of data collection (McMillan and Schumacher 2006:183). The element that determines the quality of the measurement instrument is reliability. Whenever something is being measured, there is some element of error, called measurement error. Reliability therefore refers to the level at which test scores are free of error (Muijs 2011:61). To address reliability, qualitative interviews with social media influencers will be triangulated with quantitative survey data from South African Generation Y consumers to ensure consistency and confirm the validity of the study findings. A pilot study will also be conducted using the questions intended to collect data for the main study to guarantee that the questions reflect the information the researcher aims to obtain accurately and that the respondents are able to understand and answer the questions without struggling. This will be performed on 20 respondents who will not be part of the main study, and Cronbach's alpha will be used to test the reliability of the study.

## **1.7 SCOPE OF THE STUDY**

The scope of this study is confined within the concept of influencer marketing on social media platforms, with a specific focus on the communication process between the influencers and generation Y consumers. A comparison between brand communication and influencers' communication to consumers will also be made, as a profound understanding of modern marketing practices performance within social media needs to be established. The study will also focus on investigating the perceptions of both influencers and consumers towards brands as well as the consumers' willingness to purchase the brands.

## **1.8 DELIMITATIONS**

Delimitations refer to the boundaries that the authors intentionally establish for their research. These boundaries are related to the definitions that the researchers choose, so that the goals and objectives of the study remain achievable. Delimitations are primarily connected to the research's theoretical framework, objectives, research questions, variables being studied, and the sample used in the study (Theofanidis and Fountouki, 2018:157). As a result of the interest in this study and the method with which it will be conducted, it will be delimited to individuals who have access to the internet and are active on social media networks. Moreover, this study will be delimited to South African Generation Y consumers as well as influencers who particularly have an active online presence on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube due to the broad nature of social media. The study was also limited to the borders of South Africa. The survey for consumers will be carried out on various social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp, as well as via electronic mail. These are the most popular and widely used social media platforms among South African consumers. On the other hand, the interviews with social media influencers will be conducted on Zoom, MS Teams, and Google Meet.

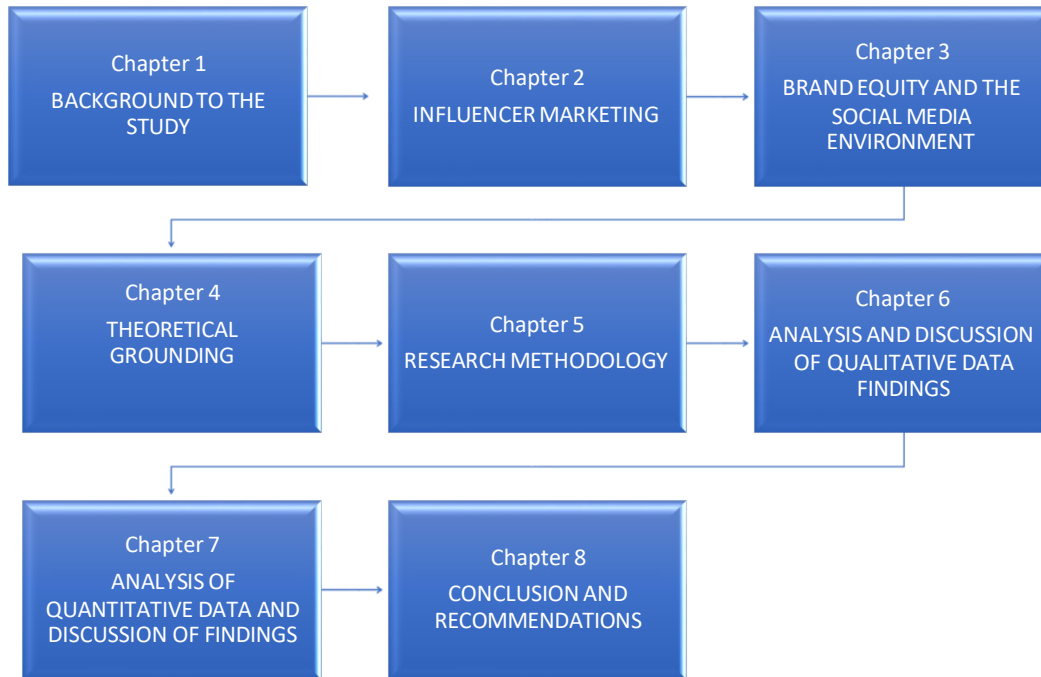
## **1.9 LIMITATIONS**

According to Akanle, Ademuson and Shittu (2020:110) limitations are factors that researchers cannot always control, and these factors can impact the study's results or how those results are understood. Every study, no matter how well it is planned or carried out, has some kind of limit. This limit might relate to the choices made about the theory or methods used in the study, or it could be due to challenges encountered during data collection. This study has limitations with regards to generalisability as it focuses only on the consumers of the Generation Y cohort. The study also has a limited scope of influencer marketing channels as it focuses only on five (5) social media platforms. These platforms are Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. Without taking into account the emerging trends and the potential impact of other social media platforms apart from the ones mentioned above, the findings of this study may not encompass the entire spectrum of

influencer marketing channels used by both social media influencers and by South African Generation Y consumers. The timeframe and financial constraints are other limiting factors in this study.

## 1.10 OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

This study was divided into seven chapters. The following is an overview of each chapter:



**Figure 2: Thesis Structure**

### CHAPTER 1 – BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Chapter 1 introduces and provides an overview of the topic. The research problem is stated, as well as the rationale of the study. Aim, objectives, and hypotheses of the study are outlined. Delimitations are explained.

### CHAPTER 2 - INFLUENCER MARKETING

This chapter will give an overview of influencer marketing, covering different aspects of the concept, including the classification of influencers, the role of influencers in marketing, consumer engagement, and the channels of engagement. The chapter also focuses on highlighting of influencer marketing landscape in South Africa. It explains the effectiveness of influencer marketing in the present age and describes how influencers interact with consumers, with an emphasis on the South African

Generation Y cohort. The chapter concludes by looking at the influence of influencer marketing in consumer decision making process.

### **CHAPTER 3 – BRAND EQUITY AND INFLUENCER MARKETING**

This chapter initiates a comprehensive exploration of the subject of brand equity, it explores how influencer marketing, as a contemporary marketing tool, plays a pivotal role in shaping and enhancing brand equity. It first provides an overview of Brand equity, then highlight the connection between brand equity and influencer marketing, then continue to demonstrate the influence of influencer marketing on the various dimensions of brand equity including brand awareness, brand associations, brand loyalty, and perceived quality, are discussed in the correct order. Finally, it concludes with the discussion of how the synergy between influencer marketing and brand equity can significantly impact consumers' intentions to make purchases.

### **CHAPTER 4 – THEORETICAL GROUNDING**

The current chapter provides an overview of the theoretical foundations of influencer marketing, with a specific emphasis on the Communication Accommodation Theory, which acts as the overarching theoretical framework in this research. Furthermore, the study explores metatheories, which include the Generational Cohort Theory, Social Influence Theory, Social Learning Theory, and Source Credibility Theory. The subsequent discourse delves into the importance and ramifications of these theories, highlighting their integration with the objectives of the study. Moreover, this chapter elucidates the interrelatedness of these theories, placing particular attention on Generation consumers.

### **CHAPTER 5 – RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This chapter provides an overview of the research methods employed in the execution of this study. This section also provides an overview of the various methodologies employed for data gathering, as well as the analytical approaches employed for data analysis. This study employed a mixed methods approach, in particular a sequential exploratory design. As a result, this chapter is structured into two distinct phases. Phase one focuses on the qualitative section, while Phase two presents the quantitative methodological section of the study.

### **CHAPTER 6 – ANALYSIS OF QUALITATIVE DATA AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

This section offers an examination of the qualitative data collected from interviews conducted with social media influencers. The ensuing discussion encompasses the identification and exploration of themes and sub-themes that have emerged from this dataset.

## **CHAPTER 7 – ANALYSIS OF QUANTITATIVE DATA AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

In this chapter, the research's quantitative data analysis and findings are presented comprehensively. The analysis of the collected data involved the application of various statistical techniques, such as descriptive statistics, inferential statistics, including factor analysis, Anova, and structural equation modelling. The statistical software packages utilized for this analysis were SPSS and AMOS version 29 and to enhance clarity and visualization, the data is accompanied by the inclusion of graphs, charts, and tables.

## **CHAPTER 8 – CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The purpose of this chapter is to present the conclusions and recommendations resulting from the obtained findings. Also presented in this chapter is an overview of the previous chapters, the achievements of research objectives, the implications of the research findings and areas that need further research are also pointed out. This chapter will end by presenting a proposed framework for optimising influencer marketing when engaging consumers in social media platforms.

### **1.6 CONCLUSION**

This chapter has established the foundation for this research by presenting the background, research problem, and the study's purpose. This research aims to examine the impact of influencer marketing on the perceptions and purchase decisions of South African Generation Y consumers. The research objectives, hypotheses, research methodology, rationale, and a general overview of the study have also been introduced. In the upcoming chapters, we will delve into the relevant literature. Chapter 2, the primary literature chapter, will comprehensively explore the subject of influencer marketing.

## **CHAPTER TWO INFLUENCER MARKETING**

### **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

This chapter explores the existing literature and research related to influencer marketing, with a specific focus on its impact on Generation Y consumers in the South African context. Building upon the theoretical grounding provided in the previous chapter, this chapter delves into the practical aspects, applications, and empirical findings related to influencer marketing.

### **2.2 THE EVOLUTION OF INFLUENCER MARKETING**

The concept of opinion leadership was originally formulated by Carl Hovland and Karl Lazarsfeld in the 1940s. During the early stages of mass media research, Katz, Lazarsfeld, and Roper (1955) described the "two-step flow of communication." In this model, opinion leaders received information from the media then conveyed these messages and ideas to their friends, family, and acquaintances. This process was believed to influence the attitudes and behaviors of less active recipients. Consequently, opinion leaders were positioned as intermediaries between mass media and the general population, actively participating in word-of-mouth processes (Childers and Boatwright 2021: 426). With the advent of the Internet, opinion leaders have gained the capacity to reach a global audience of unlimited users, providing online opinion leaders with an extended reach and an increased potential to impact marketing campaigns (Santiago and Castelo 2020: 34).

Alterations in contemporary communication environments have reshaped the traditional notion of opinion leadership that emerged in the context of traditional mass media. Traditional opinion leaders disseminated information by filtering, reshaping, and adding their perspectives while sharing it with others, as outlined in the Two-Step Flow Theory within media impact theories. This modified and conveyed knowledge subsequently led groups and individuals to form opinions and attitudes influenced by the opinion leader on a specific issue. Such interaction methods result in changes in individuals' perceptions and attitudes, ultimately affecting their decision-making processes. In the present day, the classical and conventional concept of opinion leadership (as described above) has transitioned into digital contexts, allowing for a broader influence on larger audiences. Opinion leaders who share their viewpoints through contemporary social networking sites go by various names, including phenomena, influencers, digital leaders, and entrepreneurs. These digital opinion leaders differ from their traditional counterparts in terms of the communication channels and tools they employ (Balci, Tiryaki, Karakus 2022: 37).

However, due to the ubiquity of social media, the accessibility and appeal of influencer endorsements have greatly increased. Some studies have found that approximately 50% of internet users follow some form of influencer account on social media and rely on influencer recommendations, while 40% have made purchases after seeing products on platforms like Instagram or YouTube. In 2018, 19% of all U.S. consumers made purchases based on influencer recommendations (Vrontis, Makrides, Christofi, and Thrassou 2020: 618). In this context, influencers have emerged as a highly effective marketing strategy. They function as role models for their communities and establish strong emotional bonds with their followers, sometimes transcending their community to become public social figures (Borau-Boira 2022: 328).

## **2.3 INFLUENCE IN THE DIGITAL AGE**

The contemporary marketing strategy, characterised by the provision of pertinent information and consumer interaction, is closely intertwined with communication technology and platform selection, thereby enabling dynamic consumer involvement. The advent of the digital revolution has prompted consumers to transition to online platforms, where they seek various forms of entertainment, education, and communication. Consequently, there is a growing demand for content that incorporates multimedia elements, encourages interactivity, and caters to individual preferences (He, Chai, & Zhang, 2019: 421). Within the context of the progressively competitive landscape of social media, the practice of influencer marketing is undergoing a transformation, wherein it is transitioning towards establishing enduring collaborations between brands and influencers (Kim and Kim 2021: 224).

Social media platforms enable users to freely exchange and engage in discussions regarding their ideas, offering businesses a unique opportunity to cultivate marketing strategies that diverge from conventional approaches and stimulate consumer interest. In conjunction with these advancements in the realm of digital technology, the consumer has also exhibited a process of transformation. Consumers in the realm of communication are increasingly prioritising factors such as speed, practicality, and usability. Hence, there has been an increase in consumer engagement with social media platforms, characterised by the utilisation of various features. Consequently, consumers have started to actively follow brand accounts on these platforms, seeking advantages such as access to timely information, opportunities for idea sharing, conducting brand and product research, obtaining both positive and negative brand opinions, and receiving prompt responses to their inquiries and demands (Ceyhan, 2019: 88). The widespread adoption of social media platforms has given consumers the ability to actively engage with marketing communications, transforming them from passive recipients to active communicators who can express their opinions regarding products and services offered by companies. The phenomenon has led to the emergence of individuals who create content on social media platforms with the purpose of actively distributing information and expressing

their opinions about products. Some of these individuals can garner a large following and subsequently become influential figures for their followers. They are commonly referred to as social media influencers (Cheung, Leung, Aw and Koay 2022: 1).

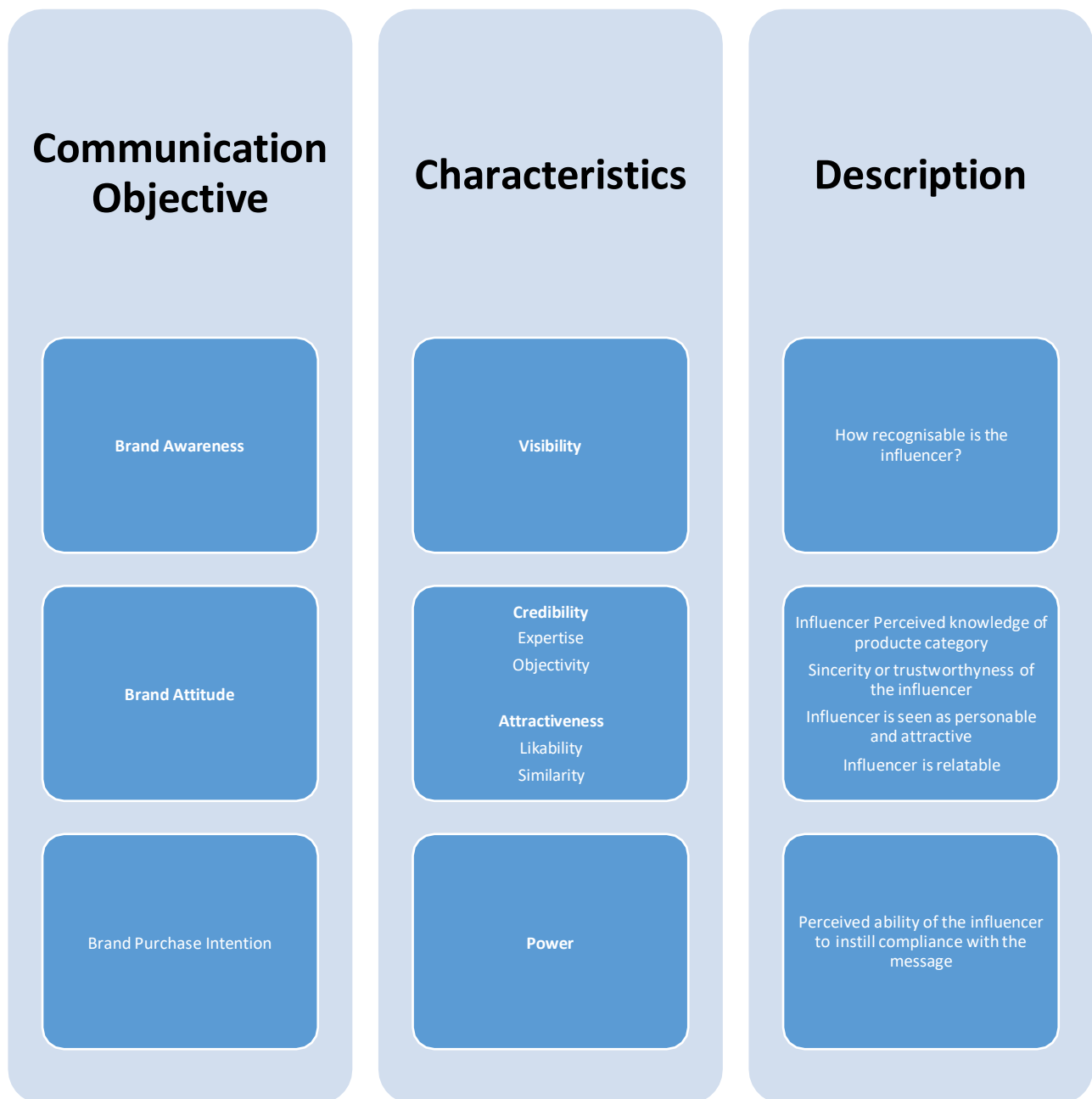
In the realm of marketing, influencer marketing has emerged as a prominent strategy for enhancing brand recognition in a more expedient and effective manner. It operates by leveraging the power of social media influencers (SMIs) who assume the role of opinion leaders, exerting their influence over prospective consumers through the dissemination of content on various social media platforms (Syed, Mehmood, and Qaiser, 2023: 2). Influencers possess a substantial following comprising individuals who demonstrate a strong inclination towards the influencers' content and endeavours. This is evident through their voluntary subscription to receive automated updates from the influencers, as well as their active engagement in comments and discussions with both the influencers and fellow followers (Farivar, Wang, and Turel, 2022: 2). Influencer marketing has proven to be advantageous for marketers and consumers alike, as it combines pertinent and valuable content with strategic promotional efforts. This approach facilitates enhanced brand-consumer interactions through the utilisation of independently generated content on influencers' owned media platforms. Furthermore, the provision of personalised and interactive information can be enhanced, thereby bolstering consumer involvement and engagement. In addition, marketers have the ability to assume the position of a "thought leader" during discussions and engagements with consumers, offering authoritative perspectives and reliable guidance (He et al., 2019: 421).

### **2.3.1 The Art of Influence**

Influence is the power to make people act and engage with a post shared by a strong social influencer, whether it's on social media or in real life (Arora, Bansal, Kandpal, Answani and Dwivedi 2019: 87). Influencers can use various social media platforms, but Instagram and Facebook are the most popular choices. Companies reward influencers with money or goods, like free products, services, trips, or experiences. Influencer ads online blend in with the content around them, like advertorials or infomercials (Campbell and Farrell 2020: 470).

Influencers are regular social media users who've built a dedicated following by telling captivating stories about their interests and lifestyles. Social media influencers create a strong online persona by sharing genuine personal stories, which include photos, videos, and activities, making use of the interactive features of social media. This careful crafting of an appealing online identity helps influencers gain followers and keep them engaged. Followers play an active role in shaping and validating influencers' online identities. They follow, interact with, endorse, and support these influencers (Taffasse and Wood 2021:2). Opinion leaders in social media networks can enhance interactions, engagement, and connections among their followers, forming an interactive and well-connected community, as stated by Wu, Li, Qi, Kong, and Li (2021: 3). Opinion leaders influence not

only what others think but also their attitudes and actions. Their influence is mainly tied to their expertise, and they frequently post and respond to messages to build their reputation in the community. Digital influencers often share details about their personal lives, experiences, and opinions through blogging or vlogging. This allows followers to understand influencers' thoughts, feelings, and personalities, reducing the psychological distance and increasing feelings of similarity (Hu, Min, Han, and Liu 2020:3). However, influencers must demonstrate a degree of trustworthiness. Trust is viewed as a relational quality that develops over time through repeated contact. In a similar vein, trust in the influencer makes followers believe that they will benefit from their relationship with the influencer. As an outcome, customers sought to engage with influencers and intend to purchase the endorsed product. In particular, the influencers' credibility characteristic is the most powerful for influencing consumer behavior which a customer responds positively to the campaign because of the influencers. In addition, the credibility of social media influencers impacts customer engagement and purchase intention (Ao, Bansal, Pruthi and Khaskheli 2023:4). Bakker 2018:82 suggests that the following table depicts the characteristics of an influencer in brand communication.



**Figure 3: Characteristics of Influencers in Brand Communication**

Source: Bakker 2018:82

In social media settings, influencers possess characteristics like attractiveness, expertise, and credibility. Other influencer attributes include their level of interaction, reputation, and power (Ling and Peng 2020:961) driving engagement, facilitating communication, and promoting the sale of a product or service. These influencers can be well-known celebrities, professionals, or even regular individuals with a substantial online following, attracting significant attention and engagement, which they can leverage to impact a particular industry. Influencer-generated content has the power to influence customers' buying decisions, either through expressing their opinions or by making aesthetic judgments. This content helps the audience recognize the alignment between a brand and

their preferences, which, in turn, can boost their intention to make a purchase. The brand's value, as conveyed through influencer-generated content, has a positive correlation with the target audience's desire to consume. This results in higher brand expectation value, increased brand engagement, and a heightened intention to purchase (Bu, Parkison, and Thaichon 2022:2). Therefore, online brand communication can significantly affect a customer's intention to make a purchase, provided it comes from a trustworthy source. This implies that for customers to develop an intention to buy a product endorsed by an influencer, they must perceive the influencer as credible. In this context, credibility refers to the belief that the influencer is a knowledgeable and reliable source of information (Muller, Mattke, and Maier 2018:3).

## **2.4 MAPPING THE INFLUENCER LANDSCAPE IN SOUTH AFRICA**

According to Cassuto (2023), various social media platforms are abuzz with the presence of digital influencers who have cultivated intimate and personalised connections with their respective followers in South Africa. Influencers have established themselves as authoritative figures in the digital realm, possessing endorsements that possess a persuasive influence surpassing conventional advertising techniques. Influencer marketing has emerged as a highly discussed marketing strategy within the nation. Considering brands' perpetual quest for novel means of engaging consumers, influencer marketing has emerged as a firmly established global strategy that has been readily embraced in South Africa (Payflex 2023). South Africa has witnessed a significant surge in internet culture, resulting in the emergence of a diverse range of influencers through influencers encompass various categories, including niche influencers, local celebrities, entertainers, and a multitude of online personalities (Fourie 2020). Superbalist and Mr. Price, prominent local brands, have effectively employed micro and nano influencers in their advertising initiatives.

The #DearSouthAfrica campaign, implemented by the renowned international brand Zara, garnered significant triumph in anticipation of the establishment of their official online store in South Africa. Zara effectively leveraged a combination of 600 nano and macro-influencers, resulting in their prominent global recognition as the leading trending name a mere day prior to the launch of (Payflex 2023). This transformation of the marketing industry has been brought about by the evolution of the influencer industry. Social media influencers in South Africa generated a revenue exceeding R100 million during the period from 2019 to 2021. This is evidence that marketers are dedicating substantial portions of their marketing budgets towards engaging influencers and content creators. On the other hand, a proportion of consumers express a greater inclination to place trust in the opinions of influencers regarding brands, as opposed to the claims made by the brands themselves (Nhlapo 2022).

According to Marketing spread (2022) approximately 45% of the South African population actively engages with social media platforms and exhibit a notable inclination towards following influencers on social media, ranking sixth on a global scale in this regard. These South Africans dedicate a considerable amount of time to social media platforms daily, positioning the country at fifth place worldwide in terms of the average duration of usage. Initially, South African consumers were drawn to social media platforms for entertainment purposes. However, they have now transitioned to utilising these channels to explore novel products and facilitate their purchasing choices and individuals who possess the ability to utilise their social presence to disseminate their thoughts, opinions, preferences, and experiences within their online community are the ones who wield the greatest level of influence, irrespective of the size of their follower base. This shift has led individuals to relinquish their conventional employment in favour of becoming full-time influencers, who employ innovative methods to disseminate captivating content through various mediums such as written text, videos, music, and voiceovers. Furthermore, this development has facilitated an increased level of creative independence for content creators, granting them greater control over the content they generate as well as their potential for financial gain (Nhlapo 2022). Consequently, the influencer landscape in South Africa has experienced a remarkable expansion. However, one of the challenges encountered by digital marketers and brands in South Africa pertains to the discernment of effective influencer marketing strategies. The identification of genuine influencers represents a preliminary stage in the research process (Fourie 2020).

## **2.5 INFLUENCER MARKETING LANDSCAPE AMONG SOUTH AFRICAN**

### **GENERATION Y CONSUMERS**

According to Pentz, Du Preez, and Swiegers (2020: 228), South Africa is a developing country that consists of a complex mix of both first and third world markets. However, it is one of the flourishing and most investor attractive economies in the African Continent bringing in international brands and investment due to its strategic geographic location, a well-established democracy, macro-economic stability, high market potential and a stable business climate (Pillay 2021: 2). Despite consumers' previous economic disadvantage in the past decades, a large amount of the South African consumer market had shifted from low to middle class with an increased purchasing power (Tseng, Baker, O'Brien, and Pillay 2020:67). This is evident in the South African retail sales statistics that showed a steady growth of 5% annually as well as the 2017 14.8% sales contribution to the country's GDP (Pentz, Du Preez, Swiegers 2020:228). Notwithstanding disproportions between consumer income groups and high levels of unemployment and poverty within the South African consumer market (Pillay 2021:2). The potentiality of upward mobility presents a great opportunity for marketers to reach even consumers at the lowest level of the consumer market (Petzer and Meyer 2013:384).

This is due an increased access to internet connectivity and as an upward trajectory of consumer usage and activity intensifies advertisers and brands' investment on digital media and content increases (The Interactive Advertising Bureau of South Africa 2020). Tseng et.al. (2020:67) substantiate that an increased access to technology stems from the apparent transformation in the South African Consumer market. Over 78% of South Africans are said to be accessing the internet through their mobile devices daily with approximately 25 million of internet users in the country (Rootman and Kruger 2020: 510). According to Pentzer and Meyer (2013: 386) the use of mobile devices, particularly smartphones is prevalent amongst Generation Y consumers in South Africa as they delight in engaging social networks such as Twitter and Facebook. These social media sites have gone beyond just platforms of communication between family and friends but also platforms for sharing information mostly among youth (Shava and Chinyamurindi 2018: 1).

Duffet (2016:22) claims that like many other developing countries, South Africa has a very youthful population with two out of three people being thirty-four (34) or younger, and about 40% aged nineteen (19) years or younger. Duffet and Wakeham (2016:24) support that South Africa has over ten (10) million Millennials with a large number of them owning a feature or smartphone giving them access to the Internet and social media networks (Duffet and Wakeham 2016:24). Pentz et.al. (2020: 229) assert that millennials also known as Generation Y consumers living in a technology-driven era are possibly a lucrative market for brands.

Consumers' increased access to technology and information about brands through social media allows space for social media influence (Tseng et.al. 2020:67). It is said that 80% of consumers are likely to consider a new brand recommended by a key influencer (Wielkie 2020:2) and South Africa happens to have several high-profile social media influencers who have active social media profiles with hundreds of thousands of followers. Their profiles increasingly serve as platforms for punting brands and commodities, although deemed as offering a visual diary of their glamorous lives (Iqani 2019:230). These influencers carefully create content focused on building intimacy that earns them good relationships with their followers (Coco and Eckert 2020:1). Given that South African consumers, like many other emerging consumer markets in Africa, are savvy and brand loyal as they often refer to products by an associated brand name, brand recognition is of utmost importance to them (Signe and Johnson 2018:15). Thus, these young consumers seem to trust these influencers more as they promote brands in real-life settings that are authentic and result in improved perceptions of trustworthiness compared to other platforms (Schouten, Janssen and Verspaget 2020:262). With the growing adoption of digital interaction, the South African influencer marketing industry is set to grow greatly with US\$15 billion projected worth by 2022 (Wits Business School 2021). South African millennials are recognised for their distinct attributes, which are molded by a fusion of conventional African cultural elements and contemporary Western influences.

The individuals in this group exhibit a significant level of diversity, characterised by variations in their backgrounds, values, and aspirations (Schutte 2023). They also present a noteworthy phenomenon as they exhibit commonalities in their attitudes, language, preferences, and brand consumption patterns worldwide (Bevan-Dye 2021:4). Bevan-Dye (2021:5) further states that in South Africa, these consumers constitute a significant proportion of the overall population, with an estimated share of 35 percent out of the total population of 59,622,350 in 2020. Constituting the largest segment of the South African population, Generation Y holds significant importance for marketers and is progressively establishing a stronger presence in the labour market. These individuals are recognised for possessing significant purchasing power and exerting influence over the purchasing choices of other consumer groups. They are also regarded as comprising the future generation of decision-makers (Filters and Pentz 2021: 208). Their culture is influenced by Western themes, values, and consumption trends disseminated through social media channels. This implies that, in comparison to individuals from previous generations, members of Generation Y exhibit greater receptiveness towards diverse cultures, display heightened interest in the marketing efforts of global brands, and possess a stronger inclination towards consuming brands that foster a sense of belonging to the global culture. The prevalence of this phenomenon has significantly increased in recent years due to the widespread usage of online social media and networking platforms among the younger generation (Bevan-Dye 2021:4).

## **2.6 TYPES OF INFLUENCERS**

Riuz-Gomez (2019:14) points out that anyone and everyone producing or posting content on social media, whether they capture attention or not, are digital content creators. However, not all who create content are influencers but those who get attention from their posts or content and build social capital. Lou and Yuan (2019:58) add that influencers have a large following across various social media platforms and have a tremendous influence on their followers. And unlike public figures and celebrities, influencers' popularity comes from their social media content. The most popular ones having a following of over a million people on platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, or Facebook (Grave 2017:1). Despite the many descriptions that have been given to influencers, there are various types of social media influencers (Ruiz-Gomez 2019:14). The influencers are segmented into various categories or types (Kay, Mulcahy and Parkison 2020: 249) such as Mega, macro, micro, and nano influencers. To determine the network size and popularity, these influencers are usually classified based on the number of followers, content quality, reputation, location, industry, and interests among other things (Berne-Manero and Marzo-Navarro 2020:4). Balaji, Jiang and Jha (2021:294) substantiate that influencers' authenticity, expertise, cultural dimensions, and follower count are considered when classifying influencers and this is demonstrated in the table below.

**Table 1 : Influencer Classification**

|  <b>KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF THE VARIOUS INFLUENCER TYPES</b> |                                                                |                                                  |                                                   |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Nano-Influencer</b>                                                                                                                       | <b>Micro-Influencer</b>                                        | <b>Macro-Influencer</b>                          | <b>Celebrity Influencer</b>                       |
| Between 500 and 5,000 followers                                                                                                              | Between 5,000 and 20,000 followers                             | More than 20,000 followers                       | More than 10 million followers                    |
| Knows many of his or her followers personally                                                                                                | Tightly knit relationship with audience                        | High level of influence on topical areas         | Moderate to extreme influence                     |
| High engagement rate                                                                                                                         | Higher engagement and conversion rate                          | Medium engagement and conversion rate            | Lower engagement but higher reach                 |
| Generates seven to 10 percent engagement per post                                                                                            | Generates five to 25 percent engagement per post               | Generates 0.5 to two percent engagement per post | Engagement varies and is unpredictable            |
| Lowest commission                                                                                                                            | Low commission                                                 | Slightly higher commission                       | Very high commission                              |
| Examples: Passionate food photographer, homemaker, frequent traveller                                                                        | Examples: Passionate foodie, work-at-home mum, popular student | Examples: Fashion blogger, yoga instructor       | Examples: Movie star, popular singer, sports star |

Source Lui and Bhattacharya (2021:50)

## **NANO-INFLUENCERS**

According to Erwee (2019:10), nano-influencers are ordinary digital citizens who hold influence within their communities and a following of about 1000 to 10,000, and they are being given attention because of their real-time brand personalisation and intimacy. Nano-influencers provide followers with high personal access and authenticity through their high engagement rates compared to all the other influencer categories (Campbell and Pharell 2020:472). Because of their level of engagement, nano-influencers also have a higher marketing and promotional effectiveness than renowned brands due to their interaction with followers, authentic posts, content, and personalities which can reach further the target audience (Wibawa, Pratiwi, Larasati 2021:293). However, Haenlein, Anadol, Farnsworth, Hugo, Hunichen, and Welte (2020:113) argue that although nano-influencers have a high engagement rate with their homogenous group of followers, their engagement is only relative to their group of followers. Despite this, nano-influencers are beneficial for brands in a case where authentic content and a relevant audience are critical. Vodák, Novysedlák, Čakanová, and Pekár (2019:153) further add that although this type of influencers' influence may seem to be little, they are the best choice for brands seeking a narrow audience in a specific location. Marketing through nano-influencers in the age of social media is an effective strategy in terms of intensity and results as followers are mostly family and friends (Wibawa et.al. 2021:293). Campbell and Pharell (2020:472) attest that nano-influencers are also lucrative for brand partnerships since they are often open to free product samples and unpaid partnerships to develop their social media exposure and grow their

networks. Brands that partner with Nano-influencers are often considered to be authentic and genuine Vodák et.al. (2019:153).

## **MICRO-INFLUENCERS**

Micro influencers according to (Yilmaz, Sezerel, and Uzuner 2020:3035) are social media consumers who have a social media following of 1,000 to 100,000 and an average of 25% to 50% engagement on their social media posts. This type of influencer usually functions well in niche markets and often has personal interaction with their followers and brands aiming to reach a wider audience work with micro-influencers often through professional collaborations. In comparison with nano-influencers, micro-influencers are more accomplished enough to make a career out of being an influencer. However, they are still smaller than macro-influencers in both scale and scope (Campbell and Pharell 2020:473). On the other hand, Park, Lee, Xiong, Septianto and Seo (2021:4) suggest that micro-influencers are more authentic and can build intimate relationships with consumers that macro and mega influencers can (Park, Lee, Xiong, Septianto and Seo 2021:4). Micro-influencers' audience is often more confined to a specific demographic area, and they are usually paid from occasional brand partnerships and affiliate-link programs (Campbell and Pharell 2020:473). For this reason, they are deemed to be more lucrative in terms of engagement and ability to mobilise a brand's promotional efforts to a more precise audience than macro-influencers can (Berne-Manero and Marzo-Navarro 2020: 5). According to Pornsrimate and Khamwon (2021: 20) four attributes that fit micro-influencers' description and provide favourable results being secret sharing, specific content, authenticity, and mean influencer. As a result, marketers are increasingly on the lookout for influencers such as these who are authentic, trustworthy, and connected to the needs and wants of consumers (Campbell and Pharell 2020:473).

## **MACRO-INFLUENCERS**

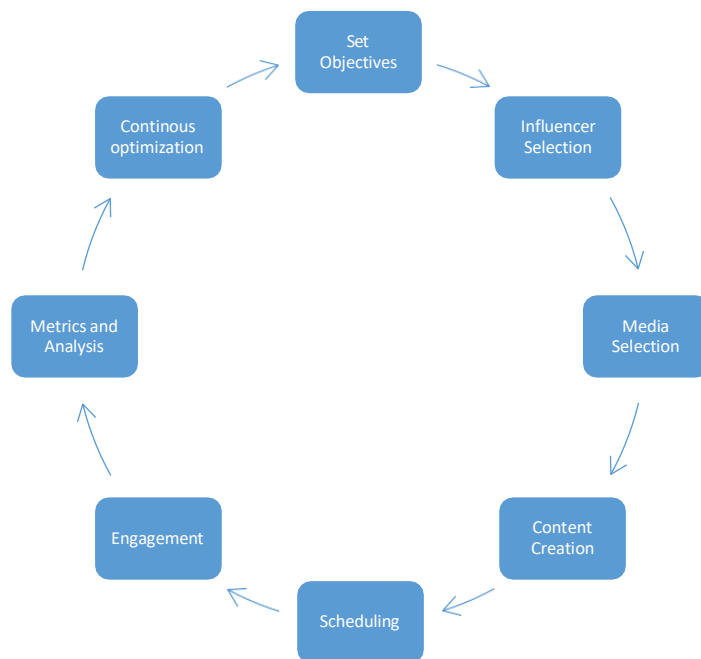
Macro-influencers followers range from 100,000 to 1 million which they acquire through their social media stardom (Ismail, 2018). They have higher popularity and relevance than micro-influencers due to their specificity in categories such as fashion, lifestyle, fitness, or business (Erwee 2021:10). Macro-influencers are regarded as key idea pioneers, innovators, or specialists in different categories they choose to focus on (Libunao, Martinez, Rodriguez, Castaño 2022:123). Given their level of influence, macro-influencers tend to have sufficient financial resources to obtain professional guidance to improve their social media posts' effectiveness. They often employ the services of copywriters to ensure that their social media content is properly focussed on the brand offering and engages the target audience well (Hung, Tse and Chan 2021:6). Consumers often consider macro-influencers as socially desirable and accessible which helps them to successfully generate consumer brand emotional ties while boosting influencers' popularity. This is because their friendliness and closeness with their followers translate to affective experience and emotional understanding which

are positive internal motivators towards consumer attitudes (Berne-Manero and Marzo-Navarro 2020:5). With this, they can achieve strong brand engagement rates and exploit their large number of followers to obtain significant brand exposure (Campbell and Pharell 2020:472). Hung et.al. (2021:6) further assert that their large following may attract diverse groups of followers with different interests. As a result, they are likely to hedge in continuous engagement through social media likes and subscriptions from their followers.

## **MEGA-INFLUENCERS**

Mega influencers are celebrities who have over one million followers and have an average of 2%–25% engagement rate per post (Yilmaz, Sezerel, and Uzuner 2020:3035). Mesarić and Gregurec (2020: 195) substantiate that mega influencers are the highest-ranked influencers with more than a million followers. They are often famous celebrities (sports stars, actors, or singers) who are known through other media. They are usually not considered an expert in a particular product domain, and the relationship they have with their followers is more detached and distant (Ouvrein, Pabian, Giles, Hudders, and De Backer 2021:1320). Although mega influencers are not necessarily experts in a specific topic, they follow different topics of interest, and have a diverse audience as well as a greater reach (Mesarić and Gregurec 2020:195). Because of their popularity, their audience is considered a fan base. Hence their popularity is sustained by managing fans through continuous interaction and communication. They also carefully curate how they present themselves to their audience to create a sociable brand (Jin and Muqaddam 2021:178). However, this does not necessitate that consumers will engage with their social media content be it by sharing it, commenting, or retweeting. This is because of the idea that influencers with a high number of followers take away the uniqueness of the product. As a result, consumers may not engage with mega influencers (Pornsrimate and Khamwon 2021:20).

## 2.7 INFLUENCER MARKETING STRATEGY



**Figure 4: Influencer Marketing Strategy**

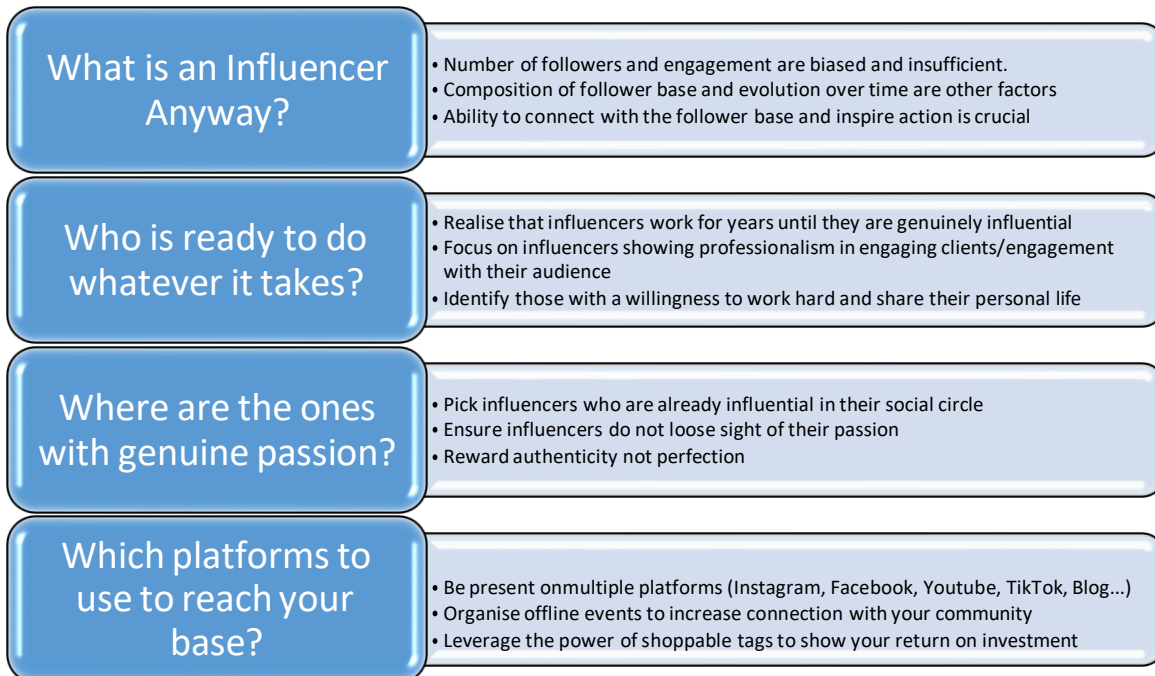
### 2.7.1 Setting Objectives

The first step in an influencer marketing campaign should serve to define the objectives of the campaign and target audience that must be consistent with the company's brand strategy. It should also attend to define the role of digital influencers and the resources available for the campaign. This first step will serve as a strategic basis for the following decisions, regarding both the selection of digital influencers and the nature and duration of the relationship. The most recurrent goals associated with influencer marketing are the following: creating or increasing awareness, increasing sales, and creating user-generated content. The launch of new products is also a very recurrent scenario in which marketers use influencer marketing campaigns (Santiago and Castelo 2020:36)

### 2.7.2 Influencer Selection

One of the significant tasks of marketers in influencer marketing is to identify and invite influencers to endorse brands or products through their social media networks. This is often a daunting task for marketers as finding suitable influencers who will have a strong positive influence on the brand's target market to consume their products is challenging (De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders 2017:802). Haenlein, Anadol, Farnsworth, Hugo, Hunichen and Welte (2020:16) maintain that one of the most important decisions in influencer marketing is finding the right influencers to work with. These are people who can create content that matches your brand's objectives. While choosing the suitable communication channel to reach your audience is important in all types of advertising, it's

especially crucial in influencer marketing because of the engagement that influencers have with their audience. The following are the four questions marketers should ask to choose the right influencers.



**Figure 5: Choosing the right influencer**

Source: Haenlein et.al. 2020:16

To identify influencers who will have a great impact on the brand's image, marketers need to first understand their target audience and explore the type of topics, content and social media platforms that will generate great engagement. Thereafter assess the demography of potential influencers' followers, and evaluate influencer's reach, number of followers, and engagement in terms of content views, likes, shares and comments. Influencers' brand experience, performance of past campaigns, frequency of content sharing as well as social media activity must be examined (Mesaric and Gregurec 2020:194).

Huang, Chen, Wang, and Ren (2020:2) denote that there is a plethora of approaches that can be used in identifying influencers through information influence such as link typology ranking measures, node embedding measures, entropy measures and centrality measures. According to Harrigan, Daly, Coussementulie, Lee, Soutar, and Evers (2021:2) managers do not necessarily need to conduct primary research as they can use big social data to identify influencers from all other social media users. Big social data can effectively and efficiently identify influencers from publicly accessible metrics through varied, rapidly expanding, and substantial data shared by consumers online. Node attributes based on the analogy of location, demographic characteristics or group memberships can also be used to identify influencers. On the other hand, action-based factors such

as continuous information exchange like chatting make it possible for social network analysis (SNA) to map interconnections among role players in social media through statistics with the intention to explain the occurrence and consequences of these interactions as well as understanding the structure of those relationships (Bethu, Sowmya, Babu, Babu, Kumar 2018:216). Jassen, Schouten and Croes (2021:102) assert that the most important thing to consider when identifying influencers is finding influencers whose characteristics match those of a brand although this notion may be more important for brands offering specific types of brands.

### **2.7.3 Media Selection**

The choice of communication media varies among digital influencers, and consequently, the strategies for executing influencer marketing campaigns differ based on the preferred social networking platform (Santiago and Castelo 2020:37). Balaji (2021:294) notes that consumers frequently use social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to search for and exchange information. It is at this point that influencers engage with their audience by sharing insights into their daily lives, their interactions with brands and products, and their opinions on current events or marketing campaigns via SNS platforms like YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram (Dinh and Lee 2021:2044). According to Audrezet, Kerviler, and Moulard (2020:557), influencers use a variety of channels such as personal blogs, Instagram, Pinterest, and Facebook to communicate their thoughts, educate their network, demonstrate their subject-matter competence, and express their passions social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube have unique architecture, norms, and culture (Khan 2017:237). In contrast to the demand for knowledge in a social media content community, a social networking site is also more focused on friends. Although users also contribute images, videos, and other types of material, services like YouTube and Flickr are categorised as social media content communities because of their lower disclosure and prominence (Du Plessis 2017:2).

On these abovementioned platforms, informational posts about brands, products, services, businesses, and other marketing initiatives are frequently posted. When these ideas are applied to consuming communities, information and entertainment are viewed as motivating factors that affect people's use of social media. While entertainment content that is viewed as entertaining, interesting, or cool may draw internet users, educational content would urge people to interact or consume the content. Because of this, it is suggested that entertainment and instructional content may affect online engagement. postings with incentives that are meant to encourage consumption, like discounts, sales, or other special deals, may draw the attention of social network users (Le 2017: 166). Users might therefore tend to regard these platforms differently in terms of their distinctive affordances and how influencers engage with them (Khan 2017:237).

## Facebook:

According to Muangmee (2021), Facebook is a hugely popular social network with more than 2.6 billion active users in early 2020, making it the largest in the world. This large user base provides an excellent opportunity for businesses to connect with a broad audience. Facebook is a valuable platform for generating leads, fostering long-lasting customer engagement, and boosting sales, regardless of the industry. In addition to its vast user base, Facebook is known for its accessibility and user-friendly features like profiles, fan pages, events, groups, marketplaces, and ads. It caters to a diverse range of users, including individuals, brands, and app developers (Hsu 2012). With over 655 million daily users, Facebook is the most widely used social media platform for sharing thoughts and opinions. The data on Facebook can offer valuable insights into user behavior, as their actions are visible to friends in the news feed (Lang and Yang 2016). Lai and Yang (2016) identified six reasons people use Facebook, including friendship, passing time, maintaining relationships, community building, entertainment, and trend-following. They also found three factors that motivate users: entertainment, social engagement, and relaxation. Additionally, four factors influence the use of social networking sites: coordination, immediate access, attachment, and leisure. The "likes" on Facebook, which represents others' opinions, can influence potential customers by serving as social proof (Lang and Yang 2016). This influence is particularly strong because real individuals, including friends and acquaintances, often like, comment, and share content (Bhattacharyya and Bose 2020).

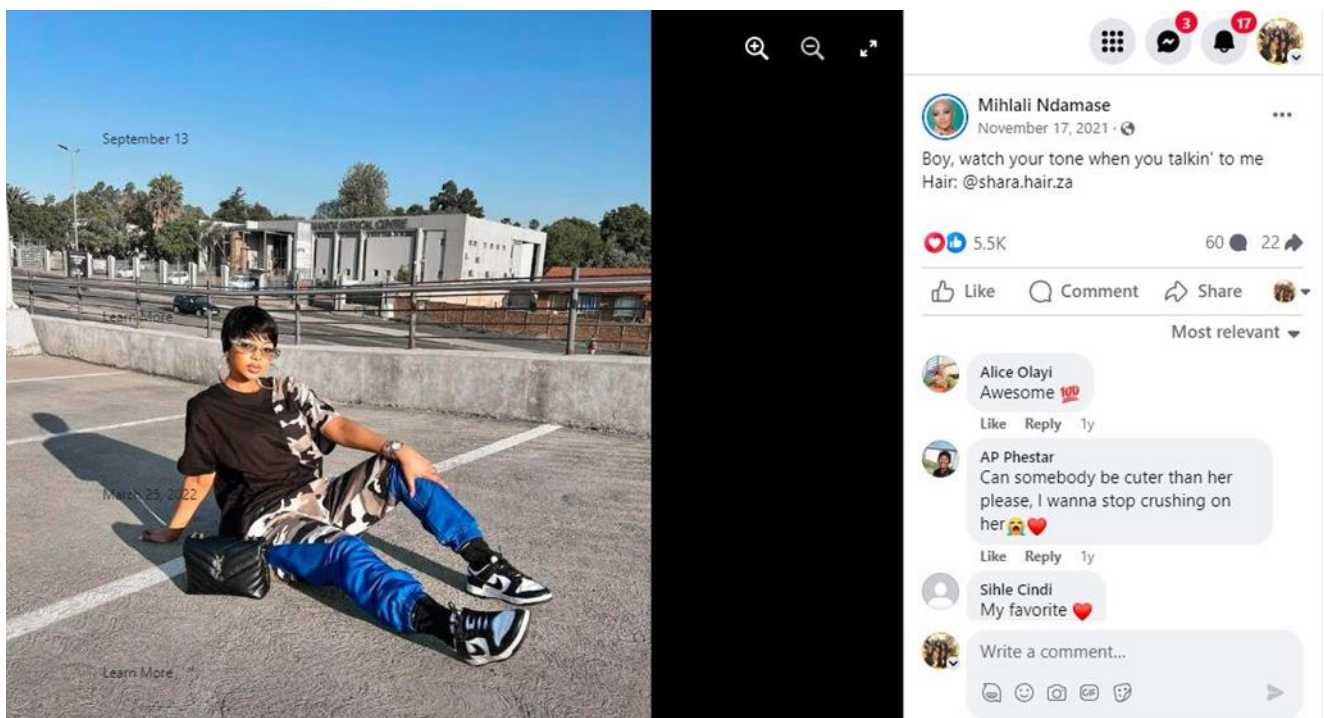


Figure 6: Facebook

Facebook is a highly versatile platform, especially for mobile web users, thanks to apps like Facebook Messenger. It serves various personal and business purposes, and businesses find it hard to ignore its marketing potential. Facebook advertising stands out due to its user-friendly, customizable, and highly targeted approach (Muangmee 2021). Several studies that explored the impact of different types of Facebook posts on engagement and reach concluded that photo posts tend to generate more likes, shares, and comments compared to the average post, while link posts result in higher conversion rates, particularly in terms of website click-throughs. Photo posts also offer a wider reach and drive more website visitors, whereas link posts have a lower reach but a higher click rate (Quesenberry and Coolson 2019). On the topic of news engagement on Facebook, users can express their feelings and opinions using six reactive emojis: "like," "love," "wow," "haha," "sad," and "angry." Among these, the "like" emoji is the most popular and often used for positive feedback or to connect with topics of interest, followed by "love" and "angry." "Sad" and "angry" emojis are associated with more emotional responses, especially in reaction to posts about unfortunate events and disasters (Guo and Sun 2020).

## **Instagram**

According to Jin, Muqaddam, and Ryu (2018), Instagram is a platform that focuses on making things look beautiful and sharing filtered pictures. It's a great place for promoting beauty products, showing off specific body ideals, and displaying luxurious lifestyles and famous luxury brands. Instagram also makes it easy for users to connect with brands and organizations, helping them gather followers and make connections. Instagram is all about people sharing digital photos, and it's great for connecting folks who have a similar interest in sharing photos, especially when they use hashtags. On Instagram, users can interact with the photo's others share by liking, sharing, and leaving comments. Additionally, Instagram offers a range of features like sharing photos, editing them, and adding location info, captions, tags, and comments (Filleri, Yen, and Yu 2022). The main idea behind Instagram is to let users share photos and videos, which they can find by using hashtags (#). While both Instagram and Facebook let people share photos, Instagram stands out by providing special filters that let users change the colors and quality of their pictures before posting (Sheldon and Bryant 2016). Instagram is designed mainly for mobile devices and lets people share images and videos with their friends and followers. It's seen incredible growth in the world of social media, with over 25 million active business accounts, even surpassing well-known platforms like Facebook and Twitter (Jones and Lee 2021). Belanche, Flavián, and Ibáñez-Sánchez (2020) say Instagram is the fastest-growing social network and is known for its focus on visuals, which empowers consumers, brands, and influencers to create profiles. Recently, Instagram has been working on improving how it looks and how users experience it by adding features like Stories and Instagram TV.



**Figure 7: Instagram**

Instagram stands out as one of the most significant and innovative developments in social media. In August 2016, Instagram introduced 'stories,' a feature that lets users share photos, live streams, and short videos that disappear after 24 hours. Instagram has become a kind of alternate reality where whatever is happening in the world finds a reflection on Instagram (Herzallah, Muñoz-Leiva, and Liébana-Cabanillas 2022). Typical Instagram influencers target specific groups of people, acting as both relatable peers and almost like celebrities. They often manage everyday tasks like parenting and homemaking while amassing a celebrity-like following and receiving numerous "likes" (Lowe-Calverley and Grieve 2021). In this visually focused environment, creating engaging content depends on being creative and original. Instagram influencer marketing is known for its effectiveness as an advertising channel, mainly because it fosters social connections. Image-based social media platforms, including Instagram, have the potential to create a social presence, making users feel like they're interacting with real people rather than just objects. Additionally, using Instagram for interaction and browsing has been linked to reduced feelings of loneliness, suggesting that it can enhance psychological well-being (Mackson, Brochu, and Schneider 2019).

Instagram has become a powerful platform for self-expression, particularly among Generation Y. It's a place where users share digital photos to gain popularity and showcase their personalities, lifestyles, and preferences, driven by five main social and psychological motives: social interaction, archiving, self-expression, escapism, and curiosity. Instagram reflects a visual culture, emphasizing the importance of images in creating and conveying meaning (Filleri et al. 2022). Recently, Instagram has enhanced its chat features to compete with other social networks, allowing users to share photos, audio, GIFs, short stories, and make video calls. These new features include posts, filters, hashtags, superzoom and boomerang visual effects, as well as live streaming. Instagram stories offer new ways for businesses to connect with customers and promote their products and services through dynamic, full-screen, short-lived interactive ads with high impact. Instagram has also influenced how consumers engage with media. Users can watch and like videos and photos from other users, as well as ads from commercial brands. Consequently, companies should focus on posting eye-catching photos to capture users' attention as they scroll through their feeds. Making a strong first impression is crucial in Instagram advertising and key to engaging users (Herzallah et al. 2022). The explosive growth of Instagram, with over 300 million active monthly users, has surpassed text-based platforms like Twitter, which has 284 million users. This highlights the idea that images convey information more effectively than words (Sung, Lee, Kim, and Choi 2016).

## **Twitter**

Twitter is a form of social media designed to give everyone the ability to swiftly and boundlessly create and share ideas and information (Chen 2015). It's a free online service that enables users to post 140-character messages, known as "tweets." Whenever a Twitter user posts a new tweet, all of their registered "followers" receive a notification. With 190 million daily unique visitors and a user base that has expanded by over half a billion since its inception in 2006, Twitter has experienced remarkable growth. One unique aspect of Twitter is its constraint on tweet length, limited to 140 characters, classifying it as a "limited length" communication platform (Isari, Pontiggia, and Virili 2016). Tweets can be dispatched directly to followers over the Internet or through Short Message Services (SMS), and they are also displayed on a user's profile page. The original query, "What are you doing now?" perfectly encapsulates Twitter's initial purpose when it launched in 2006 as a mobile status update service. However, over time, people began to use Twitter for sharing much more than just status updates (Isari, Pontiggia, and Virili 2016).

Compared to other social media platforms, Twitter is considered a more favorable choice for micro-celebrities seeking self-promotion. This is because Twitter users can freely follow others to increase their own followers. Moreover, the use of hashtags allows individuals to express themselves openly, even without a large following, as their messages can still be disseminated effectively. Current events

and trending discussions are more prominently featured on Twitter, making it an attractive option (Khan and Ahmad 2021). Twitter is widely used as a cost-effective platform for sharing information rather than for personal interactions. It is commonly employed to broadcast information about important events, festivals, and other local activities. Twitter has broadened its scope to encompass a wider range of topics. More recently, destination marketing organizations (DMOs) have harnessed the social power of Twitter to build relationships, gain influence, and enhance brand visibility (Bokunewicz and Shulman 2017).



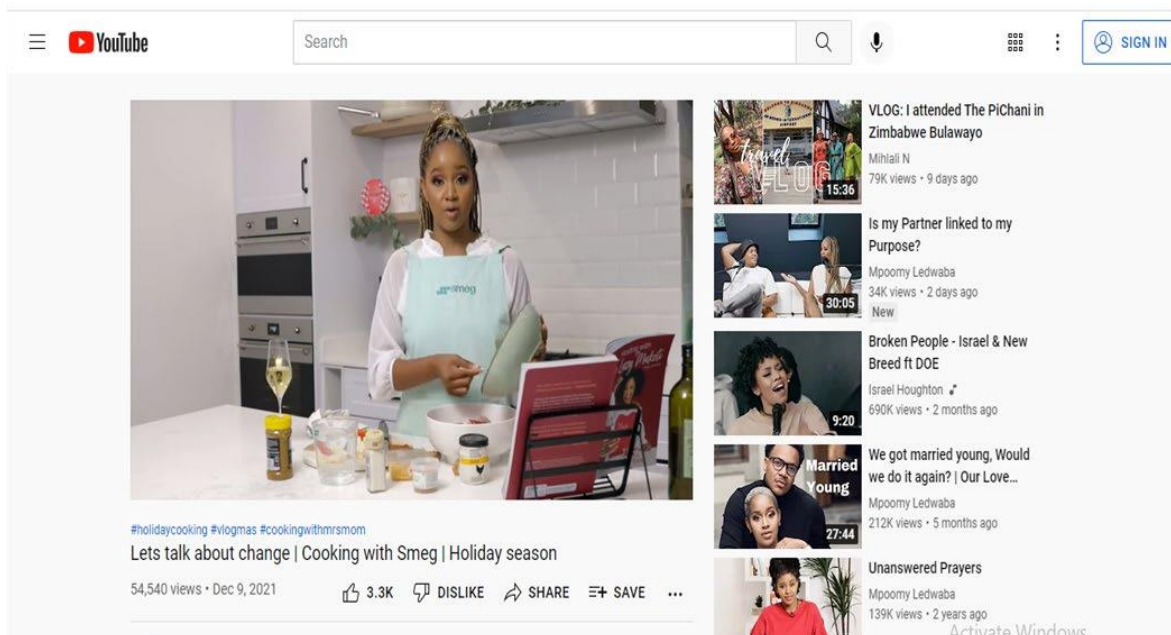
**Figure 8: Twitter**

As previously mentioned, interaction plays a crucial role on Twitter. Users can "retweet" or share other users' messages with their own followers, and they can engage in conversations by mentioning or replying to another user using the "@" symbol followed by a username. Conversations on Twitter tend to be informal, with the use of hashtags to categorize and discover messages related to specific

topics of interest. Twitter is particularly well-suited for brands aiming to establish connections with key stakeholders, even though its primary function is information dissemination (Taecharungroj 2021). Twitter distinguishes itself from traditional social networking sites like Facebook and LinkedIn in three significant ways. First, users on Twitter have "followers" instead of "friends," meaning that Twitter users may or may not be acquainted with the individuals they are following or those following them. Second, connections on Twitter are content-driven rather than relationship-based, as users follow others based on the content of their tweets, not necessarily due to personal or professional relationships. Finally, all Twitter content (tweets) is public, searchable, shareable, and spreads rapidly (Chen 2015). Twitter is characterized as open, real-time, user-friendly, cost-effective, and versatile (Taecharungroj 2017). In contrast to popular social media platforms like Facebook, there is not a unanimous consensus among experts regarding the utility of Twitter for marketing. Some have even suggested that Twitter was more of a trend than a genuinely valuable tool (Jiang and Erdem 2017).

## **YouTube**

YouTube is a popular platform for watching videos and has been in operation since 2005. It ranks as the third most visited website globally, following Google and Facebook. YouTube offers a diverse and global range of content, making it a powerful tool for reaching a broad audience of site visitors (Khan 2016: 236). This makes it a major platform for influencer marketing, where people can watch others' videos or upload their own content. It allows people to interact while watching videos. Unlike other social media platforms, YouTube gives influencers the opportunity to create and share videos that provide detailed insights into their daily lives. YouTube influencers create how-to videos, recommend popular videos, and follow other influencers for trends (Ackgoz and Burnaz 2021: 204). YouTube is very instrumental for marketers in establishing authority, building credibility, and creating a brand community through the use of branded content (Wang and Chan-Olmsted 2020: 295). Social media influencers, including YouTubers, foster connections with their followers by addressing them directly and using a conversational style (Reinikainen, Munnukka, Maity, and Luoma-aho 2020: 281). Marketing and advertising messages are frequently delivered by individuals known as YouTube influencers. These influencers are individuals who create and upload videos on the platform and have a dedicated following that regularly watches their content. In contrast, professional video uploaders, such as a brand's official YouTube channel, are not considered influencers. When YouTube influencers gain fame due to their unique personalities or content, their influence can extend beyond the YouTube platform itself (Xiao, Wang, and Chan-Olmsted 2018: 189).



**Figure 9: YouTube**

On YouTube, individuals who share video logs (vlogs) are known as YouTubers. They produce a wide variety of content that has a significant influence on internet communities. They establish strong connections with their peers and with companies that use their videos to develop new marketing strategies. Many YouTubers create videos to teach viewers how to use various products, from cosmetics to food and even toys. Others aim to entertain their followers. However, in some cases, they indirectly or directly promote brands, such as YouTuber gamers who record their performances in video games. This allows viewers to learn about products, their uses, benefits, and the intended audience. Viewers can interact with YouTubers, ask questions about advertised brands, propose experiments, and connect with other consumers to exchange ideas and information about products. This interaction positively affects brand recognition and purchase intentions, whether brands are subtly or intentionally featured in YouTube videos (Correa et al. 2020:173). As a result, the platform is a valuable resource for learning from "How-to" videos and for sharing and watching music videos (Khan 2017:237). It allows users to upload and share videos on various topics, and it includes features for interacting with content and other users. Users can review, rate, and comment on videos to express their opinions or respond to the content. The comment section has evolved into a platform for various forms of communication, including self-expression, emotional support, reminiscence, mourning, advice, and direct feedback on videos (Madden, Ruthven, and McMenemy 2012:693). These user comments serve a social purpose on YouTube, enabling interactions between viewers and channel hosts, potentially influencing people's opinions (Xiao, Wang, and Chan-Olmsted 2018: 193). The perceived credibility of video content posted by YouTube influencers is a significant factor contributing to the growth of influencer marketing on the platform (Xiao, Wang, Chan-Olmsted 2018: 189).

## TikTok

TikTok is now widely used as a marketing tool because it offers unique and captivating effects. It stands out due to its precise targeting, ensuring that the right users are reached. Unlike some other social media platforms, TikTok users spend an average of 13.8 hours per month on the app. The majority of TikTok users belong to the millennial and Gen Z demographic, and a significant 90% of them visit the app multiple times a day (Meliawati, Gerald, and Aruman 2023:78). Instagram and TikTok are particularly significant for influencer marketing due to their youthful user base, making them appealing for this type of marketing communication. Although they are smaller than more established platforms like Facebook, their growth prospects are promising. TikTok's engagement increased dramatically between 2017 and 2019, and the combined user base of TikTok and Instagram approaches two billion. Additionally, Instagram and TikTok offer content format rich in images and videos, which is more suitable for influencer marketing compared to text-based platforms like Twitter. Moreover, their entertainment focus makes it relatively easier for influencers to build a substantial follower base, even among users they have never met in person (Haenlein, Anadol, Farnsworth, Hugo, Hunichen, and Welte 2020:10).

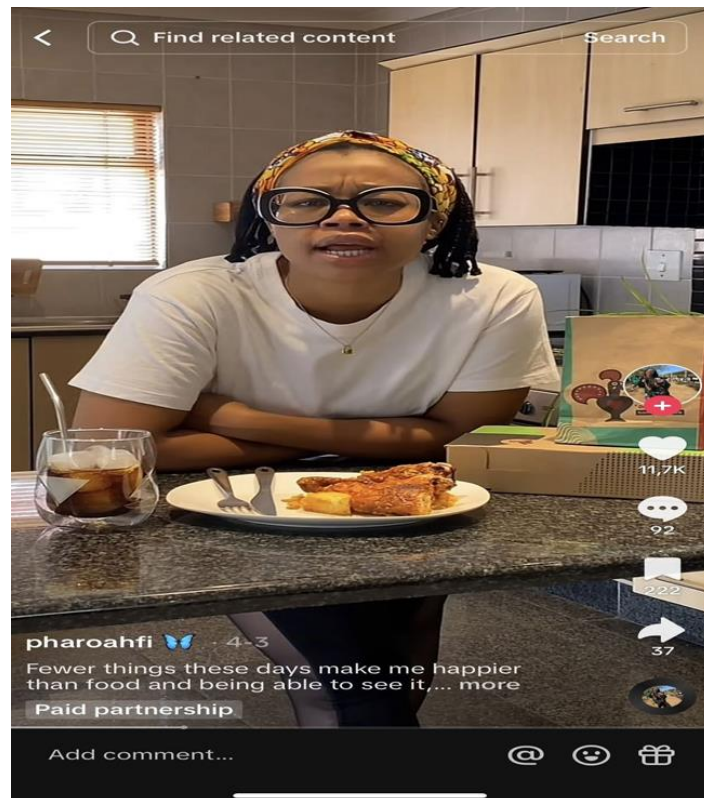


Figure 10: TikTok

TikTok offers a variety of built-in features for content creation, including animation and special effects. However, the most crucial feature is sound, which can encompass voices, movie dialogues, or songs. This sound features functions similarly to hashtags. By tapping the "Discover" button on TikTok, users can explore trending sounds on the platform. Clicking on any sound link reveals all content using that particular sound. Moreover, users can tap the circular black music button on the bottom right of a post to discover all content associated with the sound. Notably, TikTok videos are currently limited to a maximum length of 10 minutes, in contrast to YouTube, which allows almost unlimited video length (Wahid, Karjaluo, Taiminen, and Asiati 2023:108). TikTok users can utilize a range of templates, filters, visual effects, and a built-in music library to craft short videos.

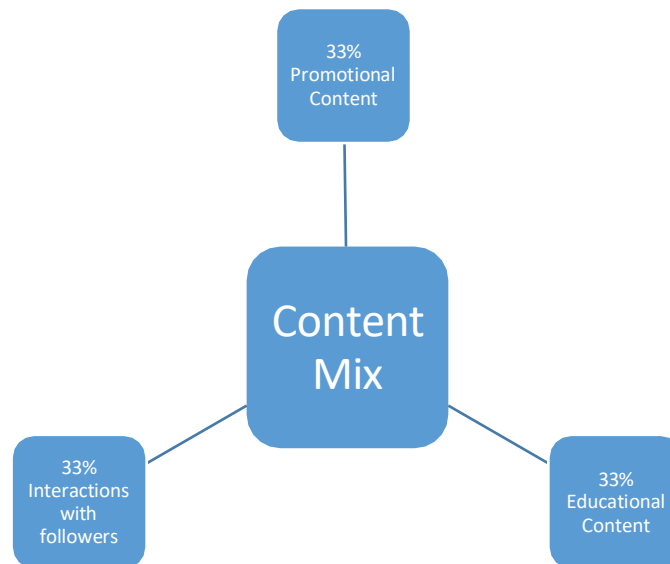
The most popular video genres include lip-syncing, dancing, and comedic skits set to 15-second music clips. TikTok is progressively evolving into a more commercialized social media platform, allowing users to generate income through in-app purchases, and receiving paid reactions or gifts in response to their videos (Su, Baker, Doyle, and Yan 2020:437). However, the response of followers to influencer marketing on TikTok may differ from responses on other social networks due to variations in publication format, content, and target audience. The primary use of short informal videos, humor to entertain followers, and the focus on a youthful audience suggest that the peripheral route of persuasion, based on emotional cues, could be especially effective on TikTok (Barta, Belanche, Fernandez, and Flavian 2023:2).

**Table 2: Summary of Social Media Platform Characteristics**

| Platform                | Facebook    | Twitter (X) | YouTube     | Instagram   | TikTok            |
|-------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------------|
| <b>Features</b>         |             |             |             |             |                   |
| Userbase                | 2.8 Billion | 192 Million | 2.3 Billion | 1.4 Billion | 1 Billion         |
| Accessibility           | Global      | Global      | Global      | Global      | Global            |
| Influence               | High        | Moderate    | High        | High        | Rapidly Growing   |
| User Demographic        | Diverse     | Diverse     | Diverse     | Younger     | Younger           |
| Commercialisation       | High        | Moderate    | High        | High        | Emerging          |
| <b>Unique features</b>  |             |             |             |             |                   |
| General features        | Newsfeed    | Tweets      | Videos      | Images      | Short-form videos |
| Engagement features     | Likes       | Retweets    | Likes       | Likes       | Likes, Shares     |
| <b>Purpose</b>          |             |             |             |             |                   |
| Value                   | Social      | News        | Content     | Visuals     | Entertainment     |
| Long-term relationships | Yes         | No          | Yes         | Yes         | Emerging          |

### 2.7.4 Content Creation

Content creation involves coming up with ideas and writing relevant pieces of content, then publishing them in various forms. It's crucial to create content that educates your readers. When consumers find your content valuable and informative, they may start to trust your brand and build a long-term relationship with your company (Herrity 2023:2).



**Figure 11: Social Media Rule of Thirds**

According to Newberry and Cohen (2023:3) the rule of thirds in social media proposes that approximately one-third of brand content should be dedicated to promoting the brand or encouraging conversions. Another third should focus on sharing curated educational material from respected industry experts, while the final one-third of brand social media posts should revolve around engaging in personal interactions with the target audience. In contrast to advertising, which aims to persuade consumers to buy specific products, social media content is focused on enhancing customers' appreciation of the brand. It does this by adding value to their lives, like educating them about the brand (Hollebeck and Macky 2019:28). Consumers' exposure to and interaction with branded content require them to learn and apply their learning skills. This aligns with Bandura's social learning theory (Lou, Xie, Feng, Kim 2019:775). Content is what users come to social media platforms for - to read, learn, see, or experience. It helps embed the brand in the hearts and minds of potential customers, current customers, and others. This highlights the importance of content being relevant to its audience. In publishing, content includes information, words, images, graphics, and more, all of which convey the brand's story to capture and hold the audience's attention. So, while a social media influencer, like other marketing communications, tells a specific product- or brand-related story, they do it with the intention of fostering long-term consumer engagement, trust,

and relationships (Hollebeck and Macky 2019:29).

Previous research has shown that consumer engagement with brands online is primarily influenced by the functional, emotional, and social values associated with a product or the content related to it (Kitirattakarn, et al. 2019: 198). Emotional appeals, in particular, focus on addressing viewers' psychological and social needs by evoking emotions related to the brand or product. These appeals aim to generate either negative or positive emotions that can motivate consumers to make a purchase. They often emphasize the brand's personality through entertaining content, such as interesting facts, emotional elements, emoticons, references to holidays, humor, teasers, slogans, and wordplay. Such content is categorized as an emotional appeal because its goal is to evoke positive emotions and create a warm connection. Furthermore, emotional appeals can also foster social interaction among fans through "relational content." This involves posing questions, initiating discussions, and engaging in small talk or banter with followers. This type of relational content caters to the psychological and social needs of followers by facilitating social interaction, building a sense of community, and encouraging engagement within the community through member participation (Dolan, Conduit, Frethey-Bentham, Fahy, and Goodman 2019:2220). Thus, Kitirattakarn et al. (2019:198) suggest that brand-related content that is informative, useful, and entertaining has been shown to impact consumers' emotional responses and their intention to use the product or engage with the brand.

Moreover, Syrdal and Briggs (2018:6) emphasise that as consumers engage with brand-related content on Social Networking Sites (SNSs) mainly for social interaction, support, and projecting a favourable image of themselves, incorporating interactive and collaborative elements in the content appears to help individuals shape their social identity and cultivate social connections within their network because social media users may have a variety of motivations for consuming branded content beyond merely feeling "connected" to the brand. For example, a consumer might read a brand's social media post because the information it contains fulfils a practical need. In this case, it's not the brand itself that draws the user to the content; it's the information within the content. Nevertheless, Wang and Chan-Olmsted (2020:296) suggest that their six content categories and their subdimensions, including information (covering product-related, value-related, and brand-related aspects) and calls to action (encompassing calls for engagement and participation in competitions), may not be sufficient to drive consumer engagement. Calls to action, in particular, have a limited impact. Instead, content characteristics geared toward persuasion, such as relevance, message clarity, and advertising tone, tend to be more effective. Generally, content that offers entertainment and includes images tends to generate higher engagement. This is why companies frequently provide content guidelines that outline the campaign's goals, key messages, and expected outcomes to influencers. However, companies also grant influencers a significant degree of creative freedom to craft content in line with their personal brand positioning, ensuring it resonates with their

followers (Leung, et al. 2022:228). As digital spending continues to rise, social media content targeted at consumers continues to grow (Godan, Conduit, Frethey-Bentham, Fahy, Goodman 2019: 2214). To execute a successful influencer marketing strategy, Marting (2022:2) recommends a series of steps to follow, highlighting the critical importance of pre-planning content. This goes beyond the simple tasks of selecting a photo, crafting a caption, and scheduling the post. The steps are as follows:

1. Plan content themes.
2. Generate ideas for campaigns and posts.
3. Determine posting schedules.
4. Decide on the content mix.
5. Assign responsibilities.
6. Write post captions.
7. Create or source design assets.
8. Schedule content in advance.

### **2.7.5 Scheduling**

At its core, the timing and content of your marketing efforts are influenced by the specific characteristics of your target audience, which are closely tied to the nature of the product or service you aim to promote. These factors are also influenced by the observed behaviour of your potential customers, as it's essential to market products or share sponsored content when your audience is available and more likely to engage with your brand. Without a thorough understanding of your customers' behaviour, you might end up displaying ads at times when your target demographic is preoccupied with work, study, or activities unrelated to shopping (Inman 2023:2). Scheduling posts plays a vital role in an influencer marketing strategy. Recent studies suggest that the timing of a post can influence how engaged users become. To enhance the likelihood of receiving more likes and shares on a post, it is recommended that influencers schedule their content for the afternoon (Shahbaznezhad et al., 2021:56). However, Kelley, Jugenheimer, and Sheehan (2015:67) add that the timing of your advertising can be important because consumers may be more receptive to messages at certain times. They suggest dividing the day into morning, afternoon, evening, and night, known as "dayparts." Most social media content is posted in the morning, afternoon, and evening dayparts (Kanuri et al. 2018:91).

On the other hand, showing ads when your target audience is actively looking to engage with brands and make specific purchasing decisions can boost engagement and increase the chances of repeat

visits in the short term. It's important to note that consumers exhibit different behaviours at different times of the day, depending on whether they're working, relaxing, or involved in online or offline social activities (Inman 2023:2). Additionally, an individual's cognitive abilities, particularly their working memory, have a significant impact on their psychological state. Research has shown that having more working memory available in the morning can make consumers more alert but less creative and innovative. These fluctuations in working memory availability throughout the day create cycles, known as circadian rhythms, which can influence how people perceive things, make judgments, and form preferences (Kanuri, Chen, and Sridhar 2018:91). Kelley et al. (2015:64) highlight that the content of your message is a vital determinant in selecting the optimal timing for marketing communications. They propose a three-fold framework to discern when consumers are most inclined to engage with brands concerning their purchase decisions:

- Pre-need: This involves timing your communication to coincide with the customary period when a consumer anticipates making a purchase of the brand.
- At-need: This pertains to aligning your communication with the specific moment when the consumer requires the brand.
- Post-need: In this context, timing your communication to occur after a consumer has already made a purchase of the brand.

On the other hand, consistency in social media is absolutely necessary. It builds engagement, keeps your audience entertained and informed, and helps maintain your presence in social media's algorithm. That is why scheduling influencers' posts is vital to a well-functioning page on Instagram. It helps maintain consistency but also allows influencers to plan and set up future posts when you have the time, so an upload opportunity is never missed. Scheduling posts is also a stellar way to fight off the unpredictable moments in life (Kiwinski 2023:2). Scheduling can be done using A social media calendar, which is a strategic, hyper-detailed plan of upcoming posts for all your social channels organized by publish date and time. Along with the publish date and time for posts, your social media calendar can also include links, tags, @-mentions, copy and media, such as images and video. Influencers use a digital calendar, spreadsheet or a social media management platform like Sprout that offers an interactive dashboard and the ability to schedule posts (Kenan 2023:2). Most of the time, the calendar is transferred to a flowchart, which shows the patterns of advertising along with the levels of advertising, all on a sheet or slide that incorporates the proposed advertising schedule, advertising weights, and respective target audiences for the entire campaign period.

| <div>  December 2019 Social Media Content Calendar </div> |                                         |                        |                              |                 |               |                  |                |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------|---------------|------------------|----------------|
|                                                                                                                                            | Sunday                                  | Monday                 | Tuesday                      | Wednesday       | Thursday      | Friday           | Saturday       |
| 1                                                                                                                                          | 2                                       | 3                      | 4                            | 5               | 6             | 7                |                |
| Facebook                                                                                                                                   | Multivitamin Enhancer                   | APP FOMO: Cyber Monday |                              | Gift Card Promo |               | \$5 Friday       |                |
| Instagram                                                                                                                                  | Multivitamin Enhancer                   | APP FOMO: Cyber Monday |                              | Gift Card Promo |               | \$5 Friday       |                |
| Twitter                                                                                                                                    | Multivitamin Enhancer                   | APP FOMO: Cyber Monday |                              | Gift Card Promo |               | \$5 Friday       |                |
| Instagram Story                                                                                                                            |                                         |                        |                              |                 | Story (Poll)  |                  |                |
| 8                                                                                                                                          | 9                                       | 10                     | 11                           | 12              | 13            | 14               |                |
| Facebook                                                                                                                                   | Rule The Day                            | Gift Card UGC          |                              | Holiday Hack    | Smoothie Baby | Holiday Giveaway | Clean Blends   |
| Instagram                                                                                                                                  | Rule The Day                            | Gift Card UGC          |                              | Holiday Hack    | Smoothie Baby | Holiday Giveaway | Clean Blends   |
| Twitter                                                                                                                                    | Rule The Day                            | Gift Card UGC          |                              | Holiday Hack    | Smoothie Baby | Holiday Giveaway | Clean Blends   |
| Instagram Story                                                                                                                            |                                         |                        |                              |                 |               |                  |                |
| 15                                                                                                                                         | 16                                      | 17                     | 18                           | 19              | 20            | 21               |                |
| Facebook                                                                                                                                   | National Chocolate Covered Anything Day |                        |                              | Dog Post        |               | \$5 Friday       | Keto Chocolate |
| Instagram                                                                                                                                  | SoT Chocolate Strawberry                |                        |                              | Dog Post        |               | \$5 Friday       | Keto Chocolate |
| Twitter                                                                                                                                    | SoT Chocolate Strawberry                |                        |                              | Dog Post        |               | \$5 Friday       | Keto Chocolate |
| Instagram Story                                                                                                                            |                                         |                        |                              |                 | Story (Quiz)  |                  |                |
| 22                                                                                                                                         | 23                                      | 24                     | 25                           | 26              | 27            | 28               |                |
| Facebook                                                                                                                                   |                                         | BOGO                   | Christmas Eve                | Christmas       |               | Holiday Hangover |                |
| Instagram                                                                                                                                  |                                         | BOGO                   |                              | Happy Holidays  |               | Holiday Hangover |                |
| Twitter                                                                                                                                    |                                         | BOGO                   |                              | Happy Holidays  |               | Holiday Hangover |                |
| Instagram Story                                                                                                                            |                                         |                        |                              |                 |               |                  |                |
| 29                                                                                                                                         | 30                                      | 31                     | 1                            | 2               | 3             | 4                |                |
| Facebook                                                                                                                                   | Tease High Intensity Blends             |                        | New Year's Eve               |                 |               |                  |                |
| Instagram                                                                                                                                  | Tease High Intensity Blends             |                        | Launch High Intensity Blends |                 |               |                  |                |
| Twitter                                                                                                                                    | Tease High Intensity Blends             |                        | Launch High Intensity Blends |                 |               |                  |                |
| Instagram Story                                                                                                                            |                                         |                        |                              |                 |               |                  |                |

**Figure 12: Social Media Content Calendar**

Source: Hamilton 2023: 2

In addition to considering your marketing and advertising goals, your target audience, geographic focus, and scheduling priorities, it's crucial to factor in competition and the creative aspects of your brand's message when planning your advertising strategy (Kelley et.al. 2015:72). Newberry and Cohen (2023:3) recommend outlining the most crucial information and functions for a successful social calendar. This should begin with basic details such as platform, date, time (including time zone), copy, visuals (e.g., photo, video, illustration, infographic, gif, etc.), link to assets, and link to the published post, along with any tracking information. A well-structured content calendar outlines the specific timing and sequence of campaigns, projects, utilization, and monitoring. Additionally, it's essential to establish a timetable for content posts, ensuring consistent contributions across various social media channels. This schedule should be practical and provide organizations with guidance on which content is suitable, authentic, and written in a relatable "human voice" (Effing and Spil 2016:3). Lastly, Busch (2023:1) highlights the advantages of scheduling social media posts, including time-saving benefits, increased flexibility, and control, maintaining consistency across platforms, simplifying strategic content creation, enhancing tracking and analysis capabilities, and uncovering new audiences.

### **2.7.7 Engagement**

In marketing, engagement refers to the actions that demonstrate the connection between customers and brands, commonly known as customer engagement behavior. It is seen to encourage customer responses to create shared experiences. Customer engagement involves a voluntary commitment from customers in terms of their thoughts, feelings, actions, and social involvement in their interactions with brands. However, there is a lack of agreement in the marketing literature regarding the exact definition of customer engagement (Bu et al. 2022:4). On a related note, (Liu 2021:2219) defines brand engagement as the level of positive cognitive, emotional, and behavioral investment a person has in a brand. Based on this, brand engagement is generally considered to have three dimensions: cognitive, emotional, and behavioral. It represents a higher level of psychological and behavioral commitment to a brand or company, beyond just consumption.

In influencer marketing, engagement is explored from four perspectives including brand engagement, customer engagement, dimensions of engagement behavior, and the connection between engagement and value. The primary focus is on what motivates brand engagement, the factors within influencer advertising that affect brand engagement, and how brand engagement impacts the effectiveness of influencer marketing. Notably, attention is given to the personal and professional characteristics of influencers, the content they produce, the social media platforms they use, and their intentions behind campaigns (Bu et al. 2022:4). Thus, brand engagement serves as a strategic approach to foster and enhance customer relationships, ultimately leading to improved business performance. Previous studies indicate various benefits of brand engagement for companies, such as establishing long-term relationships with customers, increasing the frequency of product or service purchases, a willingness to pay premium prices, and a desire to collaborate and co-develop (Liu 2021:2219).

Moreover, Lim, Rasul, Kumar, and Ala (2022:440) highlight that engagement can take on various forms, primarily falling into categories of cognitive (e.g., concentration, self-regulation, strategizing), emotional (e.g., desire, enjoyment, interest), and behavioral (e.g., attendance and participation in brand-related activities in the marketplace; actions like, comment, and share on social media). User-generated content related to brands or products that consumers create voluntarily (referred to as brand-related user-generated content [Br-UGC]) has become a vital resource for others to assess products. It has been observed to shape consumers' perceptions of brands, influence their intention to discuss brand information, and even impact their intentions to make a purchase (Kitirattarkarn, Araujo, and Neijens 2019:197). In this context, the cognitive and emotional aspects of engagement can initially affect the behavioral aspect of engagement, and the experience of behavioral engagement can subsequently influence the cognitive and emotional aspects of engagement in an ongoing cycle, much like how an initial purchase influences subsequent purchases due to the customer's experience. The expression, internal process, and extent of engagement can be

influenced by factors that come before, moderate, and mediate, and these, in turn, have an impact on outcomes (Lim, et al. 2022:440). Building on these ideas, Roy, Balaji, Soutar, Lassar, and Roy (2018:282) propose the existence of four distinct types of customer engagement behaviors, as follows:

1. **Augmenting Customer Engagement Behaviours:** These behaviors occur when a customer's actions enhance a product or service offering. For instance, customers might generate content on social media platforms that support an organization's products or services.
2. **Co-developing Customer Engagement Behaviours:** These behaviors come into play when a customer's contributions assist in the development processes of a company. For example, customers might provide innovative ideas for new products or services.
3. **Influencing Customer Engagement Behaviours:** This type of engagement behavior occurs when a customer's contributions have an impact on other customers' perceptions or actions. For instance, customers might recommend a product or service, either online or offline, influencing the choices of other customers.
4. **Mobilizing Customer Engagement Behaviours:** These behaviours take place when a customer's actions motivate other stakeholders to engage with the organization. For example, customers might persuade other potential customers to purchase a particular product or service.

In the current era of engagement and participation, consumers have transitioned from being passive recipients of brand messages to actively engaging with brands. In simpler terms, consumers are now actively involved in both creating and consuming valuable products and services. Major global companies like Amazon, Google, and Facebook have recognized this shift and are investing resources in engagement efforts. This resource allocation is primarily driven by two key factors: engaged consumers tend to make more purchases from a brand compared to unengaged consumers, and engaged consumers also tend to promote the brand, resulting in increased brand loyalty (Obilo, Chefor, and Saleh 2021:635). Online platforms, particularly social media, offer numerous opportunities for internet users to share and generate content, including content related to brands (Muntinga, Moorman, and Smit 2011:13). Social media platforms naturally embody characteristics such as information sharing, interaction, connectivity, creativity, autonomy, collaboration, and reciprocity.

Moreover, brand communities not only serve as an additional communication channel but also offer a means to foster engagement with dedicated users (Jiao, Ertz, and Sarigollu 2017:21). Consequently, social media marketing strategies employed by brands encompass five key dimensions: entertainment, interaction, staying current with trends, personalization, and word-of-mouth recommendations. Social media influencers are harnessed to enhance the perceived value of a brand and boost revenues. Within the realm of social media, influencers play a pivotal role in creating brand value by cultivating communities of consumers who share a common enthusiasm for brands (Zollo, Filieri, Rialti, and Yoon 2020:257). To demonstrate consumer engagement with brand-related content, Muntinga et al. (2011:16) have developed a COBRA (Consumers' Online Brand-Related Activities) typology, which classifies consumer activities on social media platforms along a continuum of three usage types: consumption, contribution, and creation (Muntinga et al. 2011:16).

**Table 3: COBRA (Consumers' online brand-related activities) typology**

| COBRA type                             |              | Examples of brand-related social media use                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|----------------------------------------|--------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Level of brand related-activeness<br>↓ | Consuming    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Viewing brand-related video</li> <li>• Listening to brand-related audio</li> <li>• Watching brand-related pictures</li> <li>• Following threads on online brand community forums</li> <li>• Reading comments on brand profiles on social network sites</li> <li>• Reading product reviews</li> <li>• Playing branded online videogames</li> <li>• Downloading branded widgets</li> <li>• Sending branded virtual gifts/cards</li> </ul> |
|                                        | Contributing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rating products and/or brands</li> <li>• Joining a brand profile on a social network site</li> <li>• Engaging in branded conversations, e.g. on online brand community forums or social network sites</li> <li>• Commenting on brand-related weblogs, video, audio, pictures, etc.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                           |
|                                        | Creating     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Publishing a brand-related weblog</li> <li>• Uploading brand-related video, audio, pictures or images</li> <li>• Writing brand-related articles</li> <li>• Writing product reviews</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |

Source: Muntinga et al. (2011:16)

On social media platforms, consumers actively participate by contributing, creating, consuming, and sharing content (Jiao, Ertz, and Sarigollu 2017:21). While the brand is the central focus of engagement, consumers engage with all aspects related to the brand, including other content linked to the brand, various communication channels used by the brand, and the communities of consumers associated with the brand (Obilo et al. 2021:636). On the other hand, Muntinga (2018:12) points out that the motivation for engaging in COBRA activities encompasses various factors, such as staying informed and updated about one's brand-related social environment, benefiting from the knowledge and skills of other consumers, making informed purchase decisions, finding enjoyment, relaxing, escaping daily routines, and managing boredom. It also involves shaping one's identity through self-expression, presenting a particular image of oneself to others, and gaining self-assurance. Additionally, engagement includes meeting and conversing with like-minded individuals, establishing a sense of belonging within a group that shares a common passion, and aiding others. Furthermore, it involves influencing and persuading other consumers, companies, or brands, as well as the expectation of receiving external rewards that are distinct from the behavior itself, such as money or prizes.

Consumer engagement with brand-related social media content measures the extent to which users interact with content associated with a brand on social media, not solely their interaction with the brand itself. Moreover, this measurement treats engagement as a behavioral concept rather than one that encompasses cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects (Mishra 2018:388). To gather and retain a substantial number of followers, influencers create visually appealing content in specific areas where they claim expertise. Examples of such areas include health (specialty foods and cooking), beauty (fashion and makeup), fitness (workouts and body images), and video games. Nowadays, social media users increasingly seek to learn from the genuine experiences of regular individuals in these areas of interest, rather than relying on artificial presentations by celebrities. Influencers establish a sense of authenticity and relatability in these domains, fostering a close connection with their followers (Argyris, Wang, Kim, and Yin 2020: 2). Consumers' activities on social media concerning brands differ in terms of their levels of interaction and engagement, involving the consumption, contribution, and creation of media content. This creates a three-dimensional framework for social media engagement, spanning from lower to higher levels of consumer involvement in brand-related activities (Mishra 2018:388).

Influencer marketing provides young consumers with the opportunity to engage with real individuals sharing authentic stories on their social media platforms. By seamlessly integrating commercial content with the content young consumers' desire, influencer marketing offers a less intrusive yet highly effective means of connecting with and communicating to these hard-to-reach generations. Consumers increasingly rely on influencers to discover new products and brands, which in turn influence their purchasing decisions. Compared to the average consumer, young adults are more likely to be swayed by influencers' social media posts when making purchase decisions (Feng, Chen, and Kong 2020: 974). Influencers usually get their hands on new products and services related to their areas of interest before most other consumers.

This early access allows them to understand how these products and services fit into their lives. Influencers use this knowledge to assess products, provide recommendations, and offer DIY tips to their followers. In doing so, they establish themselves as experts and find ways to make money from their work (Tafesse and Wood 2021:2). The posts that influencers share, typically consisting of photos or videos along with descriptions, serve as persuasive stories. These stories are crafted by influencers to attract followers and make them feel as if they are experiencing and admiring the influencer's lifestyle. This, in turn, influences product recommendations, whether they are sponsored or not (Feng, Chen, and Kong 2021:975). When engaging with brands, influencers' passive consumption of brands represents the least level of consumer involvement on social media. This includes their interaction with content produced by both the brand and other users on social media. It's the most common type of brand-related activity among consumers. On the other hand, their active contributions involve interactions with both their peers and the content created by the brand. This form of brand-related social media activity involves consumers contributing to content associated with a brand, such as engaging with content by liking or sharing it.

The highest level of online brand-related engagement is the creation of brand-related interactions on social media, like posting content related to a brand. The content created by consumers can act as a stimulus for other consumers to engage with and contribute to brand-related content on social media. For example, when an influencer shares a picture of their favorite brand on social media, they represent a group of consumers who are creating content for the brand (Mishra 2018:388). Engagement with social media involves customers creating, contributing to, or consuming content related to brands within a social network. The level of engagement varies from simple interactions, like "liking" a post on Instagram, to more involved forms of customer engagement, such as posting reviews (Shahbaznezhad 2021:48).

In social networking sites, actions like "liking," sharing, or commenting on content generated by brands demonstrate the investment of the consumer's social network and persuasive resources. For example, when a consumer "likes" a brand's post on Facebook, that branded content becomes visible to their connections. Given that information from fellow consumers is highly trusted and has a significant impact on the perceptions and behavior of the receiving consumer, brand posts that receive "likes," shares, or comments from fellow consumers have a substantial influence on a wider audience. Thus, engaged customers who engage with brand-generated content throughout the stages of the customer journey represent a significant potential source of competitive advantage (Demmers, Weltevreden, and van Dolen 2020:56).

The use of specific hashtags, such as brand related or independent ones, indicates a high degree of user engagement, often surpassing the more basic forms of engagement like "liking," sharing, and commenting. Hashtags are employed in social media posts to reach a broader audience interested in the post's theme. Hashtags feature a hyperlinked keyword that signals the post's subject, linking to a public listing of all posts on the same topic. Users intentionally add hashtags to their photos to expand their reach to a larger audience (Filleri, Yen, and Yu 2022:16). Hashtags are especially valuable for businesses as they group images based on consumer interests, identities, cultural events, and practices. Brand posts that incorporate hashtags are more accessible and tend to generate greater engagement. Brand posts that include at least one hashtag receive approximately 13% more engagement compared to those without hashtags. There are four main types of hashtags: brand (brand name), campaign (specific advertising campaign name), trend (related to fashion or events), and post content. Brands strategically use hashtags to expose themselves to larger audiences, connect conversations, and create innovative campaigns (Jones and Lee 2021:103).

### **General engagement strategies used by influencers:**

#### **Influencer Testimonials (Product Reviews)**

Product reviews refer to reports in mass media like newspapers or magazines where experts offer their opinions on a product or compare similar products. Marketers have integrated product reviews into their advertising strategies. These reviews can come from actual consumers or influencers (Punnahitanond 2018:62). Influencer product reviews are typically detailed and informative, discussing the blogger's personal experiences with a product, highlighting both its advantages and disadvantages. On the other hand, livestream shopping allows for real-time, interactive communication (Forbes 2023).

In advertising, testimonials involve individuals presenting a product in a strategic communication message, often seen in TV commercials. When social media influencers (SMIs) take on the role of the protagonist, they share testimonials and lend their public persona to the collaboration. Research identifies three types of testimonials: celebrity testimonials, testimonials from ordinary people, and expert testimonials. Social media influencers can embody a combination of these three types. As micro-celebrities, their status as public figures can draw more attention to their partnerships. Simultaneously, their accessibility and relatability enable them to function as typical person testimonials. Many Social media influencers specialize in specific areas like gaming, veganism, or endurance sports, which indicates their expertise. They use particular post formats like tutorials to signal their knowledge in these areas. Therefore, SMIs can also provide expert testimonials. However, the influencer concept extends beyond just giving testimonials. Testimonial givers are usually limited to the protagonist role, whereas influencers can take on various roles (Enke and Borchers 2019:268).

### **Storytelling content**

A story is essentially a narrative that presents a series of connected events and their outcomes in chronological order. Storytelling, a form of rhetoric, possesses a compelling power to persuade. According to narrative transportation theory, a story draws its audience into the depicted events, leading them to become deeply engaged in the narrative. This immersion often results in increased emotional responses and thoughts that align with the story, a reduction in critical thinking, and a better retention of key information. In marketing research, storytelling has been explored in areas such as advertising, branding, and personal selling. It is frequently examined in comparison to informational content, which typically emphasizes the attributes and features of the advertised product. In contrast, storytelling narratives revolve around personal experiences and consumer interactions with a product. While storytelling is a common approach used by social media influencers to convey information and engage their followers, research in the field of influencer marketing remains limited (Farivar and Wang 2022:4). Storytelling has been an integral part of human life for generations. Storytelling content (STC) is defined as information conveyed with emotional elements that captivate people and motivate them to act or contemplate changes in their circumstances. A story usually consists of a beginning, a middle, and an ending, which collectively form the plot. The relatability of an influencer plays a mediating role in the relationship between storytelling content and consumer engagement (Atiq, Abid, Anwar, and Ijaz 2022:3). Through storytelling, social influencers can construct their identities and effectively connect with their followers (Farivar and Wang 2022:2).

For influencers, integrating emotionally charged storytelling (ES) into sponsored posts offers two significant advantages. First, ES in sponsored posts introduces personal experiences and emotions into advertising messages, thereby strengthening the influencer's relationships with their followers. Social media users often form para-social relationships with influencers, actively seeking their opinions and guidance on various brands and products. As a result, social media users trust that they are receiving sincere advice and opinions from influencers in sponsored posts. Additionally, para-social interactions between influencers and users have been identified as a major driver of followers' interest in brands and products promoted by influencers. Hence, the inclusion of ES in sponsored posts is essential not only for influencers to establish connections and rapport with social media users but also for enhancing the effectiveness of their sponsored content. Second, sharing emotionally resonant stories about brands and products in sponsored posts is crucial for creating genuine influencer advertising (Gross, Cui, and von Wangenheim 2023:3).

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **BRAND EQUITY AND INFLUENCER MARKETING**

#### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

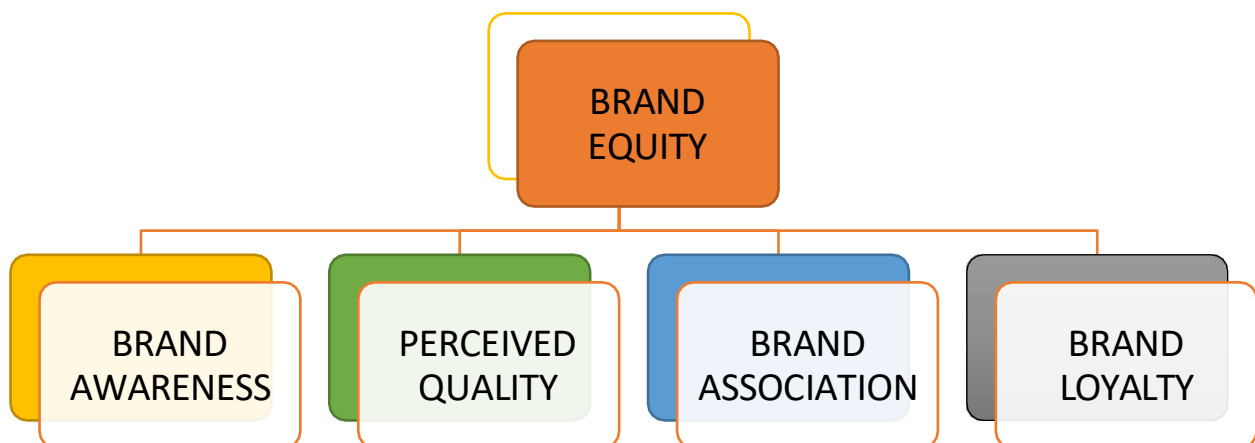
This chapter explores how the intricate relationship between influencer marketing and brand equity. Brand equity, a cornerstone of brand management, encompasses the value and strength of a brand in the eyes of consumers. It commences with an overview of brand equity, followed by an examination of its various dimensions and components. Subsequently, we investigate the impact of influencer marketing on brand equity's key dimensions: brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty. The factors influencing brand equity through influencer marketing are analysed and assess its influence on consumer purchase intentions. This chapter forms the foundation for a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics between brand equity and influencer marketing in the modern marketing landscape.

#### **3.2. OVERVIEW OF BRAND EQUITY**

Brand equity is a fundamental concept in modern marketing (Sasmita and Suki, 2015:276). It signifies the value attributed to a brand in the eyes of consumers, which greatly influences their decision-making and fosters trust. Brands serve a dual purpose by simplifying consumer purchasing decisions through easy recognition, prior positive experiences, symbolism, and associations. For companies, brands are valuable for their legal protection and for establishing unique product associations, which can translate into a competitive edge and increased financial returns (Shariq, 2018: 314). Sokołowska, Pawlak, Hajduk, and Dziakdkiewicz (2022: 2) add that from a marketing perspective, brand equity is often defined as the added value to a specific product or service, its overall utility, or the differential effect compared to marketing activities, which enhances its overall worth for both the company and its customers. Brands infuse emotional and symbolic characteristics into the functional features of a product, and this added value can be estimated by subtracting the product's utilitarian attributes from the brand's overall utility (Macheka, Quaye, and Ligaraba, 2023: 5). These assets and liabilities can be categorized into five primary areas: brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, and other brand assets, including patents, trademarks, and relationships within distribution channels (Skuter, 2014:4).

This concept of brand equity essentially hinges on the impact of consumer perceptions on brand marketing (Lee and Park, 2021:3). Well-established brands can leverage their recognition and reputation to introduce products under their own name, a practice commonly referred to as

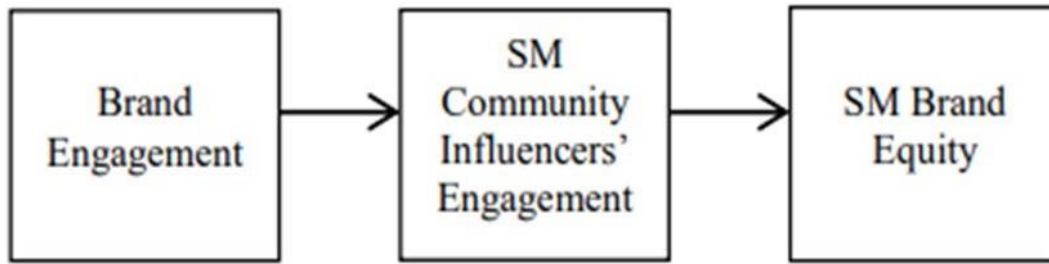
"trademark ownership" (Sasmita and Suki, 2014:276). Brands that are known for quality and reliability often enjoy the trust of consumers, mitigating the competitive risks associated with launching new products (Skuter 2014:4). This differentiation results in diverse consumer reactions to branded and unbranded products. It influences how products are perceived, consumer preferences, and behaviors related to brand marketing, including product selection, memory of advertising messages, responses to promotions, and brand extensions. When consumers respond more or less favourably to the marketing of a branded product compared to an identical unbranded product, we can discuss positive or negative brand equity. These variations in consumer reactions are influenced by consumers' knowledge, emotions, and experiences associated with a particular brand and in relation to other products within the same category, whether branded or unbranded. Importantly, brand equity is not a static value; it evolves not only due to a company's actions but also in response to competitors' activities and their product offerings (Sokołowska et al. 2022:2). Expanding on the notion of brand equity, it's considered as the added value a brand name imparts to a product. This concept is intrinsically linked to marketing principles and is inherently multi-dimensional (Foroudi, Jin, Gupta, Foroudi, and Kitchen, 2018:462). Although from the customer's perspective, customer-based brand equity (CBBE) is defined as the influence of brand knowledge on consumer responses to the marketing of that brand which often comprises four core dimensions: brand awareness, perceived quality, brand image, and brand loyalty (Kim, Choe, and Petrick, 2018:321). Brand equity is a multi-dimensional concept encompassing various aspects, such as brand loyalty, perceived quality, brand associations, and brand awareness (Macheka, Quaye, and Ligaraba, 2023 5).



**Figure 13: Dimensions and Components of Brand Equity**

Discussions regarding brand equity encompass various viewpoints, including levels of brand recognition such as brand image and brand awareness, as well as the added value perceived by consumers (Lim, Pham, and Heinrichs, 2020:928). According to Garantti and Kissi (2019:1485), brand equity comprises dimensions like social image, value, trustworthiness, commitment, and performance. However, in marketing literature, the most commonly discussed dimensions are awareness, associations, perceived quality, and loyalty. Brand awareness, the first component, pertains to a potential buyer's ability to recognize or remember that a brand belongs to a specific product category. This awareness intensifies from non-recognition to recognition, recall, and ultimately, becoming top-of-mind. Brand awareness is an initial step towards consumer commitment to a brand and is consistently linked to brand loyalty. The second dimension, perceived quality, refers to a consumer's judgment based on their comparisons between expectations and their perceptions of a service's performance. Consumers' behavioral intentions, including loyalty, often stem from the interplay of expectations, service experiences, and perception. Perceived quality is a vital component of brand equity, particularly when applied to a destination, and is likely significant in explaining tourists' attitudes towards a brand. Brands also shape their position in consumers' minds by creating an image that influences how the brand is perceived, reflecting consumer associations with the brand. Loyalty, the final dimension, represents a strong commitment to repurchase a preferred product or service and is influenced by all the other dimensions (Kim et al., 2018:321).

Syahrivar and Ichlas (2018:59) also suggest that these dimensions can be evaluated from both the brand or organization's perspective and the consumer's perspective. Furthermore, loyalty plays a crucial role in brand equity, and it can either be a part of brand equity or a result of it (Garantti and Kissi, 2019: 1485). Companies aim to enhance brand equity by strengthening consumer associations and emotions related to their brands and products. This positive influence on brand equity can affect consumer preferences, purchase intentions, perceptions of product quality, and evaluations of brand extensions (Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2016:193). Influencer marketing not only enhances brand equity but also becomes a pivotal component of brand strategy. It reflects the critical role of influencers in shaping consumer perceptions and decisions. The connection between influencer marketing and brand equity is evident: influencers play a substantial role in driving brand associations, loyalty, and perceived quality (Kim et al., 2018:321).



**Figure 14: Connection between Brand Equity and Influencer Marketing**

Source: Skuter 2014:5

The interplay between social media and brand equity is now at the forefront of marketing (Lee and Park, 2021:3). Social media's active engagement channels directly impact brand loyalty and recognition, thus influencing brand equity (Skuter, 2014:4). Influencer marketing has gained prominence in the digital era, with influencers playing a pivotal role in shaping consumer perceptions and behaviors (Sasmita and Suki, 2014:276). The relationship between brand engagement with social media (SM) community influencers and its impact on social media brand equity is a significant focus in contemporary marketing (Skuter, 2014:5). In this digital age, the influence of brands and their advertisements has evolved with the active involvement of consumers, who contribute to brand formation through their consumption behavior and electronic word of mouth (eWOM) on social media (Renchen, 2020:139). Influencer marketing, often perceived as native advertising or credible eWOM, integrates sponsored content seamlessly into the lives of social media influencers, who share it with their followers (Bonus, Raghani, Visitacion, and Castano, 2022:193). Brand equity is especially relevant in influencer marketing, where influencers personify brands, accentuating brand associations (Shariq, 2018:314).

Online brand equity, influenced by influencer micro-blogs, is characterized by positive emotions, utility perceptions, and sustained interactions with a brand (Zhou et al., 2017:824). Influencer credibility is instrumental in influencing consumers' attitudes (Barta et al., 2023:6). Influencer marketing's active and intimate nature fosters positive correlations between brand communication and brand equity (Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2015:35). Content marketing on social media pages builds strong connections and engages consumers, influencing their purchasing decisions (Ali and Alqudah, 2022:653). The impact of peer recommendations through social media further affects brand equity (De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders, 2017:800). Interaction on social media platforms influences brand equity, impacting attitudes, loyalty, reputation, experience, and relationships (Lim, Pham, and Heinrichs, 2020:929).

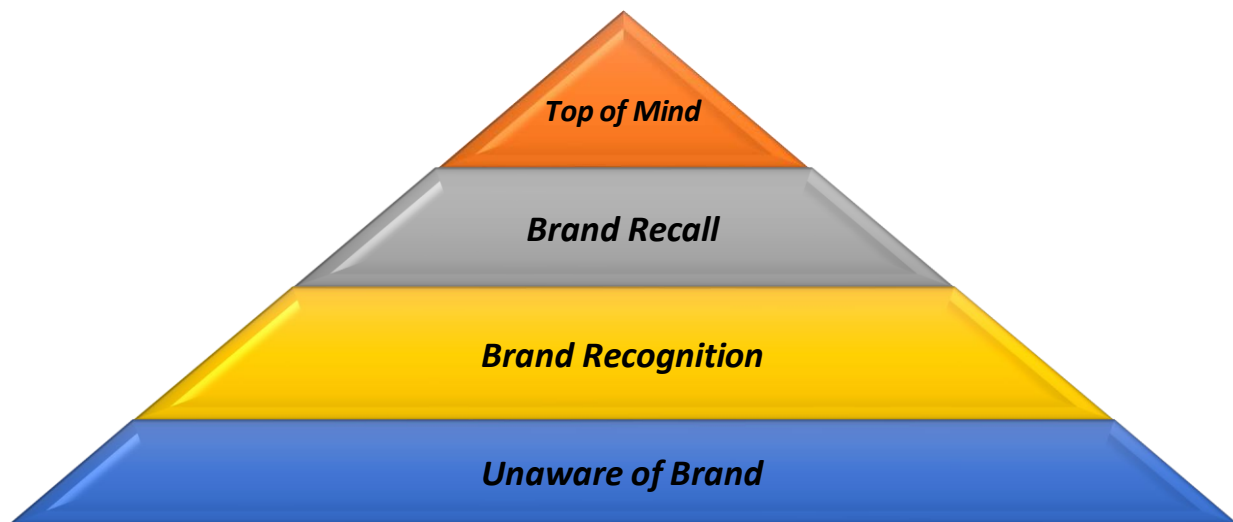
Consumers increasingly rely on social media for credible brand information, and influencers play a vital role in shaping attitudes, decisions, and behaviors (De Veirman et al., 2017: 802). Social media platforms are pivotal in marketing, offering opportunities for engagement, customization, entertainment, trendiness, and word-of-mouth (Ebrahim, 2020: 288). The synergy between established brands and influencers enhances brand equity (Sasmita and Suki, 2014: 276). Trust in brands is reinforced through influencer marketing, reducing risks associated with new product launches (Skuter, 2014: 4). Influencers' engagement with their audience's fosters brand associations and loyalty (Ansari et al., 2019:5). Thus, influencers are empowered to co-create brand equity by promoting products and services (Hesse, Schmidt, and Baumgarth, 2020:193).

### **3.3 INFLUENCER MARKETING ON THE VARIOUS DIMENSIONS OF BRAND EQUITY:**

#### **3.3.1 Brand awareness**

Brand awareness (BA) is a universal communication objective in advertising and essential for desired downstream communication effects such as brand attitude and purchase intention (Bergkvist and Taylor 2022:294). Consumers' awareness towards the company or brand can emerge as one of the stepping-stones in the customer purchasing process. A higher degree of awareness can improve consumers' possibility to purchase a product or services. It can provide the company with long-standing sustainable competitive advantage. Social marketers highlight generating awareness between the public to affect attitudes, association, and beliefs towards a particular organisation or brand (Foroudi 2019:274). Brand awareness has become an important variable that influences consumer perceptions of a brand. So, it can be assumed that a well-known brand can also affect the desire to buy or use a product more than once (repurchase intention).

Brand awareness also acts as a critical factor in consumer buying interest (Ilyas , Rahmi , Tamsah, Munir and Putra 2020:430). Furthermore, brand awareness significantly impacts consumer decision making; consumers generally use brand awareness as a decision heuristic. A known brand has a much better chance of being chosen by consumers over an unknown brand. This well-known brand likely performs better in the marketplace compared to a lesser-known brand (Huang et.al 2014:114). This is because customers tend to purchase products they recognise as products that are familiar are regularly favoured. awareness is critical to impacting behaviour in purchase conditions and the higher levels of consumers' brand awareness make the brand more central which in turn improves the likelihood that the brand is kept in mind in purchase situations (Foroudi 2019:274). (Ilyas, Rahmi , Tamsah, Munir and Putra 2020:429) suggest that Brand awareness can signify the existence, commitment, and core that are very important for a brand and has several levels starting from the lowest level, namely, not recognizing the brand and brand recognition, the top-of-the-mind recalling stage as demonstrated in the figure below;



**Figure 15: Brand Awareness Pyramid**

The first and the lowest level of the pyramid is “Unaware of Brand” in which the consumer is still unaware of the brand. “Brand Recognition” is the second level from the pyramid and in this level, it is another key point when a consumer chooses a brand at the time of purchase; Brand Recall is the level after brand recognition, this is a rebranding of the brand without any help because it is different from introductory task; Top of Mind is the highest level of brand awareness because, in this stage, the consumer will immediately remember the related brand when asked about the product category (spontaneous brand recall) (Agung, Darma and Mahyuni 2021:168).

The brand goal is to achieve the top level of the pyramid because the consumer will attend to choose the brand that they remember (Agung, et al. 2021:168). Brand recognition is the likelihood that a person recognizes a brand identifier and associates it with a product category or a category need, usually at the point of purchase. Brand recall is the likelihood that a person recalls the brand name when cued with the product category, the need fulfilled by the product category, or another purchase- or consumption- related cue (Bergkvist and Taylor 2022:297). Świtała, Reformat, Gamrot and Bilińska-Reformat (2018:100) further suggest that brand awareness can be categorized in the following levels;

- a) Spontaneous awareness, which indicates the percentage of customers who are able to provide the name of a given brand without assistance; this indicator determines the real field of customers’ choices at the same time;

- b) Top-of-mind knowledge, which informs what percentage of respondents point out a given brand as the first one in the study (the first one that comes to their mind); it shows that it is strongly rooted in buyers' awareness;
- c) Supported awareness, which represents what percentage of respondents declare brand knowledge after it is mentioned, which indicates a poor relationship with a given brand

influencer marketing is one of the marketing methods by which information about products and services is spread through influencers with social impact, leading to increased awareness and interest in the market (Nadanyiova et al. 2020:111). Influencer marketing is also carried out because the existence of one brand impends above how popular a brand is and how the brand can maintain its popularity through increased exposure every day. The emergence of influencer marketing has a big impact on a brand's ability to increase its exposure. Marketers have successfully read this phenomenon so the use of influencer marketing to improve brand awareness is increasing (Agung 2021:168). Renchen (2020:140) supports that influencer marketing is a powerful instrument of brand communication in the age of the internet and social media. Although there is no homogenous definition of influencer marketing, the term basically refers to the effect that influential communicators contribute to create awareness for a product in social media and in this way make consumption trends emerge.

Influencers are consumers in a central communicative function who impact other consumers in a targeted way to promote the consumption of certain products via social media. Marketing increasingly uses influencers to explicitly develop brand awareness of particular target groups from inside the group. It is important that influencers approach their fans in a friendly way and create a pleasant environment using their profile. Similarly, influencer marketing is a digital version of WOM (word-of-mouth), i.e. a form of disseminating information about the quality of a particular brand or product among individuals. The identification of the influencer with the product is then considered guiding, ideally as being credible and more effective than advertising on traditional media (Nadanyiova et al. 2020:111). According to behaviour Lou and Yuan (2019:62) the leading goals of brands' influencer marketing campaigns include expanding brand awareness, reaching new targeted audiences, and improving sales conversion. Brands that invest in influencer marketing aim to garner brand mentions from influencers, which in turn can boost brand awareness among their targeted consumers and consequently drive sales. Given that brand awareness is one of the leading goals of influencer marketing and plays a significant role in purchase. Regarding influencer marketing aims, companies are targeting brand recognition as a goal since it is vital for consumers' purchasing decisions and buying behavior. This also leads to a better understanding of the influence of brand awareness on client purchase intentions.

Customers' trust in purchasing decisions is linked to brand awareness. Companies should establish powerful brands through increasing brand awareness. Brand loyalty is mostly driven by brand awareness. Brand awareness represents buyers' capacity to recognize and remember the brand in a certain product category, and it is therefore critical in the purchasing decision process (Ali and Alqudah 2022:652). This is successful when the consumer is aware of any brand of products and they can recognize, recall, and memorize the brand particularly the names, colours, features or even the location where the brand is situated in any retail stores. high brand awareness happens when consumers can remember the brand, pronounce the brand name, explain the brand features, and identify the brand among all other competing brands. The process of making consumers memorize a brand is not an easy task as it takes longer time but if marketers keep appearing and exist in front of consumers such as through YouTube advertisements, the problem with awareness is no longer a major concern because YouTube will facilitate the process of getting good memory (Ahmad, Idris, Wong, Malik, Masri and Alias 2020:7972).

Brands can effectively enhance brand awareness through strong relationships with customers increasing the company's ability to interact with customer dialogue and thereby strengthening their communication tools. Because a large majority of individuals have used social media, brand names scattered across the network will help educate and spread people across the network, increasing brand recognition (Febriyantorito 2020:5). social networks like Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook, social media afford influencers an opportunity to create content promoting certain brands with the goal of obtaining more followers and brand recognition (Nadanyiov, Gajanova, Majerova and Lizbetinova 2020:110). Bakker (2018:83) asserts that influencers make product and service-related posts to their followership on social media channels. Quantitatively, influencers gain prominence by the number of followers they have. The more followers the better, as posts receive a higher reach and have more potential for further engagement (e.g. likes, retweets, comments). This User-generated content has a stronger effect on brand awareness than brand-generated content, whereas brand-generated content had a stronger effect on brand consideration than user-generated content (Demmers, Weltevreden, and van Dolen 2020:54)

### **3.3.2 Brand Associations**

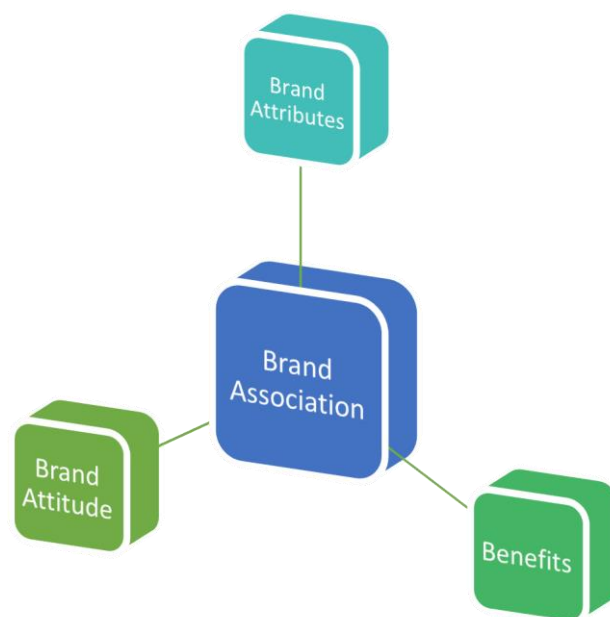
Brand associations represent the second facet of customer-based brand equity. This dimension pertains to any elements stored in the consumer's memory that are connected to a brand. These brand associations essentially mirror the brand image and encompass everything that consumers relate to the brand (Nguyen-Viet and Nguyen 2021:78). The brand image, in turn, comprises a structured set of associations, typically organized in a meaningful manner, reflecting what consumers hold in memory about the brand. It is essentially the perceptions of the brand as indicated by the

brand associations residing in the consumer's memory. Brand associations are the various informational nodes linked to the brand node in memory and encapsulate the significance of the brand for consumers. The favorability, strength, and distinctiveness of these brand associations are the pivotal dimensions that distinguish brand knowledge, playing a significant role in shaping the distinctive consumer responses constituting brand equity, particularly in high-involvement decision scenarios. Brand image is positioned on the recipient's side (Shariq 2018:322). This is primarily because a brand that is easily remembered is valuable, yet it is often essential for the brand to hold a more comprehensive significance for the consumer beyond merely being a part of a product category. Brands serve as potent communication tools that can reinforce crucial attributes or benefit associations that define the positioning of their products (Wijaksono and Ali 2019:374).

Consumers attach personal meanings to brands, forming brand knowledge, which consists of a network of associations linked to the brands. These associations can be product-related or non-product-related, encompassing aspects like price, usage, and user image. For instance, consumers may associate "youthful," "refreshing," and "caffeine" with the Pepsi brand and may consequently choose this brand. Consumers rely on their prior experiences to make predictions about a brand (Akturan 2018:814). Furthermore, brand associations can be perceived as emotional imprints in addition to product and non-product-related associations. These emotional imprints signify consumers' emotional reactions to stimuli related to the brand, stored in their memory. In essence, emotional brand attachments lead to the formation of emotionally charged memories that likely enhance the prominence of brand associations, which is a critical element of Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) (Dwivedi, Johnson, Wilkie, and Araujo-Gil 2018:1182).

Brand associations play a pivotal role in influencing consumer decisions regarding brand preference and can be categorized into three key dimensions: attributes, benefits, and attitudes. Attributes encompass the perceived qualities of the brand's offerings, reflecting what the brand products or services entail. Meanwhile, benefits are related to the socio-emotional and experiential connections that consumers establish with the brand based on its offerings. Attitudes are a manifestation of consumer decisions driven by the evocation, assimilation, and synthesis of attributes and benefits. Brand attitudes inherently pertain to the perceived image of the brand and hold significant sway over post-purchase behaviors (Baksi and Panda 2018:1171). Kostov (2022:55) further classifies brand associations into the same three primary categories: attributes, benefits, and attitudes. Attributes describe the intrinsic characteristics of a product or service, elucidating how users define these products and what they symbolize. Attribute brand associations can be further divided into subcategories. The first is product-related attributes, which are the essential elements required for a product to function as intended and meet consumers' needs. Non-product-related attributes encompass external aspects associated with the purchase and consumption of a product or service. Benefits represent the perceived value that consumers assign to a product's characteristics,

reflecting what consumers believe a product or service can deliver for them. Conversely, brand attitude is influenced by the familiarity and trust consumers place in a brand. Greater familiarity and confidence lead to a higher intention to purchase. While brand attitude and purchase intentions are related, brand attitude constitutes a comprehensive evaluation made by the customer, whereas purchase intention reflects the behavioral predisposition of the customer. It is not merely a sentiment towards a brand, but a conscious plan or motivation to undertake a particular action (Ramesh, Goswami, Sekar, and Dahiya 2018:379).



**Figure 16: Categories of Brand Association**

Source: Authors own compilation

Brand associations often embody the brand's value as they serve as a conduit through which consumers perceive that the brand fulfills their specific needs (Wijaksono and Ali 2019:374). These associations possess varying degrees of strength, with their potency increasing when they stem from a multitude of experiences or exposures to brand-related communications. They can be categorized into two primary forms: product-related attributes, such as brand performance, and non-product related attributes, including brand personality and user profile (Nguyen-Viet and Nguyen 2021:78). In the process of building a relationship between brands and consumers, initial brand associations primarily revolve around product attributes. Subsequently, through extended product usage, marketing initiatives, and other influencing factors, associations related to the benefits offered by the product or service take center stage in the consumer's memory (Kostov 2020:55).

Brand image plays a pivotal role in shaping brand attitudes, which in turn give rise to these associations, ultimately igniting purchase intentions and intentions to repurchase. Brand attitude can be defined as the overall evaluation made by consumers regarding a brand, which can be either positive or negative, contingent upon their knowledge and reflective experiences (Ramesh et al. 2018:384). Consequently, these associations constitute the foundation for purchase decisions and stand as a crucial element in the creation and management of brand equity. Elevated brand equity signifies that consumers hold strong positive associations with the brand (Nguyen-Viet and Nguyen 2021: 78). Marketers harness these associations to cultivate positive brand attitudes and provide favorable cues in the consumer's purchase choices, while consumers leverage them to categorize and retrieve information (Akturan 2018:814). Understanding brand associations is fundamental in comprehending consumer-based brand equity.

Associations that are strong, positive, and distinctive serve to bolster a brand and enhance its equity, making them pivotal drivers of brand strategy (Akturan 2018:814). The establishment of clear and well-defined brand associations is critical for defining a brand's identity and competitiveness. However, to achieve differentiation from competitors' offerings, marketers must initially discern which attributes within brand associations are perceived as important by consumers (Syahrivar and Ichlas 2018:59). This aligns with the idea that consumers' favorable perceptions of individual brands influence their evaluations of brand alliances. Therefore, the distinct positioning of an influencer facilitates a brand in achieving a unique and favorable position in the market. Firms may also create a multidimensional brand image by collaborating with diverse influencers (Leung et al. 2022:235). Influencer marketing complements the brand positioning led by firms, as it allows companies to harness the personal positioning of influencers to create, enhance, or adapt the specific brand associations of the company. Influencers work diligently to construct their personal brands by aligning themselves with distinctive attributes that set them apart from other influencers. Prior research suggests that personal brands, especially those of celebrities or well-known figures, serve as intangible assets that firms can strategically tap into to shape consumer attitudes and behaviors.

Influencers actively manage the positioning of their personal brands by sharing posts, images, and stories on social media platforms, independently of any strategic input from a specific brand and at their own expense. People choose to follow a particular influencer based on the appealing positioning of their personal brand, and as a community, they collectively form shared perceptions of the influencer's positioning, identity, and values (Leung, Gu, and Palmatier 2022:235). The distinctiveness, or perceived uniqueness, of an influencer's positioning provides a firm with the opportunity to associate its brand with specific attributes, such as being perceived as delicious, high-end, or trendy, as exemplified in the preceding comment (Russell and Rasolofoarison 2017:764).

When it comes to brand attribute evaluation, social media influencers (SMIs) utilize it to create electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) by offering assessments of brand performance on specific attributes. The narrative strategies employed by SMIs must align with the personas they have cultivated or seek to project. To effectively assume the roles they aspire to, social media influencers must present a version of 'who they are' and their 'ought-self' to secure the approval of their audiences. They bear the responsibility of sharing information and opinions about products and brands to convey their image as opinion leaders to consumers. As a result, they utilize this narrative strategy to establish and sustain their position as opinion leaders by actively sharing knowledge, providing compelling arguments, and offering evaluations to endorse brands and provide recommendations for brand choices (Zhou 2021:125).

Leveraging a digital influencer's endorsement heightens the anticipation of eliciting positive attitudinal and behavioral responses towards the endorsed brand. The use of influencers to enhance brand reputation is substantiated by their ability to cultivate extensive social networks of followers who place their trust in these influential figures and perceive them as credible due to their appeal and alignment with the endorsed brand. This increased trust and credibility subsequently elevate the likelihood of consumer purchase intentions (Bonus et al. 2022:191). Perceiving influencers as trustworthy and experienced, consumers foster favorable brand attitudes. The electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) generated and propagated by influencers, whom consumers trust, contributes to the augmentation of consumers' brand knowledge. Consequently, consumers extend their positive sentiments from the influencer to the brand (Renchen 2020:141).

Brands derive significance from their associations with elements of popular culture, particularly social media celebrities, and consumers, in turn, adopt this significance. This transfer of meaning is particularly likely when the celebrity is perceived as knowledgeable about the brand with which they are associated, thereby possessing credibility in the eyes of consumers. While the attitude toward the influencer can directly influence the brand associated with the celebrity through an endorsement, it is also crucial for the audience to perceive that the celebrity endorsing the brand genuinely appreciates the product. Consumers' evaluations of the brand tend to be more positive when the endorser is seen as motivated by product quality rather than solely financial incentives (Russell and Rasolofoarison 2017: 764). Utilising marketing communication through various social media platforms, including Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Sina Weibo, presents an opportunity to dispel misunderstandings and preconceptions about brands while enhancing brand value. This is achieved by creating a platform that encourages online interactions, collaborations, and the sharing of content and information among individuals.

Social media empowers consumers to become storytellers, allowing them to critique negative brand experiences or share positive ones. It facilitates consumers' engagement with a brand and the sharing of their brand experiences within their social networks. Consumers consider various product attributes, such as price, quality, design, and brand image, when making purchase decisions (Yu and Yuan 2019:1234). These images, accompanied by textual explanations and specific commercial information about products, including brands, prices, and purchasing links, are narrated through personal stories that showcase product consumption and usage. Social media influencers employ enthusiastic language and emotional expressions to convey their personal experiences, passion, or admiration for favored brands and desired products. This strategy aims to inspire brand affection among consumers and reveal the ideal value that ownership of a product or brand can bring. Social media influencers employ this narrative approach to stimulate consumers' brand affection and purchase intentions, especially in the context of luxury products, which often carry deep meanings, symbols, and status, making them integral to consumers' self- concept and identity reinforcement or expansion (Zhou 2021:126). Marketers must ensure that they collaborate with influencers whose lifestyles, personalities, and overall identities align with the promoted product and brand values to avoid negatively impacting a brand's reputation. Therefore, it is crucial to identify potential influencers based on characteristics like relevance, engagement, reach, frequency, and authenticity (Bonus et al. 2022:191).

### **3.3.3 Perceived quality**

Perceived quality is the consumer's judgment regarding the excellence or superiority of a brand, formed through their subjective perceptions. Products from high-quality brands incite a desire among consumers to purchase them and serve to distinguish the brand from its competitors. Perceived quality does not represent an objective measure of the functional or manufacturing quality of products; rather, it is a subjective evaluation of products based on consumer perceptions (Akoglu and Ozbek 2021:2134). In the context of consumer brand engagement, perceived quality essentially reflects a consumer's perception of the reliability and trustworthiness of a product or service. It is closely tied to customer preferences, satisfaction, and purchase decisions. This perception arises from customer experiences while interacting with the brand and the communication efforts made by marketers. It's important to note that perceived quality is not an objective measure of a brand's or product's actual quality, but rather a consumer's assessment of the overall service excellence or entity of the product. Consumers often evaluate product or service quality based on various information or attributes associated with these offerings (Wijaksono and Ali 2019).

Perceived quality contributes value to consumers by providing them with a rationale for making a purchase and by setting the brand apart from its competitors. Consequently, when customers hold a positive perception of brand quality, it leads to an increase in brand equity (Nguyen-Viet and Nguyen 2021:78). Quality is recognized as a pivotal and multifaceted component of business strategy, with firms competing on quality, consumers actively seeking it, and markets undergoing transformations due to it. Being perceived as one of the top brands in the market is a significant factor that encourages consumers to establish a loving relationship with a brand (Colhoe, Bairrada, and Colhoe 2019:45). Amidst the heightened competition prevalent in global markets, brands occupy a central role in the strategies for promoting products and services. They form the basis for product/service differentiation and represent a substantial component of a company's asset valuation. As competition for consumers intensifies, a strong brand becomes increasingly invaluable (Kim et al. 2019:765). Additionally, it facilitates the creation of a strong brand perception while allowing for premium pricing of high-quality products.

Regarding consumer brand loyalty, perceived quality pertains to a consumer's perception of the dependability of a product or service and is intrinsically linked to their preferences, satisfaction, and purchase inclinations. It plays a crucial role as an antecedent in building emotional commitment, which in turn fosters brand loyalty and trust (Akoglu and Ozbek 2021:2134). Brand perceived quality encompasses two types of attributes in its evaluation: intrinsic attributes, which emphasize the physical characteristics of the product, including aspects like product performance, features, reliability, suitability, durability, serviceability, and aesthetics; and extrinsic attributes, which are external to the product itself, encompassing factors such as price, brand name, brand image, corporate reputation, manufacturer image, retail store impressions, and the country of origin (Wijaksono and Ali 2019). In essence, when consumers encounter higher prices for products that are similar, it often leads to an increased perception of quality. Perceived quality serves as a catalyst for generating positive attitudes towards the brand. In simple terms, higher perceived quality opens the door to fostering positive associations with the brand. Moreover, consumers tend to gravitate towards products that make them feel secure. Therefore, it is advisable to reinforce and utilise perceived quality as a competitive advantage.

To enhance perceived quality, it is recommended to employ tools such as warranties, pricing strategies, and brand information to align quality with the brand. Perceptions of brand quality are shaped by factors such as price, appearance, characteristics, and features. Additionally, marketing activities significantly influence the evaluation of quality (Foroudi et al. 2018: 468). As consumers form their perceptions of product quality based on both functional and nonfunctional attributes, innovation and improvements at these levels should lead consumers to perceive the brand as more capable of meeting their needs. Consequently, this should enhance their perception of brand excellence, which is synonymous with brand quality. This underscores the idea that quality,

exceptional performance, plays a profound role in shaping consumers' brand experiences. A higher level of quality translates to an experience devoid of shortcomings and better aligned with customers' needs. Moreover, the perception of exceptional quality and the fulfillment of customer expectations suggest that the brand is committed to serving its customers, ultimately leading consumers to view the brand as competent and sophisticated (Colhoe, Bairrada, and Colhoe 2019: 45). Perceived quality stands as a significant component of brand perception, representing the added value that both current and potential consumers attribute to the brand name, symbols, and personality (Foroudi et al. 2018: 462). Furthermore, perceived quality should contribute to the perception of value, which reflecting is a more abstract construct considering both the benefits and costs of an offer, thereby encompassing quality assessments (Colhoe, et.al 2019:45).

Perceived quality pertains to the extent to which a brand is perceived as offering high-quality products and services when compared to the offerings of its competitors. Given the pivotal role of perceived quality in influencing customer purchase decisions, it is essential to understand what quality signifies to different customer segments. While creating a quality product or service is a significant achievement, it is equally important to cultivate a positive perception of the product or service (Syahrivar and Ichlas 2018:59). An integral component in achieving a positive brand perception is the marketing communication plan. It has been emphasized that a high brand perception is the result of effective marketing strategies, with marketers playing a vital role in constructing the dimensions of a brand. Marketers also contribute to shaping the beliefs and ideals associated with brands, thereby fostering positive associations in the minds of consumers, and nurturing a favorable attitude towards the brand (Foroudi et al. 2018: 462).

Marketers can cultivate a positive brand perception by actively listening to their customers. Crafting a robust production and quality control process, as well as designing attributes effectively, can lead customers to perceive the brand as being attentive to their needs. Consequently, brand quality is likely to influence customers' assessment of their brand experience and the brand's personality (Colhoe et al. 2019: 45). Social media influencers deliver consumer reviews based on their personal experiences, preferences, and opinions of products. These personalized recommendations carry significant weight with readers when making product purchase decisions (Stubb and Coriander 2019: 211). These personal narratives about product consumption and usage are conveyed through a combination of images with accompanying textual explanations and specific commercial information, including brand details, pricing, and purchase links. Given the association of luxury products with meanings, symbols, and status, they hold particular importance in shaping consumers' self-concept and contributing to identity reinforcement or expansion (Zhou et al. 2021:126).

The sharing of experiences and lives related to brands through pictures, text, stories, hashtags, and check-ins, among other content, by social media influencers in their capacity as third-party endorsers is central to their role as brand ambassadors. They design sponsored content to convey and enhance a brand's image and reputation, ultimately driving brand engagement and fostering brand loyalty (Joshi, Lim, Jagani, and Kumar 2023: 3). Moreover, consumers on digital platforms cannot physically inspect products. In the absence of face-to-face interactions, consumers must rely on various informational cues to guide their decision-making process. Among these cues, product presentation on digital platforms plays a crucial role. Earlier research has indicated that images have the potential to divert consumers' attention away from textual information, and the properties of these images used in marketing communications can significantly influence consumers' attitudes towards the advertised products (Teo, Leng, and Phua 2018:323). Building on influencer reviews and content, consumers can engage in discussions about products and how they perceive the quality of these products. A consumer may opt to purchase a product based on the understanding that it offers a unique value that cannot be replicated by other products. As consumers consistently return for products from a specific brand, they begin to believe that each product produced by that brand possesses a unique quality unmatched by other brands (Shahana et al. 2019:59).

High quality content serves to offer followers a more enjoyable hedonic experience, and the quality of content information plays a crucial role in building a reputation within social media communities. Specifically, when users of social media platforms perceive that opinion leaders contribute high-quality content, it has a positive impact on the reputation of these opinion leaders (Barta, Belanche, and Flavian 2023:5). It is widely acknowledged that social media influencers significantly influence consumers' purchase intentions. The perceived "attractiveness" and "trustworthiness" of influencers are aspects of credibility that more effectively explain shoppers' purchase intentions (Ali, Ali, and Mostapha 2021:6). Furthermore, when images shared on social network sites exhibit high quality, they are more likely to elicit positive emotional experiences among followers. Such high-quality images also tend to lead consumers to form favorable impressions about the quality of the products depicted. Even the simple manipulation of image size can impact consumers' attention and their attitudes toward products, favoring those with higher image quality.

However, while image quality is vital, it is equally important for the images to align with the informal nature of the platform. Social network sites are informal communication platforms, and consequently, informal snapshots may resonate more effectively with the audience compared to formal studio shots (Teo et al. 2018:323). The quality of information delivered by influencers and the credibility of influencers play a crucial role in creating perceived information usefulness among customers. This, in turn, significantly and positively influences customers' purchase intentions. Influencers can establish strong connections with their followers, fostering valuable, trustworthy, and reliable relationships that inspire followers to discover new brands and products, both for their personal use

and for recommending to others (Ali, Ali, and Mostapha 2021:7). Therefore, quality content can be described as information that embodies excellence, adds value, holds importance, and meets the needs of the audience. High-quality influencer content influences not only consumers' perceptions and evaluations but also, through its symbolic meanings, offers more gratifying and pleasurable experiences (Barta et al. 2023:5).

### 3.4 BRAND LOYALTY



**Figure 17: Brand Loyalty**

Brand loyalty, as Syahrivar and Ichlas (2018:59) describe, occurs when customers merge their attitudes, emotions, and behaviors to consistently choose a brand based on their prior experiences. They do so because they perceive the brand as embodying the right image, price, quality, and attributes. In essence, brand loyalty represents a positive mindset towards a brand, resulting in ongoing and regular brand purchases. It essentially becomes a learned response to a product due to a favorable perception of the brand. When a company consistently engages with a customer, whether before or after a purchase, the customer may opt to continue purchasing that brand due to their positive relationship with the company (Shahana et al. 2019:59). Brand loyalty comprises two key facets: attitude and behavior. Attitude reflects the overall feelings and sentiments of customers towards the brand, while behavior relates to the customers' tendency to make repeat purchases (Bernarto, Berlianto, Meilani, Masman, and Suryawan 2020:414). Ledikwe, Roberts-Lombard, and Klopper (2018:88) highlight that behavioral loyalty indicates customers' preference to stick with a brand even after an unfavorable experience. In contrast, attitudinal loyalty can be described as the attachment of customers to a brand and the extent to which they are not enticed by competing offers in the market.

Attitudinal loyalty is linked to the degree of emotional attachment and attitude that customers hold towards a brand, including their willingness to share positive recommendations and endorse a service provider to other customers. On the other hand, behavioral loyalty relates to repeat patronage (Wong and Haque 2021:343). Customers often exhibit brand loyalty to products that enhance or express their identity. In simpler terms, brand loyalty can be viewed as a measure of the connection consumers feel with a brand. It serves as an indicator of customer loyalty to a brand, helping identify when a customer might be inclined to switch to other brands offered by competitors, often due to changes in factors like pricing or other attributes (Bernarto et al. 2020:414). Put simply, customers develop loyalty to their favorite product brands and form strong bonds with well-established brand names after a certain amount of time for public recognition. This positive connection ultimately contributes to customer satisfaction with the brand and guides efforts to increase product profitability (Ratnasari 2020).

Brand loyalty is akin to a customers' dedication to a brand and is based on trust. Companies invest efforts to attract and retain loyal customers through competitive pricing. Loyalty programs can assist products in thriving and achieving long-term success. A brand with a strong presence and a high-quality image fosters loyalty among customers, and positive brand associations play a significant role in this (Zia et al. 2021:1093). While consumer brand engagement aims to cater to consumer preferences and elicit a positive response, the goal of enhancing consumers' perceptions of brand or product quality is to promote purchase and post-purchase behaviors, such as repeat purchases. Consumer brand engagement on social media empowers consumers to convey their views on product or service quality through reviews and ratings (Shanahan et al. 2019:58). Loyalty, a valuable asset in fiercely competitive markets, is often considered a strategic tool for managing long-term customer relationships (Wong and Haque 2021: 343). Brand loyalty comes with several significant strategic advantages for companies, such as expanding market share, attracting new customers, supporting brand extensions, reducing marketing costs, and fortifying the brand against competitive threats (Zia et al. 2021:1094).

Furthermore, brand loyalty influences customers' preferences towards a product or brand and raises awareness regarding purchases. In this context, brand loyalty represents the degree of attachment among businesses and competing companies. Factors like product taste, freshness, and portion size are all related to quality, and product quality has nearly twice the impact on brand loyalty as service quality. Moreover, product quality significantly reinforces brand loyalty. Loyalty that stems from customer satisfaction leads to repeat purchases and positive word-of-mouth marketing efforts within the brand's ecosystem (Tunahana and Kutlu 2023:187).

Loyalty also indicates consumers' inclination to associate themselves with a particular brand, regardless of price changes or alterations in product features. Brand loyalty holds particular importance for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in highly competitive environments, as it leads to ongoing purchases, reduced operational costs, positive word-of-mouth recommendations, and price tolerance, all of which contribute to increased profitability and a strengthened competitive advantage. Customers tend to remain loyal to a brand that offers superior products or services compared to other brands. As a result, brand loyalty is a valuable asset for businesses, as it ensures the continuity of the consumer lifecycle and generates positive advocacy for a business's offerings in the marketplace (Ledikwe et al. 2018:88).

On the other hand, loyalty is closely associated with various factors, one of which is the user experience. Customer loyalty can be driven by high switching barriers, which result from technological, economic, or psychological factors that make switching to another option costly or challenging (Manavat, Panday, Panday, and Chauhan 2022:1374). Numerous studies have explored the drivers and outcomes of brand loyalty in the online context. Loyalty drivers in the online environment differ from those in traditional or offline contexts, necessitating firms to focus on factors specific to the online landscape, including connectivity, interactivity, customization, convenience, the relevance of online information, and the sense of community (Ebrahim 2020:296). Influencer marketing, by its nature, aims to influence all phases of the consumer's journey, encompassing the processes leading up to and following the purchase decision. Consumer attitudes are shaped by a combination of internal and external motivations, which collectively form the consumer's psychological profile. External motivations include factors like family, reference groups, culture, and social class, while internal motivations encompass perceptions, personality, lifestyle, and emotions (Weinlich and Semerádová 2022:60).

Friends and family members who influence informational and normative beliefs about a brand's competence can serve as a safeguard against trust-related issues. Consumer experiences with corporate brands are inherently social and are influenced by peer interactions, which can take two primary forms. The first form involves opinion-based communication, where peers share their knowledge and experiences with a corporate brand. Due to the credibility of these sources, consumers integrate this information into their decision-making processes. The second form of peer influence occurs when consumers observe the behavior of others to gather information that can help mitigate risks associated with their engagement with a corporate brand. In this observational learning process, consumers tend to rely more heavily on the information provided by others (Ozdemir et al. 2020:794).

The accessibility of brand-related information due to the proliferation of social media can significantly influence consumer attitudes toward brands and their shopping behaviors. The effectiveness of influencer marketing hinges on the strength of the influence relationships between individual nodes (users) within the social network. However, the adoption of this marketing approach may heavily depend on an individual's personal characteristics, emotional attachment capacity, and reliance on others (Weinlich and Semerádová 2022:61). With an increasing number of digital consumers turning to social media for brand research, firms need to comprehend which social media activities contribute to brand equity and determine the specific social media activities needed to achieve these outcomes (Lim, Pham, and Heinrichs 2020: 928). As a measure of a brand's ability to consistently and reliably deliver high-quality offerings with integrity, brand competence is grounded in rationality, fostering cognitive trust. When confronted with peer opinions about a brand's competence, a positive experience contributes to people's existing perceptions, and the level of cognitive trust in the brand is shaped by this overall impression of competence. Specifically, when a consumer's perception of a brand's competence aligns with that of their peers, it amplifies the impact on cognitive trust in the brand. Conversely, when opinions are contradictory, consumers may experience cognitive trust erosion as they struggle to resolve the conflict (Ozdemir et al. 2020:793).

### **3.5 FACTORS INFLUENCING BRAND EQUITY THROUGH INFLUENCER MARKETING**

The impact of social media on brand equity cannot be overstated, particularly through the engagement of users across various platforms. It is essential to recognize that the nature of individual engagements may vary on different social media platforms (Lim, Pham, and Heinrichs 2020:928). However, social media is a double-edged sword, as it can also serve as a platform for negative reviews about products or services that can significantly influence brand equity and consumers' purchasing decisions (Syahrivar and Ichlas 2018:58). Firms allocate a substantial portion of their resources to leverage content communities, microblogs, and social networking platforms to enhance their presence and effectiveness on social media (Lim, Pham, and Heinrichs 2020:928). The value of Social Media Influencers (SMIs) lies in their ability to establish trust and relatability with their followers. Social media users tend to be repelled when they sense manipulative commercial intentions from SMIs and are more drawn to content shared by ordinary non-commercial consumers. Key factors influencing this perception include influencer credibility, alignment with the brand, relevance to the audience, and the authenticity of the marketing campaign. Trust is a pivotal element in social media interactions (Reinikainen, Munnukka, Maity, and Luoma-aho 2020:284).

A consumer's trust in another consumer or a marketer within a social media brand community can extend to trust in the associated brand. Furthermore, trust and distrust within an online brand community can spill over to impact the brand even without the brand's direct involvement. Brand trust plays a crucial role in fostering brand loyalty and purchase loyalty. Additionally, it has been observed that brand trust can moderate the impact of sales promotions on purchase decisions. In this way, brand trust serves as a foundation for purchase intention, reflecting the consumer's willingness to purchase a product or service endorsed within a social media community (Reinikainen, et. al 2020:284). As social media influencers' follower count grows, they often attract commercial benefits such as brand sponsorships and compensation from brands. However, this commercialization may lead to a compromise in authenticity and trustworthiness. The relationships between SMIs and their followers are built on emotional attachment and trust-based interactions, and this emotional bond plays a significant role in the outcomes of branded influencer communications. Smaller influencer networks are more vulnerable to negative impacts when authenticity is compromised, while larger, more established networks exhibit greater resilience as emotions have a more substantial influence on consumer engagement (Holiday, Hayes, Park Lyu, and Zhou 2023:418).

The importance of authenticity in influencer marketing is exemplified by cases such as Volvo, which faced criticism due to a lack of congruence between the influencer and the brand. In such instances, brands risk wasting resources on ineffective partnerships that do not highlight their products. In response, influencers like Lim may need to address the risk of losing followers and influence by retracting or indirectly apologizing for their posts. These examples underscore the importance of aligning brand and influencer values for marketing efforts to succeed. Nevertheless, challenges related to authenticity are not the sole concern for brand marketers. They must also identify unethical influencers who claim fake followers or falsify engagement rates. Brands are therefore compelled to undergo rigorous processes to find and collaborate with suitable influencers. Once collaboration is achieved, influencers must craft campaigns that resonate naturally with their audience, avoiding any appearance of covert advertising. In doing so, they foster a perception among their followers that the promoted message is genuine, ultimately driving positive responses, such as purchases and product recommendations (Belanche et al. 2020:78).

### **3.6 BRAND EQUITY AND PURCHASE INTENTIONS IN INFLUENCER MARKETING**

Purchase intention plays a pivotal role in understanding and predicting consumer behavior. It is the driving force behind a consumer's decision to acquire a product from a particular brand. Purchase intention can be defined as an individual's inclination to make purchases of goods or services to fulfill their specific needs. This intention or behavior is shaped by one's attitude, which, in turn, is influenced by their beliefs. Beliefs can be formed through three primary sources: personal experiences and observations, external sources of information, and processes of inference (Isamudin and Jan, 2021:21). Purchase intention is a fundamental component of consumer cognitive behavior as it pertains to an individual's intent to purchase a particular brand or product. Marketing practitioners regularly use measurements of purchase intention as valuable inputs for sales and market share forecasts, both for existing and new products and services. Purchase intention typically emerges after consumers have completed their information search and evaluated alternative products, indicating a readiness to make a purchase decision (Lin, Jan, and Chuang, 2019:36). Therefore, in the context of influencer marketing, advertising appeals are considered external sources of information that can significantly impact the formation of beliefs and attitudes among consumers, ultimately leading them toward the purchase intention of a product (Isamudin and Jan, 2021:21).

In the context of influencer marketing, social media influencers are viewed as more credible, trustworthy, and knowledgeable compared to traditional celebrity endorsements. This is particularly relevant for businesses targeting younger generations. Social media influencers excel in building rapport with consumers, making them highly effective in shaping consumer attitudes and purchase intentions (Lim, Radzol, Cheah, and Wong, 2017:20). Social media platforms are ideal channels for consumers to freely share brand-related information with their social circles. These online conversations give rise to information dissemination processes, including branding comments, sentiments, and opinions. Individuals with a high level of opinion-giving behavior, often referred to as opinion leaders, exert a significant influence on the attitudes and behaviors of other consumers. In the realm of social media, there is a positive relationship between the brand equity generated by social media marketing activities and future purchase behavior and responses (Godey, Manthiou, Pederzoli, Rokka, Aiello, Donvito, and Singh, 2016:5835). In addition, brand equity encompasses the positive emotions, opinions, and purchase intentions that customers hold toward a product. It is essentially the distinctive impact a brand has on a customer's perceptions when they interact with the brand's products or services and plays a significant role in influencing the purchase intentions of customers during the brand selection process. When a consumer chooses one brand over another, even if the alternatives offer more features, it is often attributed to the brand's equity (Rizwan, Al-Malkawi, Gadar, Sentosa, and Abdullah, 2021:352).

### **3.7 CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, this chapter provided a concise yet insightful examination of the symbiotic relationship between brand equity and influencer marketing. It explored the various dimensions of brand equity and how influencer marketing influences them, focusing on brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty. Additionally, this chapter delved into the factors that shape brand equity through influencer marketing. Moreover, the influence of brand equity on consumer purchase intentions within influencer marketing was discussed. This chapter serves as a foundational framework for understanding the interplay of these essential elements in the ever-evolving marketing landscape. The following literature chapter will present the theoretical grounding for this research.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **THEORETICAL GROUNDING**

#### **4.1 INTRODUCTION**

This chapter presents the theoretical underpinnings of influencer marketing, with a particular focus on the Generational Cohort Theory, which serves as the grand theory within this study. Additionally, it delves into metatheories, encompassing the Communication Accommodation Theory, Social Influence Theory, Social Learning Theory, and Source Credibility Theory. The ensuing discussion explores the significance and implications of these theories, emphasizing their synthesis with the study's objectives. Furthermore, this chapter illustrates the interconnectedness of these theories, with a specific emphasis on Generation Y (Gen Y). This foundational theoretical exploration is of paramount importance in comprehending the dynamics of influencer marketing and its impact on consumer behaviour, especially within the Gen Y demographic.

#### **4.2 GENERATIONAL COHORT THEORY (GCT)**

The concept of generations has historical origins dating back to ancient texts, with references found in Ptahhotep's writings around 2400 BCE. These early references associated generations with the transmission of knowledge from one generation to the next and the accumulation of wisdom among older members of society. However, the modern understanding of generational theory began to develop in the late 18th and 19th centuries. During this period, generational theory emerged as an explanatory model for understanding the societal changes brought about by industrialization and democratization, which disrupted traditional ties to family, social class, and geographic location (Jauregui, Watsjold, Welsh, and Ilgen 2018:61). Ryder first proposed generational cohort theory in 1965, with contributions from scholars like Mannheim (1970) and Inglehart (1977) playing a significant role in its early development. A generation is typically considered to span 20 to 25 years, though this duration can vary among different authors (Lappen and Coppin 2020: 3). The key factors defining a generation are the period of birth and the major events associated with that era (Owusu, Combey, and Oppong 2022:83). Generational cohorts consist of individuals born during the same time period who progress through life together, leading to shared experiences of external events during their late adolescence and early adulthood (Liang and Xu 2017:122).

Generational cohorts are typically defined based on how individuals in different stages of life are shaped by significant historical and social events. The Generational Cohort Theory (GCT) posits that groups of consumers share common experiences related to social, economic, political, and cultural

events during their early adulthood. These events may include economic shifts, wars, political ideologies, technological advancements, and social upheavals. These external factors play a crucial role in shaping the values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of consumers, effectively distinguishing one cohort from another (Ivanova, Flores-Zamora, Khelladi, and Ivanaj 2018:1163). The defining moments experienced by these groups leave a lasting impact on their values, attitudes, preferences, expectations, and purchasing behaviors, creating a generational identity that remains relatively constant throughout their lives (Liang and Xu 2017:122).

Generational cohorts are often given specific names and associated year ranges. Examples include the Silent Generation, also known as Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y, with various names like Millennials, Digital Natives, or Echo Boomers (Arsenault, 2004). For instance, Zemke, Raines, and Filipczak (1999) outlined the following birth year ranges for the generations: Silent generation (Traditionalists) (1922-1943); Baby Boomers (1944-1960); Gen X (1961-1980); Gen Y (1981-2000). However, it's worth noting that the time spans assigned to generational cohorts are not uniform and can vary by country, and in some cases, they may overlap due to the profound impact of the internet. Nevertheless, since cohort effects evolve linearly rather than categorically, changes tend to progress steadily over time instead of shifting abruptly at specific birth-year boundaries. Generation Y, also known as Millennials, Digital Natives, or Echo Boomers, is considered one of the most significant consumer groups after the Baby Boomers, primarily due to their substantial purchasing power (Ivanova et al. 2018:1167). This generational distinction is believed to have a significant influence on communication styles, knowledge, skills, and various aspects of life, including socialization and consumer behavior (Thangavel, Pathak, and Chandra 2019:2).

#### **4.2.1 Significance of Generational Cohort Theory and Generation Y**

The theory of generational cohorts is highly relevant as it introduced the concept of generations as a tangible reality, where people born around the same time with similar experiences perceive themselves as forming a generation. A generational cohort can be defined by the distinctive formative experience(s) shared by members of a birth cohort. Hence, the essence of generational cohort theory is that a generation of individuals who experience the same political, economic, and social events during their early years will develop a similar set of beliefs, values, and behaviors. This implies that each generational cohort is molded by the events that occur during their year of birth and the subsequent 10 to 20 years. Generations are seen as cyclical, and the next generation can be predicted based on a repeating cycle of the prophet, nomad, hero, and artist (Thach, Reiwie, and Camillo 2019:3). This theory is widely used by academics and marketers to derive segmentation variables (Lappenman and Cappin 2020:2). Apart from market segmentation, generational cohorts

find applications in other fields, including consumer behavior and management. For instance, it can be employed to explore how human values affect product preference concerning a product's utilitarian and symbolic meanings. It can be used to investigate variations in buying involvement in purchase situations among individuals from different cohorts. Additionally, it can be used to examine the relationship between consumption patterns and generational cohorts (Fernandez-Duran 2016: 436).

In the consumer context, generational cohorts can significantly influence purchase patterns and shopping behavior. This assumption serves as a fundamental basis for consumer segmentation. Hence, comprehending the values and motivations of a generation has become crucial for targeting specific consumers, as each generation is guided by distinct ideas about the type of lifestyle they aspire to achieve (Lissitsa and Kol 2019: 549). The analysis of generational cohorts is of importance to organizations and their brands, as it provides them with a means to design and implement marketing offerings that are tailored directly to meet a specific generational cohort's needs, wants, desires, and other characteristics. As discussed earlier, the millennial generational cohort is very important to organizations and brands due to its current and future buying power (Duffett 2020: 36). Generational marketing strategies are based on the concept of generations and their major features, as well as the differences between them. Generational branding provides a concrete example of how such strategies may be implemented. Companies may then develop products that best suit a given generation. For example, when targeting Generation Y, marketers may propose products reflecting values resonating with this generation. Buying decisions are often significantly conditioned by one's generation; peers often guide product and brand choice, directly or indirectly. Thanks to tremendous technological advances and consumer connectedness, it is easy for companies to adapt their offerings to the unique expectations of younger consumers (Chaney, Touzane, and Slimane 2017: 183).

#### **4.2.2 Implications of Generational Cohort Theory**

While generational cohorts have been widely used for segmentation, criticism of cohort theory has emerged in the 21st-century literature. A prevalent concern is the Western perspective often applied as a global standard, which doesn't universally hold true and can lead to misleading assumptions about non-Western cohorts. The absence of universal boundaries for generational cohorts contributes to ambiguity and potential meaninglessness in their definitions. For instance, despite the widespread use of terms like "Millennials," one could argue that a Millennial in Mali differs significantly from a Millennial in Japan. Additionally, other scholars have identified limitations stemming from unpredictable events and technological advances disrupting the predictable cycles proposed by generational cohort theory. Such disruptions can result from unforeseen occurrences like wars and

terrorist attacks, as well as the transformative influence of technological innovations such as smartphones and social media. Furthermore, concerns regarding generational cohort theory encompass the challenge of defining the precise start and end dates for each cohort. The dates associated with defining a generation exhibit considerable variability, ranging from 7 to 10 years, and, in some cases, extending up to 20 years. Another issue is the considerable diversity found within the same age cohort when considering country or cultural contexts. Each national subculture is intricately intertwined with a specific generational cohort, resulting in divergences between countries or regions. Lastly, certain researchers have reported a lack of significant distinctions between generational cohorts in particular studies, challenging the notion that generations uniformly exhibit distinct values and behaviors (Thach et al. 2019:3).

The notion of Generation Y, often referred to as Millennials, is widely accepted as a generational cohort among marketing practitioners and scholars. However, it's important to note that there is no consensus on the exact start and end dates for this generation (Purani, Kumar, and Sahadev 2019: 216). Despite potential limitations and some confusion surrounding these generational terms, generational cohort theory has gained increasing prominence over the past few decades, particularly within the realm of consumer products marketing. This approach involves a meticulous examination of the values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors specific to a targeted generation, shaped by the significant events and socioeconomic trends during their formative years. Through such analysis, it becomes possible to develop marketing strategies and promotions tailored to appeal to that particular generation. Consequently, generational cohort theory serves as a valuable method for market segmentation and offers distinct advantages beyond conventional demographic, psychographic, or geographic segmentation strategies (Thach et al. 2019:4).

#### **4.2.3 Generation Y Cohort**

Generation Y, often referred to as "N-gen," "Echo Boom," or "Millennials," comprises individuals born between 1981 and 1995. Growing up with early exposure to technology had a profound impact on their behavior, resulting in significant psychological, social, and cognitive consequences. They are known for their 24/7 connectivity through multiple devices, which has influenced their worldview. This generation questions established authority, challenges traditional hierarchical structures, and expects personal and equal-to-equal interactions with brands and companies (Chaney et al. 2017: 182). Generation Y is commonly characterized as "tech-savvy" and is recognized for its preference for informality, rapid learning, and embrace of diversity. Members of this generation are often associated with strong morals and ethics. They are considered the "elusive new youth market" due to their resistance to advertising and their exposure to unethical corporate scandals. Additionally, Generation Y is described as the best-educated and most culturally diverse generation in history,

marked by its tolerance and open-mindedness toward alternative lifestyles (Ivanova et al. 2018: 1164). Duffett (2020:36) underscores that the millennial generational cohort is exceptionally technologically advanced compared to previous generations, as they have spent their entire lives in a digital environment with online technology, including computers, mobile devices, the internet, social media, and various other digital ICT platforms. This tech-savvy generation considers behaviors like posting and viewing online videos, tweeting, texting, instant messaging, online social networking, and e-commerce purchases as fundamental aspects of their daily lives. They seek products that align with their personality and lifestyle. Members of Generation Y tend to allocate more of their spending on personal or digital services rather than apparel, often carrying higher levels of debt and earning less on average than previous generations. Social media platforms, such as Facebook, play a crucial role in their communication, and they use various mobile resources and platforms. They are more inclined to seek out specific brands and prioritize quick shopping, in contrast to Baby Boomers (Eger, Komarkova, Egerova, and Micik 2021:3).

#### **4.2.4 South African Generation Y Consumers**

Recent mid-year population estimates in South Africa reveal that Generation Y makes up roughly 36% of the total population in the country, establishing them as the most substantial generational cohort within South Africa. Generation Y wields considerable influence within the nation, prompting substantial interest from researchers. Notably, they not only constitute the largest generational segment but also hold the distinction of being the most educated and technologically proficient group in the nation's history (Strydom 2021:4). Millennials, also known as Generation Y, place significant importance on achieving a harmonious work/life balance, exhibit diverse needs, highly value technological connectivity, prioritize social responsibility, and demonstrate a strong penchant for travel. In the South African context, millennials possess unique attributes due to being the first generation not entirely raised under apartheid. They currently represent one of the most significant segments of the working-age population and are transitioning into parenthood, thereby influencing the emerging Generation Z. Consequently, they are exposed to greater levels of political, social, and economic representation compared to previous generations. Thus, constructing a comprehensive profile and gaining insights into the desires and motivations of potential millennial travelers could unlock the consumption potential of brands in South Africa (Douglas, Hoogendoorn, and Richards 2023:2).

Generation Y, referred to as the post-apartheid cohort encompassing those born between 1977 and 1994, represents the first generation that came of age in the post-apartheid era. Generation Y South Africans, despite the persistent political and socio-economic reverberations of apartheid, have been presented with increased opportunities for education, employment, and wealth generation. This cohort of Generation Y South Africans enjoys various privileges, including access to recreational amenities, improved educational prospects, the ability to connect with other parts of the world, engage in chat rooms, and observe the dissemination of global youth culture through flat-screen TVs. They continually partake in post-apartheid celebrations and have adopted an unceasing revelry lifestyle. They harness the power of the internet to stay updated on the latest fashion trends and conduct various business transactions via their mobile phones. The rapidly evolving social, technological, and economic landscape in South Africa places considerable pressure on Generation Y South Africans. It drives them not only to pursue successful careers and amass substantial wealth but also to seek inclusion and acceptance within higher social circles. As a result, they prioritize the acquisition of status-oriented products such as homes in coveted neighborhoods, high-end automobiles, top-tier televisions, smartphones, branded clothing, and footwear. Given the significant population of Generation Y South Africans and their improved income-generating opportunities, the demand for these products represents a lucrative prospect for marketers. It's noteworthy that a clothing voucher ranks high on the annual birthday wish list of Generation Y South Africans (Duh and Struwig 2015:95).

#### **4.3 COMMUNICATION ACCOMMODATION THEORY (CAT)**

According to Suputra, Ramendra, and Swandana (2020:5) Communication Accommodation pertains to the capability to adapt, modify, and regulate one's behavior in response to interactions with others. This theory encompasses two principal communicative strategies, namely convergence and divergence. Convergence involves communicators adopting comparable communicative behaviors as their conversational counterparts, often with the objective of seeking social endorsement, fostering affiliation, and establishing interpersonal likeness while concurrently diminishing social distance. In contrast, divergence constitutes a strategic choice in which communicators accentuate the distinctiveness of their communication behaviors in comparison to their interlocutors. This emphasis on distinctiveness is frequently driven by the aspiration to underscore different social identities and extend social separation (Dragojevic, Gasiorek, and Giles 2015:37). Presbitero (2021: 5) points out that regardless of the type of strategy, communication accommodation is asserted to be important particularly in maintaining social valence.

Empirical studies concerning Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), have demonstrated that communication convergence can be achieved through adaptations in various dimensions, encompassing verbal elements like language and information density, para-verbal features such as utterance length, speech rate, accent, vocal intensity, pausing frequencies, and lengths, and non-verbal attributes, including gestures, head nodding, facial expressions, posture, smiling, and gaze. These adjustments tend to evoke positive perceptions, influencing not only the communication itself but also the perception of the interlocutor in terms of warmth, credibility, trust, sociability, and attractiveness, and the dynamics of the relationship, including aspects like relational satisfaction, closeness, the establishment of a collective identity, and intimacy (Deng, Hine, Ji, and Wang 2021:2).

Interactants often hold specific expectations regarding the ideal degree of accommodation which are frequently rooted in preconceived stereotypes about outgroup members, as well as the prevailing social and situational norms, underscoring the inherent nature of human interactions. It's important to recognize that people often form these preconceived notions about others even before any interaction formally commences (Presbitero 2021:5). For example, consider the prevalent negative stereotypes associated with young adults, who are often perceived as being over-indulgent, lacking motivation, displaying disrespect, disloyalty, having a deficient work ethic, and showing an excessive reliance on technology. Such negative stereotypes could potentially pose challenges in interactions with consumers from different generation cohorts. These generational stereotypes hold significance in the communication process, as individuals tend to adapt their communicative behaviors by either converging or diverging based on their perceptions of their conversational partner and the established social norms. These strategic communicative adjustments can generally be categorized as accommodating, non-accommodating, or avoiding when interacting with individuals from other generational cohorts (Anderson and Morgan 2017:381).

Consumer communication accommodation transpires within digital platforms, primarily social media networks, encompassing both social and technical dimensions. The social components involve the platform's participants and the strength of their social connections, while the technical aspects pertain to the platform's design and functionality (Xu and Lee 2020:3). Social media serves as a hub for interpersonal communication, requiring advertisers to adhere to platform norms by engaging with users in a human-like manner. This engagement includes the incorporation of human imagery, such as an anthropomorphic brand image, a human representative of the company, or even a human representative of the consumer. Moreover, it involves employing a human voice, characterized by interpersonal communication language (Chang, Li, Yan, and Kumar 2019:1029). These human representatives play a vital role in disseminating user-generated content, comprising ratings, reviews, photos, and videos. On the social front, consumers utilize social media to obtain information from their peers and to share their own experiences, emotions, and information, particularly through

reviews. Maintaining a presence characterized by frequent, informal, and active interaction is pivotal in the realm of social media (Xu and Lee 2020:4). Hence, it comes as no surprise that leveraging influencers for promoting sales is gaining momentum, eclipsing traditional digital advertising. Social networks have evolved into essential environments for consumers to express their thoughts and emotions. Individuals with a significant internet presence often amass a substantial following, unified by shared characteristics (Davidaviciene, Meidute-Kavaliauskiene, and Paliulis 2019:41). The unique nature of social media communication engenders a sense of connection with others without physical presence, partially facilitated using emoticons to convey emotions and attitudes. Emoticons, which abstractly represent facial expressions conveying basic emotions like joy and sadness, are frequently combined with appropriate text (Venter 2017: 502). Smutny, Hancsincs, and Sule (2020: 140) maintain that effective interpersonal communication, it is vital to comprehend the emotional nuances of a message, which is naturally embedded in the three most used tools for this purpose: emoticons, emojis, and stickers, all of which have evolved over the past three decades. This is used by influencers who consistently produce updates on social media within their respective domains of expertise, where they communicate compelling messages to their followers that combine both informative and entertaining elements. The content shared by influencers often provides valuable information regarding product alternatives and other informative content, fostering an enjoyable experience for their followers (Lou and Yuan 2019:60).

Davidaviciene et al. (2019:42) adds that influencers have garnered interest and trust among their followers by sharing images, thoughts, immersive blog posts, and video content. Influential figures leverage the opportunities presented by digital communication to swiftly reach their target audience, making recommendations for products or services within a digital context. Thus, communication accommodation serves to enhance communication efficiency between the sender and receiver while enabling the sender to maintain a positive social identity. The Communication Accommodation Theory pertains to both the content and language of communication, with the content and linguistic style being inherently intertwined. This understanding extends beyond the verbatim content and aids in comprehending the underlying message that the sender intends to convey (Xu and Lee 2020:4).

#### **4.3.1 Significance of Communication Accommodation Theory**

The utilization of internet technologies in marketing communication is increasingly prominent. Notably, a substantial portion of revenues is now derived from online marketing communications, with a primary focus on strategies involving personalization, multimedia integration, and real-time interactions (Krizanova, Lăzăroiu, Gajanova, Kliestikova, Nadanyiova, and Moravcikova 2019:5). Notably, in the realm of social media, where brand-consumer interactions predominantly occur through written communication, the role of language is even more pronounced compared to offline interactions. While offline communications leverage a combination of verbal, para-verbal, and non-verbal cues, brand posts on social media primarily rely on written language which can profoundly affect consumer perceptions, subsequently influencing consumer engagement behaviors. Although previous research has extensively explored the effects of various brand post attributes, including content type, media type, and posting frequency, providing insights into how marketers can strategically design brand posts to enhance consumer engagement which serves as the primary medium for conveying meanings, wielding significant influence in shaping consumers' perceptions, memory, attitudes, and behaviors, there has been limited exploration of the impact of brand communication on consumer engagement (Deng et al. 2021:1).

Communication accommodation theory is a suitable theoretical framework that holds promise for enhancing communication as it is primarily concerned with the adaptive changes individuals make to align their communication with the person they are conversing with, as well as the extent to which individuals perceive their conversation partners as making similar adjustments. This theory is rooted in the concept that individuals modify their communication to align with the speech patterns and style of their conversational partners. It also offers several advantages when applied in practice, including increased communication efficiency, the cultivation of a more favorable social identity, and the sender's attainment of approval from the receiver (Momand, Sacuevo, Hamidi, Sun and Dubrowski 2022:2). Furthermore, in the nearly five decades since its inception, Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) has evolved into a versatile and cross-disciplinary theoretical framework. It is extensively employed to forecast and elucidate various communication processes in a diverse array of social settings, encompassing interpersonal, intergroup, and intercultural interactions. CAT adeptly connects micro-level and macro-level factors to account for communication dynamics and their outcomes. As one of the most influential behavioral theories of communication, CAT significantly contributes to our comprehension, forecasting, and explanation of situations where individuals from different social groups and cultures engage in communication (Hoffman and Zhang 2022:78).

### **4.3.2 Implications of Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT)**

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) has emerged as an exceptionally pragmatic approach for examining interpersonal and intergroup communication, especially in contexts where speakers come from diverse backgrounds. This interdisciplinary framework proves valuable in analyzing language and communication studies. CAT's significance extends beyond mere language adaptation; it also encompasses the importance of adjusting paralinguistic cues to meet the conversational needs of interlocutors. Despite CAT's relevance in interpersonal and intergroup studies across various domains, limited attention has been given to its five sociolinguistic strategies and their potential in offering effective communication strategies (Odhiambo 2022:15). On the other hand, research applying CAT to mediated contexts, dating back to the late 1990s, sought to understand the extent to which accommodative behaviors occur in non-live, asynchronous interactions. Much of this CAT research has delved into micro-level speech and language behaviors that trigger accommodation. In online communication, many of these language features are especially conspicuous and directly observable. Given that computer-mediated communication often lacks visual or audio cues, the role of linguistic cues to identity and group membership becomes particularly pronounced. Consequently, accommodation takes place during online communication over the course of message exchanges (Giles, Edwards, and Walther 2023:8).

Recent scholarship has extended the application of Communication Accommodation Theory to elucidate virtual interaction within the online environment. CAT has been employed to depict the communication accommodation processes occurring in global online networks. Notably, it was discovered that the linguistic styles of brand posts exert influence on consumer engagement behaviors, including actions like liking, sharing, and commenting, as part of the communication accommodation process. Although CAT is traditionally used to explain individuals' verbal interactions in the physical world, its application in online environments is still in its nascent stages (Liu, Gong, Zhang, and Ma 2023:3). Robust patterns of accommodation within communication have emerged, with adaptations being closely linked to various socio-demographic and psychological factors of interlocutors, including aspects related to social power or status and personality type. Notably, in terms of gender dynamics, there is a common occurrence of asymmetrical convergence, where women exhibit more pronounced adjustments in their language use when communicating with men, compared to the opposite scenario (Hilte, Vandekerckhove, and Daelemans 2022:243).

Additionally, demographic attributes of users significantly influence the patterns and frequency of emoji usage in social media. Prior studies have revealed that, both in face-to-face and virtual communication, women tend to be more expressive with their emotions and use emojis more frequently than men. Furthermore, a similar contrast can be observed between different age groups of emoji users, with the younger generation showing a higher frequency and broader range of emoji usage in comparison to the older generation (Shah and Tewari 2021:115). Intergenerational interactions, which are increasingly prevalent, are often characterized as challenging or dissatisfying by participants in conversations. This dissatisfaction and the associated negative sentiments often stem from widely held stereotypes and differences in communication objectives, needs, and behaviors. Such challenges can be particularly pronounced in multi-generational settings with established hierarchical structures (Anderson and Morgan 2017:378). In this intricate landscape of communication dynamics, the Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) offers a valuable perspective to understand the interconnected, two-way influence between users' posts and feedback in virtual brand communities (VBCs). Employing effective text analysis technologies, such as those applied to textual information within the online environment, enables firms to gain insights into users' emotional states and even predict their behaviors (Liu et al. 2022:2).

#### **4.4 SOCIAL INFLUENCE THEORY (SIT)**

The Social Identity Theory (SIT), originally developed by Kelman, is a well-established socio-psychological theory that elucidates how an individual's opinions are molded and their behavior transformed due to social influences. This theory postulates that alterations in attitudes and actions stem from social influence processes, which encompass compliance, identification, and internalization (Zhao, Stylianou, and Zheng 2018:17). Compliance is a process wherein an individual embraces the influence exerted upon them with the expectation of receiving favorable reactions from others or a particular group. They adopt the prompted behavior not out of a genuine belief in its content but in the anticipation of specific rewards, approval, or the avoidance of particular punishments or disapproval by conforming. Identification, on the other hand, occurs when an individual yields influence to establish or maintain a gratifying self-defining relationship with another person or group. The induced behavior is adopted because it is associated with the desired relationship. Internalization, as posited by the theory, takes place when an individual accepts influence because the content of the prompted behavior is inherently rewarding. They embrace the induced behavior because it aligns with their personal value system (Liu, Min, and Han 2020:527). As Li (2013:266) suggests, social influence pertains to how an individual within a social network is swayed by the actions of others, leading to adherence to communal behavioral patterns. This phenomenon is influenced by factors like the extent of one's integration into the social network, the

persuasiveness of the content, and the content's relevance. The interactions occurring between social media influencers and their audience hold substantial sway over their contributions and behaviors (Liu, et al. 2020:528).

As per Li's perspective (2013: 266), there exist two primary categories of social influence: informational influence and normative influence. Informational social influence revolves around the acceptance of information from others as a source of evidence regarding reality. In contrast, normative social influence entails conforming to the expectations set by another person or a group. Marketing researchers, as argued by Zhao et al. (2018:17), have identified three distinct types of social influence, which align with these two categories. These are normative influence, value-expressive influence, and information influence. Informational influence typically manifests as genuine influence leading to a private acceptance of the conveyed message. Normative influence, on the other hand, is defined as the act of conforming to the positive expectations of others, driven by the desire to attain rewards, such as approval, or to evade disapproval. Normative influence is fundamentally socially motivated, addressing individual needs for approval and a sense of belonging. However, it is largely instrumental in nature, signifying a tendency to align with the group's expectations in pursuit of personal gain, which may be more connected to power dynamics than influence per se (Spears 2021:371).

Falk and Scholtz (2018:335) support the idea that social influence, particularly when it involves learning normative information like the preferences of others, serves to encourage and reinforce specific preferences and behaviors while discouraging others. They argue that conformity to social norms, which involves adjusting one's ratings to align with group norms, is driven by valuation processes akin to the reinforcement learning mechanisms that guide motivated behaviors more broadly. Furthermore, value-expressive influence can significantly impact individuals' intentions to use mobile services or engage in online games since it stems from their desire to maintain a sense of belonging within a particular social group (Zhao et al. 2018:17). Consumer research has demonstrated that Kelman's processes can be linked to Deutsch and Gerard's social influence types, where informational social influence aligns with the internalization process, and normative social influence can be achieved through either compliance or identification. More specifically, identification represents a form of normative social influence where individuals conform to their own judgments. In this process, individuals hold certain expectations regarding their own behavior. Both informational social influence and internalization revolve around acquiring knowledge that is beneficial for understanding the environment and addressing specific challenges, such as product evaluation. Gerard's adaptation of social influence dimensions offers a concise and comprehensive framework that captures the fundamental aspects of social influence in consumer contexts (Hu, Chen, and Davison 2019:302). Furthermore, Zhao et al. (2018:17) argue that informational influence

Normative social influence includes compliance and identification, both of which manifest as individuals' efforts to adhere to others' expectations in order to secure rewards, gain approval, and enhance their self-image through association with others. Therefore, Deutsch and occurs through the internalization process when individuals accept influence due to the intrinsically rewarding nature of the induced behavior. They also contend that value-expressive influence arises through the identification process, where individuals adopt a behavior to associate with another person or group that embodies desirable values. In this form of influence, individuals strive to emulate or truly become like the other person by echoing their actions and words. Additionally, individuals often anchor their behavior to a reference group to maintain their self-definition as a member of that group. For example, an academic researcher invests a significant amount of time in research-related activities to uphold their self-defining relationship with the research community.

The fundamental principle of the social influence theory centers on group settings (such as TikTok, as examined in this study) and how individuals' interactions within these groups affect their attitudes, actions, and behaviors. Social influence has the potential to induce changes in attitudes and behaviors, but the extent of these changes can vary depending on the processes by which users accept this influence. While factors related to social influence, attitudes, and behaviors can impact the use of social media, the strength of this influence can differ across various social media platforms (Hazari, Talpade, and Brown 2023:2). Consequently, this concept enhances the effectiveness of translating intentions into actual behaviors within social networks. When consumers become aware of the need to alter or maintain their behavioral patterns, they are more likely to reinforce their own behavioral tendencies, disseminate relevant cognitive structures and practical processes, and influence the decisions of others. Furthermore, the intent of influencers and trailblazers transforms behavioral intentions into actual practices through communication channels and the endorsement of their own behavioral practices. These practices subsequently spread throughout interpersonal networks, leading to increased imitation and convergence (Cui, Lissillour, Cheben, Lancaric, and Duan 2021:1000).

In essence, the influences of peer groups, as reflected in subjective norms, play a pivotal role in shaping behavioral responses, including loyalty. Consequently, unlike previous generations of consumers, millennials, particularly those who are digital natives, place significant importance on personal characteristics and social influences in shaping their attitudes toward brands (Purani, Deepak, and Sahadev 2019: 216). Social influence serves as a means through which consumers access information and find the incentive to establish or replicate new attitudes and adopt behaviors approved by the general public (Cui, et al. 2021:1000). Reference groups, such as social media influencers, wield their influence over consumer behaviors through the establishment of normative standards of behavior (i.e., normative influence), the enhancement of an individual's self-image (i.e., normative influence), and the provision of information in uncertain situations (i.e.,

informational influence) (Matsuo et al. 2018: 43). Norms can be defined as the way in which an individual's behavior is influenced by their perception of significant reference groups, which may include peers, friends, colleagues, relatives, among others. Two fundamental factors underlie this process: normative beliefs that an individual associates with these reference groups and the inclination to act in accordance with the wishes of these reference groups (Purani, Kumar, and Sahadev 2019:217). This concept relates to the perceived social pressure associated with an action. The frequency and intensity of communication between an individual and their significant others play a crucial role in determining the extent to which that person will be influenced by their ideas and beliefs. Social influences represent the most influential element in shaping consumers' intentions to engage in product purchases (Confente and Vigolo 2018:662). As a result, social media influencers have cultivated a strong presence on social media platforms by sharing highly engaging, relatable, user-generated content. They position themselves as experts or, more broadly, present their entire lifestyles. Social media influencers often emphasize their close connection with their followers. Given that many followers assume that peers have no commercial interests, they view these influencers as authentic and trustworthy sources of information. This view aligns with the explanation of social influence within the context of its importance in forming accurate perceptions of reality and responding accordingly, as well as in developing social relationships and maintaining a positive self-concept (Matsuo, Minami, and Matsuyama 2018:43).

When individuals encounter evidence, facts, or any other form of relevant information in the context of a decision under discussion by members of their community, with a focus on making informed, high-quality decisions, informational influence prompts them to reevaluate their stances. It is through this process that individuals acquire additional information, strengthening their confidence in shaping their future attitudes or behaviors. Prior to embracing a particular behavior, individuals assess the successful experiences of other members within their social group. Consequently, social influence can be seen as a mechanism of learning (Li 2013:265). In addition to this, when people are faced with the adoption of new technologies, they tend to consult their social network and are influenced by the perceived social pressure exerted by significant others. Social influence has a positive impact on the intention to embrace online activities, particularly in the context of trust. Significantly, consumer decision processes are greatly influenced by the observation of peers, to the extent that individuals who use socially unacceptable innovations may find themselves isolated from their social group when they lack adequate social support (Matsuo, Minami, and Matsuyama 2018:43).

#### **4.4.1 Implications of Social Influence Theory (SIT)**

The impact of social influence is observable in consumer behaviors, particularly when consumers anticipate specific outcomes and are inclined to follow guidance from influencers. Social influence emerges from both formal and informal relationships with others in society and can be driven by explicit and implicit sources, shaped by elements such as culture, social classes, reference groups, and the opinions of influential figures (Wathanakom 2023:5). Research on social influence demonstrates that an individual's attitudes and decisions are influenced by the opinions of others within the same category (Oc and Bashshur 2013:922). Consequently, many studies make the common assumption that social media influencers (SMIs) inherently possess stronger relationships with consumers compared to traditional influencers or celebrities. In fact, consumers tend to perceive brand-related posts by social media influencers (SMIs) as more trustworthy than posts by celebrities (Rohde and Mau 2021: 2703). This preference for SMIs can be attributed to informational influence. When individuals are presented with evidence, facts, or other relevant information while discussing decisions within their community, with an emphasis on making informed and high-quality choices, informational influence leads them to reevaluate their positions. It is through this process that individuals acquire additional information, which bolsters their confidence in shaping their future attitudes and behaviors. Before adopting a particular behavior, individuals tend to assess the successful experiences of other members within their social group. Thus, social influence can be viewed as a mechanism of learning (Li 2013:265).

The model of social influence delves into the connection between individuals and social systems, and it distinguishes three primary processes of social influence: compliance, identification, and internalization. The focus of this research is on the identification process, which comes into play when an individual seeks to be influenced by others to establish a relationship or maintain a satisfying relationship in which they can define their own identity (Pick 2020:15). This fundamental concept serves as the basis for distinguishing between individuals labeled as (social media) influencers and those who are not. The determination of an individual's level of social media influence relies on social media metrics, which assess both the quantity (e.g., the number of followers) and quality (e.g., engagement and liking levels, including the valence of comments and like-to-dislike ratio) of their relationships. Furthermore, the concept of social influence is deeply rooted in and aligns with decades of robust empirical and theoretical progress in marketing and related fields. It effectively explains a wide range of empirical social phenomena by combining social influence and heuristic thinking (Rohde and Mau 2021:2706).

## 4.5 SOURCE CREDIBILITY THEORY

The source credibility model is a well-established theory within the field of source credibility, and it serves as a valuable tool for explaining or predicting the effectiveness of a message. This model encapsulates the three most influential aspects of the source's impact on purchase intent, brand attitudes, and attitudes toward an advertisement. It posits that the effectiveness of a message conveyed by an endorser relies on consumers' perceptions of the brand endorser's expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. The utilization of a credible spokesperson enhances the persuasive power of the message (Scheinbaum and Wang 2020:4). Source credibility is determined by two key factors: expertise and trustworthiness. Source expertise pertains to a source's competence and qualifications, encompassing their knowledge and skills to make claims about a specific subject or topic. Source trustworthiness relates to how receivers perceive a source in terms of honesty, sincerity, and truthfulness. McGuire (1985) introduced a third element of source credibility: attractiveness, which refers to a source's physical appeal and likability. In a similar vein, Ohanian (1990) defined source credibility as a three-dimensional construct, drawing from prior literature that included trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness (Lou and Yuan 2019:62).

To delineate the characteristics of social media influencers, this study employed Ohanian's Source Credibility model (1990). According to this model, the credibility of a media personality is evaluated based on their expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. Expertise pertains to the individual's competence and knowledge in specific subjects, while trustworthiness concerns the degree to which listeners have confidence in the speaker's message, resulting in a sense of psychological security and acceptance. Attractiveness can be categorized into physical attractiveness and social attractiveness. Physical attractiveness refers to the person's appealing and attractive physical appearance, while social attractiveness involves the extent to which one's beliefs and social standing are perceived as similar to the listener's, often referred to as attitude homophily (Le and Hancer 2021: 514).

Source expertise is closely linked to source credibility and is considered a fundamental mechanism for reducing uncertainty when utilizing user reviews. Expertise is defined as the degree to which the source is seen as capable of providing accurate information. The level of expertise is linked to the source's experience or training. Individuals employ various methods to assess the expertise of the message's author. Expertise can be gauged by factors such as the quantity of reviews posted, the content of these reviews, and the duration of the reviewer's membership on the platform. Perceived trustworthiness of the sender is another determinant of source credibility. When the source is deemed trustworthy, receivers are less likely to doubt the credibility of the information. Information sources and recommendations are considered trustworthy if they are judged to be valid, honest, and directly relevant (Ismagilova, Slade, Rana, and Dwivedi 2020:2).

A highly trustworthy and expert-like social media influencer results in consumers becoming more receptive to the endorsed message, leading to an increased level of acceptance of the promoted content (Chia, Hsu, Lin, and Tseng 2021:7). In the online sphere, individuals have the freedom to express their opinions and feelings regarding products, services, and brands while maintaining anonymity. Consequently, users strive to evaluate the trustworthiness of the contributors to determine whether to accept or reject the provided information. When a consumer perceives that the information comes from a highly trustworthy source, they are more likely to consider the information valuable. Prior research has demonstrated that source trustworthiness significantly influences the perceived usefulness of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) communications (Ismagilova, et al. 2020: 2). Influencers with a high perceived credibility tend to elicit a stronger sense of personal connection with their audience, thereby increasing the likelihood that consumers will view an advertised product as relatable, subsequently leading to a higher purchase intent (Pick 2020:15). Source credibility is a widely utilized factor for assessing the effectiveness of endorsement advertising. When information is conveyed by a credible social media influencer, it has a greater potential to influence consumers' beliefs, opinions, attitudes, and behaviors (Chia, et al. 2021:7).

#### **4.5.1 Significance of Source Credibility Theory (SCT)**

Brands are increasingly turning to social media influencers (SMIs) as a strategy to drive their marketing campaigns and boost sales because of their genuineness and trustworthiness. Consequently, influencer marketing has emerged as a central focus in both theoretical discussions and practical marketing approaches (Rahman 2022:43). To elucidate the distinct characteristics of these social media influencers, this study made use of Ohanian's Source Credibility model (1990) (Le and Hancer 2021: 514). Despite digital influencers being a growing brand communication tool, there is a research gap in analyzing the influence of digital influencers on their followers' perceptions regarding endorsed brands. In cases when the recipient has little or no information except the message being advertised, the endorser's credibility is especially important. To increase the effectiveness of advertisements with influencers, marketers need to focus on source credibility (Bogoevska-Gavrilova and Ciunova-Shuleska 2022:72). The model advocates that individuals instinctively tend to employ stereotypes as a cognitive mechanism for categorizing individuals they encounter. This cognitive process operates instinctively and subconsciously. The dimensions of warmth and competence are frequently used to categorize individuals and nations, resulting in a stereotype content model with four categories: paternalistic prejudice, contemptuous prejudice, envious prejudice, and admiration. Despite the automatic nature of this cognitive process, it is a multifaceted phenomenon with consequences for how a source is perceived.

Source credibility holds a significant role in this process, particularly in the context of celebrity testimonials. In instances where celebrities are harnessed to enhance source credibility, a model referred to as the source credibility model, or source credibility theory, is applied to scrutinize celebrity testimonial advertising and celebrity endorsement. The impact of credibility on message persuasiveness is, indeed, positive, though it comes with nuanced complexities (Seiler and Kucza 2017:2). Source credibility is related to the communicator's character and positive personal characteristics that affect message persuasiveness. The influencer, perceived as a credible source of information, is effective in creating purchase aspirations (Bogoevska-Gavrilova and Ciunova-Shuleska 2022:72). The credibility of a message becomes one of the important factors in the process of influencing others. Reviews about a product will have an influence on consumers' minds and change their decisions to purchase a product. The results of previous studies show that source credibility has a positive and significant effect on purchase intention. In addition, previous research shows that the credibility of sources from online communities influences the purchase intention of consumers in Malaysia. When influencers can provide information honestly and are trusted by consumers, it will increase their purchase intention in the future (Yulianti and Keni 2021:488).

#### **4.5.2 Implications of Source Credibility Theory**

The effectiveness of a credible influencer significantly enhances the persuasiveness of the message. Existing research tends to overlook consumer involvement and often concentrates on just one or two aspects of source credibility theory. Consequently, it is imperative to examine all three facets of source credibility namely, expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness while also investigating the role of consumer involvement (Scheinbaum and Wang 2020:4). Ismagilova et al. (2020:2) adds that previous studies in this domain have predominantly delved into the influence of source credibility on information recipients. However, fewer studies have delved into how distinct attributes of source credibility impact consumer behavior. These studies indicate that expertise, trustworthiness, and homophily can shape perceptions of source credibility, which subsequently leads to more favorable assessments of online reviews. Nevertheless, contradictory findings exist regarding the impact of various aspects of source credibility on other variables. For instance, while some studies have indicated that expertise claims have a weak relationship with the perceived usefulness of reviews for search and experience products on online platforms, they have also found that reviewer expertise has a positive effect on the perceived usefulness of electronic word-of-mouth in service contexts. These discrepancies make it challenging to construct a comprehensive model of source credibility characteristics based on the results of past research. Although some studies have offered literature reviews on eWOM credibility, they tend not to focus extensively on the attributes of source credibility and their influence on readers. Moreover, several studies have subsequently discovered positive effects related to trustworthiness, likability, similarity, interactivity, argument quality, issue involvement, product knowledge, and information credibility on endorsements initiated by

influencers (Rohde and Mau 2021:2704).

A review of the literature reveals that source-credibility theory is applied in topics related to consumer behavior, technology, media, and information. Some research has examined the significant effects of source credibility on attitudes toward a message and purchase intentions. In both studies, it was found that individuals exhibited greater confidence when the source possessed high credibility. Likewise, multiple studies supported the idea that individuals with high credibility, as perceived by receivers, tend to be respected, and their words are more readily accepted. The communicator's personal characteristics play a critical role in the credibility and reliability of the receiver (Serman and Sims 2022: 3). However, it's worth noting that the source credibility model and the source attractiveness model have not been without criticism in this field of research. It is posited that neither model can provide a detailed explanation of the alignment between a testimonial and a specific product. In a three-stage model, the first stage encompasses aspects like culture and image, which are shaped within a social context and transferred to the celebrity. In the second stage, meaning is transferred from the celebrity to the product, ultimately reaching the consumer in the third and final stage (Seiler and Kucka 2017).

#### **4.6 SYNTHESIS OF THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS IN ALIGNMENT WITH RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

**To identify current influencer marketing strategies used to engage consumers in the social media environment.**

➤ **Theory: Communication Accommodation Theory**

Communication Accommodation Theory is centered on the idea of individuals adapting their communication styles to align with those of others. This theory offers a valuable perspective for understanding the reciprocal influence between users' posts and feedback in online brand communities. Research rooted in Communication Accommodation Theory has shown that individuals tend to naturally mirror the linguistic and verbal styles of others when engaging in communication. Just as in face-to-face interactions, online virtual exchanges involve posting and replying. Within the realm of social media, users often share strong affiliations with a brand, and the feedback provided by the brand significantly shapes the content generated by users (Liu et al. 2022: 3). Consequently, this theory can be applied to identify influencer marketing strategies employed by influencers as they adapt to effectively engage consumers on social media.

- **To determine if influencer marketing has changed the way in which brands interact with consumers.**

Theory: Social Influence Theory

Social influence pertains to the adjustments individuals make in their behavior to align with the expectations of their social surroundings. This influence can manifest in response to explicit actions, commands, or requests from influencers, but it can also be driven by individuals' perceptions of how others may think or act (Hollebeek, Sprott, Sigurdsson, and Clark 2021:92). An insight into the workings of both informational and normative influence can provide valuable perspectives on how influencer marketing has transformed the dynamics of brand-consumer interactions. Brands often tailor their strategies to harness the potential of these influential mechanisms.

- **To determine the extent to which influencer marketing sways consumer brand perceptions and purchase intentions.**

Theory: Social Influence Theory

The Social Influence Theory delves into how individuals are impacted by their peers within their social circles. Social media influencers hold the role of opinion leaders for their followers within the social platforms they operate. Social influence encompasses the thoughts, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that are influenced by reference to others. Informational social influence involves the internalization of accepted information, while normative social influence can be achieved through compliance or identification. The primary source of social influence stems from peers, including friends, relatives, and neighbors (Liang, Hu, Islam, and Mubarik 2021:57845). This form of influence takes place when individuals seek guidance from others as a source of information to inform their own behavior or decisions. Here, individuals conform to the behavior or viewpoints of others because they believe that those individuals possess more accurate or valid information. Influencers are perceived by consumers as disseminating information based on their personal sensibilities and interests, establishing them as credible sources of information (Masuda, Han and Lee 2022:2). Given this objective, the Social Influence Theory is well-suited to examine how influencer marketing shapes consumers' perceptions of brands and their intentions to make purchases through content on social media, product reviews, images, and information sharing.

➤ **To identify the level of brand awareness created through brand influencers.**

Theory: Communication Accommodation Theory

Communication Accommodation Theory, as posited by Topaloglu and Dass (2021:754), emphasizes individuals' adaptability in adjusting verbal and nonverbal communication to align with prevailing social norms. This principle extends to written communication, enabling the assessment of whether brands modify their communication approaches akin to influencers' methods when engaging with consumers. Such adaptations could potentially transform brand-consumer interactions, consequently fostering and heightening brand awareness. As social media continues to gain prominence in marketing, marketers are increasingly utilizing social media marketing (SMM) strategies to convey brand messages, aiming to establish a robust and favourable brand image among consumers. The incorporation of entertaining elements in social media brand communication, such as engaging photos and videos on platforms like Facebook and Instagram, effectively captures the attention of pleasure-seeking consumers. This exposure to entertaining brand content, comprising videos, images, and stories, potentially strengthens brand recall and recognition. Engaging with enjoyable elements on social media brand pages contributes to creating a positive experiential link in consumers' minds, increasing the likelihood of brand recognition (Cheung, Pires, and Rosenberger 2018:7).

➤ **To evaluate the degree of Generation Y consumers' trust in brand influencers.**

Theory: Source Credibility Theory

Source credibility theory posits that the effectiveness of a persuasive message is significantly influenced by the character and favorable personal attributes of the communicator. It underscores the idea that an endorser, when perceived as a trustworthy source of information, holds the potential to effectively generate purchase intentions, thereby fostering the desire to make a purchase. Furthermore, the theory suggests that when there are shared cultural backgrounds, demographics, and values between the message source and the recipient, it can enhance the source's credibility in the eyes of the audience (Bogoevska-Gavrilova and Ciunova-Shuleska 2022:74). This theory provides a valuable framework for evaluating the impact of a source on the effectiveness of persuasive messages. Source trustworthiness is centered on how receivers perceive a source, whether as an honest, sincere, or truthful entity (Lou and Yuan 2019:61).

#### Theory: Generational Cohort Theory

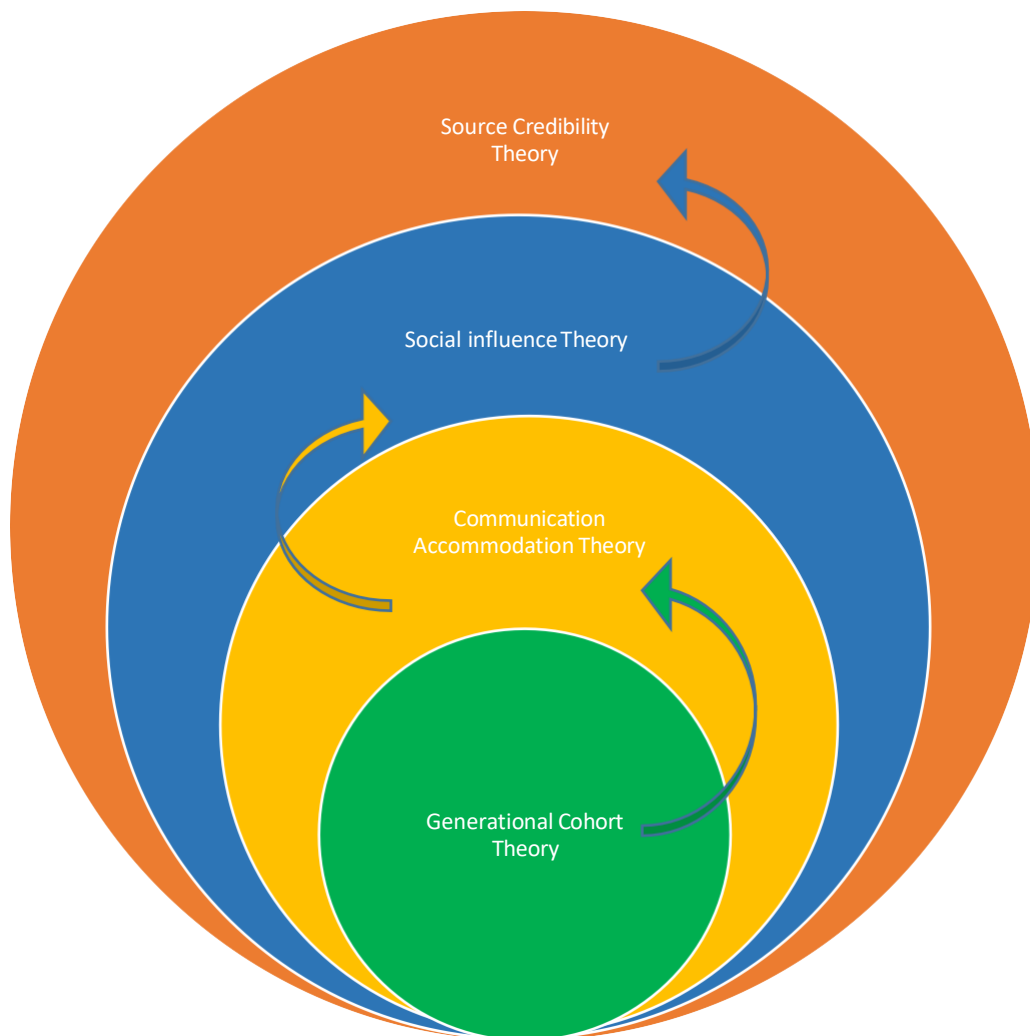
The Generational Cohort Theory posits that each generation possesses distinct characteristics and attitudes. This theory is instrumental in evaluating the levels of trust among Generation Y consumers, also known as Millennials, especially concerning brand influencers. It aids in comprehending how the messages conveyed by influencers resonate with South African Generation Y consumers, rooted in their shared generational experiences and values. Such an understanding is crucial for shaping influencer marketing strategies. Furthermore, it is of paramount importance for marketers to gain insights into the values, needs, expectations, demands, and preferences of various generational cohorts. While earlier generations might not completely trust and engage with online product reviews, Generation Y exhibits a high comfort level with social media and remains consistently attentive to messages conveyed through these platforms. In this context, understanding how different generations place their trust in influencers and how it influences their purchase decisions becomes highly relevant (Cabeza-Ramírez, Fuentes-García, Cano-Vicente, and González-Mohino 2022: 1432).

- **To develop a framework for optimizing influencer marketing when engaging consumers in social media platforms.**

#### Theory: Combination of theories

Developing a comprehensive framework will involve integrating various elements from different theories grounded in this research. Communication Accommodation Theory, Generational Cohort Theory, Social Influence Theory, Social Learning Theory, and Source Credibility Theory will contribute to the development of a framework that guides the effective use of influencer marketing on social media platforms.

#### 4.7 INTERCONNECTEDNESS OF THE THEORIES



**Figure 18: Theoretical Conceptualisation**

As per the Generational Cohort Theory, each distinct generation cohort exhibits variations from others due to unique experiences occurring during different periods. This theory goes on to emphasize that generational distinctions are less influenced by individual age and more so by the

shared impacts and experiences specific to each generation. Consequently, groups of individuals born within the same timeframe and shaped by these common experiences will develop shared values, attitudes, beliefs, and expectations, which endure throughout their lifetime, forming a generational identity. This generational identity plays a substantial role in influencing consumer behaviors and purchasing patterns (Eger et al. 2021:3). Generation Y, commonly referred to as Millennials, had their behavioral patterns significantly influenced by early exposure to technology, resulting in substantial psychological, social, and cognitive consequences. Consequently, their mode of communication is greatly molded by the prevalence of new technologies, the Internet, and social networks, as they maintain constant connectivity across multiple devices around the clock. This interconnectedness has shaped their perspective on the world, fostering a sense of comfort and a willingness to express and disseminate their opinions about brands and companies. They also anticipate having personal, peer-to-peer exchanges with these entities (Chaney et al. 2017:182). Venter (2017: 501) suggests that the techno-centric nature of Generation Y places a strong emphasis on individualism, but it also underscores the need for group interactions, particularly due to their continuous quest for feedback. This generation has developed its unique style of interaction, distinct from that of preceding generations. They actively seek constant connectivity with family and friends, facilitated by various digital devices and social networks, irrespective of location. Key interaction attributes of Generation Y's communication encompass the following:

- Instant – The interaction is perceived as prompt, unpremeditated, and in real-time.
- Playful – The interaction is viewed as entertaining, pleasurable, and stimulating.
- Collaborative – The interaction is seen as cooperative, harmonizing, and communal.
- Expressive – The interaction is regarded as transparent, unrestricted, and vibrant.
- Responsive – The interaction is felt as attentive, swift, and responsive.
- Flexible – The interaction is considered flexible, accommodating, and modifiable.

Electronic communication has gained significant prominence, particularly among Generation Y, as more consumers rely on electronic information sources and perceive them to be more trustworthy than the marketing information provided directly by brands. The credibility of electronic communication hinges on how individuals assess the believability of recommendations from specific sources, whether individuals or organizations. As a result, the judgment of the receivers regarding source credibility plays a pivotal role in the early stages of the information persuasion process (Daowd, Eldabi, Ul-Shan, Cao and Karsemsarn 2021:1). Considering the above assertions, Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) has been employed to elucidate how Generation Y conversationalists adapt their communicative behaviors, especially when communicating with others

from different age groups, in response to disparities in verbal and nonverbal communication (Omori, Otta, and Stark 2021:2). This is because individuals adjust aspects like their accent to align more closely with their conversation partners. This accommodation goes beyond accent and encompasses variations in speech rate, pronunciation, utterance length, and pauses. People make these linguistic adjustments in an attempt to be accepted or understood by others by aligning their speech with those of their interlocutors. People also alter their speech rate, pitch, volume, word choices, syntax, and even topics of conversation to increase or decrease similarity with others, and to facilitate or inhibit social relationships and interactions. Consequently, communication, characterized by brevity and clarity, serves as a powerful social tool, enabling individuals to make a positive impression, influence others, and reduce social disengagement, all in the pursuit of their social objectives (Elhami 2020: 193). This also sustains social influence has the potential to influence influencer communication strategies, although self-learning adjustments present practical challenges, as they involve the entire social system. Key aspects of social learning that influencer marketing focuses on include influential peer effects (influence arising from early adopter effects) and general peer effects (influence from similar individuals) (Hao, et al. 2018: 2).

Informational social influence is closely associated with social learning theory, which emphasizes the role of self-efficacy in altering fearful and avoidant behaviors. Expectations of personal efficacy derive from four primary sources of information: performance accomplishments, vicarious experiences, attempts at verbal persuasion, and emotional arousal (physiological states). Of these, vicarious experiences and verbal persuasion are most pertinent to social and personal influence. Specifically, consumer resistance to innovative products or services tends to decrease when they observe others adopting these innovations without adverse consequences or when they receive encouragement from others to embrace such products or services. Consumer innovativeness affects adoption behavior through the social learning process. It is posited that social influence diminishes innovation resistance by reducing perceived complexity risk, performance risk, and entrenched usage patterns. On the other hand, normative social influence or conformity pressure encompasses the urge to align with the positive expectations of others. This type of social influence includes 'utilitarian influence,' which arises when others can observe the behavior and have the ability to mediate rewards and punishments, and 'value expressive influence,' which occurs when members of a social group affect an individual's self-concept. It is worth noting that informational and normative social influences exert differing effects on responses to new products or services (Matsuo et al. 2018: 44). In the same vein, source credibility characterizes the trustworthiness and believability of both the information and its source. This is because credible individuals are those considered trustworthy and the information, they provide is deemed believable. The persuasiveness of a message is

contingent upon the recipient's perception of the source's credibility, as a highly credible source positively influences consumer perceptions towards the brand (Muda and Hamzah 2021:445)

## **4.8 CONCLUSION**

This chapter laid a solid theoretical foundation for the exploration of influencer marketing and its ramifications. By delving into the Communication Accommodation Theory and various metatheories, this chapter has demonstrated the multifaceted nature of this field. It highlights the importance of understanding the theoretical underpinnings in translating the concept of influencer marketing, particularly in the context of Generation Y. These theories will serve as a guiding framework for our analysis and interpretation of influencer marketing's role in shaping brand perceptions and purchase intentions among Gen Y consumers. The following chapter will transition from this theoretical framework to the empirical realm, presenting the methodological approach adopted in this research.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **5.1 INTRODUCTION**

The preceding chapters recognised the variables in this research and conferred the theoretical framework that supported it. This provided a background for the combination of methods needed to achieve the objectives of this study. This chapter presents the research design adopted by this study. The nature of the research problem, and the research objectives are described. Alongside these, the research methodology, is discussed in relation to the research design, methods, approach, sampling technique and instrument design. The statistical and analytical techniques, as well as issues of reliability and validity are also addressed.

#### **5.2 THE RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY**

Rahi (2017:1) describes a paradigm as a set of scientific beliefs and assumptions about world views that research investigation. Thus a paradigm should be followed to minimise bias (Rahi 2017:1). A paradigm is a conceptual spectacle that a researcher uses to identify the research approach and data analysis methods that will be used in a research project by examining the aspects of methodology in their research project. They further add that the four aspects of a paradigm are ontology, epistemology, methodology and axiology Kivunja and Kuyini (2017:26). Morgan (2014: 37) denotes that the initial and controversial work of Kuhn (1962) propagated the theory of paradigms. Kuhn's version of paradigms which was later developed into another version by Lincoln and Guba (1985) focused on the evolving nature of paradigms. Lincoln and Guba (1985) utilised the abovementioned elements of paradigms like methodology (the study of methods of knowledge production), epistemology (the nature of knowledge), as well as ontology (the nature of reality) to narrate the fundamental assumptions of realism and constructivism.

The study's pursuit of understanding the interplay between independent and dependent variables, seeking to determine how they contribute to consumer's attitudes, perceptions, and behaviour, resonates deeply with the positivist paradigm. This correspondence becomes clearer when viewing positivism through the framework of the hypothetico-deductive model of science. Park, Konge, and Artino (2019:690) suggest that this model unfolds as a cyclical process, originating from theories gleaned from existing literature. This foundation allows to craft hypotheses suitable for empirical testing, structure an experiment by operationalizing variables determining elements to manipulate and measure through group assignments, and execute an empirical study grounded in experimentation. Additionally, following a deductive approach, as emphasized by Bryman and Bell

(2011:11), hypotheses were formulated based on established theoretical knowledge, subjecting them to empirical scrutiny. This approach guided this research's systematic data collection process, ensuring a methodical exploration of our research objectives.

On the other hand, pragmatism, described by Creswell (2014:10), focuses on understanding real-world situations rather than relying solely on experiments, observations, or the pursuit of absolute truths. It prioritizes the research problem over a specific approach. This allows for flexibility in adopting different viewpoints, assumptions, and using various methods to comprehend a problem and gather and analyze data. According to Creswell and Clark (2011:50), integrating different methodological approaches enhances the overall research design and compensates for potential limitations in any single approach.

Therefore, this study will adopt both positivism and pragmatism for an exploratory sequential study, due to their complementary nature which can significantly benefit the research objectives. Silva, Siqueira, Araújo and Dornelas (2017:71) sustain that positivism and pragmatism are complementary, with positivism's focus on empirical observation and measurable data, that aids in the quantitative phase of the study, offering structured and numerical insights derived from surveys, supporting the need for objective data collection and statistical analysis, providing clear patterns and correlations. While pragmatism allows for flexibility in the research approach, accommodating the qualitative preliminary phase involving interviews. This emphasises practicality and problem-solving, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon through open-ended exploration and interpretation of participants' experiences and perspectives. Together, these philosophies bridge the gap between qualitative and quantitative methods, ensuring a holistic view of the research problem, from complex exploration to empirical validation. Hence, this study adopted multiple paradigms and utilized a mixed methods approach to better address the research objectives.

### **5.3 RESEARCH DESIGN**

A research design serves as a plan that guides what, how, and why a researcher observes and analyzes a specific subject (Abutabenjeh and Jaradat 2018:241). It acts as a blueprint detailing the methodology, data collection, and analysis techniques to be employed in conducting the research (Wagner, Kawulich, and Garner 2012:21). This aligns with the research questions or hypotheses formulated based on gaps identified in the literature review (Delost and Nadder 2014:237). According to Wiid and Diggenes (2017: 40) there is no specific procedure to follow for the marketing research process. One must ensure that all key aspects get addressed. Mohajan (2018:1) argues that the necessity for each research approach to be systematic, disciplined, and clear to yield appropriate

results. Additionally, as highlighted by Delost and Nadder (2014:237), a suitable research design is crucial for the success of a research endeavour.

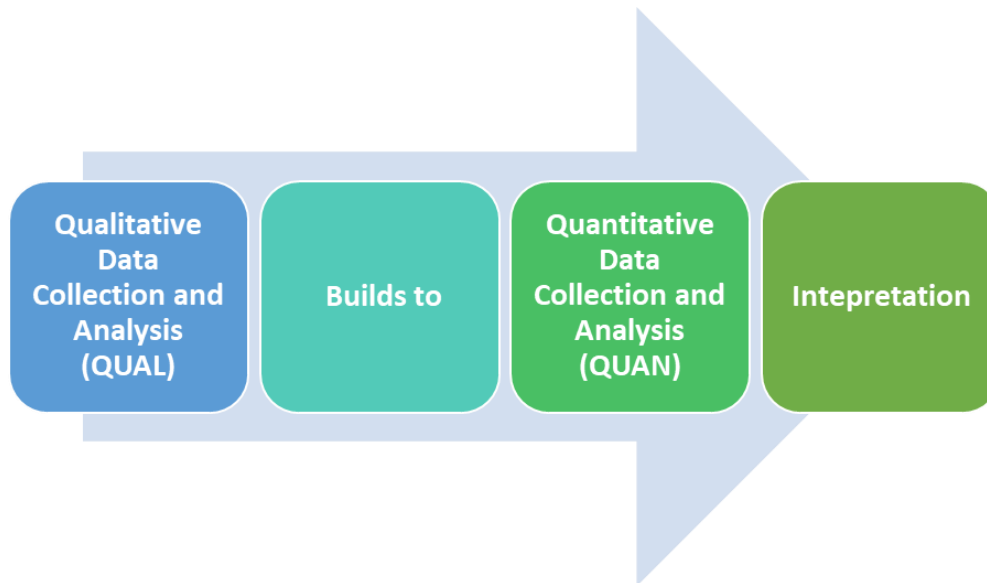
A research design may be descriptive, causal, or exploratory in nature (Kent 2007:16). Clow and James (2014: 34) assert that a researcher in both descriptive and causal designs has an excellent comprehension of the research question or problem, while Van Zyl, Joubert and Stack (2017:87) imply that unlike the aforementioned designs, an exploratory design relies on various practical considerations which result from an inductive empirical research, literature review in quantitative research and research propositions or hypotheses in circumstances where there is little or no information. As a result, this study will employ an exploratory research design. Exploratory research is usually conducted to clarify perplexing circumstances or to identify potential business opportunities. Although it is not projected to deliver evidence that can be utilized in decision making, supplementary research in exploratory design is intended to deliver more decisive evidence (William, Zikmund and Babin 2010:52).

In order to hypothesize the relationship between qualitative and quantitative research components, the researcher revert to the following design typologies:

- **Sequential explanatory:** collection and analysis quantitative data is done before that of qualitative data which is used then used to interpret and explain quantitative results.
- **Sequential exploratory:** qualitative data is collected and analysed thereafter, quantitative data is collected and analysed and integrated at the level of interpretation.
- **Sequential transformative:** the researcher gathers either quantitative or qualitative data first and then integrate results at interpretation stage.
- **Concurrent triangulation:** here both quantitative and qualitative data are collected analysed at the same time in a singular study and this typology is also known as convergent design.
- **Concurrent nested:** this typology gives one research approach priority over the other and guides the study, while the other method gets grounded within the main research approach.
- **Concurrent transformative:** in this design theoretical frameworks which are seen in the research question(s) guide methodological choices (Alavi, Archibald, McMaster, Lopez and Cleary 2018:528).

To get a deeper understanding of how influencer marketing impacts the thoughts and buying decisions of Generation Y consumers in South Africa, this study took a broad look at this concept. It used a two-step method that began by gathering and studying qualitative information, then followed up with collecting and analysing quantitative data. This approach aimed to strengthen the reliability

of the findings and address any unanswered questions. It also helped in building on new ideas that emerged from these discoveries (Gogo and Musonda 2022:2).



**Figure 19: Exploratory Sequential Mixed-Methods Design**

Source: Creswell 2014: 220

Qualitative research was carried out to explore deeper into the issue at hand. The insights gained from this qualitative phase were used to shape the design of the questionnaire used in the quantitative part of the research. Berman (2017:6) explains that in an exploratory approach, researchers initially gather and analyse qualitative data, using the emerging themes to shape a questionnaire for further investigation. This approach led to three analysis stages: one after the initial qualitative phase, another after the subsequent quantitative phase, and a third at the integration stage, which connects and builds upon the initial qualitative findings.

## **5.4 RESEARCH APPROACH**

A mixed method approach draws inferences from both qualitative and quantitative approaches for a single study or research. In a mixed method approach data is collected and analysed, thereafter integrated in the research findings (Palinkas Mendon Hamilton 2019:424). In this instance the qualitative approach explores a concept while the quantitative one justifies the findings of research questions and hypotheses (Creswell and Hirose 2019:1). Thus, a mixed method approach draws its strength from both the qualitative and qualitative approaches (Berman 2017:5).

The table below compares the characteristics of both quantitative research and qualitative research.

**Table 4: Characteristics of Quantitative vs Qualitative Approaches**

| Factor                             | Quantitative                                                                                         | Qualitative                                                                                                                                                            |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Data Collected</b>              | Hard data                                                                                            | Soft data                                                                                                                                                              |
| <b>Data Collection Techniques</b>  | Passive interaction through experimental design and/or questionnaire                                 | Active interaction with target population                                                                                                                              |
| <b>Research variables</b>          | Small number                                                                                         | Larger number                                                                                                                                                          |
| <b>Sample population</b>           | Large population                                                                                     | Small population                                                                                                                                                       |
| <b>Data collection</b>             | Before and after experiment                                                                          | On-going observation                                                                                                                                                   |
| <b>Relationship</b>                | Short term and distant                                                                               | Long term and intense                                                                                                                                                  |
| <b>Research context</b>            | Controlled                                                                                           | Uncontrolled                                                                                                                                                           |
| <b>Data analysis</b>               | Statistical analysis (descriptive and inferential statistics) using specific procedures such as SPSS | Interpretive/Content analysis through patterns, themes, and narrative synthesis, using descriptive statistics and coding, including frequency, ranking and percentages |
| <b>Research findings</b>           | Deductive through inferences from data                                                               | Inductive through critical reflection and creativity                                                                                                                   |
| <b>Research instruments/ Tools</b> | Questionnaires, calculator, computer, etc                                                            | Researcher as instrument, tape recorder, interview guide, computer, transcriber, typewriter, etc                                                                       |
| <b>Interpretation of results</b>   | Positivism Objective                                                                                 | Interpretivism Subjective                                                                                                                                              |
| <b>Nature of inquiry</b>           | Research tradition Correlational, descriptive, casual-comparative, experimental, etc                 | Hermeneutics, ethnography, case studies, phenomenography, etc                                                                                                          |

**Source:** Sognuro (2002: 5)

Sekaran and Bougie (2013:147) state that, unlike qualitative research, quantitative research is used in studies that seek to generalise the results of a large population. However, Sognuro (2002:6) advocates that disparities between the two methods should not cover up the reasonable similarities that make them compatible. Wiid and Diggins (2017:111) further denote that an extensive understanding of the approaches is significant to the success of the entire research.

Therefore, in consideration of the above characteristics of these two methods, the research objectives, and questions, as well as the nature of the research samples, a mixed-method approach was deemed suitable for this study. The other motivation for the use this approach was to obtain extensive and different perspectives from both the influencers and consumers on influencer marketing. Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009:35) support that a mixed-method allows the researcher an opportunity to explore and confirm questions and as a result, verify and develop theory in the same study. Primary data in this study was gathered in two phases, beginning with the qualitative phase which collected data by use of online interviews, and information from the literature review was used to inform the questionnaire. Thereafter, a quantitative phase followed. The qualitative phase collected data by use of an online survey implemented on various digital media channels.

**Table 5: Overview of the Qualitative and Quantitative Research Approaches**

| Characteristics       | Qualitative approach                      | Quantitative approach |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Paradigms/assumptions | Interpretivism                            | Positivism            |
| Methodology           | Inductive and intuitive                   | Deductive             |
| Methods               | In-depth interviews and document analysis | Surveys               |
| Analysis              | Thematic analysis                         | Statistical analysis  |

**Adapted:** O'Leary (2014: 121)

#### 5.4.1 Qualitative Phase

A qualitative research approach is an inductive social action technique that focuses on how people interpret and understand their personal experiences of a phenomenon to make sense of their individual social reality (Mohajan 2018:2). Wiid and Diggines (2017:97) support that qualitative research aims to understand the social or human problem and further state that it builds a complex and holistic picture, made of words, documenting in-depth views of respondents, and carried out in their natural environment. It is exploratory and seeks to explore how and why a phenomenon occurs to describe the nature of an individual's experience or to develop a theory (Berman 2017:5). This can be done in the form of data collection through interviews, journals, diaries, immersions, open-ended questionnaires, or observations (Mohajan 2018:2). And the analysis and interpretation of this data cannot be quantified or summarised in numbers (Wiid and Diggines 2017:97). This study undertook qualitative research to understand the information that lay beneath the research problem.

#### **5.4.1.1 Target population and sampling method**

A target population is a collection of subjects that the research project aims to produce findings on. The basic elements of a population are usually the people, housing units, households, or parts of an organization. These elements are definitive and can be counted (Fricker 2017: 3). Delost and Nadder (2014: 237) add that a population is the whole set of objects or individuals with similar characteristics related to the research project. These characteristics determine how the research participants are selected to partake in the study and this is done through an eligibility criterion that the researcher defines. This study obtained opinions of South African social media brand influencers with the hope of acquiring a full picture of all opinions and attitudes regarding influencer marketing. According to Utian-Preston (2019). There are 152,791 verified influencers on Instagram and 69 488 on Twitter, and of these statistics, South Africa has 63 influencers on Instagram with over 1 million following, and 53 on Twitter. However, there are also over 200 000 unverified South African influencers on these social media platforms (Utian-Preston 2019). In a qualitative study that focuses on an exploratory study, a smaller sample size is more representative than a larger sample size (David and Sutton 2011:234). Therefore, ten South African social media brand influencers formed a sample size for this study. Farrugia (2019:69) also supports that to allow detailed exploration and the richness of data collected, qualitative research works with a small number of subjects that are sufficient to study in-depth.

Sampling in qualitative research starts with recognising whether respondents are eligible to take part depending on the objective of the research as they need to have experience or exposure or with the content under investigation (Rutberg and Bouikidis 2018:211). In line with the aforementioned, the researcher identified potential participants who met the requirements of this study. This population was chosen using a purposive sampling which is a type of non-probability method (Zikmund and Babin 2010: 424). This study needed to purposefully select South African influencers due to their pivotal role as trendsetters and opinion leaders within the South African Generation Y consumer demographic. By engaging with this specific group of influencers, the study aimed to gain insights into how their marketing strategies and content impact the attitudes, perceptions, and purchasing decisions of Generation Y consumers in South Africa. Their unique position and reach within this demographic made them a crucial population for understanding the dynamics and effectiveness of influencer marketing in this context.

#### **5.4.1.2 Pilot Study**

A pilot study is an evaluation phase that follows the research design while a pre-test is a particular phase of assessment that comes after the overall design although it's before gathering data. Testing the measuring instrument is important to reduce the likelihood of bias so the study yields quality data (Gobo and Mauceri 2014:260). A pilot is also conducted to review the practical aspect of the study on subjects that meet the requirements of the study, although they are not included in the original study sample and so is the data collected in the same pilot (Creswell 2014: 207). To evaluate the length and the structure of the interview guide, transparency of questions, vocabulary, grammar, and to determine the suitability of the participants to address the research problem, a pilot study was conducted with 4 participants from using the same set of questions intended for the full study. Consequent to the pilot study, several observations were made. The research process encountered one logistical challenge initially, primarily related to scheduling interviews due to conflicting availability, prompting adjustments in timelines to accommodate diverse participant regions. Feedback on instruction clarity was generally positive, though minor confusion around the question, "Describe your audience" which necessitated clarifications through rephrasing. Unexpected technical glitches disrupted data collection, leading to pauses and follow-ups to ensure comprehensive coverage. Participant engagement varied across interview segments, impacting data depth, leading to refinements in interview techniques to elicit more specific insights. Moreover, diverse experiences among participants underscored the subtle nature of influencer journeys, revealing contrasting views on platforms, brand collaborations, and audience engagement strategies.

#### **5.4.1.3 Data Collection**

A personal invitation to take part in this study was sent out to social media influencers through an email and in this email the purpose of study was explained, confidentiality was assured, and their consent was requested. Qualitative interviews were used to collect data from the social media influencers. According to McGrath, Palmgren, and Liljedahl (2019:1002) qualitative interviews allow the researcher to explore matters that are significant to the interviewee's experiences in-depth, giving the researcher a thorough understanding of how particular concepts are perceived and experienced. Due to the relationship between researchers and participants and the focus on the exploration of human experiences, interviews are one type of data collection tool which have been connected to the naturalistic paradigm and qualitative research (McGrath et al. 2019:1002).

According to Johnson and Turner (2003:308), the following are the benefits of qualitative interviews:

- Useful for exploration and confirmation
- Allow probing by the interview
- Allow good interpretative validity
- Can provide in-depth information
- Good for measuring attitudes and most other content of interest
- Moderately high measurement validity for well-constructed and well-tested interview protocols
- Relatively high response rates often attainable

In qualitative studies, semi-structured or structured interviews are the most popular data collection tools (Hawkins 2018:493) due to their ability to invite creative intelligence and reflexivity with regards to methodological, theoretical and ethical research elements (Brown and Danaher 2017:78). As a result, this employed in-depth semi-structured interviews to explore issues that might be relevant to incorporate in the questionnaire and more importantly to obtain qualitative knowledge in everyday language instead of numerical data. Hawkins (2018: 493) further suggests that face-to-face interviews have been the primary way to collect data but with technological advances, various options such as email, text message, telephone, and videoconference can now be used for data collection.

Internet tools such as electronic interviewing with Zoom, Skype or other computer assisted techniques have mutually beneficial results for both researcher and participants due to their respective affordances (Brown and Danaher 2017:77). In this study, data was collected by use of online interviews conducted on Zoom and Microsoft teams with selected South African social media influencers to make sense of their role in influencer marketing. These interviews sought to establish the type of programmes the influencers run, their relationships with brands and with consumers, the choice of social media channels they use, as well as their views and attitudes towards objectives of their role and results of their activities. One of the advantages of online collection is increased accessibility of a geographically diverse population. Online interviews also provide an opportunity for a face-to-face communication with body language and other non-verbal communication that other online methods cannot afford as well as decreased chances of social desirability bias because of the researcher's physical absence (Heath, Williamson, Williams, Harcourt 2018:31).

#### **5.4.1.4 Development of the measuring instrument**

When selecting an interview technique to use, researchers need to consider several factors such as the aim of the research, the pros and cons of the data collection technique including costs, time, accessibility, and both researcher and participants' familiarity and comfortability with technology (Hawkins 2018:493). All 10 questions that made up the semi-structured interview guide for this study were informed by the key overall aim and the objectives of this study as well as information from the literature review. To invite participants to express their feelings, ideas, opinions, sentiments, and personal experiences that may have been omitted while developing the interview guide, open-ended questions were designed to collect data for this research. To allow participants to become accustomed to the line of questions, a funnelling approach in which questions were set to begin with broad questions that progressively narrowed down to more focused questions (Tofade Haines and Elsner, 2013:2), was used in this research interview guide. Along with the suggested questions, the interview guide identified particular themes. According to Wiid and Diggins (2013:95), it is significant that the researcher is efficient and asks probing questions that extract detailed answers and guide the participant back to the theme whenever necessary. The semi-structured nature of the interview schedule allowed for probing as well as additional questions emanating from the interviewee's response.

#### **5.4.1.5 Data Collection (Interview process)**

The researcher began by informing the participants that the interview was being recorded and required their consent. With the aim of minimising errors in the interview data, the researcher started each interview with a general introduction which provided the background of the study and the purpose of the research and how it would benefit the individual and brands and the marketing industry. The interview followed a logical flow and while open-ended questions were used to collect data, probing questions were also posed to gather in-depth information. Efforts were made not to interrupt participants during the interview sessions and to avoid bias. Participants spoke freely and did not show any signs of distress or fear. Data collection continued until the point of data saturation, which is when the researcher stopped collecting data because information given no longer generated new insights or revealed new properties (Creswell 2014:297). Interviews were intended to last forty-five minutes to an hour affording participants to answer questions in a comfortable atmosphere without feeling rushed. The interviews were recorded in the zoom meeting room and Microsoft teams meeting alike and thereafter saved to the researcher's google one drive account. Notes were also taken during the interviews and made part of the raw data that was analysed. After the interview, the recordings were saved to One drive, then transcribed to a text format for analysis. The transcribed sent to each participant for final comments before being incorporated into the study.

#### **5.4.1.6 Data Analysis Approach**

The qualitative approach does not necessarily follow a particular systematic guideline. Instead, its focus is on reliability to improve data acceptability (Akinyode and Khan 2018:173). The researcher becomes a tool for analysis when analysing qualitative data by making coding, theming, data decontextualising, and recontextualising decisions. All qualitative approaches have specific strategies for collecting, documenting, and assessing data analysis processes although it is the duty of the researcher to ensure the consistency and trustworthiness of data (Nowell 2017:2). Thematic analysis is a relevant qualitative research method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns of large amounts of data (Scharp and Sanders 2019:117). It is a highly flexible method that can be customised to the needs of a study, affording the researcher an in-depth yet complex amount of data. It is also a comprehensible method of analysis that does not necessarily need the technological and detailed theoretical expertise of other qualitative methods. It is further beneficial for comparing different insights and cultivating unforeseen perspectives as well as reviewing important elements of extensive data by using a well-structured technique to handle data which results in an organised and straightforward report (Nowell 2017:2). When analysing data for this study, the researcher followed Braun and Clarke's iterative thematic analysis process which includes the following six steps:

- Data transcription,
- Generation and categorising of codes,
- Themes development,
- Themes review,
- Themes characterisation and labelling, as well as
- Locating exemplars (Scharp and Sander 2018:118).

This study used semi-structured interviews, in which data was faultlessly transcribed and effortlessly analysed by the researcher. When coding, the researcher focused on the way particular features of data were presented or treated and the frequency of their occurrence, then collated the subsequent codes into themes by putting together data was relevant to one issue. The researcher then verified that the themes that arose matched the generated codes and the overall data. Firstly, data was effortlessly transcribed personally by the researcher, then coded according to the themes that arose. Once verified, the themes were then defined and labelled based on what was communicated. Lastly, the researcher identified significant examples that were used by participants in relation to objective of this study as supporting evidence to the themes.

#### 5.4.1.7 Trustworthiness:

According to Churchill and Lacobucuci (2010:59), the overall success of a research design is dependent on the extent of authenticity and credibility in which the insights and ideas are established. Validity in a qualitative study is used to determine the authenticity of the results in respects to the researcher, participant, and the reader (Cresswell 2014:201). It is significant that a qualitative study seeks to firmly validate its scientific ability to acquire in-depth information about a concept under study without losing sight of the researchers' intricate subjectivity in the context that is changing or developing. In qualitative research, validity can be described in various terms such as trustworthiness, rigor, quality or even appropriateness (Hayashi, Abib, Hoppen 2019:98).

**Table 6: Criteria to ensure trustworthines**

| ASPECT        | NATURALISTIC TERM | METHOD                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|---------------|-------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| TRUTH VALUE   | Credibility       | Member checks.<br><i>Taking the final report back to participants to establish their agreement on the accuracy of the findings.</i><br><br>Triangulation.<br><i>Check evidence from different sources and verify.</i><br><i>This will include the quantitative data.</i><br><br>Peer debriefing.<br><i>Approach external individuals who are willing to question and discuss.</i><br><i>Discussion of any negative or contrary information improves credibility.</i> |
| APPLICABILITY | Transferability   | <i>Use description that is rich and thick and will take readers to the scene.</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| CONSISTENCY   | Dependability     | Code-recode procedure.<br><i>Coding and then repeating the procedure two weeks later.</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| NEUTRALITY    | Confirmability    | Ensure objectivity.<br><i>Reflect on any possible bias and remove it if evident.</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |

**Source:** Adapted from: Creswell 2003: 201-203; Guba 1981: 80

To ensure trustworthiness in this study, peer debriefing and member checks were conducted to ascertain accuracy. Transcribed interview reports were sent back to participants to check and pass comments as correct on text ascribed to themselves. One participant added a few notes where the video recording was not audible. Most participants indicated satisfaction, apart from a few minor grammatical alterations. Peer debriefing was held with the moderator after each interview and once the material had been transcribed. This helped to ensure credibility. Objectivity was ensured by using an external individual to transcribe the recording of the interviews to remove any potential bias. The researcher reassessed data repeatedly to ensure that the constructs, categories, explanations, and interpretations made sense and that they were error-free. The above-mentioned activities were all done to ensure the trustworthiness of the qualitative data.

### **5.4.2 Quantitative Phase**

A quantitative research approach is a deductive and positivistic method that seeks to examine a concept by collecting quantifiable data in numerical form. To produce explanatory, predictive or confirmatory results, quantitative research is usually used to assess relationships between variables in social science studies (Ragab and Arisha 2018:7). To determine relationships between variables, hypotheses describing supposed relationship or outcomes from the question being researched are developed (Rutberg and Bouikidis 2018:211). As a result, it is effective to answer a what or how question of a given relationship. The questions are also quantifiable, direct, and usually include expressions like, what proportion? What percentage? To what degree? How much? And how many? This enables researchers to determine demographics of the sample, to quantify usage, to assess behaviours and attitudes, identify trends or clarify what is known anecdotally (Goertzen 2017:12). Unlike qualitative research, a quantitative study measures the degree to which ideas, theories and constructs are related (Wiid and Diggines 2017:111).

Advantages of Quantitative method:

- The results are considered numerical, measurable, observable, and fact-based due to their quantitative nature.
- It simplifies the administering and analysis of large volumes of data.
- Quantitative data makes it easier to highlight changes and differences.
- It is easier to make comparison of numerical data.
- It allows for development of quantitative assessment indicators
- It accommodates enquiries about causality, generalizability, or magnitude of effect (Basias and Pollalis 2018:94).

In consideration of the above benefits and the nature of this study, influencer marketing insights that were generated during the qualitative phase were confirmed through the quantitative phase of this study. The initial qualitative phase explored, sought to understand and generated influencer marketing insights. These insights were then further examined and confirmed in the subsequent quantitative phase, which involved statistical analysis or data measurement to validate the findings obtained from the qualitative phase.

#### 5.4.2.1 Population\target population

A population is a collection of people that a study aims to carry out research on and develop conclusions from (Barnsbee, Barnett Halton and Nghiem 2018). Barnejee and Chaudhury (2010) support that a target population in is a whole group on which information needs to be established. It is of the utmost important that a target population is well understood prior to initiating fieldwork (Murphy 2016:6). According to Turner (2019:8) when designing the sampling strategy, the population units are described as elements and when put together a list of these elements of the target population are classified as sampling frames. Thus, a target population's characteristics or a subset thereof should be clearly described (Barnsbee, Barnett Halton and Nghiem 2018). Below is a sampling frame that describes the characteristics of this study population.

**Table 7: Sampling Frame**

|                          |                                                                                                                    |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Target Population</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All Generation Y Consumers in South Africa</li> </ul>                     |
| <b>Sample Units</b>      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Economically Active Generation Y consumers in South Africa</li> </ul>     |
| <b>Sampling elements</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Generation Y Consumers who are active on Social media networks</li> </ul> |

The motivation for focusing on this sample was because generation Y, also referred to as millennials, are aged from eighteen years old to early thirties and there are over 10 million Millennials in South Africa, with majority owning a feature phone or smartphone, and three out of four access the Internet and social media via mobile devices (Duffett and Wakeham 2016:6)

#### 5.4.2.2 Sampling strategy

A sampling strategy is a prearranged plan detailing the method of sampling, the size, and process for engaging participants (Moser and Korstjens 2018:10). A sampling method on the other hand is an instrument or process utilised by researchers to rationally choose a subset or a smaller number of individuals or elements from a predetermined population which will be presented as the subjects of the study (Sharma 2017:749). The process of sampling is iterative and may continually develop and need to be improved throughout the research process (Farrugia 2019:69). However, Sharma (2017:749) points out that it is ideal to examine the entire population to attain reliable, valid and accurate outcomes. But if it is not possible to do so, the researcher may then make use of sampling methods to select a sample. Although it is better to study the whole population due to better reliability (Albaum 2012:2), studying a sample is suitable for research due to time, convenience, and cost (Sharma 2017:749).

According to Sekaran and Bougie (2010:296) a sample is a subgroup of the entire research population. This subgroup is distinctly classified in a way that elements will be chosen and assessed. And while other methods of classification exist, sampling strategies are usually described as probability and non-probability sampling (Turner 2019:8). Sharma (2017:749, 750) state that probability sampling gives every unit of the population the same probability to be included in the sample while non-probability uses judgement to select elements that needs to be included in the sample. A clear motivation for selection of participants into a sample must be clearly stated in a non-probability sampling (Taherdoost 2016:20). Probability sampling on the other hand is mainly free from bias but is mostly energy and time consuming for a given standard of sampling error (Taherdoost 2016:20). For abovementioned reasons, this study adopted a non-probability sampling method. The table below portrays different types of probability and non-probability sampling.

**Table 8: Probability Sampling vs Non-Probability Sampling**

| Probability Sampling   | Non-Probability Sampling |
|------------------------|--------------------------|
| Simple Random Sampling | Quota Sampling           |
| Systematic Sampling    | Purposive Sampling       |
| Stratified Sampling    | Self-Selection Sampling  |
| Cluster Sampling       | Snowball Sampling        |

**Source:** Sharma 2017: 750

#### **5.4.2.3 Purposive sampling**

Purposive sampling, also referred to as selective or judgmental sampling, relies on the researcher's judgement when selecting research subject that the study needs to investigate. The types of purposive sampling method include extreme case sampling, typical and homogenous sampling, maximum variation sampling, ad expert sampling and total population sampling. While the goals of these methods vary, each of them can provide researchers with the validation to generalise samples that under study in regardless of whether these generalisations are logical, theoretical or analytical in nature (Sharma 2017:751).

#### **5.4.2.4 Convenience sampling:**

Convenience sampling is a technique that collects data from an easily accessible population allowing researchers a time and cost-effective way of collection data (Rahi 2017:3). This is supported by Turner (2020:10) who adds that convenience is more common due to its ease of participants' recruitment as a study may include those who respond first. However, this technique can result in bias due to the nature of the selected sample in terms of population representation.

#### **5.4.2.5 Sample size**

Often quantitative studies strive to take advantage of statistical power by using large sample sizes (Farrugia 2019:69). This is because inadequate sample sizes reduce generalizability and result in unreliable facts. Apart from affirming that larger sample sizes result in reliable outcomes, researchers recommend varying sample sizes although majority endorse a sample size of at least 300. Often sample size suggestions from 50 – 400 in general range. However, the samples normally rated in the following manner, 50 (very poor), 100 (poor), 200 (fair), 300 (good), 500 (very good), and 1000 (excellent) (Carpenter 2018:34). Sekaran and Bougie (2010: 296) stated that although a greater sample size indicates a chance for more reliable outcomes of the study, too large (over 500) a sample size can be problematic, implying that a sufficient sample size for a population of 75 000 to 1 000 000 to be 384. As a result, this study projected a sample size of 500.

#### **5.4.2.6 Data collection**

Quantitative research makes use of formal instruments and structured procedures which allow for a systematic and objective data collection particularly when variables and inferences are quantifiable (Queirós, Faria, and Almeida 2017:370). These structured procedures in a form of experiments or questionnaires collect numeric data in a more organised environment which enables the researchers to control the research variables, and the research questions (Rutberg and Bouikidis 2018:211). Because quantitative research employs an empirical measurement to get objective data or evidence, data collection should follow a protocol that restricts in the investigator from influencing data in any way (Whitehead, Ferguson, Lobiondo-Wood, Faan, Haber 2020:195). Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2007: 103) indicate that various measuring instruments such as standardised tests,

archival records, documentation and questionnaires can be used for primary data collection. This study will use a questionnaire to collect data.

#### **5.4.2.7 Pilot Study**

A pilot study or a pre-test is a small-scale study intended to evaluate various techniques and instruments that are designed to be used for the actual study on a larger population with the aim of assessing the adequacy of their methods and preventing mistakes that cost time and money (Lowe, 2019:117). In addition to reducing the risks of uncontrollable problems during data collection, data analysis and interpretation (Ismail, Kinchin and Edwards 2018:4), a pilot study is also beneficial in detecting how collected data will fall around each research element or theme (Carpenter 2018:34). Rocha da Silva (2017: 4) affirms that a pilot study uses a measuring instrument that will be used on a small sample which replicates the diversity of the target population, and 10-30 subjects are adequate for a pilot study. However, Carpenter (2018: 34) argues that a suitable sample size for a pilot study ranges between 50 and 100 subjects.

To ensure clarity of the data collection instruments used in this study, a pilot study was conducted. This was useful in minimising potential bias and readjusting the measuring instrument before gathering data for the main study. While 4 Social media brand influencers were used to evaluate the interview guide, a pilot study was conducted with 20 Generation Y consumers before it could be utilised in the main study. The study faced technical challenges where one participant encountered access issues, while another struggled with navigating the online platform, leading to incomplete responses. Additionally, unclear or confusing questions resulted in varied interpretations among participants, potentially impacting data reliability. Notably, two questions lacked clarity and were reworded for better understanding, and the researcher identified and removed a duplicated question to streamline the questionnaire. These adjustments aimed to enhance data accuracy and minimize interpretation discrepancies among participants.

#### **5.4.2.8 Measuring instrument**

Although often perceived as a process whereby the numerical representation of subjects features or study objects is allowed (Zyphur and Pierides 2017:9), the objective of measurement in quantitative research is to statistically represent degrees of attributes in a controlled and systematic manner. This will enable the researcher to conduct numerical tests and to analyse differences between groups (Cope and Hagan 2014:431). Questionnaires are the most important measuring instruments for data collection (Smith 2017:75) and were as a result the main data collection tool used in this study. The use of questionnaires for data collection such as the current one is supported by Zikmund and Babin (2013:280).

A questionnaire is a document which contains questions developed to solicit appropriate information for analysis. And is the commonly used primary data collection technique in business research due to its ability to obtain data from a large and geographically dispersed sample as well as the ability to use a wide- ranging options of statistical analysis (Ragab and Arisha 2018:14). While the traditional ways of collecting data through postal surveys, telephonic interviews and through face-to-face surveys are popular in different fields of academia and marketing research, the growing global internet access to online surveys (Regmi, Waithaka, Paudyal, Simkhada, and van Teijlingen 2016: 641). The traditional means of data collection can be time-consuming and costly in that it usually involves fieldwork and, in some cases, requires the use of research assistants to ensure satisfactory collection of data. On the other hand, online surveys have the potential to efficiently and inexpensively gather large amounts of data in a shorter time frame compared to the traditional approaches (Lefever, Dal and Matthíasdóttir 2007:574). As a result, online questionnaires were deemed to be the most appropriate instrument for data collection in this study based on the following reasons:

#### **5.4.2.9 Advantages of Questionnaires**

- **Economic advantage** – Online questionnaires are the most inexpensive form of data collection or survey. Most tools used to create online questionnaires free of charge and those that are charged are of lower financial costs and are self- determined by the number of respondents (Bilanová, Vrábek and Geni 2018:118). Mutepefa and Tapera (2018:12) support that the administrative and financial costs of paper-based questionnaires are twice that of online questionnaires confirming that online questionnaires are less costly.
- **Time and local independence** – Bilanová et al. (2018:118) further indicate that though the design of online questionnaires takes the same time as traditional questionnaires, online questionnaire distribution (usually emailing or sharing on websites and social networks) is more time-efficient. This is because respondents can fill in the questionnaires in their own time affording them enough to understand the questions and provide sufficient answers. Wright and Schwager (2018:255) add that online surveys minimise time taken to control the sample by the researcher as well as the time taken by respondents to fill in the questions.

- **Easy evaluation of closed questions** – According to (Wright and Schwager 2018:255) online questionnaires afford researchers efficiency in data entry as contemporary questionnaire tools often provide non-complex tools for collecting and analysing data. The researcher can see results as soon as the data is collected. These results acquired by automated evaluation have high accuracy compared to manual evaluation (Bilanová et al. 2018:118).

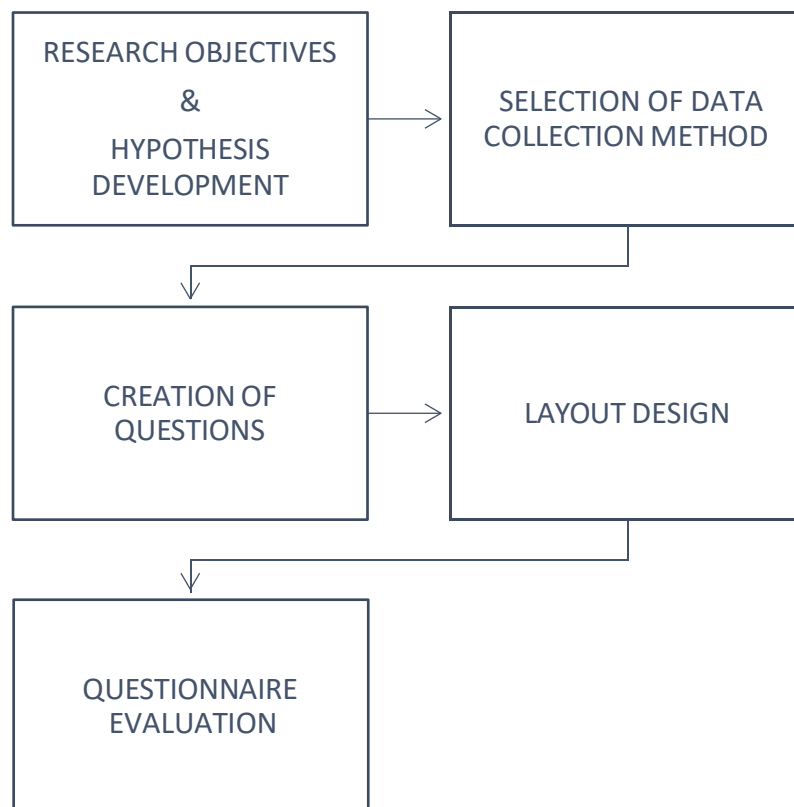
- **Anonymous respondent** – online questionnaires also afford respondents a higher sense of anonymity to potential respondents who are more open to discuss sensitive topics and this increases participation in the survey compared to traditional surveys (Bilanová, Vrábek and Geni 2018:118). Nayak and Narayan (2019:32) support those online surveys result in minimum mistakes, less item refusal and fewer blank items compared to traditional surveys. There are also fewer processing costs while still allowing standardization and anonymity.

#### **5.4.2.10 Disadvantages of Questionnaires**

Although questionnaires are popular and usually preferable for data collection due to their time convenience, Murgan (2015:269) argues that anonymity that respondents are afforded in questionnaires may result in untruthful and inaccurate outcomes. At times, questionnaires do not provide adequate information because respondents are often required to answer too many questions. Salama, Uzunboyu, and Muti (2020:55) substantiate that the reliability of data in online surveys may be questionable due to researcher or mediator absence during questionnaire completion. In addition, questionnaires may be left unanswered or overlooked particularly in online surveys where respondents are usually bombarded with many other surveys, online pranks, and deals.

#### 5.4.2.11 Questionnaire Design

Questionnaire design is one of the most important skills a researcher needs to have to collect appropriate and useful data in a manner that respondents understand and also to allow ease of data coding (Wiid and Diggins 2017:41). While there is no questionnaire format, there are principles that need to be followed when designing a questionnaire in order to yield good quality data (Clow and James 2014:3). Smith (2017:75) further warns that the attainment of most empirical research relies on the quality of questionnaire design and distribution. Therefore, questionnaire development in this study followed the process in Figure 5.2.



**Figure 20: Questionnaire development process**

Source: Author's own design

Questions were designed based on the objectives, hypotheses as well as the findings of the qualitative phase of this study which were both supported by the literature review in order to ensure reliability of the research outcomes. Although open-ended questions are more popular for online surveys, closed- ended questions with pre-set answers were employed in this due to their high response rate as they do not require a lot of processing or cognitive resources (Zhoua , Wanga ,

Zhangb and Guob 2017:1274). Data from closed-ended question is easy to code, capture and analyse as well as afford greater uniformity and consistency (Hyman and Sierra 2016:2). While Desai and Reimers (2018:1426) argue that closed-ended questions can bias the responses, they nevertheless support that closed-ended questions are suitable for online survey are less they need on mouse-press or single key responses. Martin (2006:6) points out that there are six types of closed-ended questions namely, category, listing, rating, grid, and quantity. The questionnaire used in this study applied a mixture of category and rating closed-ended questions. In order to obtain information on consumer perceptions, Likert-scale type of questions was the primary used type of questions for this study. Likert- scales are the most widely used itemised scales in marketing with the endpoints ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree expressing the extent of the respondent's agreement with the items in one of the five response categories (Maholtra 2011:8). Clow and James (2014:16) suggest that researchers can implore the likelihood of consumption or level of intensity that respondents have towards the item in question. Moreover, Likert-scale questions have the potential to acquire interval data that can be analysed using powerful statistical tests instead of just standard deviations, means and frequency counts allowing data comparison across various platforms such as respondents' demographics.

Lietz (2017:253) recommends that double-barrelled questions or statements that are made up of two different verbs or concepts should be avoided when developing questions and this was taken into consideration when developing the questions for this study. Rocha da Silva (2017:4) adds that each question should be objectively interpreted to avoid raising doubts and the entire questionnaire must be rigorously standardised both in its order and in the text. Although this will afford the researcher an innovative and significant understanding of consumers' perceptions and the practices of organisations, attention needs to be given to design and administration in order to obtain meaningful results (Hullard, Baumgartner, and Smith 2017:93). When devising and developing a questionnaire for this study, leading question and negative statement were avoided to keep away from confusing respondents. Statements and questions were kept simple and straight to the point. Efforts were also made to ascertain clarity of the informed consent, questionnaire instructions, as well as the content of the questionnaire. A questionnaire was created in google forms and it was administered by sending a link to respondents through various emails and various social media platforms. The eligibility criteria for the survey were based on respondents' access and engagement in social media platforms as we as respondents had to be part of Generation Y consumers. Questionnaires were accompanied by cover-letter and informed consent to be read by respondents before engaging in the questionnaire.

#### **5.4.2.12 Validity**

According to Ragab and Arisha (2018:15), validity and reliability are significant when evaluating the design of questionnaires. Validity is a unitary authentication of test score inferences that embodies all the evidence supporting intended the interpretation of an instrument (Solimun and Fernandes 2017:1204). Similarly, Sekaran and Bougie (2010:156) describe validity as a measure of how well a research instrument measures a particular item. It encompasses internal and external validity. Internal validity ensures that the study was designed, conducted, and analysed allows for reliable responses to the research questions. It assesses the degree of bias or systematic error, while external validity on the other hand determines if the outcomes of the study can be generalised in different contexts. Though like internal validity, external validity is not computed but based on judgement (Andrade 2018:499).

Although the consensus document advises not to separate validity into subcategories, dividing into groups such as construct validity, content validity, and criterion validity is convenient (Solimun and Fernandes 2017:1204). These subcategories of validity were acknowledged by Sekeran (2003: 206) who also implied that content validity ensures that a measuring instrument include a representative and adequate set of items that cover the concept. In an attempt to ensure validity, the questionnaire used in this study consisted of representative and adequate set of items that covered the topic under investigation. Efforts were made to align the content of the questionnaire with the research objectives, the literature used in this study, as well as the conceptually sound results of the studies conducted by other scholars in order to maintain construct validity. In addition, an exploratory factor analysis of the pre-test was conducted to further address the validity of measures.

#### **5.4.2.13 Reliability Statistics**

The primary elements crucial for accuracy encompass both reliability and validity. Reliability involves gathering multiple measurements from the same subject. A reliability coefficient equal to or exceeding 0.60 is typically deemed "acceptable" for a newly established construct. According to Hoque, Siddiqui, Awang, and Baharu (2018:87), a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.60 or higher signifies a dependable measure of internal consistency. The value 0.7 and above was considered acceptable. As shown in Table 4.7, the Cronbach's alpha value measures for all the constructs were above the value of 0.7, implying a degree of consistency. This indicates the research instrument is reliable.

**Table 9: Assessing the quality and reliability of the survey instrument.**

| Section                                          | Number of items | Cronbach's alpha |
|--------------------------------------------------|-----------------|------------------|
| Important Is Social Media                        | 11              | 0.905            |
| Brand Awareness                                  | 10              | 0.953            |
| Influencer Strategies                            | 13              | 0.935            |
| Engagement/Interaction                           | 10              | 0.938            |
| Consumer Trust                                   | 17              | 0.957            |
| Consumer Brand Perception And Purchase Intention | 17              | 0.925            |

**5.4.2.14 Reliability**

According to Malhotra (2010:318) it is crucial to perform a reliability test to ensure consistency in data collection for different distributions of a measuring instrument. As a result, de Souza, Alexandre and Guirardello (2017:2) define reliability as an ability to produce the same results that portray coherence, consistency, uniformity, and similarity repeatedly. It essentially refers to the internal consistency and equivalence of a measuring instrument that also relies on the use of the measuring tool, the sample and the context in which it is utilised.

Cronbach's Alpha statistic is the most popular technique for examining reliability of questionnaires. It makes use of inter-item correlations (Ragab and Arisha 2018:15). The result of Cronbach's Alpha is numbered between 0 and 1 and 0.7 and higher is an acceptable reliability score (Heale and Twycross 2015:67).

**Table 10: Attributes of Reliability**

| Attributes                                   | Description                                                                                          |
|----------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Homogeneity</b> (or internal consistency) | The extent to which all the items on a scale measure one construct.                                  |
| <b>Stability</b>                             | The consistency of results using an instrument with repeated Testing.                                |
| <b>Equivalence</b>                           | Consistency among responses of multiple users of an instrument, or alternate forms of an instrument. |

**Source:** (Heale and Twycross 2015: 67).

The techniques adopted when addressing the reliability of measures in this study are deliberated further. Cronbach Alpha was used to test the internal consistency of reliability for the quantitative aspect of this study. According to Jain Angural (2017:285) Cronbach Alpha is one of the popularly used methods of testing the reliability of a measuring instrument. An instrument is reliable when the extent to which it measures a concept is consistent or similar. The test relies on pre-testing instrument items through an analysis of the reliability coefficients of items which between 0 and 1. While a coefficient of 0 indicates a lack of reliability, a coefficient of 1 or a number closer to 1 is good. Therefore, the higher the reliability of a measure the better and vice versa (Babin and Zikmund 2013:249). Slattery, Voelker, Nussenbaum, Rich, Paniello, and Neely (2011 834) point out that the validity and reliability of a questionnaire are normally inspected during the administration of pilot study. As a result, Cronbach Alpha Coefficients in this research were analysed using the results of data collected from the pilot study to determine the reliability of the measuring instrument ahead of the actual survey.

Overall, the subsequent measures were considered in order to determine and improve both validity and reliability of the questionnaire in this study:

- A pilot study which provided learning points and helped improve the reliability of this study was conducted.
- Two measuring instruments (Questionnaires and in-depth interviews) were used.
- Questions used in both the questionnaire and in-depth interview were based on the objectives of the study.
- All questions were made simple, and straightforward in order to accommodate all levels of intellectual capacities among the respondents.
- A multi-mode survey approach was used for data collection.

- Pilot study was done for both the quantitative and the qualitative studies.
- A larger sample was used in an effort to provide more accurate results as opposed to using a smaller sample.

### **5.4.3 DATA ANALYSIS**

Data analysis is the systematic synthesis and arrangement of research data (Neuman, 2011:487). Its purpose is to yield comprehensive results in the form of formulae and theories (Ragab and Arisha 2018:7). Relevant analytical approaches vary depending on the depth of the research problem and are selected based on the nature of the research problem, research design and datasets (Babin and Zikmund 2013:59). According to Malhotra and Birks (2010:410) analysis involves manipulation, ordering, categorising, and summarising data and interpreting it in a meaningful way. Wilson (2010: 200) sustains that it is a systematic organisation of data in a way that can be used to test hypotheses. In this study an exploratory sequential mixed methods design was employed. Therefore, data was analysed in two phases with results from the qualitative analysis first used to build the measuring instrument for the quantitative phase of the study.

#### **5.4.3.1 Qualitative data**

Qualitative data analysis usually materialize in the form of thematic analysis, discourse analysis and content analysis. Thematic analysis, which has been used in this study categorises and segments data in order to identify suitable patterns for date interpretation and necessitates thorough and careful studying of raw data in order to acquire individualised data meanings, to enrich data description as well as to identify and explain relationships between variables (Mathews and Ross 2010: 373). Nowell, Norris, White, and Moules (2017: 2) assert that thematic analysis is easily adjustable to needs of different studies due to its flexibility and is highly valuable when summarising crucial components of a large data set as it adopts a more structured method of data handling that results in a well organised and clear final report.

This following section shows the processes followed in the analysis of qualitative data:

### ***Coding and analysis***

According to Smith (2017:137) preliminary coding, often referred to as open or line by line is first stage of coding that involves identifying primary themes or ideas from collected data. While Meta-coding, also known as axial or focused coding is the second stage of coding that involves thorough assessment of themes or ideas that were identified during preliminary coding to identify greater themes from those reflected in the preliminary stage. Following the above process, transcripts from this study were analysed by summarising and classifying statements into themes. The category of statements was then coded through preliminary and meta-coding with the assistance of ATLAS.ti software. Data gathered from this phase was used when designing questionnaires that were used to collect data in the quantitative section of this research.

#### **5.4.3.2 Quantitative data**

According to Queiros, Faria and Almeida (2017:370), numerical data analysis is achieved through statistical procedures such as SPSS, Stata, and R. Thus, data collected in the quantitative phase of this research was analysed with the use of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS version 24). Zikmund and Babin (2013:336) also suggest that a meaningful presentation of data is achieved by use of descriptive statistics. In this study, descriptive statistics were used to present data in the form of percentages, frequency tables, graphs means, cross tabulations and standard deviations to provide simple and clear summaries about the measures and samples (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill 2012:173). Analysis of data in this study began as soon as data was collected from the participants from all the online platforms that questionnaires were distributed through. 475 of a total of 500 questionnaires that were distributed to the Generation Y South African consumers through various social media platforms and Emails were completed.

Conclusions and generalisations about the sample population were achieved with the use of inferential statistics. According to Picardi and Masick (2014:180) inferential statistics are used to test hypothesis in a population. This kind of statistics also use vigorous statistical tests to yield significant values of the tested hypothesis (Salim and Sulaiman 2011:124) as well as the structural Equation Model (SEM) which was used to test the adequacy and strength of the proposed relationships between observed and latent variables, the strength of the relationships between variables. In order to investigate the role of influencer marketing on the South African Generation Y consumers, factor analysis, ANOVA, and structural equation modelling. All analysis was performed using SPSS and AMOS version 29 were applicable and interpreted at  $\alpha=0.05$ . Factor analysis was performed to determine the basis of factors variability or differences in the data set. Finally, to establish the relationship between all the variables in this study, the Pearson correlation tests ( $r$ , correlation coefficients) were utilised.

## **5.5 SCOPE OF THE STUDY**

The scope of this study is confined to understanding the art of influencer marketing within new media with a specific focus on the communication process between the influencers and Generation Y consumers. A comparison between brand communication and influencers' communication to the consumers will also be made, as a profound understanding of modern marketing practices performance within social media needs to be established. The study will also focus on investigating the perceptions of both influencers and consumers towards brands as well as the consumers' willingness to purchase the brands.

## **5.6 DELIMITATIONS**

As a result of the interest in this study and the method with which the research will be conducted, it will be delimited to individuals who have access to the internet and are active on social media networks. Moreover, this study will be delimited to South African Generation Y consumers as well as influencers who particularly have an active online presence on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube due to the broad nature of social media. The study was also limited to the borders of South Africa. The survey for consumers was carried out on various social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp as well as via electronic mails (Email). These are the most popular and widely used social media platforms amongst South African consumers. On the other hand, the interviews with social media influencers were conducted on Zoom, Ms Teams, and Google Meet.

## **5.7 LIMITATIONS**

Given that the respondents were drawn from Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and Electronic mails (E-mails) only, the sample size became a limiting factor as other social media platforms used in South Africa were not explored for the survey. It was also not feasible to translate the questionnaires in all the 11 South African languages, therefore Language was another limiting factor as questionnaires were only made available in the English language.

## **5.8 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Moral values aimed at guiding people's behaviour in society are called Ethics. However, professional ethics are specifically focused on controlling behaviour in a work environment, guiding professionals when they work with moral implications (Thomas 2004:90). Flick (2014:49) further elaborates that ethics are concerned with protecting research participants. Be it Economic, physical or mental, all situations that may potentially put individual or group participants at the risk of danger or any form of harm are addressed by ethics (Churchill et.al. 2010:42). Completely ethical behaviour is considered as being objective, unbiased, and acceptable and is stimulated by one's moral values. Therefore,

good morals resemble the concept of right and deficiency thereof resembles the concept of wrong (Zikmund and Babin 2010:87).

The Durban University of Technology's Ethics Committee granted the researcher ethical clearance to conduct this study. Various ethical practices for both the qualitative and the quantitative study were greatly considered in this study. Participation was completely voluntary, and no one was coerced to take part in this study. The study required the participation of South African Generation Y consumers who are active on social media, therefore a letter enlightening them of the motives behind the study was presented to them. Participants were alerted that the results of the study will be revealed to the interested parties which allowed them to make informed decisions about whether to partake in the study. To ensure voluntary participation, no one was coerced to participate in this study if they are not willing to. Participants were asked to fill in and sign a consent form before they could partake in the study.

Confidentiality and anonymity was ensured as respondents were asked not to include their identity and were informed that they could withdraw from the survey for any motive they may consider necessary as suggested by Creswell (2009:89). To ensure anonymity, confidentiality and protection from harm, participants' true identity was concealed by using code names during interviews, and the interview recording has been saved using encrypted memory card for safety, and transcripts have been kept away from the public. Raw and analysed data from both the qualitative and quantitative studies was archived in the researcher's personal drop box and will be kept there for two years, and thereafter be deleted permanently.

## **5.9 CONCLUSION**

This chapter has presented the research methodology adopted by this study. The research design, research paradigm, research approach, and sampling strategy employed were highlighted in this chapter. An exploratory sequential mixed method approach that commenced with gathering and analysis of qualitative data before proceeding to collection and analysis of quantitative data was employed in this study. This chapter also highlighted an overview of the adopted instrument design, measuring scale, data collection procedure and data analysis. While semi-structured questions were used to collect qualitative data, quantitative data was collected by the use of closed-ended structured questionnaires which were administered to respondent through various electronic platforms. Four Social media brand influencers were used to evaluate the reliability and validity of the interview guide while the questionnaire was pre-tested on 20 Generation Y consumers participated before it was used in the main study. Thematic analysis was employed in the qualitative stage of this study while quantitative analysis was statistically analysed using several tests which are discussed in this chapter. The subsequent chapter will provide a presentation, analysis and summary of the qualitative research outcomes.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF QUALITATIVE FINDINGS**

#### **6.1 INTRODUCTION**

Having discussed the literature that underlies the research problem in Chapters 2, 3 and 4 and explained the methodology used in this study in Chapter 5, this chapter outlines the results of the first phase of the research which is described as the qualitative phase. This chapter presents the qualitative analysis which was reported on these six preliminary themes: Brand Awareness, Influencer Strategies, Consumer Engagement/Interaction, Consumer Trust/Influencer credibility Brand perception and Purchase Intentions. The main objective of this phase was to gain a better perspective of influencer marketing, and to contribute towards the development of the questionnaire which was employed in phase two. The data collected was analysed using the process of thematic analysis. Rich descriptive data was obtained from ten participants by use of semi-structured interviews. The data in this chapter was presented according to themes and sub-themes, which emerged from the analysis. These themes were identified upon the analysis of the data gathered from structured interviews which served to illustrate the essence of each influencer's experience. Ten participants took part in the study and were in line with achieving the following objectives.

- To identify current influencer marketing strategies used to engage Generation Y consumers in the social media environment.
- To determine if influencer marketing has changed the way in which brands interact with Generation Y consumers.
- To determine the extent to which influencer marketing sways consumer brand perceptions and purchase intentions.
- To identify the level of brand awareness created through brand influencers.

## 6.2 ANALYSIS OF DATA

In this section, data derived from in-depth semi-structured interviews is presented.

### 6.2.1 Demographic Profiles

Demographic profiles of the participants are provided in Table 11.

**Table 11: Demographic Profile of Participants.**

| Pseudonym | Influencer Category \ Niche      |
|-----------|----------------------------------|
| P1        | Fashion and beauty               |
| P2        | Fitness and Wellness             |
| P3        | Lifestyle                        |
| P4        | Fitness and Travel               |
| P5        | Travel, Technology and Lifestyle |
| P6        | Outdoor adventure                |
| P7        | Lifestyle                        |
| P8        | Beauty                           |
| P9        | Faith, Beauty and Natural hair   |
| P10       | Skin care and Healthy eating     |

## 6.3 INTERVIEWS

The interview schedule provided below had questions that allowed all ten samples to share their views and experience regarding influencer marketing within the South African context. The interviewer expected to gain qualitative knowledge in everyday practices, strategies rather than numerical measurements.

The questions on the schedule were as follows:

### **6.3.1 INTERVIEW GUIDE**

Interview questions

1. Which social media platforms are you active on?
2. What features do you like the most on the social media channels you are active on?
3. Would you briefly describe your social media usage pattern?
4. Can you describe the category of influencer marketing you fall on?
5. Can you describe your audience or followers?
6. What do you think your audience likes?
7. How do you connect with consumers?
8. What communication strategies do you use to engage with your followers?
9. What do you think really makes an impact on your followers?
10. Which category of brands do you focus on?
11. What do you think brands care about most when deciding which influencers to work with?
12. What do you care about most when deciding which brands to work with?
13. What differentiates a good experience working with a brand from a great one?
14. What do you think is the significance of personal passion and authentic relationships in influencer marketing?
15. What do you think sets you apart from other influencers in the same category as you?

### **6.3.2 The Process of Analyzing Interviews**

The data was transcribed verbatim to guide the discussion. Relevant codes were generated and categorised to support the discussion of the study. Themes and subthemes were developed and reviewed and clearly defined. Themes were then characterised and labelled through the location and illustration of excerpts from the data to support and exemplify each theme. Excerpts were given codes according to the participant's order of participation with P1 being (Participant number one), P2 (Participant number two) and P3 (Participant number three) in that order.

The themes derived from data are reflected in Table 12 below:

**Table 12: Themes derived from the Interviews**

| Themes                                       | Sub-Themes                            | Focus/Explanations                                                                                 |
|----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Brand Awareness</b>                       | Platform Selection                    | Participants' preference for specific social media platforms.                                      |
|                                              | Niche Focus                           | Areas of specialization in content by the influencers.                                             |
|                                              | Content Strategy                      | Strategies and content types used to build brand awareness.                                        |
|                                              | Audience Demographics                 | Insights into the participants' audience demographics.                                             |
| <b>Influencer Strategies</b>                 | Content Diversification               | The variety of content and strategies on different platforms.                                      |
|                                              | Content Creation                      | Approaches and techniques for creating and presenting content.                                     |
|                                              | Content Tone                          | The overall tone and style of influencer's content.                                                |
| <b>Consumer Engagement/Interaction</b>       | Audience Engagement                   | Methods used for engaging with followers.                                                          |
|                                              | Interactive Strategies                | Specific methods like Q&A sessions, polls, and live chats, discount Codes                          |
|                                              | Accessibility                         | How participants make themselves accessible to their audience.                                     |
| <b>Consumer Trust/Influencer credibility</b> | Authenticity and Authentic Engagement | The role of authenticity in gaining trust and how influencers engage authentically with consumers. |
|                                              | Follower Values                       | Understanding what the audience values in influencer content.                                      |
|                                              | Personal Passion                      | The impact of participants' personal passion on their content.                                     |

|                            |                                         |                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Brand Perceptions</b>   | Brand Alignment and Collaboration Focus | How influencers align with brands that match their values. Types of brands that influencers prefer to collaborate with and what participants look for in brands when deciding to collaborate. |
|                            | Collaboration Experience                | Factors distinguishing a good brand collaboration from a great one.                                                                                                                           |
| <b>Purchase Intentions</b> | Brand Trust                             | How brand trust impacts purchase intentions. And how the importance of brand authenticity in purchase considerations                                                                          |
|                            | Influencer Expertise                    | The influencer's role in influencing purchase decisions. And their expertise impacts product recommendations.                                                                                 |

## 6.4 DATA ANALYSIS

The data was transcribed verbatim to guide the discussion. Relevant quotes from the data obtained from structured interviews were used to support this discussion.

### Brand Awareness

Platform selection, niche Focus, content strategy and audience demographics are the subthemes generated under this theme. In order to create brand awareness participants indicated varying preferences for conveying marketing messages to their audience. This included Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Twitter, Snapchat, and Facebook, based on their various content focus and audience reach. Each participant had a distinct niche, ranging from faith-based beauty to skincare, healthy eating, outdoor activities, fashion, and lifestyle content. Their approach to content strategies spans from showcasing natural beauty, faith reflections, and survival techniques, to fashion style, authentic outdoor experiences, and health-conscious tips. The audience demographics varied, encompassing individuals of different age groups, values, interests, and preferences. The majority of the participants indicated that their audience age ranged within 18 years to late 40's.

The Platform selection:

These qualitative outcomes illuminate the intricate relationship between influencers' platform

selection, niche focus, content strategies, and their audience demographics. Each influencer carefully chooses platforms that align with their content goals and audience preferences. Participant 1 maintains an active presence across Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter, leveraging each platform's unique features for tailored content sharing and engagement. Similarly, Participant 4 utilizes Instagram predominantly but is exploring TikTok for its growing potential. Participant 5 covers a wide spectrum of platforms, including Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, Snapchat, Facebook, and Threads, aiming to reach diverse audience segments. Participant 6, a digital explorer, navigates Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and LinkedIn, maintaining a multi-platform approach to maximize reach and connectivity.

- *P1 “I’m most active on Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter. These platforms allow me to connect with my audience and share content that resonates with them.”*
- *P4 “I’m predominantly active on Instagram. I left Facebook, but I’ve recently been trying to understand TikTok and getting back into it.”*
- *P5 “I’m active mainly on Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, Snapchat, Facebook, and Threads.”*
- *P6 “I’m a digital explorer, so you’ll find me on Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and LinkedIn. I like to cover all my bases. I also have a Facebook which I mainly use just checkup on old Friends and family but not so much for influencing purpose”.*

#### Niche Focus and Content Strategy:

In terms of niche focus and content strategy, influencers strategically capitalize on each platform's strengths. They highlight Instagram's visual appeal for showcasing specific content, such as fitness routines, landscapes, lifestyle experiences, or beauty demonstrations. YouTube enables them to dive deeper with longer-form content, while platforms like Twitter and TikTok offer quick updates or playful, engaging content. This tailored approach allows influencers to cater to varied audience preferences and content consumption behaviors across different platforms.

- *P1 “On Instagram, I love the visual storytelling aspect with features like Stories and Reels. On YouTube, the ability to create longer, in-depth content is fantastic. Twitter’s real-time interaction and quick updates also have their unique appeal”*
- *P2 “Instagram’s visual appeal and Stories feature allow me to showcase workout routines and fitness tips effectively. YouTube enables me to create in-depth workout tutorials, and Twitter is great for quick updates and interactions with my audience.”*
- *P7 “Instagram’s visual appeal is perfect for showcasing the breathtaking landscapes I explore, while YouTube allows me to provide in-depth guides to my audience.”*
- *P8 “My content varies from platform to platform so I like different platforms for different*

*reasons. Instagram is where I curate my lifestyle experiences, Pinterest is where I find inspiration, TikTok showcases my playful side, and Snapchat provides a real and raw look into my daily adventures."*

- *P9 "I like TikTok's short video format allows me to create snappy, engaging beauty demonstrations. Instagram's visual storytelling features like Stories and IGTV enable me to dive deeper into product demonstrations and engage with my audience. I find Facebook a little boring, it also has more of your mature people who are not so interested in beauty"*

#### Audience demographics:

Furthermore, the audience demographics reflect the influencers' efforts in aligning their content with their followers' interests. The audience for Participant 1 is primarily fashion-conscious, while Participant 2 caters to fitness enthusiasts seeking workout routines and health advice. Participant 4's audience comprises young families appreciating relatable and authentic content, while Participant 7 attracts adventure seekers and nature enthusiasts. Participant 9 focuses on individuals seeking skincare, self-care, and healthy eating tips within the age range of 20 to early 40s.

- *P1 "My followers are primarily young adults aged 18 to 35, with a strong interest in fashion and beauty. They're fashion-conscious, seeking style inspiration and advice."*
- *P2 "My followers primarily consist of fitness enthusiasts, ranging from beginners to experienced athletes. They seek workout routines, nutrition advice, and motivation to lead a healthy lifestyle. They are youth around my age, I think their age ranges from 18 upwards maybe till early 30's."*
- *P4 "My followers are fellow moms, young families, and individuals who appreciate honesty and authenticity. They value content that relates to their daily lives, challenges, and experiences. There are between they age of 20 to 50. But, most of them are between the ages of 25 to early 40's."*
- *P7 "My followers are adventure seekers, nature lovers, and fellow explorers. They appreciate the raw beauty of the outdoors and seek inspiration for their own outdoor journeys. I would say it's mostly male but also many women follow me. The last time I checked, the age range of my followers were between the ages of 18 to early 50's. Majority of them are between 25 to 48 years."*
- *P9 "My audience is primarily made up of individuals aged 20 to early 40's who value authenticity and seek tips on skincare, self-care, and healthy eating."*

These findings highlight the strategic interplay between platform selection, niche focus, content strategies, and audience demographics in influencer marketing. Participants strategically utilize

different platforms to leverage their strengths. Influencers who tailor their content to resonate with specific platforms and audience preferences are better positioned to create engaging, relatable, and valuable content, thus fostering a stronger connection with their followers. This is in line with Hudders et al. (2020:90) who assert that as more individuals use social media, it becomes crucial to consider demographic factors in understanding how they each experience these platforms. Although each social media platform has their own limits based on who uses them, how they are used, and their features, having many platforms available allows people to address their various preferences and adapt to their unique needs.

The variety in norms across different platforms offers opportunities for influencers to handle various kinds of interactions or showcase different aspects of themselves. For instance, Instagram for visual appeal, YouTube for in-depth content, and TikTok for engaging demonstrations. Some mentioned using Facebook mainly for their personal interaction with family and old friends. There's a clear understanding of their audience demographics, tailoring content to meet their preferences. This understanding is crucial in crafting relatable and engaging content. Despite being content creators in similar domains such as lifestyle, beauty or fashion, their unique niches and content strategies set them apart, showcasing diverse approaches to engage their audiences. Some participants mention trying out new platforms (like TikTok) or leaving certain ones (like Facebook), highlighting the need to adapt to changing trends and their audience preferences.

### **Influencer Strategies**

Influencers employ diverse strategies to engage their audience and create compelling content. Participants alluded to covering various topics, from faith and natural beauty to lifestyle, humor, tech, travel, and outdoor experiences in their influencer strategies. Engagement techniques involve relatability, authentic storytelling, educational content, interactive questions and answer sessions, and responding to comments. Methods range from sharing personal experiences, providing detailed tutorials, and offering product reviews, to showcasing lifestyle and fashion choices. Ones vary based on the influencers' personalities and content focus, balancing seriousness with entertainment and information sharing. This theme included subthemes such as content diversification, audience engagement, content creation and content tone which were supported by exemplars below.

#### *Content Diversification:*

The participants exhibit a wide range of thematic coverage and content types within their niches. Participant 1 demonstrates a breadth of topics, encompassing tech reviews, humor, memes, and occasional DIY projects, indicating a strategy of versatility and entertainment. Participant 2 takes a deeper dive into specific themes like faith, beauty, and lifestyle, aiming for in-depth exploration and resonance within these areas. Participant 3's approach involves showcasing survival techniques and personal experiences, emphasizing a mix of educational and personal content.

- *Participant 1: "I cover topics ranging from tech reviews to humorous skits or memes and occasionally, DIY projects."*
- *Participant 2: "I create content that allows for a deeper exploration of faith, beauty, and lifestyle themes."*
- *Participant 3: "My strategies involve showcasing survival techniques, sharing personal experiences, and engaging in conversations."*

#### *Content Creation:*

In content creation, Participant 7 reflects a similar versatility, spanning tech reviews, humor, and DIY tutorials, aligning with Participant 1's approach. Participant 8 prioritizes engaging directly with followers through faith discussions and live Q&A sessions, focusing on interactive content centered on heartfelt conversations. Participant 9 delves into outdoor survival techniques and personal stories, focusing on educational and experiential narratives.

- *Participant 7: "I create content ranging from tech reviews to humorous skits and DIY tutorials."*
- *Participant 8: "I actively engage with my followers through heartfelt faith discussions and live Q&A sessions."*
- *Participant 9: "I create content that details outdoor survival techniques, personal stories, and experiences."*

#### *Content Tone:*

Regarding content tone, Participant 10 adopts a range from informative tech reviews to engaging DIY content, showcasing a mix of informational and entertaining content. Participant 11's audience appreciates straightforward skincare advice and health-conscious recipes, emphasizing clarity and usefulness in content delivery. Participant 12 aims for a relatable tone, focusing on personal fashion style and detailed tutorials on natural hair care, aiming to connect with the audience on a more personal level.

- *Participant 10: "My tone ranges from informative tech reviews to light-hearted humor and engaging DIY content."*
- *Participant 11: "My audience appreciates straightforward skincare advice and easy, health-conscious recipes."*
- *Participant 12: "I aim for a relatable tone in sharing personal fashion style and detailed tutorials on natural hair care."*

These findings underline the importance of tailoring content strategies to both the influencers' personalities and their audience preferences. The variation in coverage, content types, and tone highlights the need for influencers to adapt their approaches to resonate with their specific audience demographics and interests. While some emphasize versatile content creation, others focus on in-depth, niche-specific content (Audrezet et.al 2020: 565). The differing engagement methods showcase the importance of personalization and authenticity in connecting with followers. The variation in content tone underscores the need to adapt to audience preferences, ranging from informative to relatable approaches. This diversity demonstrates that successful influencer strategies are nuanced and should align with both the influencers' authentic voice and the audience's expectations, ensuring both engaging and informative content while fostering relatability and connection with their followers.

### **Consumer Engagement/Interaction**

Building authentic relationships is considered vital for trust and effective influencer marketing across the board. Interactive strategies include question-and-answer sessions, responding to comments, sharing personal stories, and creating open dialogues with the audience. Accessibility through relatable content, honest reviews, and sharing personal struggles is seen as an effective engagement strategy. The aim is to foster a sense of community and encourage open discussions and dialogues within the audience. The sub-themes that built up this theme are audience engagement, interactive strategies and accessibility.

#### **Audience Engagement and Interactive Strategies:**

Examining the insights provided by participants sheds light on their distinct engagement tactics and approaches. Participant 4, for instance, prioritizes timely responses, humor, and entertaining content like memes to create a friendly atmosphere. Participant 6 employs storytelling, humor, and challenges to keep conversations flowing, while Participant 8 utilizes humor, challenges, behind-the-scenes glimpses, and candid conversations to engage followers.

- *P4 "I use questions in my posts to spark conversations and engage with my followers. Responding to comments and messages in a timely manner is essential. I also share memes and lighthearted content to entertain and create a friendly atmosphere."*
- *P6 "I employ a mix of storytelling, humor, and polls to create interactive experiences. Regular question and answer sessions, live chats, and fun challenges keep the conversation flowing."*
- *P8 "I use humor, quick challenges to keep my followers engaged. Interactive question and answer sessions, behind-the-scenes glimpses, and candid conversations are also part of my strategies."*

- *P10 “I actively engage with my followers through, live beauty challenges, and Responding to comments and sharing personal beauty stories is essential to foster community and connection. I also provide natural beauty tips, tutorials, and insights on simple living to foster a strong sense of community, On Instagram, I provide in-depth product demonstrations, share beauty tips.”*

#### Accessibility:

Accessibility strategies are diverse as well. Participant 1 emphasizes consistency across platforms, maintaining a daily presence on Instagram, weekly on YouTube, and regular engagement on Twitter.

Participant 8 tailors content across platforms, curating lifestyle experiences on Instagram, showcasing a playful side on TikTok, and offering inspiration on YouTube. Participant 10 plans content meticulously, providing detailed tutorials on YouTube while showcasing fashion and daily life on Instagram, delving into faith and authentic living, highlighting a deeper exploration of these subjects.

- *P1 “I typically post daily on Instagram, weekly on YouTube, and engage with my followers on Twitter throughout the day. I believe in maintaining a consistent presence to keep my audience engaged.”*
- *P8 “On Instagram, On TikTok, I share step-by-step healthy recipes for my audience. My content varies from platform to platform. Instagram is where I curate my lifestyle experiences and provide product recommendations. YouTube is where I find inspiration, TikTok showcases my playful side, and provides a real and raw look into my daily adventures.”*
- *P10 “I plan my content ahead and post at specific intervals to maintain consistency. On Instagram, I showcase my fashion style and offer a glimpse into my daily life. On YouTube, I provide detailed tutorials on natural hair care and fashion. It is also where I highlighting my journey of faith, natural beauty, and simple living. Basically, I create content that allows for a deeper exploration of these subjects and provide value to my audience.”*

This encapsulates diverse perspectives and strategies across the theme showcasing the varied approaches and focuses of each participant in influencer marketing. This diverse range of approaches highlights the multifaceted nature of influencer engagement strategies. While there are shared priorities like timely interactions and relatable content, each influencer tailors their strategies based on their audience preferences, content focus, and platform nuances. This diversity underscores the need for a nuanced approach to influencer marketing, where authenticity, relatability, and adaptability to diverse platforms are key drivers of successful engagement. Influencers who come up with more unique and creative content are likely to get more notice compared to those who don't. When influencers share authentic ideas and content, their followers

tend to see them as more relatable, knowledgeable and trustworthy, making followers more likely to engage with them. Being original is a crucial aspect of being genuine and is a significant characteristic of successful influencers (Leung et al.2022: 98).

### **Consumer Trust/Influencer credibility**

These findings emphasise the critical role of authentic engagement, follower values, and personal passion in fostering trust, credibility, and meaningful connections between influencers and their audience within the realm of influencer marketing.

#### *Authentic Engagement:*

Participants across the board stress the importance of creating genuine relationships through relatable content and interactive experiences. They highlight the value of being transparent, relatable, and genuine in their interactions. The authenticity they project helps build trust, fosters a stronger connection with their audience, and solidifies credibility. This genuine engagement is seen as the cornerstone of their relationships with followers, influencing their decisions and opinions.

- *Participant 1: "Creating genuine relationships through content that resonates and interactive experiences is essential for my credibility in this space. Unlike television advertisements where there's a clear separation between the product and the personality promoting it, my advertising style is personal and relatable. Consumers can see the real me behind the screen, interacting with them, sharing experiences, and discussing things they care about. This authenticity sets makes consumers trust be me and fosters a stronger sense connection with my audience."*
- *Participant 2: "My passion fuels everything I create, and it's what's kept my followers around since the beginning, from my days as an organic influencer to now, when I collaborate with brands. They've seen the journey and stuck with me, and the response has been consistently positive and growing. The heart of it all lies in the connections I've forged with them. We engage on a personal level, chatting about everything from new finds to daily experiences. This engagement isn't just about numbers; it's about genuine conversations. These relationships are the foundation of trust my followers know I'm genuine because they've seen me stay true to myself, and that authenticity extends to the brands I partner with."*
- *Participant 3: "In the world of influencer marketing, forming genuine connections is key. It's been crucial for me as an influencer. Over time, I've built a reputation for being credible and honest, and that's earned me trust from consumers. They believe in what I say and recommend because they know I'm sincere and genuine in my interactions. Maintaining this trust is everything. If I ever acted dishonestly, it wouldn't take much to break that trust. That's*

- *why I'm always careful to uphold the same practices that earned me their trust in the first place. Being authentic and truthful isn't just a strategy it's the foundation of the relationship I have with my audience.*
- *P9 "Authenticity, sharing my faith journey, and offering practical tips for embracing natural beauty and simplicity are what truly resonate with my followers. They find value in content that uplifts their spirits, enhances their natural beauty, and leads to a more purposeful life."*

#### *Follower Values:*

Understanding the values and preferences of their audience is crucial for these influencers. Each participant tailors their content to align with their audience's needs and desires. From providing practical workout routines and fitness advice to honest tech product reviews or content that informs and entertains, influencers strive to deliver what their followers appreciate and value. The emphasis on authenticity, timely information, and content that resonates underscores the significance of catering to audience interests.

- *P2 "My audience values practical workout routines, evidence-based fitness advice, and motivational content that helps them achieve their fitness goals. They appreciate authenticity and personal stories of perseverance."*
- *P3 "My audience values detailed and honest tech product reviews, tech tips, and industry updates. They appreciate content that helps them make informed decisions about tech purchases."*
- *P5 "Authenticity, timely information, and content that resonates with their interests. They value staying informed and entertained through my content."*
- *P8 "My audience loves a mix of sophistication and fun. They want to live the good life while maintaining a sense of humor and playfulness. Content that brings a smile to their faces is what they seek."*
- *P9 "My audience craves product demonstrations, step-by-step beauty tutorials, and honest reviews. They appreciate content that helps them make informed beauty choices and look their best."*

### *Personal Passion:*

The influencers' genuine enthusiasm and passion for their content and collaborations with brands are evident. They believe that their passion is the driving force behind their engaging content and the authentic relationships they establish. They see personal passion as vital in fostering genuine connections, resonating with their audience, and ultimately, creating impactful influencer marketing campaigns.

- *P1 "Personal passion and authentic relationships are vital. When I'm passionate about a brand or product, it comes across in my content, and my audience responds positively. Authentic relationships build trust and credibility."*
- *P3 "My content is fueled by my genuine enthusiasm, and I prioritize cultivating real connections with both brands and followers. These relationships serve as the bedrock for trust, allowing me to create impactful content that truly connects with my audience and aligns with brand values."*
- *P7 "I love doing the work that I do and I am so passionate about it. Being passionate helps me create real connections with my followers. Personal passion is the driving force behind my content and fosters authentic connections with both brands and followers. These connections are pivotal for impactful influencer marketing."*
- *P10 "Personal passion is the driving force behind my content and the authentic relationships I build with my audience and brands. These relationships are pivotal in influencer marketing, as they build trust, resonate with the audience, and lead to meaningful partnerships."*

Overall, these findings shed light on how authenticity, aligning with follower values, and personal passion contribute significantly to influencers' success. Building authentic relationships, understanding follower preferences, and being genuinely passionate about their content are central pillars that influencers leverage to establish trust, credibility, and impactful connections within the influencer marketing landscape. Authenticity matters in brand communication because it's been proven to make people view a brand more positively and be more likely to buy from it. Hence, social media influencers, being authentic adds to how credible they seem because when influencers are both authentic and knowledgeable, it helps their followers trust them more (Balaban and Szabolcs 2022: 236).

## Brand Perceptions

Brand perceptions play a pivotal role in influencer-brand collaborations, shaping the nature of partnerships and influencing the influencer's brand image. The insights gathered from participants highlight various facets of brand perceptions and how they influence collaboration focus and experience within the influencer marketing landscape.

### *Brand Alignment and Collaboration Focus:*

Influencers prioritize collaborating with brands that align with their content, values, and audience preferences. They seek authenticity in brand partnerships and favor products or services that resonate with their content themes. This alignment ensures a natural fit between the influencer's message and the brand's ethos. The emphasis on the brand's authenticity, values, and effectiveness of products showcases the influencers' commitment to maintaining integrity in their collaborations.

- *P2 “I primarily collaborate with fitness and wellness brands, including active wear, nutrition supplements, and fitness equipment. These align with my content and resonate with my audience. I prefer brands that offer high-quality products that I genuinely enjoy using and can confidently recommend. The brand's alignment with my content and values is essential.”*
- *P4 “I like collaborating with brands that align with my values and those that offer products or services I genuinely use and believe in. The brand's authenticity and willingness to collaborate in an authentic way are important to me”*
- *P7 “While brands often look for influencers whose content aligns with their target audience, showcases the product or experience authentically, and inspires the audience to take action. I prioritize brands that share my passion for the outdoors and a commitment to preserving nature. The brand's authenticity and alignment with my values are crucial factors for collaboration.”*
- *P9 “The brand's alignment with my values and the effectiveness of their products are essential. I collaborate with beauty brands across the spectrum, from cosmetics and skincare to hair care and wellness products. My focus is on showcasing and demonstrating the best beauty solutions.”*

### *Collaboration Experience:*

The influencers' descriptions of an ideal collaboration experience revolve around aspects of open communication, creative liberty, mutual respect, and embracing creative input. They value brands that offer them creative freedom, respect their expertise, and engage in transparent communication. These influencers seek collaborations that allow for co-creation and respect the influencer's unique style and voice. A collaborative spirit, appreciation for creative input, and crafting content that

engages both the audience and the brand's customers are key components of a successful partnership.

- *P1 "A great experience often involves open communication, mutual respect, and creative freedom. When a brand values my input and allows me to be creative, it leads to a more successful partnership that will enable me to create a successful brand image in consumers' minds."*
- *P5 "An ideal collaboration hinges on transparent communication, creative liberty, mutual respect, independence, and fair compensation. When a brand not only values my proficiency in product demonstrations but also trusts my insights and expertise, it not only leads to a more successful and enjoyable partnership but also ensures fair and equitable compensation, fostering a relationship built on mutual respect and professionalism."*
- *P6 "A great experience is when a brand sees the potential for co-creation. It's about fostering a collaborative spirit, respecting creative input, and crafting content that delights both my audience and the brand's customers."*
- *P8 "A great experience involves a brand that embraces the whimsy and elegance in my content. When a brand is open to creative collaboration, respects my voice, and values both luxury and playfulness, it leads to a more delightful partnership."*

These findings highlight that successful influencer-brand collaborations are rooted in authenticity, mutual respect between brands and influencers, and creative freedom. When brands align with an influencer's values and content, and when collaborations allow for open communication and creative input, it leads to a more fruitful and enjoyable partnership for both parties involved. This emphasis on authenticity and creative collaboration reinforces the significance of genuine relationships in influencer marketing partnerships. Audrezet (2020: 588) suggest that Social media influencers' values and natural inclination to share about their personal interest might get diverted when they are offered chances to endorse brands or products they wouldn't typically care about. This means that influencers' genuineness could be at risk because brands start getting involved in the content they create. Hence majority give priority to brands that respect their values and creative freedom.

## **Purchase Intentions**

These qualitative outcomes shed light on the multifaceted aspects of brand trust and influencer expertise within the context of influencer marketing and the role they play in consumers' purchase intentions

### *Brand Trust:*

The influencers' statements reveal that trust is established through genuine connections, honesty, and authenticity in their content. Followers perceive trustworthiness in influencers who maintain transparency, openly sharing opinions about products, whether positive or negative. This transparency and openness foster a sense of credibility, making followers more likely to trust both the influencer's opinions and the brands they endorse. By aligning their recommendations with their audience's preferences and values, influencers create believable and relatable brand integrations that resonate authentically.

- *P3 “My followers see me as trustworthy because lots of people follow me and I've partnered with top brands. I've made a good name for myself, and my followers really connect with what I post. We talk a lot, and that's made them trust me. Because they trust me, they trust the brands I talk about. I'm straight with them if I don't like something, I tell them, and that honesty matters.”*
- *P6 “My followers trust me because I'm genuine. So when I feature a brand or product in my content, it's not just an advertisement. It's a natural fit that aligns with my style and resonates with what my audience enjoys. This authenticity is what makes the brand integration more believable and relatable to my followers. Ultimately, it's important to tell a compelling story that connects the brand with my audience in a way that feels real and enjoyable, fostering that trust between my followers and the brands I work with.”*
- *P7 “My followers value authenticity and the excitement of discovering new things. They're keen on exploring fresh perspectives and having a great time while doing so. Exploring new things requires that comes from being genuine and real. So, when I recommend brands or products, it's because I genuinely believe in them and think they'll bring value or joy to my followers' lives. And because my audience knows I'm honest and authentic in my recommendations, they're more likely to trust the brands I suggest. It's all about creating an enjoyable experience while introducing new and exciting things to my followers, building that trust through authenticity and a shared sense of exploration and fun.”*

### *Influencer Expertise:*

Influencers demonstrate their expertise by catering to their audience's needs and preferences. They provide valuable, reliable, and comprehensive information that helps followers make informed decisions. Expertise is built through a combination of knowledge, experience, and genuine connections. Influencers leverage their in-depth understanding of their niche or industry to guide their audience effectively. They prioritize researching and trying out products before recommending them, ensuring they genuinely align with their audience's interests and needs.

- *P3 “In the tech niche, my followers appreciate reliable and up-to-date information, comprehensive product reviews, and practical tech tips. They value content that helps them navigate the complex world of technology. Responding to tech-related queries, participating in discussions, and hosting live question and answer sessions to address their tech concerns builds confidence in my expertise and their confidence to purchase the products I recommend.”*
- *P5 “My know-how across different platforms, my varied content, and my genuine connections with my audience and brands make me stand out in the lifestyle influencer world. Because of these strengths, I can really boost my followers' confidence and strongly affect what they choose to buy.”*
- *P7 “As an influencer, I've got a lot of knowledge and experience that helps me guide people in what they buy. I've been doing this for a while, so I know what works and what people like. When I talk about a product or brand, it's because I really understand it and think it's good. If I decide to collaborate with a brand, I do research about it and then try it out so that I can share with customers something that will not harm or disappoint them. That's why people trust what I say and often decide to buy things based on my recommendations.”*

The discussion around brand trust and influencer expertise highlights the importance of authenticity and credibility in consumers' purchase intentions in influencer marketing. Influencers earn trust by being genuine and transparent, offering valuable insights, and demonstrating expertise in their niche. As a result, their recommendations hold weight and influence followers' purchasing decisions. These findings emphasize the critical role influencers play in establishing and maintaining trust between their audience and the brands they endorse. Liu (2022: 2) supports that trustworthiness is an important quality related to how believable and respectable endorsers are. When influencers are seen as credible, it strongly affects what consumers decide to buy. Their credibility boosts a brand's marketing efforts and influences how people make quick buying decisions. In addition to influencers' credibility, their expertise also matters a lot in convincing customers to make a purchase. Customers often trust the expertise of endorsers, relying on it to help them decide what to buy without spending much time planning.

## **6.5 CONCLUSION**

This chapter offered a comprehensive insight into the world of influencer marketing through in-depth interviews with a diverse set of South African influencers. The detailed procedure of data collection and analysis was outlined, elucidating the rich tapestry of themes discovered. Each theme was meticulously explored and encapsulated, shedding light on the nuanced perspectives of influencers within the retail landscape. These insights underscore the necessity for further research in this domain, revealing the intricate dynamics and untapped areas within influencer marketing. The subsequent chapter delves into the quantitative study, building upon the qualitative phase to provide a more comprehensive understanding of this evolving field.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### QUANTITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS

#### 7.1 INTRODUCTION

The preceding chapter, presented the qualitative data, which helped build the questionnaire used in the quantitative phase of this study. This chapter present the quantitative data analysis which focuses on the outcomes of collected quantitative data, presenting the results, and analysing the findings from the questionnaire. This chapter serves as the gateway to a comprehensive exploration of influencer marketing's profound influence on consumer Generation Y consumers. The aim of this chapter is to analyse the role of influencer marketing on Generation Y consumers brand perceptions and purchase intentions. Data were collected using questionnaire distributed to 475 respondents which constitutes a response rate of 95%. The collected data were analysed using both descriptive and inferential statistics including factor analysis, ANOVA, and structural equation modelling. All analysis were performed using SPSS and AMOS version 29 were applicable and interpreted at  $\alpha=0.05$ .

#### 7.2 DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

This section details the demographic characteristics of the respondents. The respondents were described based on their gender, race, age group, and level of education.

##### 7.2.1 Gender

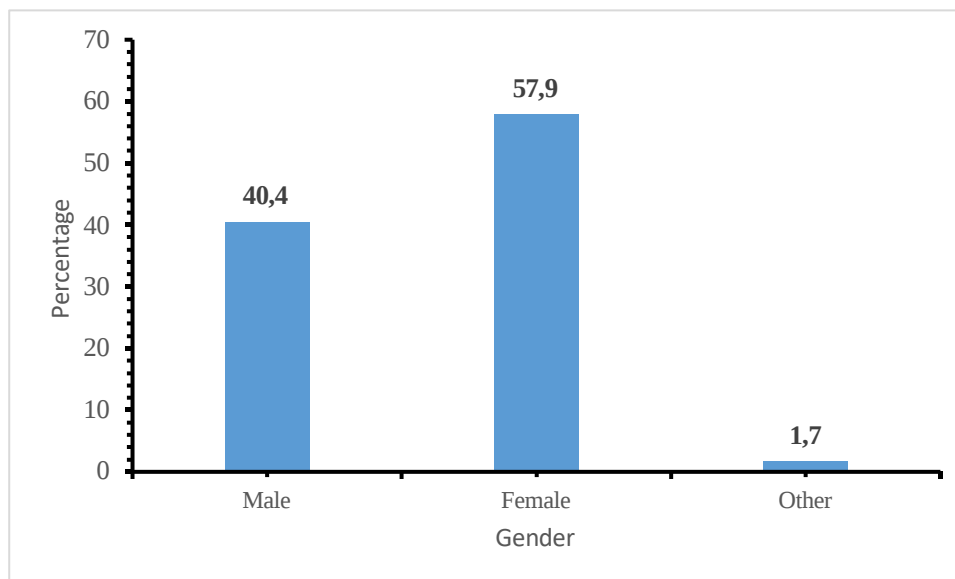
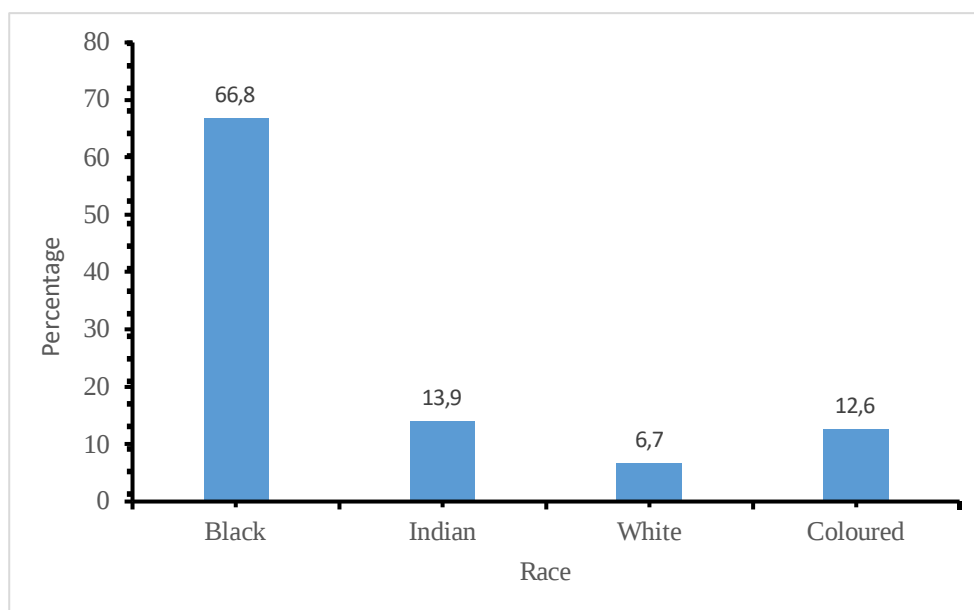


Figure 21: Respondents Gender

Figure 21 provides the gender category of the respondents. The result reveals that most of the respondents were female (57.9%), followed by males (40.4%), and a small number who identified as other (1.7%). This data suggests that there might be a significant influence of female voices in the influencer landscape. Brands could benefit from collaborating with female influencers who resonate with this majority audience. However, it's also important not to overlook the male and other gender categories, as they still represent a significant portion of the audience. Diversity in influencer partnerships, considering various genders, could help brands engage with a broader spectrum of the South African audience. This kind of inclusive approach in influencer marketing might better connect with diverse gender groups and foster a more comprehensive and relatable brand representation. Perju-Mitrana and Budacia (2015:568) suggest that in influencer marketing, both men and women exhibit varying behaviours in their online engagements, encompassing communication patterns, content consumption like photos and videos, social interactions, and sharing of information. Gender differences also manifest in loyalty behaviors, with distinct reasons prompting loyalty.

### 7.2.2 Race

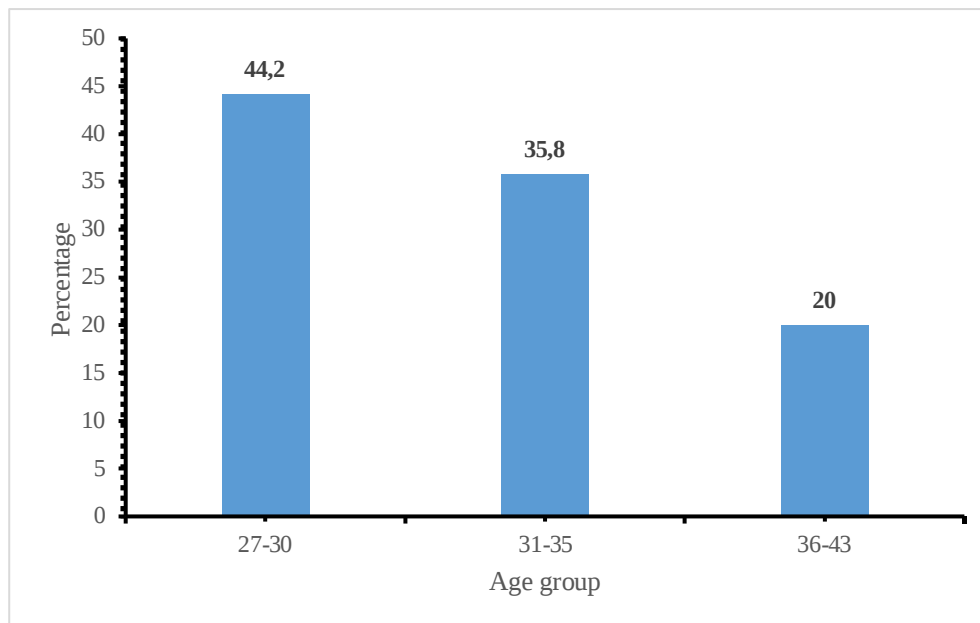


**Figure 22: Race Category of Respondents**

The data in Figure 22 provides an overview of the racial diversity within the sample. The results reveal the predominance of the Black category (66.8%), followed by Indian (13.9%), Coloured (12.6%), and White categories (6.7%). It is worth mentioning that some of the respondents (n=14) did not disclose their race, accounting for 2.9% of the sample. Brands looking to market their products or services might benefit from partnering with influencers who reflect this diversity. It's essential to have influencers that represent and resonate with different racial groups to effectively reach and connect with diverse audiences in South Africa. This way, influencer campaigns can be more

inclusive and appealing to a broader range of people, leading to better engagement and success. Burgess, Wilkie and Dolan (2020: 148) agree that marketing aiming to show diversity must create a feeling of connection with the audience. If an ad doesn't achieve this and instead shows diversity in a poor or disingenuous way, people might feel left out or not included and reject the marketing communication and to the brand that's sending it.

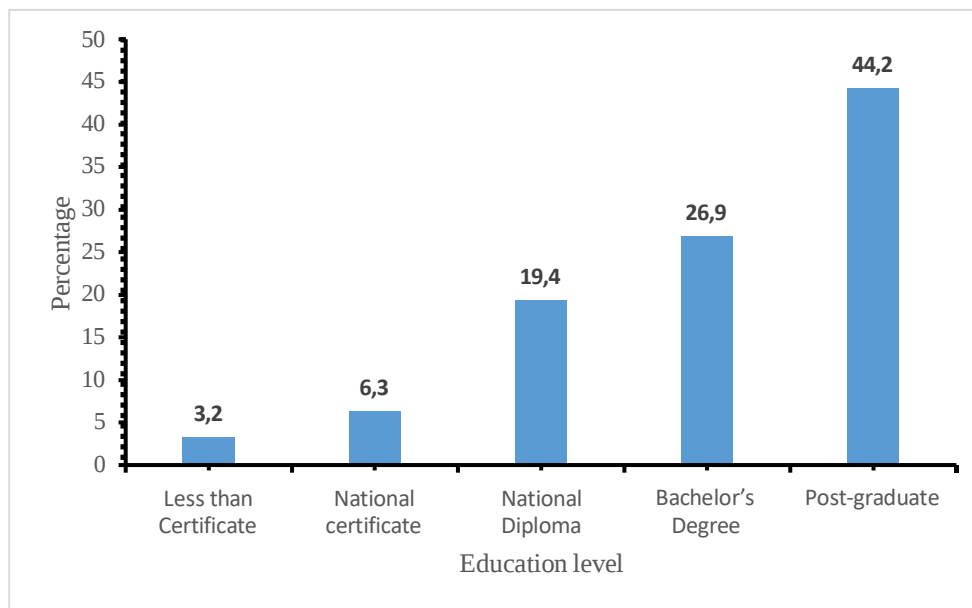
### 7.2.3 Age group



**Figure 23: Respondents Age Groups**

Figure 23 depicts the age group distribution of the surveyed respondents. The data reveal that respondents within 27-30 years is the most represented, accounting for 44.2%, followed by 31-35 years (35.8%), and 36-43 years (20%). This breakdown is significant for influencer marketing as it highlights the age segments that hold the most potential for targeting. Influencers catering to these age brackets might resonate more effectively with the majority of Generation Y consumers in South Africa. Crafting marketing campaigns that align with the preferences and interests of these age groups could enhance engagement and foster better connections with the intended audience. This insight into the age demographics aids in tailoring influencer strategies that are more relevant and appealing to different segments within Generation cohort (Childers et al. 2020:428).

### 7.2.4 Educational level



**Figure 24: Respondents level of education**

Figure 24 shows the respondents' level of education. The majority (71.1%) of respondents have completed at least a bachelor's degree (26.9%) or pursued post-graduate education (44.2%). This highlights a well-educated segment within this demographic concurred by Munir, Fairuz, Noranee, Sundram and Aziz (2018: 3) who suggest that Generation Y generally possesses higher levels of education, often undergoing more professional training, and tends to display a more optimistic and cooperative demeanor when compared with preceding cohorts. Therefore, influencers aiming to connect with Generation Y in South Africa might benefit from crafting content that aligns with higher educational standards. Campaigns could focus on more intellectually stimulating topics or products that appeal to individuals with a higher level of education. Influencers who can engage with this educated audience, providing valuable and insightful content, might resonate more effectively with this demographic. Understanding this educational background helps tailor marketing approaches to better suit the interests and preferences of a well-educated Generation Y audience in South Africa.

### 7.3 SOCIAL MEDIA RELATED QUESTIONS

This section deals with statements related to the respondent's activity on social media, and their common social media platforms.

### 7.3.1 Activeness on social media

**Table 13: Respondents activeness on social media**

|                                 |       | Frequency | Percent |
|---------------------------------|-------|-----------|---------|
| Are you active on social media? | No    | 7         | 1.5     |
|                                 | Yes   | 468       | 98.5    |
|                                 | Total | 475       | 100.0   |

The respondents were asked to indicate if they are active on social media. As shown in Table 13, overwhelming majority (98.5%). revealed to be active on social media while some few (1.5%) were not active. Nawaz (2020: 26) agrees that Generation Y are social media active and digitally savvy with their social media consumption influenced by personal and non-personal factors. This overwhelming participation underscores the pervasive influence of social media within this demographic. It signifies an extensive reach and potential influence when collaborating with influencers to connect with Generation Y consumers in South Africa. Understanding the ubiquity of social media among this group emphasizes the importance of leveraging these platforms effectively to engage with and influence this audience.

### 7.3.2 Social media networks

Table 14 provides insights into the social media networks the respondents are active on.

**Table 14: Respondents social media network activity**

|              |                                                  | Frequency | Percent |
|--------------|--------------------------------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Social media | Facebook;                                        | 63        | 13,3    |
|              | Facebook;Instagram;                              | 14        | 2,9     |
|              | Facebook;Instagram; TikTok;                      | 23        | 4,8     |
|              | Facebook;Instagram; TikTok;WhatsApp;             | 4         | ,8      |
|              | Facebook;Instagram; YouTube;                     | 45        | 9,5     |
|              | Facebook;Instagram; YouTube;discord, Kakao Talk; | 6         | 1,3     |
|              |                                                  |           |         |

|  |                                                              |    |     |
|--|--------------------------------------------------------------|----|-----|
|  | Facebook;Instagram;                                          | 4  | ,8  |
|  | YouTube;TikTok;                                              |    |     |
|  | Facebook;Instagram;<br>YouTube;TikTok;                       | 7  | 1,5 |
|  | Facebook;Instagram;<br>YouTube;TikTok;Twitter;               | 6  | 1,3 |
|  | Facebook;Instagram;<br>YouTube;Whatsapp;                     | 4  | ,8  |
|  | Facebook;TikTok;                                             | 15 | 3,2 |
|  | Facebook;TikTok;<br>Instagram;                               | 2  | ,4  |
|  | Facebook;TikTok;<br>Whatapp;                                 | 7  | 1,4 |
|  | Facebook;TikTok;<br>YouTube;Instagram;                       | 4  | ,8  |
|  | Facebook;Twitter;<br>Instagram;TikTok;                       | 4  | ,8  |
|  | Facebook;Twitter;<br>Instagram;YouTube;                      | 2  | ,4  |
|  | Facebook;Twitter;<br>Instagram;YouTube;<br>TikTok;           | 25 | 5,3 |
|  | Facebook;Twitter;<br>Instagram;YouTube;<br>Whatsapp;         | 8  | 1,7 |
|  | Facebook;Twitter;<br>YouTube;                                | 14 | 2,9 |
|  | Facebook;Twitter;<br>YouTube;Instagram;<br>TikTok;WhatsApp ; | 8  | 1,7 |
|  | Facebook;Twitter;<br>YouTube;TikTok;                         | 3  | ,6  |

|                                        |    |     |
|----------------------------------------|----|-----|
| Linkedin;                              |    |     |
| Facebook;YouTube;                      | 17 | 3,6 |
| Facebook;YouTube;<br>TikTok;           | 8  | 1,7 |
| Facebook;YouTube;<br>Whatsapp;         | 11 | 2,3 |
| Instagram;                             | 17 | 3,6 |
| Instagram;Facebook;<br>TikTok;YouTube; | 2  | ,4  |
| Instagram;Facebook;<br>YouTube;        | 2  | ,4  |
| Instagram;TikTok;                      | 17 | 3,6 |
| Instagram;TikTok;<br>YouTube;          | 4  | ,8  |
| Instagram;Twitter;<br>Facebook;TikTok; | 8  | 1,7 |
| Instagram;Twitter;<br>YouTube;         | 6  | 1,3 |
| Instagram;<br>Whatsapp and LinkedIn;   | 4  | ,8  |
| Instagram;YouTube;                     | 1  | ,2  |
| Instagram;YouTube;<br>Facebook;        | 6  | 1,3 |
| Instagram;YouTube;<br>TikTok           | 2  | ,4  |
| Instagram;YouTube;<br>TikTok;          | 6  | 1,3 |
| Instagram;YouTube;<br>Twitter;         | 8  | 1,7 |
| Linkedin;YouTube;                      | 3  | ,6  |
| LinkedIn;                              | 3  | ,6  |

|  |                                                    |     |       |
|--|----------------------------------------------------|-----|-------|
|  | Threads;YouTube;<br>Instagram;                     | 4   | ,8    |
|  | TikTok;Facebook;<br>Instagram;WhatsApp ;           | 2   | ,4    |
|  | TikTok;Twitter;<br>Instagram;YouTube;              | 2   | ,4    |
|  | TikTok;YouTube;                                    | 2   | ,4    |
|  | TikTok;YouTube;<br>Instagram;Facebook;             | 5   | 1,1   |
|  | Twitter                                            | 14  | 2,9   |
|  | Twitter;Facebook;<br>Instagram;                    | 4   | ,8    |
|  | Twitter;Instagram;<br>Facebook;YouTube;<br>TikTok; | 9   | 1,9   |
|  | Twitter;Instagram;<br>TikTok;                      | 2   | ,4    |
|  | WhatsApp;                                          | 6   | 1,3   |
|  | WhatsApp; Instagram                                | 2   | ,4    |
|  | WhatsApp ;Facebook;Instagram;<br>YouTube;TikTok;   | 4   | ,8    |
|  | YouTube;                                           | 3   | ,6    |
|  | YouTube; Instagram                                 | 2   | ,4    |
|  | YouTube;Facebook;                                  | 8   | 1,7   |
|  | YouTube;Facebook;<br>Instagram;TikTok;             | 2   | ,4    |
|  | YouTube;Instagram;<br>Twitter;Facebook;            | 11  | 2,3   |
|  | Total                                              | 475 | 100,0 |

The data revealed 13.3% of respondents are mostly active on Facebook, 9.5% are active on both Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, 5.3% are active on both Facebook, Twitter, Instagram,

YouTube, and TikTok, 2.9% of the sample, are active both Facebook and Instagram, 4.8% are active both Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, 4 individuals, comprising 0.8%, are active on both Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp. In addition, various other combinations follow with different percentages and frequencies, indicating users of multiple social media platforms. These diverse combinations signify a trend of multi-platform usage among Generation Y in South Africa. For influencer marketing strategies, understanding these varied social media habits is crucial. It emphasizes the need for influencers to have a presence across multiple platforms to effectively reach and engage with this audience, as their attention is spread across various social media channels (Horan 2021:3).

### 7.3.3 Social media platforms engaged with influencers.

Table 15 provides a comprehensive view of how respondents rank or use various combinations of social media platforms.

**Table 15: Ranking of social media platforms respondents engaged with influencers**

|                                                         |                                                  | Frequency | Percent |
|---------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Ranking of Social Media Platform Engage With Influences | Facebook;Instagram;Twitter;Other;YouTube;Tiktok; | 8         | 1,7     |
|                                                         | Facebook;Instagram;Twitter;YouTube;Other;Tiktok; | 4         | ,8      |
|                                                         | Facebook;Instagram;Twitter;YouTube;Tiktok;Other; | 14        | 2,9     |
|                                                         | Facebook;Instagram;YouTube;Other;Tiktok;Twitter; | 4         | ,8      |
|                                                         | Facebook;Instagram;YouTube;Twitter;Other;Tiktok; | 2         | ,4      |
|                                                         | Facebook;Instagram;YouTube;Twitter;Tiktok;Other; | 4         | ,8      |
|                                                         | Facebook;Tiktok;Instagram;YouTube;Twitter;Other; | 3         | ,6      |
|                                                         | Facebook;Tiktok;YouTube;Instagram;Other;Twitter; | 4         | ,8      |
|                                                         | Facebook;Tiktok;YouTube;Instagram;Twitter;Other; | 8         | 1,7     |
|                                                         | Facebook;Tiktok;YouTube;Other;Instagram;Twitter; | 4         | ,8      |
|                                                         | Facebook;Twitter;Instagram;YouTube;Tiktok;       | 6         | 1,3     |

|  |                                                  |    |     |
|--|--------------------------------------------------|----|-----|
|  | Facebook;Twitter;Instagram;YouTube;Tiktok;Other; | 4  | ,8  |
|  | Facebook;Twitter;Tiktok;Instagram;YouTube;Other; | 4  | ,8  |
|  | Facebook;YouTube;Tiktok;Instagram;Twitter;Other; | 9  | 1,9 |
|  | Facebook;YouTube;Tiktok;Twitter;Instagram;       | 11 | 2,3 |
|  | Facebook;YouTube;Twitter;Instagram;Tiktok;       | 9  | 1,9 |
|  | Facebook;YouTube;Twitter;Instagram;Tiktok;Other; | 9  | 1,9 |
|  | Facebook;YouTube;Twitter;Tiktok;Instagram;Other; | 5  | 1,1 |
|  | Instagram;Facebook;Tiktok;Twitter;YouTube;Other; | 4  | ,8  |
|  | Instagram;Facebook;Tiktok;YouTube;Other;Twitter; | 2  | ,4  |
|  | Instagram;Facebook;Twitter;YouTube;Tiktok;Other; | 12 | 2,5 |
|  | Instagram;Facebook;YouTube;Tiktok;Twitter;Other; | 4  | ,8  |
|  | Instagram;Facebook;YouTube;Twitter;Tiktok;       | 6  | 1,3 |
|  | Instagram;Facebook;YouTube;Twitter;Tiktok;Other; | 12 | 2,5 |
|  | Instagram;Tiktok;Facebook;YouTube;Twitter;Other; | 8  | 1,7 |
|  | Instagram;Tiktok;Other;YouTube;Facebook;Twitter; | 4  | ,8  |
|  | Instagram;Tiktok;Twitter;YouTube;Facebook;Other; | 4  | ,8  |
|  | Instagram;Tiktok;YouTube;Facebook;Twitter;Other; | 13 | 2,7 |
|  | Instagram;Twitter;Facebook;YouTube;Tiktok;       | 6  | 1,3 |
|  | Instagram;Twitter;Facebook;YouTube;Tiktok;Other; | 8  | 1,7 |

|  |                                                  |   |     |
|--|--------------------------------------------------|---|-----|
|  | Instagram;Twitter;YouTube;Facebook;Tiktok;       | 6 | 1,3 |
|  | Instagram;Twitter;YouTube;Facebook;Tiktok;Other; | 4 | ,8  |
|  | Instagram;Twitter;YouTube;Tiktok;Facebook;       | 6 | 1,3 |
|  | Instagram;Twitter;YouTube;Tiktok;Facebook;Other; | 5 | 1,1 |
|  | Instagram;YouTube;Facebook;Tiktok;Twitter;       | 6 | 1,3 |
|  | Instagram;YouTube;Facebook;Twitter;Other;Tiktok; | 2 | ,4  |
|  | Instagram;YouTube;Facebook;Twitter;Tiktok;Other; | 2 | ,4  |
|  | Instagram;YouTube;Tiktok;Facebook;Other;Twitter; | 9 | 1,9 |
|  | Instagram;YouTube;Tiktok;Facebook;Twitter;Other; | 4 | ,8  |
|  | Instagram;YouTube;Twitter;Facebook;Tiktok;Other; | 8 | 1,7 |
|  | Instagram;YouTube;Twitter;Tiktok;Facebook;Other; | 3 | ,6  |
|  | Other;Facebook;YouTube;Tiktok;Twitter;Instagram; | 4 | ,8  |
|  | Other;Facebook;YouTube;Twitter;Instagram;Tiktok; | 3 | ,6  |
|  | Other;Instagram;Tiktok;Facebook;YouTube;Twitter; | 4 | ,8  |
|  | Other;YouTube;Instagram;Twitter;Tiktok;Facebook; | 4 | ,8  |
|  | Other;YouTube;Twitter;Facebook;Tiktok;Instagram; | 3 | ,6  |
|  | Tiktok;Facebook;Instagram;YouTube;Other;Twitter; | 3 | ,6  |
|  | Tiktok;Facebook;Instagram;YouTube;Twitter;       | 6 | 1,3 |
|  | Tiktok;Facebook;YouTube;Instagram;Twitter;Other; | 5 | 1,1 |

|                                                  |    |     |
|--------------------------------------------------|----|-----|
| Tiktok;Instagram;Facebook;Twitter;YouTube;Other; | 4  | ,8  |
| Tiktok;Instagram;Facebook;YouTube;Other;Twitter; | 4  | ,8  |
| Tiktok;Instagram;YouTube;Facebook;Twitter;Other; | 5  | 1,1 |
| Tiktok;Twitter;Facebook;YouTube;Instagram;Other; | 8  | 1,7 |
| Tiktok;Twitter;YouTube;Facebook;Other;Instagram; | 4  | ,8  |
| Tiktok;Twitter;YouTube;Instagram;Facebook;Other; | 8  | 1,7 |
| Tiktok;YouTube;Facebook;Instagram;Twitter;Other; | 2  | ,4  |
| Tiktok;YouTube;Facebook;Other;Twitter;Instagram; | 9  | 1,9 |
| Tiktok;YouTube;Instagram;Facebook;Other;Twitter; | 2  | ,4  |
| Twitter;Facebook;Instagram;YouTube;Tiktok;Other; | 12 | 2,5 |
| Twitter;Instagram;Facebook;Tiktok;YouTube;Other; | 8  | 1,7 |
| Twitter;Instagram;Facebook;YouTube;Tiktok;       | 4  | ,8  |
| Twitter;Instagram;Facebook;YouTube;Tiktok;Other; | 10 | 2,1 |
| Twitter;Instagram;Other;Facebook;YouTube;Tiktok; | 3  | ,6  |
| Twitter;Instagram;Tiktok;YouTube;Facebook;Other; | 8  | 1,7 |
| Twitter;Instagram;YouTube;Tiktok;Facebook;Other; | 4  | ,8  |
| Twitter;Tiktok;Instagram;Facebook;YouTube;Other; | 5  | 1,1 |
| Twitter;Tiktok;YouTube;Facebook;Instagram;       | 6  | 1,3 |
| Twitter;YouTube;Tiktok;Facebook;Instagram;       | 6  | 1,3 |

|  |                                                   |     |       |
|--|---------------------------------------------------|-----|-------|
|  | Twitter;YouTube;Tiktok;Instagram;Facebook;Other;  | 8   | 1,7   |
|  | YouTube;Facebook;Instagram;Twitter;Tiktok;Other;  | 8   | 1,7   |
|  | YouTube; Facebook; Tiktok; Instagram; Twitter;    | 6   | 1,3   |
|  | YouTube; Facebook;Tiktok;Other;Twitter;Instagram; | 4   | ,8    |
|  | YouTube;Facebook;Twitter;Instagram;Tiktok;        | 6   | 1,3   |
|  | YouTube;Facebook;Twitter;Instagram;Tiktok;Other;  | 4   | ,8    |
|  | YouTube;Instagram;Facebook;Twitter;Tiktok;Other;  | 8   | 1,7   |
|  | YouTube;Instagram;Twitter;Facebook;Other;Tiktok;  | 8   | 1,7   |
|  | YouTube;Instagram;Twitter;Facebook;Tiktok;Other;  | 5   | 1,1   |
|  | YouTube;Other;Facebook;Instagram;Tiktok;Twitter;  | 5   | 1,1   |
|  | YouTube;Other;Instagram;Tiktok;Twitter;Facebook;  | 4   | ,8    |
|  | YouTube;Twitter;Facebook;Instagram;Tiktok;Other;  | 3   | ,6    |
|  | YouTube;Twitter;Facebook;Other;Instagram;Tiktok;  | 8   | 1,7   |
|  | YouTube;Twitter;Tiktok;Facebook;Instagram;Other;  | 4   | ,8    |
|  | Total                                             | 475 | 100,0 |

This data shows that there are numerous combinations of social media platforms listed, each with varying frequencies and percentages of the total sample. For example, some individuals use platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, TikTok, and others in different combinations. The frequencies range from 2 to 14, with corresponding percentages ranging from 0.4% to 2.9% of the total sample. This is in line with the two-preceding data on social media activity and engagement. This diversity emphasizes the need for a comprehensive approach in influencer marketing strategies. Generation Y in South Africa isn't confined to a single social media platform; instead, they're actively

engaged across multiple platforms. Influencers seeking to reach this audience effectively should consider having a presence across various platforms to maximize their impact and engagement. Understanding these varied combinations helps tailor influencer campaigns to suit the diverse social media preferences of this demographic.

#### 7.4 RELIABILITY OF THE INSTRUMENT

Before providing the interpretation for the empirical findings and theoretical validation of the data, this section will deliberate focus on reliability of the research constructs. Reliability and validity are two of the most important aspects in research. Reliability of the survey was assessed using Cronbach alpha value. The value 0.7 and above was considered acceptable. As shown in Table 16, the Cronbach's alpha value measures for all the constructs were above the value of 0.7, implying a degree of consistency. This indicates the research instrument is reliable.

**Table 16: Assessing the quality and reliability of the survey instrument**

| Section                                          | Number of items | Cronbach's alpha |
|--------------------------------------------------|-----------------|------------------|
| Important Is Social Media                        | 11              | 0.905            |
| Brand Awareness                                  | 10              | 0.953            |
| Influencer Strategies                            | 13              | 0.935            |
| Engagement/Interaction                           | 10              | 0.938            |
| Consumer Trust                                   | 17              | 0.957            |
| Consumer Brand Perception And Purchase Intention | 17              | 0.925            |

#### 7.5 SECTION ANALYSIS

This section details the respondents' level of agreement on statements measuring the importance of social media, influencer strategies, engagement/interactions, consumer brand perception and purchase intention, brand awareness, and consumer trust. One-sample t-test was done to determine if there is significant agreement/disagreement to each item. The average agreement score is tested against the central score of '3' to determine if it differs significantly from '3'. The results are adjudged to be significant when  $p < .05$ .

### 7.5.1 Importance of social media

#### 7.5.1.1 Level of agreement on the importance of social media

This section presents the results of a survey that measures the importance of social media. The data in Table 17 represents a different aspect of how respondents perceive the significance of social media in their lives. The mean value measures for all the 11 items were above 3, indicating that the respondents agreed on the importance of social media in their lives.

**Table 17: Respondents level of agreement on the importance of social media**

| Construct: Importance of social media                                                                           |       | Mean (SD)    | t      | Df  | p-value |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|--------------|--------|-----|---------|
| Social media is important to me because I prefer socialising through electronic communication than face to face | ISM1  | 3.23 (1.325) | 53,144 | 474 | <.001*  |
| Social media is important to me because I like collaborating with like-minded individuals                       | ISM2  | 3.88 (1.211) | 69,726 | 474 | <.001*  |
| Social media is important to me to build my network of contacts and friends                                     | ISM3  | 3.39 (1.269) | 58,254 | 474 | <.001*  |
| Social media is important to me to remain connected with others                                                 | ISM4  | 4.05 (1.034) | 85,376 | 474 | <.001*  |
| Social media is important to me to stay abreast of trends                                                       | ISM5  | 4.00 (1.112) | 78,489 | 474 | <.001*  |
| Social media is important to me to hear the views of others                                                     | ISM6  | 3.95(1.036)  | 83,011 | 474 | <.001*  |
| Social media is important to me to see the preferences of others                                                | ISM7  | 3.62(1.111)  | 71,047 | 474 | <.001*  |
| Social media is important to me to help me make decisions                                                       | ISM8  | 3.65(1.107)  | 71,806 | 474 | <.001*  |
| Social media is important to me to share my opinion with others                                                 | ISM9  | 3.61(1.058)  | 74,468 | 474 | <.001*  |
| Social media is important to me to share my preferences with others                                             | ISM10 | 3.56(1.119)  | 69,366 | 474 | <.001*  |
| Social media is important to me to influence others                                                             | ISM11 | 3.28(1.226)  | 58,376 | 474 | <.001*  |

These are explained further.

**ISM1 - Preference for Electronic Communication:** Respondents rated their preference for socializing through electronic communication rather than face-to-face interactions. On average, they scored 3.23 with a standard deviation of 1.325. The t-statistic was 53.144, and the p-value was less than 0.001, indicating a significant preference for electronic communication over face-to-face interactions.

**ISM2 - Collaboration with Like-minded Individuals:** This construct measured the importance of social media for collaborating with like-minded individuals. Respondents, on average, scored 3.88 (SD = 1.211), indicating a strong inclination towards using social media for collaboration. The t-statistic was 69.726, and the p-value was less than 0.001, signifying a significant preference for collaboration with like-minded individuals through social media.

**ISM3 - Building a Network of Contacts and Friends:** Individuals valued social media as a means to build their network of contacts and friends (Mean = 3.39, SD = 1.269). The t-statistic was 58.254, and the p-value was less than 0.001, showing a significant importance placed on networking through social media.

**ISM4 - Remaining Connected with Others:** The construct assessed the importance of social media in staying connected with others. Respondents scored an average of 4.05 (SD = 1.034), indicating a strong preference for using social media to maintain connections. The t-statistic was 85.376, and the p-value was less than 0.001.

**ISM5 - Staying Abreast of Trends:** Social media was found to be important for staying informed about trends (Mean = 4.00, SD = 1.112). The t-statistic was 78,489, and the p-value was less than 0.001, suggesting a significant role of social media in trend awareness.

**ISM6 - Hearing the Views of Others:** Respondents rated social media's importance for hearing the views of others (Mean = 3.95, SD = 1.036). The t-statistic was 83,011, and the p-value was less than 0.001, emphasizing the significance of social media in this aspect.

**ISM7 - Seeing the Preferences of Others:** Individuals considered social media important for observing the preferences of others (Mean = 3.62, SD = 1.111). The t-statistic was 71,047, and the p-value was less than 0.001.

**ISM8 - Help in Decision Making:** Social media's role in decision-making was also assessed, and respondents scored 3.65 (SD = 1.107). The t-statistic was 71,806, and the p-value was less than 0.001, indicating that social media is a significant factor in decision-making.

**ISM9 - Sharing Opinions:** Social media was perceived as important for sharing opinions (Mean = 3.61, SD = 1.058). The t-statistic was 74,468, and the p-value was less than 0.001.

**ISM10 - Sharing Preferences:** Respondents valued social media for sharing their preferences with others (Mean = 3.56, SD = 1.119). The t-statistic was 69,366, and the p-value was less than 0.001.

**ISM11 - Influence on Others:** The construct explored the importance of social media in influencing others, with respondents scoring an average of 3.28 (SD = 1.226). The t-statistic was 58,376, and the p-value was less than 0.001.

These findings indicate that respondents generally prefer electronic communication over face-to-face interactions, as shown by a significant preference indicated by the low p-value (less than 0.001) for Preference for Electronic Communication (ISM1). Additionally, there is a strong inclination towards using social media for collaboration with like-minded individuals (ISM2), networking (ISM3), staying connected with others (ISM4), staying informed about trends (ISM5), hearing others' views (ISM6), observing others' preferences (ISM7), decision-making (ISM8), sharing opinions (ISM9), sharing preferences (ISM10), and influencing others (ISM11). All these aspects showed significant importance placed on social media usage, reflected in low p-values (less than 0.001) and high t-statistics, indicating a clear significance and reliance on social media for various aspects of interaction and decision-making among respondents. The findings suggest that social media plays a crucial role in various aspects of individuals' lives, including communication preferences, collaboration, networking, staying connected, trend awareness, and influencing others (Auer 2011: 711). These constructs highlight the multifaceted importance of social media in today's society.

#### 7.5.1.2 Assessing the reliability of social medial importance

Factor analysis was applied to determine if there were any specific groupings of these 11 items. The rotated varimax method with Kaiser normalisation reveals two components which accounts for 74.01% of the variance in the data. The factor loadings are shown in Table 18.

**Table 18: Factor coefficient of social media importance**

| Rotated Component Matrix <sup>a</sup> |           |   |
|---------------------------------------|-----------|---|
|                                       | Component |   |
|                                       | 1         | 2 |

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |      |      |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|------|
| ISM1                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | ,586 |      |
| ISM2                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | ,594 |      |
| ISM3                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |      | ,637 |
| ISM4                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | ,696 |      |
| ISM5                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | ,784 |      |
| ISM6                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | ,824 |      |
| ISM7                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | ,757 |      |
| ISM8                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | ,656 |      |
| ISM9                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |      | ,785 |
| ISM10                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |      | ,868 |
| ISM11                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |      | ,866 |
| <p>Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.</p> <p>Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.</p> <p>a. Rotation converged in 3 iterations.</p> <p>Variance=74.01%</p> <p>Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy=0.873</p> <p>Bartlett's Test of Sphericity= (p&lt;0.001; X<sup>2</sup>=3166,336; df=55)</p> |      |      |

The two extracted components or factors are summarised in Table 19. These components help to simplify the interpretation of the importance of social media and provide a clearer understanding of the underlying structure of why respondents find social media important in their lives. Factor 1 represents the importance of social media in enhancing and facilitating interpersonal connections and communication. It includes items related to preferences for electronic communication, collaboration, staying connected, staying informed about trends, and observing the preferences of others. Factor 1 is internally consistent ( $\alpha=0.831$ ) and accounts for a significant portion of the variance (52.608) in the included items (ISM1, ISM2, ISM4, ISM5, ISM7, and ISM8).

Factor 2 encompasses the importance of social media for self-expression, networking, and influencing others. It includes items (ISM3, ISM9, ISM10, and ISM11) related to sharing opinions,

sharing preferences, and influencing others. Factor 2 is also highly internally consistent ( $\alpha=0.861$ ) and accounts for a portion of the variance (11.072) in the included items.

**Table 19: Reliability and Variance extracted on the importance of social media**

| Factor | Construct                                                              | Items included                     | Number of items | Variance extracted | Cronbach's alpha |
|--------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------|--------------------|------------------|
| 1      | Enhancing and facilitating interpersonal connections and communication | ISM1, ISM2, ISM4, ISM5, ISM7, ISM8 | 6               | 52.608             | .831             |
| 2      | self-expression, networking, and influencing others                    | ISM3, ISM9, ISM10, ISM11           | 4               | 11.072             | .861             |

### 7.5.2 Objective One: Influencer strategies

This section addresses the research objective One which is to assess influencer strategies use in social media engagement.

#### 7.5.2.1 Level of agreement on influencer strategies

Table 7.0 presents the results of a survey that assesses respondents' attitudes and preferences related to influencer marketing and influencer strategies. The mean value measured for the 13 items was above 3, indicating that the respondents agreed on the influencer marketing strategies.

**Table 20: Respondents level of agreement on influencer strategies**

| Construct: Influencer Strategies                                                  |     | Mean (SD)    | T      | df  | p-value |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|--------------|--------|-----|---------|
| Discount codes posted by influencers prompt my purchase intentions                | IS1 | 3.03 (1.300) | 50,767 | 474 | <.001*  |
| I like to buy brands that influencers mention in their social media conversations | IS2 | 3.18 (1.130) | 61,278 | 474 | <.001*  |
| I like influencers' campaigns involving more than one brand                       | IS3 | 3.31 (1.175) | 61,471 | 474 | <.001*  |

|                                                                               |      |                 |        |     |        |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|-----------------|--------|-----|--------|
| I get inspired by influencers' brand testimonials                             | IS4  | 3.37<br>(1.212) | 60,535 | 474 | <.001* |
| Influencers' product demonstrations help me in my purchase decision           | IS5  | 3.36<br>(1.227) | 59,715 | 474 | <.001* |
| I like joining brand competitions that influencers post about                 | IS6  | 3.00(1.29<br>8) | 50,391 | 474 | <.001* |
| I like influencers' posts about product promotions                            | IS7  | 3.38(1.15<br>6) | 63,659 | 474 | <.001* |
| Influencers' comparison of brands motivates my brand choice.                  | IS8  | 3.40(1.12<br>5) | 65,893 | 474 | <.001* |
| I prefer brands that re-share influencers content on their social media pages | IS9  | 3.37(1.19<br>8) | 61,295 | 474 | <.001* |
| I enjoy influencers' live video collaborations with other followers           | IS10 | 3.36(1.27<br>1) | 57,678 | 474 | <.001* |
| I like when influencers collaborate with other influencers                    | IS11 | 3.57(1.12<br>5) | 69,242 | 474 | <.001* |
| I like when influencers take over brands' social media pages                  | IS12 | 3.35(1.24<br>6) | 58,534 | 474 | <.001* |
| I like when influencers tell stories about brands                             | IS13 | 3.52(1.08<br>8) | 70,501 | 474 | <.001* |

These are further detailed below.

**IS1: Discount Codes Influence Purchase Intentions:** Respondents, on average, rated a mean of 3.03 (SD = 1.300) for their likelihood to make a purchase when influencers post discount codes. The t-statistic was 50,767, and the p-value was less than 0.001. This indicates that discount codes shared by influencers significantly influence purchase intentions.

**IS2: Preference for Brands Mentioned by Influencers:** On average, individuals scored 3.18 (SD = 1.130) for their preference to buy brands mentioned by influencers in their social media conversations. The t-statistic was 61,278, with a p-value less than 0.001, demonstrating a significant preference for brands endorsed by influencers.

**IS3: Liking Influencers' Campaigns Involving Multiple Brands:** Respondents rated a mean of 3.31 (SD = 1.175) for their liking of influencer campaigns involving more than one brand. The t-statistic was 61,471, and the p-value was less than 0.001, indicating a positive response to campaigns featuring multiple brands.

**IS4: Influence of Influencers' Brand Testimonials:** Individuals, on average, were influenced by influencers' brand testimonials with a mean score of 3.37 (SD = 1.212). The t-statistic was 60,535, and the p-value was less than 0.001, showing that brand testimonials by influencers have a significant impact on consumers.

**IS5: Product Demonstrations Influence Purchase Decisions:** Influencers' product demonstrations were rated as influential for purchase decisions, with a mean score of 3.36 (SD = 1.227). The t-statistic was 59,715, and the p-value was less than 0.001, emphasizing the impact of product demonstrations on purchase decisions.

**IS6: Liking Brand Competitions Promoted by Influencers:** Respondents, on average, scored 3.00 (SD = 1.298) for their liking of brand competitions promoted by influencers. The t-statistic was 50,391, and the p-value was less than 0.001, indicating an overall positive attitude toward brand competitions initiated by influencers.

**IS7: Preference for Influencers' Posts about Product Promotions:** The preference for influencers' posts about product promotions was high, with a mean score of 3.38 (SD = 1.156). The t-statistic was 63,659, and the p-value was less than 0.001, indicating strong interest in such posts.

**IS8: Influencers' Comparison of Brands and Brand Choice:** Respondents were motivated in their brand choice by influencers' comparisons of brands, as evidenced by a mean score of 3.40 (SD = 1.125). The t-statistic was 65,893, and the p-value was less than 0.001.

**IS9: Preference for Brands that Reshare Influencers' Content:** Individuals preferred brands that reshared influencers' content on their social media pages, with a mean score of 3.37 (SD = 1.198). The t-statistic was 61,295, and the p-value was less than 0.001.

**IS10: Enjoying Influencers' Live Video Collaborations:** Respondents enjoyed influencers' live video collaborations with other followers, with a mean score of 3.36 (SD = 1.271). The t-statistic was 57,678, and the p-value was less than 0.001.

**IS11: Liking Influencers' Collaboration with Other Influencers:** Individuals had a positive attitude toward influencers collaborating with other influencers, with a mean score of 3.57 (SD = 1.125). The t-statistic was 69,242, and the p-value was less than 0.001.

**IS12: Preference for Influencers Taking Over Brands' Social Media Pages:** Respondents liked it when influencers took over brands' social media pages, with a mean score of 3.35 (SD = 1.246). The t-statistic was 58,534, and the p-value was less than 0.001.

**IS13: Liking Influencers Telling Stories About Brands:** Respondents had a positive response to influencers telling stories about brands, with a mean score of 3.52 (SD = 1.088). The t-statistic was 70,501, and the p-value was less than 0.001.

The data from various measures assessing consumers' responses to influencer activities on social media reveals intriguing trends. Discount codes shared by influencers significantly impact purchase intentions, as seen through a low p-value (less than 0.001) and a substantial t-statistic (50,767). Consumers exhibit a marked preference for brands mentioned by influencers in social media conversations, reflected by a low p-value (less than 0.001) and a notable t-statistic (61,278). Additionally, positive responses prevail toward influencer campaigns involving multiple brands, brand testimonials, product demonstrations, brand competitions, and posts about product promotions (Cheng-Xi Aw and Agnihotri 2023:3), evident from consistently low p-values and substantial t-statistics across these measures (all less than 0.001 and ranging from 50,391 to 63,659). Influencers' comparison of brands, collaborations with other influencers, taking over brand social media pages, and storytelling about brands also received significant positive responses, as denoted by low p-values (less than 0.001) and substantial t-statistics (ranging from 58,534 to 70,501). These findings collectively illustrate the substantial influence and favourable attitudes consumers hold towards various influencer-initiated activities on social media platforms. Overall, this data suggests that influencer marketing strategies have a significant impact on individuals' purchasing intentions, brand preferences, and engagement with influencer content across a range of strategies and content types. Consumers are influenced by influencers in various ways, and their strategies appear to be effective in driving consumer behaviour and preferences (Argyris et al. 2020:3).

#### **7.5.2.2 Assessing the reliability of influencer strategies.**

Factor analysis was applied to determine if there were any specific groupings of these 13 items. They all loaded onto a single factor (KMO = .873, and Bartlett's (55) = 3166,336;  $p < 0.001$ ) which accounts for 65.79% of the variance in the data. The factor loadings are shown in Table 21. These items are combined into a single reliable (Cronbach's alpha = .935) variable, IS.

**Table 21: Factor Loading of influencer strategies**

| Component Matrix <sup>a</sup>                                                                                                                                                                                                           |           |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | Component |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | 1         |
| IS1                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | ,645      |
| IS2                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | ,781      |
| IS3                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | ,685      |
| IS4                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | ,876      |
| IS5                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | ,811      |
| IS6                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | ,769      |
| IS7                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | ,909      |
| IS8                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | ,828      |
| IS9                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | ,906      |
| IS10                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | ,868      |
| IS11                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | ,854      |
| IS12                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | ,674      |
| IS13                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | ,877      |
| Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.<br>a. 1 components extracted.<br>Variance=65.79%<br>Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy=0.932<br>Bartlett's Test of Sphericity= (p<0.001; X <sup>2</sup> =6002,723; df=78) |           |

### **7.5.3 Objective Two: Engagement/Interaction**

This section addresses research objective two which is to assess the level of engagement and interaction with brand influencers on social media.

#### **7.5.3.1 Level of agreement on engagement/interaction**

Table 22 presents the level of the respondents' agreement on the statements related to their engagement and interaction with brand influencers on social media. The mean value measured for

all the 10 items was above 3, which suggests that respondents were in agreement with statements on engagement and interaction with brand influencers on social media.

**Table 22: Respondents level of agreement on engagement and interaction with brand influencers on social media**

| Construct: Engagement/Interaction                                                      |      | Mean (SD )   | t      | df  | p-value |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|--------------|--------|-----|---------|
| Social media is the best communication channel for interacting with brand influencers  | EI1  | 3.88 (1.119) | 75,619 | 474 | <.001*  |
| I prefer influencers' brand posts on social media compared to advertisements by brands | EI2  | 3.39 (1.183) | 62,492 | 474 | <.001*  |
| I like that influencers are able to empathise with me                                  | EI3  | 3.48 (1.093) | 69,295 | 474 | <.001*  |
| I like that influencers respond to my questions and comments                           | EI4  | 3.37 (1.225) | 60,015 | 474 | <.001*  |
| I ask influencers questions on their social media posts                                | EI5  | 3.05 (1.364) | 48,781 | 474 | <.001*  |
| I like, comment or share influencers' posts that I find useful to me                   | EI6  | 3.55(1.340)  | 57,790 | 474 | <.001*  |
| I like influencers who share detailed videos                                           | EI7  | 3.88(1.083)  | 78,017 | 474 | <.001*  |
| I like influencers who post pictures and text                                          | EI8  | 3.74(1.135)  | 71,805 | 474 | <.001*  |
| I like influencers who share plain text                                                | EI9  | 3.19(1.178)  | 59,057 | 474 | <.001*  |
| I am able to engage with influencers on their live videos                              | EI10 | 3.37(1.313)  | 55,986 | 474 | <.001*  |

These are further detailed below:

**EI1: Social Media as the Best Communication Channel:** On average, individuals rated a mean of 3.88 (SD = 1.119) for their belief that social media is the best communication channel for interacting with brand influencers. The t-statistic was 75,619, and the p-value was less than 0.001, indicating strong agreement with this statement.

**EI2: Preference for Influencers' Brand Posts:** Respondents, on average, scored 3.39 (SD = 1.183) for their preference for influencers' brand posts on social media compared to advertisements by brands. The t-statistic was 62,492, and the p-value was less than 0.001, suggesting a significant preference for influencer content.

**EI3: Liking Influencers' Empathy:** Individuals, on average, liked that influencers are able to empathize with them, with a mean score of 3.48 (SD = 1.093). The t-statistic was 69,295, and the p-value was less than 0.001, indicating that influencers' ability to empathize is appreciated.

**EI4: Liking Influencers' Responsiveness:** Respondents, on average, liked that influencers respond to their questions and comments, with a mean score of 3.37 (SD = 1.225). The t-statistic was 60,015, and the p-value was less than 0.001, showing that influencer responsiveness is valued.

**EI5: Asking Influencers Questions:** Individuals, on average, indicated that they ask influencers questions on their social media posts, with a mean score of 3.05 (SD = 1.364). The t-statistic was 48,781, and the p-value was less than 0.001, reflecting a willingness to engage with influencers.

**EI6: Liking, Commenting, or Sharing Influencers' Posts:** Respondents, on average, liked, commented, or shared influencers' posts that they find useful, with a mean score of 3.55 (SD = 1.340). The t-statistic was 57,790, and the p-value was less than 0.001, demonstrating active engagement with influencer content.

**EI7: Liking Influencers Who Share Detailed Videos:** On average, individuals liked influencers who share detailed videos, with a mean score of 3.88 (SD = 1.083). The t-statistic was 78,017, and the p-value was less than 0.001, highlighting a preference for detailed video content.

**EI8: Liking Influencers Who Post Pictures and Text:** Respondents, on average, liked influencers who post pictures and text, with a mean score of 3.74 (SD = 1.135). The t-statistic was 71,805, and the p-value was less than 0.001, indicating a positive response to multimedia content.

**EI9: Liking Influencers Who Share Plain Text:** Individuals, on average, liked influencers who share plain text, with a mean score of 3.19 (SD = 1.178). The t-statistic was 59,057, and the p-value was less than 0.001, showing appreciation for text-based content.

**EI10: Engagement with Influencers on Live Videos:** On average, individuals indicated that they are able to engage with influencers on their live videos, with a mean score of 3.37 (SD = 1.313). The t-statistic was 55,986, and the p-value was less than 0.001, demonstrating active participation in live video interactions.

The results from various measures gauging consumers' perceptions and behaviors towards influencer engagement on social media unveil significant trends. Consumers strongly believe in social media as the prime communication channel for interacting with brand influencers, indicated by a mean score of 3.88 (SD = 1.119) and a notably low p-value (less than 0.001) with a substantial t-statistic (75,619). This is in consistence with Yahaya, Nawawi and Salin (2017: 259) who believe that Generation Y shows a greater level of involvement in social networking platforms. Additionally, there exists a notable preference for influencer content over brand advertisements on social media, as showcased by a mean score of 3.39 (SD = 1.183), a low p-value (less than 0.001), and a significant t-statistic (62,492). Consumers highly value influencers' empathetic abilities, responsiveness to queries, and engagement with their content, as reflected in the favourable mean scores (ranging from 3.37 to 3.55) and consistently low p-values across these measures (all less than 0.001). Moreover, there's a clear inclination towards detailed video content (mean = 3.88, SD = 1.083) and multimedia posts (mean = 3.74, SD = 1.135), while even plain text-based content also garners appreciation (mean = 3.19, SD = 1.178). In general, consumers actively engage and appreciate various forms of influencer content on social media, emphasizing the crucial role of influencers in shaping consumer perceptions and interactions within digital spaces. This data suggests that individuals are highly engaged with brand influencers on social media. They value influencer content, appreciate influencer responsiveness, and actively participate in various forms of engagement, including asking questions, liking, commenting, and sharing content. This engagement reflects a strong and positive relationship between individuals and brand influencers on social media platforms (Hughes et al. 2019: 80).

### 7.5.3.2 Assessing the reliability of engagement/interactions.

Factor analysis was applied to determine if there were any specific groupings of these 7 items. They all loaded onto a single factor (KMO = .902, and Bartlett's (45) = 3919,033;  $p < 0.001$ ) which accounts for 64.91% of the variance in the data. The factor loadings are shown in Table 23. These items are combined into a single reliable (Cronbach's alpha = .938) variable, EI.

**Table 23: Factor loading of respondents' engagement and interaction with brand influencers on social media**

| Component Matrix <sup>a</sup>                    |           |
|--------------------------------------------------|-----------|
|                                                  | Component |
|                                                  | 1         |
| EI1                                              | ,724      |
| EI2                                              | ,776      |
| EI3                                              | ,870      |
| EI4                                              | ,881      |
| EI5                                              | ,791      |
| EI6                                              | ,813      |
| EI7                                              | ,842      |
| EI8                                              | ,875      |
| EI9                                              | ,707      |
| EI10                                             | ,756      |
| Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. |           |
| a. 1 components extracted.                       |           |
| Variance=64.91%                                  |           |

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy=0.902

Bartlett's Test of Sphericity= ( $p < 0.001$ ;  $X^2 = 3919,033$ ;  $df = 45$ )

#### **7.5.4 Objective three: Consumer brand perception and purchase intention**

This section addresses the research objective three which is to assess consumers' brand perception and purchase intentions influenced by social media influencers.

##### **7.5.4.1 Level of agreement on consumer brand perception and purchase intention**

Table 24 highlights the level of agreement on how consumers perceive brands and make purchase decisions based on the influence of social media influencers. The mean value measured for all the 17 items was above 3, indicating agreement among the respondents.

**Table 24: Respondents level of agreement on consumers' brand perception and purchase intentions influenced by social media influencers**

| Construct: Consumer Brand Perception and Purchase Intention                                        |      | Mean (SD )   | T      | df  | p-value |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|--------------|--------|-----|---------|
| A brand used by an influencer is more reliable                                                     | PI1  | 3.28 (1.189) | 60,157 | 474 | <.001*  |
| I find brand products promoted by influencers to be more appealing                                 | PI2  | 3.44 (1.028) | 72,851 | 474 | <.001*  |
| Influencers represent a brand's character                                                          | PI3  | 3.41 (1.105) | 67,257 | 474 | <.001*  |
| If my favourite influencer recommends a brand, I am more likely to try it                          | PI4  | 3.24 (1.134) | 62,344 | 474 | <.001*  |
| I seek influencers' reviews before making purchase decisions                                       | PI5  | 3.43 (1.157) | 64,576 | 474 | <.001*  |
| I make purchases based on online recommendations                                                   | PI6  | 3.25(1.12 5) | 62,876 | 474 | <.001*  |
| I usually engage with a brand following an influencers recommendation                              | PI7  | 3.29(1.13 9) | 63,054 | 474 | <.001*  |
| I always depict alternative brands to purchase through social media influencers                    | PI8  | 3.31(1.10 3) | 65,499 | 474 | <.001*  |
| I disregard a brand because of negative influencer reviews                                         | PI9  | 3.24(1.16 0) | 60,820 | 474 | <.001*  |
| Interactions with influencers cannot influence my purchase intention                               | PI10 | 3.16(1.14 6) | 60,136 | 474 | <.001*  |
| My personal decisions are always transformed after going through an influencers' social media page | PI11 | 3.99(1.05 6) | 82,226 | 474 | <.001*  |
| I seek specific qualities in a brand                                                               | PI12 | 3.63(1.09 1) | 72,525 | 474 | <.001*  |
| I purchase a brand that meets my quality criteria that is mentioned by the influencer              | PI13 | 3.52(1.11 2) | 69,008 | 474 | <.001*  |
| I purchase a brand if I perceive it adds value to me                                               | PI14 | 3.16(1.17 4) | 58,746 | 474 | <.001*  |

|                                                                                |      |             |        |     |        |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|-------------|--------|-----|--------|
| I purchase a brand based on the positive qualities mentioned by the influencer | PI15 | 3.40(1.124) | 66,033 | 474 | <.001* |
| My perception of brands is easily influenced by influencers                    | PI16 | 3.31(1.112) | 64,918 | 474 | <.001* |
| Influencers have changed my brand preferences                                  | PI17 | 3.54(1.075) | 71,827 | 474 | <.001* |

These are further detailed below:

**PI1: Influencer-Endorsed Brands as More Reliable:** On average, respondents rated a mean of 3.28 (SD = 1.189) for their belief that a brand used by an influencer is more reliable. The t-statistic was 60,157, and the p-value was less than 0.001, indicating a strong association between influencer endorsements and brand reliability.

**PI2: Appeal of Brand Products Promoted by Influencers:** Consumers find brand products promoted by influencers to be more appealing, with an average score of 3.44 (SD = 1.028). The t-statistic was 72,851, and the p-value was less than 0.001, suggesting that influencer promotions enhance the appeal of these products.

**PI3: Influencers Represent a Brand's Character:** On average, individuals agreed that influencers represent a brand's character, with a mean score of 3.41 (SD = 1.105). The t-statistic was 67,257, and the p-value was less than 0.001, highlighting the perception that influencers embody a brand's character.

**PI4: Influence of Favourite Influencer Recommendations:** If a favourite influencer recommends a brand, consumers are more likely to try it, as indicated by a mean score of 3.24 (SD = 1.134). The t-statistic was 62,344, and the p-value was less than 0.001, showing the impact of influencer recommendations.

**PI5: Seeking Influencers' Reviews for Purchase Decisions:** Consumers seek influencers' reviews before making purchase decisions, with an average score of 3.43 (SD = 1.157). The t-statistic was 64,576, and the p-value was less than 0.001, suggesting that influencers' reviews play a significant role in consumer decision-making.

**PI6: Purchases Based on Online Recommendations:** On average, consumers make purchases based on online recommendations, with a mean score of 3.25 (SD = 1.125). The t-statistic was 62,876, and the p-value was less than 0.001, emphasizing the impact of online recommendations, potentially from influencers.

**PI7: Engagement with Brands Following Influencer Recommendations:** Respondents often engage with a brand following an influencer's recommendation, with a mean score of 3.29 (SD = 1.139). The t-statistic was 63,054, and the p-value was less than 0.001, indicating engagement prompted by influencers.

**PI8: Depicting Alternative Brands Through Influencers:** Consumers often explore alternative brands to purchase through social media influencers, with a mean score of 3.31 (SD = 1.103). The t-statistic was 65,499, and the p-value was less than 0.001, indicating that influencers influence brand exploration.

**PI9: Disregarding Brands Due to Negative Influencer Reviews:** Respondents may disregard a brand because of negative influencer reviews, as indicated by a mean score of 3.24 (SD = 1.160). The t-statistic was 60,820, and the p-value was less than 0.001, suggesting the influence of negative reviews.

**PI10: Influencer Interactions and Purchase Intention:** On average, interactions with influencers can influence consumers' purchase intentions, with a mean score of 3.16 (SD = 1.146). The t-statistic was 60,136, and the p-value was less than 0.001, indicating the transformative effect of influencer interactions.

**PI11: Influencers' Transformation of Personal Decisions:** Respondents' personal decisions are often transformed after going through an influencer's social media page, as indicated by a mean score of 3.99 (SD = 1.056). The t-statistic was 82,226, and the p-value was less than 0.001, showing a significant impact on personal decisions.

**PI12: Seeking Specific Qualities in a Brand:** Consumers often seek specific qualities in a brand, with a mean score of 3.63 (SD = 1.091). The t-statistic was 72,525, and the p-value was less than 0.001, highlighting the importance of these qualities in brand selection.

**PI13: I purchase a brand that meets my quality criteria that is mentioned by the influencer.** The mean score for this item is 3.52, with a standard deviation (SD) of 1.112. The t-statistic for this item was 69,008, and the p-value is less than 0.001. This suggests that, on average, consumers are willing to purchase a brand if it meets their quality criteria, especially when these criteria are highlighted by an influencer. The high mean score and low p-value indicate a strong agreement among consumers that influencer mentions of quality criteria influence their purchase decisions positively.

**PI14: I purchase a brand if I perceive it adds value to me.** The mean score for this item is 3.16, with a standard deviation (SD) of 1.174. The t-statistic for this item was 58,746, and the p-value is less than 0.001. This indicates that consumers often make purchases based on their perception that

a brand adds value to them. While the mean score is slightly lower than the previous item, the low p-value implies a significant impact of perceived value in influencing purchase decisions.

**PI15: I purchase a brand based on the positive qualities mentioned by the influencer.** The mean score for this item is 3.40, with a standard deviation (SD) of 1.124. The t-statistic for this item was 66,033, and the p-value is less than 0.001. This item suggests that consumers frequently buy a brand when they perceive positive qualities being emphasized by influencers. The relatively high mean score and the low p-value imply that consumers are strongly influenced by the positive attributes highlighted by influencers in their purchase decisions.

**PI16: Easy Influence of Brand Perceptions:** On average, consumers indicate that their perception of brands is easily influenced by influencers, with a mean score of 3.31 (SD = 1.112). The t-statistic was 64,918, and the p-value was less than 0.001, emphasizing the ease with which influencers shape brand perceptions.

**PI17: Influencers Changing Brand Preferences:** On average, consumers assert that influencers have changed their brand preferences, with a mean score of 3.54 (SD = 1.075). The t-statistic was 71,827, and the p-value was less than 0.001, highlighting the role of influencers in altering consumer preferences.

The results indicate a substantial impact of influencer involvement on consumer perceptions and behaviors regarding brands. Consumers overwhelmingly believe that influencer-endorsed brands are more reliable and find products promoted by influencers more appealing than standard advertisements. There is a consensus that influencers embody a brand's character and hold significant sway over purchase decisions, with consumers often seeking influencers' reviews before making purchases (Lou and Yuan 2019: 61). Moreover, influencer interactions through various media types, including live videos and multimedia content, exhibit active engagement and influence on consumer decision-making processes. Additionally, influencers have the power to transform personal decisions and shape brand perceptions, leading to alterations in consumer brand preferences. Influencers play a vital role in brand engagement, influencing brand exploration, purchase intentions, and the formation of brand preferences among consumers. Thus, this data suggests that social media influencers have a substantial impact on consumers' brand perception and purchase intentions. Consumers find influencer-endorsed brands more appealing, and they actively seek and engage with influencers' content in their purchase decision-making processes. Influencers' recommendations and reviews play a critical role in shaping consumer behaviour and perceptions related to brands.

#### 7.5.4.2 Assessing the reliability of consumer brand perception and purchase intention

Factor analysis was applied to determine if there were any specific groupings of these 17 items. The rotated varimax method with Kaiser normalization reveals two components which accounts for 60.19% of the variance in the data. **The factor loadings are shown in Table 25 below.**

**Table 25: Factor Loadings**

| Rotated Component Matrix <sup>a</sup>               |           |      |
|-----------------------------------------------------|-----------|------|
|                                                     | Component |      |
|                                                     | 1         | 2    |
| PI1                                                 | ,688      |      |
| PI2                                                 | ,714      |      |
| PI3                                                 | ,731      |      |
| PI4                                                 | ,773      |      |
| PI5                                                 | ,640      |      |
| PI6                                                 | ,791      |      |
| PI7                                                 | ,682      |      |
| PI8                                                 | ,662      |      |
| PI9                                                 |           | ,651 |
| PI10                                                | ,737      |      |
| PI11                                                |           | ,843 |
| PI12                                                | ,522      | ,599 |
| PI13                                                | ,658      | ,526 |
| PI14                                                | ,793      |      |
| PI15                                                | ,723      |      |
| PI16                                                | ,761      |      |
| PI17                                                | ,821      |      |
| Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.    |           |      |
| Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. |           |      |
| a. Rotation converged in 3 iterations.              |           |      |
| Variance=60.19%                                     |           |      |

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy=0.903

Bartlett's Test of Sphericity= ( $p < 0.001$ ;  $X^2 = 5729,686$ ;  $df = 136$ )

The two extracted components or factors are summarised in Table 26. These factors help segment and understand different aspects of consumer behaviour related to influencer marketing.

**Factor 1:** Purchase Intention includes items PI1 to PI8 and items PI14 to PI17. These items are related to consumers' purchase intentions and how influencers affect those intentions. The factor explains 51.64% of the variance in the items related to purchase intentions. This indicates that this factor accounts for a significant portion of the total variation in consumers' intentions to purchase products influenced by social media influencers. The Cronbach's alpha for this factor is 0.934, which is very high. It suggests a high level of internal consistency or reliability among the items in this factor. In other words, the items in Factor 1 are highly correlated with each other, indicating that they are measuring a similar underlying construct.

**Factor 2:** Influencer-Driven Decision-Making includes items PI9 and PI11. These items are focused on how influencers influence decision-making and preferences. This factor explains 8.55% of the variance in the included items. While this is a lower percentage compared to Factor 1, it still suggests that Factor 2 plays a notable role in influencing decision-making driven by influencers. The Cronbach's alpha for Factor 2 is 0.475, which is relatively lower than for Factor 1. While it suggests some level of internal consistency, it is not as high. This may indicate that the items in Factor 2 are less strongly correlated with each other compared to the items in Factor 1. Given the low reliability of factor 2, it was dropped from further analysis.

**Table 26: Extracted factors, variance and reliability of consumer brand perception and purchase intention**

| Factor | Construct                         | Items included   | Number | Variance extracted | Cronbach's alpha |
|--------|-----------------------------------|------------------|--------|--------------------|------------------|
| 1      | Purchase Intention                | PI-PI8, PI14-P17 | 12     | 51.64              | .934             |
| 2      | Influencer-Driven Decision-Making | PI9, PI11        | 2      | 8.55               | .475             |

### 7.5.5 Objective four: Brand Awareness

This section addresses research objective four which is to assess consumers brand awareness influenced by social media influencers.

#### 7.5.5.1 Level of agreement on brand awareness

Table 27 explores the respondents' level of agreement on how consumers' awareness of brand is influenced by the presence and actions of social media influencers. The mean value measured for all the 10 items was above 3, indicating agreement among the respondents for these items.

**Table 27: Respondents level of agreement on consumers brand awareness influenced by social media influencers.**

| Construct: Brand Awareness                                                                                            |      | Mean (SD )   | t      | Df  | p-value |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|--------------|--------|-----|---------|
| I become aware of certain brands through social media influencers                                                     | BW1  | 3.97 (1.024) | 84,585 | 474 | <.001*  |
| I become aware of brand promotions through influencers' social media posts                                            | BW2  | 3.87 (1.038) | 81,254 | 474 | <.001*  |
| I get updated on new trends by influencers                                                                            | BW3  | 3.84 (1.032) | 81,113 | 474 | <.001*  |
| I learn of certain products' benefits through influencers                                                             | BW4  | 3.67 (1.154) | 69,193 | 474 | <.001*  |
| After going through influencers' social media pages, some characteristics of brands come to my mind quickly           | BW5  | 3.71 (1.187) | 68,167 | 474 | <.001*  |
| I can recognize brands that influencer post on social media among other competing brands.                             | BW6  | 3.72(1.146)  | 70,660 | 474 | <.001*  |
| The brands of products reviewed by influencers on social media are very familiar                                      | BW7  | 3.78(1.112)  | 74,010 | 474 | <.001*  |
| I can remember the brands of a product that were reviewed by influencers on social media                              | BW8  | 3.60(1.108)  | 70,861 | 474 | <.001*  |
| I can quickly recall the symbol or logo of brands influencers post about on social media                              | BW9  | 3.64(1.099)  | 72,245 | 474 | <.001*  |
| Products of brands influencers post about are the first I think of when I want to buy items in same products category | BW10 | 3.43(1.221)  | 61,195 | 474 | <.001*  |

These are further explained below:

**BW1: Brand Awareness Through Social Media Influencers:** On average, consumers become aware of certain brands through social media influencers, with a mean score of 3.97 (SD = 1.024). The t-statistic was 84,585, and the p-value was less than 0.001, indicating that influencers play a significant role in brand awareness.

**BW2: Awareness of Brand Promotions Through Influencers:** Respondents often become aware of brand promotions through influencers' social media posts, as shown by a mean score of 3.87 (SD = 1.038). The t-statistic was 81,254, and the p-value was less than 0.001, emphasizing the impact of influencer-driven promotions.

**BW3: Learning About New Trends Through Influencers:** On average, consumers get updated on new trends by influencers, with a mean score of 3.84 (SD = 1.032). The t-statistic was 81,113, and the p-value was less than 0.001, highlighting influencers' role in trend awareness.

**BW4: Learning About Products' Benefits Through Influencers:** Consumers often learn about certain products' benefits through influencers, with a mean score of 3.67 (SD = 1.154). The t-statistic was 69,193, and the p-value was less than 0.001, indicating that consumers find influencers helpful in understanding product benefits.

**BW5: Rapid Recall of Brand Characteristics:** After going through influencers' social media pages, certain brand characteristics come to consumers' minds quickly, with a mean score of 3.71 (SD = 1.187). The t-statistic was 68,167, and the p-value was less than 0.001, suggesting a strong association between influencers and brand recall.

**BW6: Recognizing Brands Among Competing Brands:** Consumers can recognize brands that influencers post on social media among other competing brands, as indicated by a mean score of 3.72 (SD = 1.146). The t-statistic was 70,660, and the p-value was less than 0.001, emphasizing brand recognition facilitated by influencers.

**BW7 and BW8: Familiarity and Recall of Influencer-Reviewed Brands:** Respondents find brands of products reviewed by influencers on social media to be very familiar, with a mean score of 3.78 (SD = 1.112), and they can remember these brands easily, with a mean score of 3.60 (SD = 1.108). The associated t-statistics were 74,010 and 70,861, respectively, with p-values less than 0.001.

**BW9: Quick Recall of Brand Symbols or Logos:** Consumers can quickly recall the symbol or logo of brands that influencers post about on social media, with a mean score of 3.64 (SD = 1.099). The t-statistic was 72,245, and the p-value was less than 0.001, indicating the impact of influencer content on brand logo recognition.

**BW10: Influence on Purchase Decisions:** Products of brands that influencers post about are the first to come to mind when consumers want to buy items in the same product category, with a mean score of 3.43 (SD = 1.221). The t-statistic was 61,195, and the p-value was less than 0.001, suggesting that influencers have a substantial influence on consumer purchase decisions within product categories.

The results strongly emphasize the fundamental role of social media influencers in shaping brand awareness and consumer perceptions. Consumers frequently become aware of brands, brand promotions, and new trends through influencer-driven content, highlighting the significant influence of influencers on brand exposure and trend awareness. Moreover, influencers play a vital role in educating consumers about product benefits, facilitating rapid brand recall, recognition, and easy remembrance of reviewed brands. Their influence extends to brand logos, making them quickly recognizable among competing brands. The data also suggests that influencer-promoted brands are often the first to spring to consumers' minds when making purchase decisions within specific product categories, emphasizing the substantial influence influencers wield in consumer purchase behaviors and brand preferences. Overall, the findings illuminate the considerable sway influencers hold in brand familiarity, recall, and eventual consumer decision-making processes as influencers help consumers discover new brands, stay informed about promotions and trends, and recall brand characteristics, logos, and products. Consumers often look to influencers as a valuable source of information and guidance in their purchasing decisions, making influencers an essential part of brand awareness strategies (Arora et al.2019 87).

#### 7.5.5.2 Assessing the reliability of brand awareness.

Factor analysis was applied to determine if there were any specific groupings of these 7 items. They all loaded onto a single factor (KMO = .925, and Bartlett's (45) =4591, 002;  $p < 0.001$ ) which accounts for 70.52% of the variance in the data. The factor loadings are shown in Table 28. These items are combined into a single reliable (Cronbach's alpha = .953) variable, BW.

**Table 28: Factor loading on constructs measuring brand awareness**

| Component Matrix <sup>a</sup> |           |
|-------------------------------|-----------|
|                               | Component |
|                               | 1         |
| BW1                           | ,767      |
| BW2                           | ,844      |
| BW3                           | ,778      |
| BW4                           | ,854      |
| BW5                           | ,886      |
| BW6                           | ,890      |
| BW7                           | ,839      |
| BW8                           | ,879      |

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |      |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|
| BW9                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | ,859 |
| BW10                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | ,793 |
| Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.<br>a. 1 components extracted.<br><br>Variance=70.52%<br>Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy=0.925<br>Bartlett's Test of Sphericity= (p<0.001; X <sup>2</sup> =4591,002; df=45) |      |

### 7.5.6 Objective five: Consumer Trust

This section addresses research objective five which is to assess consumers' trust in social media influencers and their perceptions of influencers' trustworthiness.

#### 7.5.6.1 Level of agreement on consumer trust

Table 29 highlights the respondents scoring pattern on statements that pertains to consumers' trust in social media influencers and their perceptions of influencers' trustworthiness. Excluding CT1, the mean value measured for 16 of other items was above 3, implying that the respondents were in agreement to these statements.

**Table 29: Respondents level of agreement on statements that pertains to consumers' trust in social media influencers and their perceptions of influencers' trustworthiness**

| Construct: Consumer Trust                                                     |     | Mean (S)        | t      | Df  | p-value |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|-----------------|--------|-----|---------|
| I think influencers are experts                                               | CT1 | 2.80<br>(1.233) | 49,561 | 474 | <.001*  |
| I think the influencers I follow are sincere.                                 | CT2 | 3.29<br>(1.147) | 62,490 | 474 | <.001*  |
| I think influencers are more trustworthy than brand-controlled advertisements | CT3 | 3.13<br>(1.147) | 59,469 | 474 | <.001*  |
| I trust the opinions of verified influencers                                  | CT4 | 3.38<br>(1.133) | 64,892 | 474 | <.001*  |

|                                                                                     |      |                 |        |     |        |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|-----------------|--------|-----|--------|
| I prefer opinions of influencers working with well-known brands                     | CT5  | 3.53<br>(1.085) | 70,853 | 474 | <.001* |
| It is important that influencers are reliable in brand promotions                   | CT6  | 3.85(1.08<br>6) | 77,363 | 474 | <.001* |
| Influencers' reputation is based on their honesty                                   | CT7  | 3.83(1.13<br>1) | 73,823 | 474 | <.001* |
| I think the influencers I follow are credible in their social media posts           | CT8  | 3.67(1.08<br>0) | 74,100 | 474 | <.001* |
| I review influencers to determine their integrity                                   | CT9  | 3.54(1.21<br>2) | 63,733 | 474 | <.001* |
| I trust influencers that have experienced the product they are promoting            | CT10 | 3.76(1.11<br>4) | 73,610 | 474 | <.001* |
| I think a brand is more trustworthy if it is recommended by my favourite influencer | CT11 | 3.44(1.19<br>7) | 62,574 | 474 | <.001* |
| I think the influencers I follow are ethical by being honest                        | CT12 | 3.41(1.09<br>0) | 68,269 | 474 | <.001* |
| I think that influencers I follow are convincing                                    | CT13 | 3.55(1.07<br>3) | 72,155 | 474 | <.001* |
| I trust influencers that post brand sponsored content                               | CT14 | 3.49(1.05<br>2) | 72,305 | 474 | <.001* |
| I think that influencers I follow are genuine when promoting a product or a brand   | CT15 | 3.57(1.04<br>6) | 74,412 | 474 | <.001* |
| I trust influencers that promote brands they find trustworthy                       | CT16 | 3.68(0.95<br>4) | 83,991 | 474 | <.001* |
| I trust influencers that post brand sponsored content                               | CT17 | 3.56(1.00)      | 76,185 | 474 | <.001* |

These are further detailed below:

**CT1: Trust in Influencers as Experts:** On average, consumers consider influencers as experts, with a mean score of 2.80 (SD = 1.233). The t-statistic was 49,561, and the p-value was less than 0.001, indicating that some consumers perceive influencers as experts in their respective domains.

**CT2: Perceived Sincerity of Followed Influencers:** Respondents generally believe that the influencers they follow are sincere, as reflected in a mean score of 3.29 (SD = 1.147). The t-statistic was 62,490, and the p-value was less than 0.001, highlighting a high level of perceived sincerity among influencers.

**CT3: Trust in Influencers Over Brand-Controlled Ads:** On average, consumers trust influencers more than brand-controlled advertisements, with a mean score of 3.13 (SD = 1.147). The t-statistic was 59,469, and the p-value was less than 0.001, indicating a preference for influencer content over traditional ads.

**CT4: Trust in Opinions of Verified Influencers:** Consumers tend to trust the opinions of verified influencers, as shown by a mean score of 3.38 (SD = 1.133). The t-statistic was 64,892, and the p-value was less than 0.001, suggesting a strong correlation between verification status and trust.

**CT5: Trust in Influencers Working with Well-Known Brands:** On average, consumers prefer the opinions of influencers collaborating with well-known brands, with a mean score of 3.53 (SD = 1.085). The t-statistic was 70,853, and the p-value was less than 0.001, indicating that brand association influences trust.

**CT6: Importance of Influencer Reliability in Brand Promotions:** Respondents believe it is important for influencers to be reliable in brand promotions, with a mean score of 3.85 (SD = 1.086). The t-statistic was 77,363, and the p-value was less than 0.001, emphasizing the significance of reliability in influencer marketing.

**CT7: Influence of Honesty on Influencer Reputation:** Consumers believe that influencers' reputation is based on their honesty, with a mean score of 3.83 (SD = 1.131). The t-statistic was 73,823, and the p-value was less than 0.001, highlighting the importance of honesty in influencer trust.

**CT8: Credibility of Followed Influencers in Social Media Posts:** On average, consumers perceive the influencers they follow as credible in their social media posts, with a mean score of 3.67 (SD = 1.080). The t-statistic was 74,100, and the p-value was less than 0.001, suggesting high credibility.

**CT9: Reviewing Influencers for Integrity:** Respondents often review influencers to determine their integrity, as indicated by a mean score of 3.54 (SD = 1.212). The t-statistic was 63,733, and the p-value was less than 0.001, suggesting that consumers actively assess influencer integrity.

**CT10: Trust in Experienced Influencers:** Consumers trust influencers who have experienced the product they are promoting, with a mean score of 3.76 (SD = 1.114). The t-statistic was 73,610, and the p-value was less than 0.001, emphasizing the significance of firsthand experience.

**CT11: Influencer Recommendations for Brand Trust:** On average, consumers believe that a brand is more trustworthy if recommended by their favourite influencer, with a mean score of 3.44 (SD = 1.197). The t-statistic was 62,574, and the p-value was less than 0.001, highlighting the influence of favourite influencers on brand trust.

**CT12: Perceived Ethical Behaviour of Followed Influencers:** Consumers perceive the influencers they follow as ethical by being honest, with a mean score of 3.41 (SD = 1.090). The t-statistic was 68,269, and the p-value was less than 0.001, indicating the importance of ethical behaviour in influencer trust.

**CT13: Convincing Influence of Followed Influencers:** On average, consumers find the influencers they follow convincing, as indicated by a mean score of 3.55 (SD = 1.073). The t-statistic was 72,155, and the p-value was less than 0.001, highlighting the persuasive power of influencers.

**CT14 and CT17: Trust in Brand-Sponsored Content:** Respondents trust influencers who post brand-sponsored content, as reflected in a mean score of 3.49 (SD = 1.052) for CT14 and a mean score of 3.56 (SD = 1.020) for CT17. The t-statistics were 72,305 and 76,185, respectively, with p-values less than 0.001, indicating trust in sponsored content.

**CT15: Genuine Promotion of Products/Brands:** Consumers trust influencers who are genuine when promoting a product or a brand, with a mean score of 3.57 (SD = 1.046). The t-statistic was 74,412, and the p-value was less than 0.001, suggesting that authenticity in promotion builds trust.

**CT16: Trust in Influencers for Reliable Brands:** Consumers trust influencers who promote brands they find trustworthy, with a mean score of 3.68 (SD = 0.954). The t-statistic was 83,991, and the p-value was less than 0.001, highlighting the association between influencer trust and brand trustworthiness.

The findings shed light on the multifaceted nature of trust and credibility associated with social media influencers. Consumers generally perceive influencers as experts within their respective domains, attributing a high level of sincerity and credibility to the content they share. Notably, influencers' opinions often carry more weight than brand-controlled advertisements, with verified status and collaborations with well-known brands further enhancing trust levels. Reliability, honesty, and integrity emerge as pivotal traits influencing influencer reputation, while first-hand experience and ethical behaviour also play significant roles in establishing trust. This is supported by Wellman et al. (2020:69) who claim that Influencers base their decisions on authenticity when navigating sponsored content, balancing the need to earn income through collaborations with brands against preserving a genuine and trusted connection with their audience. This is because consumers actively review and assess influencer integrity, seeking authenticity and genuineness in product endorsements, which significantly contribute to building consumer trust.

Additionally, the influence of favourite influencers on brand trust, coupled with the convincing power of their content, underscores the persuasive influence influencers wield in shaping consumer perceptions and purchase behaviours (Kim and Kim 2021:225). Overall, the study underscores the intricate interplay of various factors that contribute to establishing trust and credibility in influencer marketing. In summary, this data reveals that consumers generally place a significant amount of trust in social media influencers. They perceive influencers as experts, trust their sincerity and credibility, and often prefer influencer content over traditional brand advertisements. Trust is influenced by factors such as influencer verification, honesty, and perceived experience with promoted products. This high level of trust underscores the importance of influencers in influencing consumer opinions and purchase decisions.

#### 7.5.6.2 Assessing the reliability of consumer trust

Factor analysis was applied to determine if there were any specific groupings of these 17 items. The rotated varimax method with Kaiser normalisation reveals two components which accounts for 67.08% of the variance in the data. **The factor loadings are shown in Table 30.**

**Table 30: Factor Loadings**

| Rotated Component Matrix <sup>a</sup> |           |      |
|---------------------------------------|-----------|------|
|                                       | Component |      |
|                                       | 1         | 2    |
| CT1                                   |           | ,764 |
| CT2                                   |           | ,874 |
| CT3                                   |           | ,842 |
| CT4                                   |           | ,746 |
| CT5                                   | ,517      | ,632 |
| CT6                                   | ,693      |      |
| CT7                                   | ,648      |      |
| CT8                                   | ,702      |      |
| CT9                                   | ,691      |      |
| CT10                                  | ,765      |      |
| CT11                                  | ,599      | ,525 |
| CT12                                  | ,536      | ,663 |
| CT13                                  | ,624      | ,533 |

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |      |  |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|--|
| CT14                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | ,667 |  |
| CT15                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | ,751 |  |
| CT16                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | ,784 |  |
| CT17                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | ,758 |  |
| Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.<br>Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.<br>a. Rotation converged in 3 iterations.<br><br>Variance=67.08%<br>Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy=0.929<br>Bartlett's Test of Sphericity= (p<0.001; X <sup>2</sup> =6901,431; df=136) |      |  |

The two extracted components or factors are summarised in Table 31. These factors help segment and understand different aspects of how consumers perceive and trust influencers in the context of brand promotions and in general. Factor 1: Influencer Credibility and Trust in Brand Promotions (SP) consists of items CT6 to CT10 and items CT14 to CT17. These items are related to the credibility of influencers in brand promotions and how much trust consumers place in influencers' brand-related content on social media. The factor explains a substantial amount of the variance, accounting for 59.70% of the variance in the included items. This suggests that **Factor 1** plays a significant role in understanding the credibility and trustworthiness of influencers when it comes to brand promotions on social media. The Cronbach's alpha for Factor 1 is 0.926, which is very high. It indicates a high level of internal consistency among the items in this factor. This implies that the items in Factor 1 are strongly correlated with each other, demonstrating a reliable measurement of the underlying construct.

**Factor 2:** Influencer Credibility and Trust includes items CT1 to CT4. These items focus on the general credibility and trustworthiness of influencers. Factor 2 explains 7.38% of the variance in the included items. While this is a smaller percentage compared to Factor 1, it still suggests that Factor 2 is important in understanding the general credibility and trust of influencers among consumers. The Cronbach's alpha for Factor 2 is 0.888, which is relatively high. This indicates a good level of internal consistency among the items in this factor. The items in Factor 2 are moderately correlated with each other, suggesting a reliable measurement of the construct of influencer credibility and trust.

**Table 31: Extracted factors, variance and reliability of consumer trust**

| Factor | Construct                                                 | Items included      | Number of items | Variance extracted | Cronbach's alpha |
|--------|-----------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------|--------------------|------------------|
| 1      | Influencer Credibility and Trust in Brand Promotions (SP) | CT6-CT10, CT14-CT17 | 9               | 59.70              | .926             |
| 2      | Influencer Credibility and Trust                          | CT1-CT4             | 4               | 7.38               | .888             |

## 7.6 THEORETICAL FINDING AND HYPOTHESES TESTING

This section provides the theoretical foundation of the study. Measurement model (MM) based on the proposed conceptual model was testing for both validity and reliability. The proposed hypotheses were assessed using structural equation modelling.

### 7.6.1 Factor analysis

Factor analysis is a statistical method used to group similar items together based on their shared variance. Both exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) were applied to test and validate the constructs in the MM. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity are statistical tests commonly used in factor analysis to assess whether the data is suitable for factor analysis. A KMO value of 0.923 suggests that the data is highly suitable for factor analysis (Table 32). The high value indicates that there is substantial common variance among the variables included in the analysis, making it appropriate to perform factor analysis on this dataset. Bartlett's Test is used to determine whether or not the correlation matrix among the variables is an identity matrix (i.e., all variables are uncorrelated). In other words, it tests if there is sufficient correlation in the data to proceed with factor analysis. The highly significant p-value ( $p < 0.001$ ) from Bartlett's Test indicates that the data does not follow an identity correlation matrix.

**Table 32: KMO and Bartlett's test for the MM**

| KMO and Bartlett's Test                          |                    |           |
|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------|-----------|
| Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy. |                    | ,923      |
| Bartlett's Test of Sphericity                    | Approx. Chi-Square | 33647,409 |
|                                                  | Df                 | 1770      |
|                                                  | Sig.               | <,001     |

Table 33 summarises the identified constructs of the MM. Although nine components were identified the items only loaded into eight, explaining about 75.053 of the total variances in the data. Items with cross-loading (loading into more than one component) or single item were dropped from the MM.

**Table 33: Extracted constructs in the MM**

| Rotated Component Matrix <sup>a</sup> |           |      |   |   |   |   |      |   |   |
|---------------------------------------|-----------|------|---|---|---|---|------|---|---|
|                                       | Component |      |   |   |   |   |      |   |   |
|                                       | 1         | 2    | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7    | 8 | 9 |
| BW1                                   |           | ,809 |   |   |   |   |      |   |   |
| BW2                                   |           | ,778 |   |   |   |   |      |   |   |
| BW3                                   |           | ,733 |   |   |   |   |      |   |   |
| BW4                                   |           | ,738 |   |   |   |   |      |   |   |
| BW5                                   |           | ,753 |   |   |   |   |      |   |   |
| BW6                                   |           | ,736 |   |   |   |   |      |   |   |
| BW7                                   |           | ,736 |   |   |   |   |      |   |   |
| BW8                                   |           | ,691 |   |   |   |   |      |   |   |
| BW9                                   |           | ,669 |   |   |   |   |      |   |   |
| BW10                                  |           | ,591 |   |   |   |   |      |   |   |
| IS1                                   |           |      |   |   |   |   | ,572 |   |   |

|      |      |  |  |      |      |  |      |      |  |
|------|------|--|--|------|------|--|------|------|--|
| IS2  | ,536 |  |  |      |      |  | ,505 |      |  |
| IS3  | ,646 |  |  |      |      |  |      |      |  |
| IS4  | ,666 |  |  |      |      |  |      |      |  |
| IS5  | ,678 |  |  |      |      |  |      |      |  |
| IS6  | ,620 |  |  |      |      |  |      |      |  |
| IS7  | ,765 |  |  |      |      |  |      |      |  |
| IS8  | ,721 |  |  |      |      |  |      |      |  |
| IS9  | ,736 |  |  |      |      |  |      |      |  |
| IS10 | ,673 |  |  |      |      |  |      |      |  |
| IS11 | ,666 |  |  |      |      |  |      |      |  |
| IS12 | ,554 |  |  |      |      |  |      |      |  |
| IS13 | ,774 |  |  |      |      |  |      |      |  |
| EI1  |      |  |  |      |      |  |      |      |  |
| EI2  |      |  |  |      | ,521 |  |      |      |  |
| EI3  |      |  |  |      | ,692 |  |      |      |  |
| EI4  |      |  |  |      | ,714 |  |      |      |  |
| EI5  |      |  |  |      | ,716 |  |      |      |  |
| EI6  |      |  |  |      | ,553 |  |      |      |  |
| EI7  |      |  |  |      |      |  |      |      |  |
| EI8  |      |  |  |      | ,585 |  |      |      |  |
| EI9  |      |  |  |      | ,670 |  |      |      |  |
| EI10 |      |  |  |      | ,711 |  |      |      |  |
| PI1  |      |  |  |      |      |  |      |      |  |
| PI2  |      |  |  |      |      |  |      | ,542 |  |
| PI3  |      |  |  |      |      |  |      |      |  |
| PI4  |      |  |  | ,614 |      |  |      |      |  |
| PI5  |      |  |  | ,629 |      |  |      |      |  |
| PI6  |      |  |  | ,731 |      |  |      |      |  |
| PI7  |      |  |  | ,654 |      |  |      |      |  |

|                                                                  |  |  |      |      |  |      |  |  |  |
|------------------------------------------------------------------|--|--|------|------|--|------|--|--|--|
| PI8                                                              |  |  |      | ,652 |  |      |  |  |  |
| PI10                                                             |  |  |      | ,675 |  |      |  |  |  |
| PI14                                                             |  |  |      | ,695 |  |      |  |  |  |
| PI15                                                             |  |  |      | ,589 |  |      |  |  |  |
| PI16                                                             |  |  |      | ,660 |  |      |  |  |  |
| PI17                                                             |  |  |      | ,596 |  |      |  |  |  |
| CT1                                                              |  |  |      |      |  |      |  |  |  |
| CT2                                                              |  |  |      |      |  | ,673 |  |  |  |
| CT3                                                              |  |  |      |      |  | ,656 |  |  |  |
| CT4                                                              |  |  | ,582 |      |  |      |  |  |  |
| CT5                                                              |  |  | ,675 |      |  |      |  |  |  |
| CT6                                                              |  |  | ,629 |      |  |      |  |  |  |
| CT7                                                              |  |  | ,647 |      |  |      |  |  |  |
| CT8                                                              |  |  | ,642 |      |  |      |  |  |  |
| CT9                                                              |  |  | ,701 |      |  |      |  |  |  |
| CT10                                                             |  |  | ,746 |      |  |      |  |  |  |
| CT14                                                             |  |  | ,687 |      |  |      |  |  |  |
| CT15                                                             |  |  | ,722 |      |  |      |  |  |  |
| CT16                                                             |  |  | ,733 |      |  |      |  |  |  |
| CT17                                                             |  |  | ,763 |      |  |      |  |  |  |
| Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.                 |  |  |      |      |  |      |  |  |  |
| Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. <sup>a</sup> |  |  |      |      |  |      |  |  |  |

a. Rotation converged in 15 iterations.

Table 34 summarize the results of a factor analysis, which includes several factors (constructs) extracted from a set of survey items. Factor 1 represents "Influencer Strategies" and is composed of 11 items (IS3 to IS13). This factor explains a substantial amount of the variance in the data (45.873%), and it has high internal consistency, as indicated by a Cronbach's alpha of 0.953. This suggests that these items are strongly related and can be considered as a single construct related to influencer strategies.

Factor 2 represents "Brand Awareness" and includes 10 items (BW1 to BW10). This factor explains a smaller amount of the variance in the data (6.696%). The factor exhibits high internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.953, indicating that these items are strongly related and form a coherent construct related to brand awareness.

Factor 3 represents "Consumer Trust" and consists of 11 items (CT4 to CT10, CT14 to CT17). This factor explains 5.795% of the variance in the data and demonstrates high internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.937. It suggests that these items are interrelated and together capture the concept of consumer trust in the context of influencers and brands.

Factor 4 represents "Perception & Purchase Intention" and comprises 10 items (PI4 to PI8, PI10, PI14 to PI17). This factor accounts for 3.921% of the variance in the data and demonstrates a high level of internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.927). It reflects how consumers perceive products and their intentions to purchase them based on influencer recommendations.

Factor 5 represents "Engagement & Interaction" and includes 8 items (EI2 to EI6, EI8 to EI10). This factor explains 3.254% of the variance in the data and maintains high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.928). It characterizes how consumers engage with influencers and interact with influencer content on social media.

Factor 6 represents Influencer Credibility and Trust in Brand Promotions and includes 2 items (CT2 and CT3). This factor explains 2.920% of the variance in the data and maintains high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.880).

**Table 34: Variance and Cronbach's alpha reliability of the construct in the MM**

| Factor | Construct                            | Items included           | Number of items | Variance extracted | Cronbach's alpha |
|--------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------|--------------------|------------------|
| 1      | Influencer Strategies (IS)           | IS3-IS13                 | 11              | 45.873             | .953             |
| 2      | Brand Awareness (BW)                 | BW1-BW10                 | 10              | 6.6960             | .953             |
| 3      | Consumer trust (CT)                  | CT4-CT10, CT14-CT17      | 11              | 5.795              | .937             |
| 4      | Perception & purchase intention (PI) | PI4-PI8, PI10, PI14-PI17 | 10              | 3.921              | .927             |
| 5      | Engagement & Interaction (EI)        | EI2-EI6, EI8- EI10       | 8               | 3.254              | .928             |
| 6      |                                      | CT2-CT3                  | 2               | 2.920              | .880             |

### 7.6.2 Measurement Model: Scale Reliability and Construct Validity

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was then applied to confirm the quality of the measurement models through an evaluation of convergent and discriminant validity. Table 35 reflects the composite reliability, convergent and discriminant validity of the measurement model. Convergent validity refers to “the extent to which a measure correlates positively with alternative measures of the same construct” (Hair et al., 2014). Criteria that were used to assess convergent validity including standardized loadings,

Construct (composite) reliability (CR) and the average variance extracted (AVE). The CR is a measure of the internal consistency or reliability of the latent constructs (factors). It indicates how well the observed variables (items) are related to each other in measuring a latent construct. All the constructs (EI, IS, BW, CT, PI) have high CR values, ranging from 0.925 to 0.956, indicating that the items measuring each construct are reliably related to one another.

AVE measures the amount of variance captured by the latent construct relative to the amount of variance due to measurement error. AVE values for all constructs range from 0.554 to 0.668, indicating that, on average, more than 50% of the variance in the observed variables is captured by the latent constructs. This suggests that the latent constructs are adequately capturing the underlying variance in the observed items.

Discriminant validity refers to “the extent to which a construct is truly distinct from other constructs by empirical standards” (Hair et al. 2014). The MSV (Maximum Shared Variance) is a measure of the discriminant validity of a scale or a construct. It represents the maximum correlation between a construct and any other construct in the model. Values below AVE are desirable. The MSV values are relatively lower than the AVE values for all constructs, indicating that the constructs are not overly correlated with each other. This is a good sign for discriminant validity. In addition, MaxR(H) (Maximum Redundancy in Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (MaxR(H))) assesses the extent to which the construct is related to other constructs relative to how much it shares variance with its own indicators. It's a measure of discriminant validity. All constructs have high MaxR (H) values (ranging from 0.932 to 0.966), indicating that most of the variance in each construct is explained by its own indicators and not highly correlated with other constructs. This suggests good discriminant validity.

In summary, the statistics CFA analysis suggest that the measurement model has good reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. This means that the constructs in MM are internally consistent, adequately capture variance in the observed variables, and are distinct from each other.

**Table 35: Composite Reliability, Average Variance Extracted, and Maximum Shared Square Values**

|           | CR    | AVE   | MSV   | MaxR(H) | EI           | IS           | BW           | CT           | PI           |
|-----------|-------|-------|-------|---------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| <b>EI</b> | 0.929 | 0.621 | 0.545 | 0.938   | <b>0.788</b> |              |              |              |              |
| <b>IS</b> | 0.956 | 0.668 | 0.573 | 0.966   | ,738         | <b>0.817</b> |              |              |              |
| <b>BW</b> | 0.949 | 0.655 | 0.573 | 0.959   | ,713         | ,757         | <b>0.809</b> |              |              |
| <b>CT</b> | 0.932 | 0.557 | 0.403 | 0.938   | ,635         | ,609         | ,619         | <b>0.746</b> |              |
| <b>PI</b> | 0.925 | 0.554 | 0.531 | 0.932   | ,725         | ,729         | ,541         | ,585         | <b>0.744</b> |

### 7.6.3 Fitness of the Model

The fit indices are commonly used in structural equation modelling (SEM) to assess the goodness of fit of a model. The overall fit of the MM was assessed by multiple fit criteria given in Table 36. The goodness of fitness indices are as follows: chi-square = 7400.870, df = 1132,  $p < .001$ ,  $\chi^2 / df = 6.537$ , CFI = 0.761, IFI = 0.762, RMSEA = 0.108. In summary, the fit indices suggests that your model may have some issues with goodness of fit, particularly with regard to the IFI, CFI, and RMSEA values. The probable explanation for this may be attributable to large sample size. Another explanation may be associated with the high inter-item correlations in the dataset (See Figure 25). Nevertheless, the Chi-Square measures suggests a significant fit.

**Table 36: Model fitness indices for the MM**

| Fit Indices             | Fit values   | Criteria |
|-------------------------|--------------|----------|
| $\chi^2 / df$ (p-value) | 6.537(<.001) | <5       |
| IFI                     | 0.762        | >.9      |
| CFI                     | 0.761        | >.9      |
| RMSEA                   | 0.108        | <.08     |

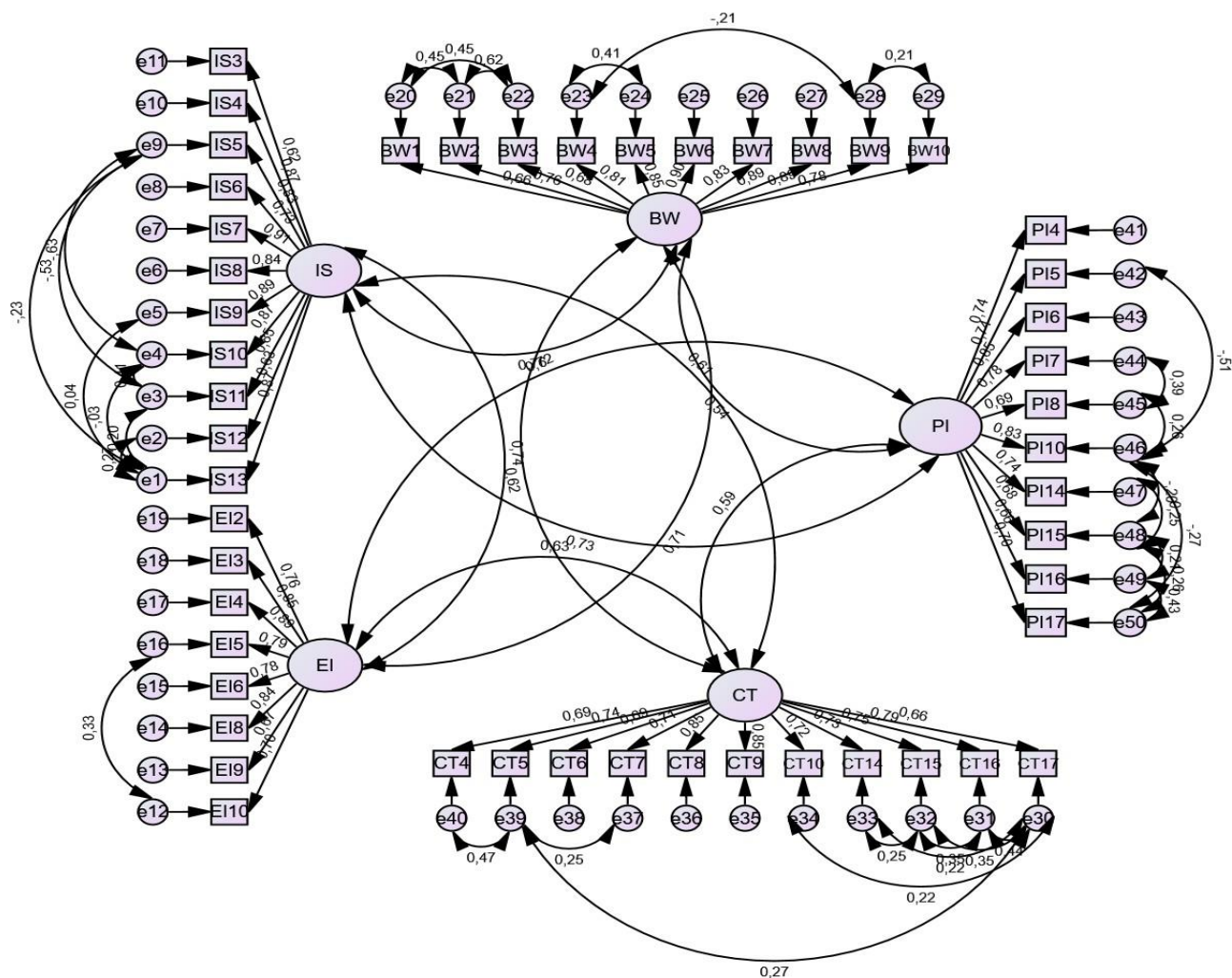
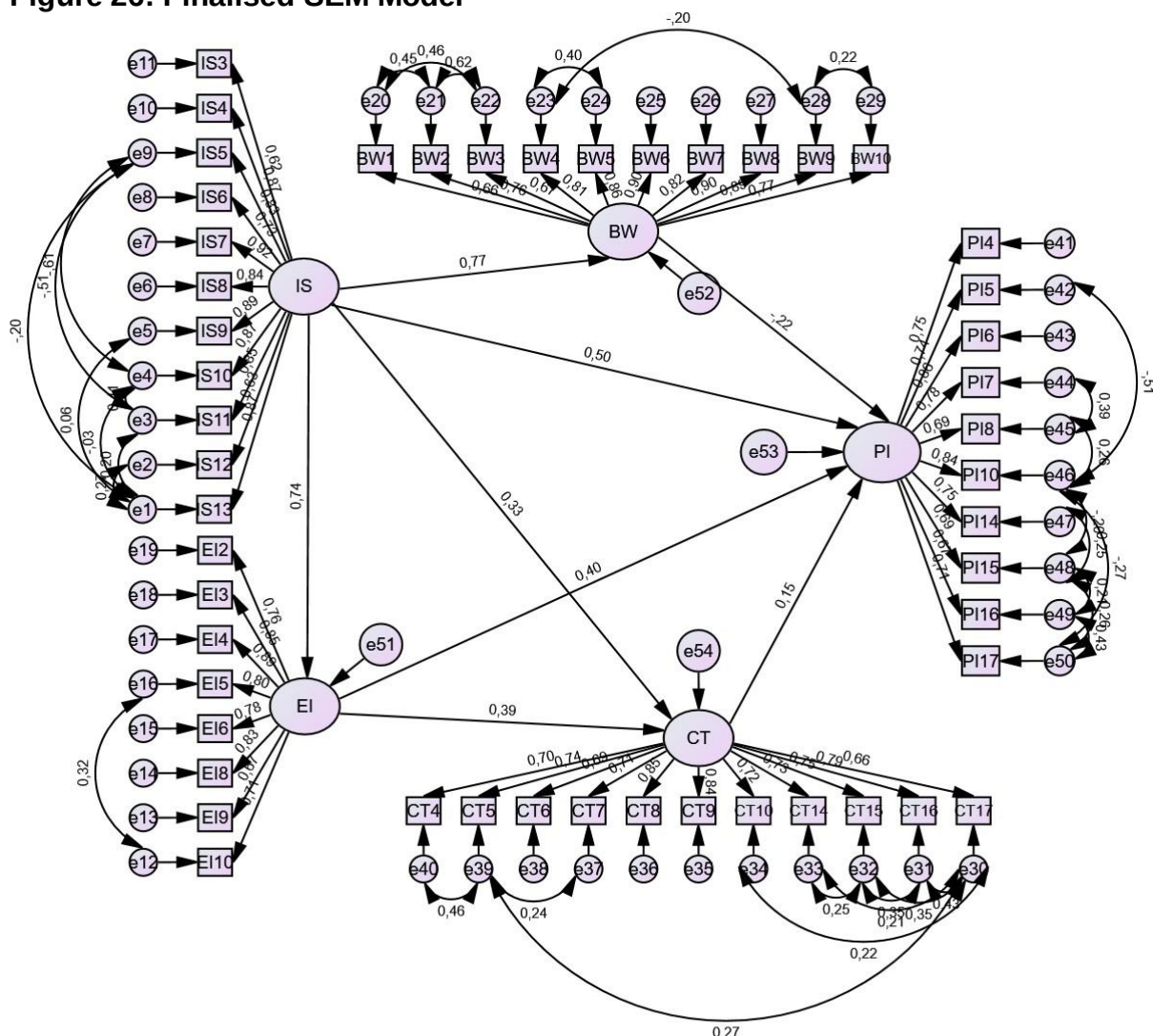


Figure 25: Model Fitness for the MM

#### 7.6.4 Structural Equation Model (Hypotheses Testing)

The MM model was then converted into a path model that shows the relationship between the latent variables. An SEM was applied to test all the hypothesized relationships that exist among the latent variables (Figure 26).

### Figure 26: Finalised SEM Model



Note:  $\chi^2 = 7462.870$ ,  $df = 1134$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\chi^2 / df = 6.581$ , CFI = 0.759, IFI = 0.760, RMSEA = 0.109

**Table 37: Summary of the path estimate and hypotheses testing.**

| Hypotheses | Dependent variable (DV) |      | Independent Variable (IV) | Standardized coefficient $\beta$ | S.E.  | Critical Ratio. (CR) | P      | Decision |
|------------|-------------------------|------|---------------------------|----------------------------------|-------|----------------------|--------|----------|
| H1         | EI                      | <--- | IS                        | 0.745                            | 0.051 | 14.302               | <0.001 | Accepted |
| H2         | BW                      | <--- | IS                        | 0.766                            | 0.040 | 13.855               | <0.001 | Accepted |
| H3         | CT                      | <--- | IS                        | 0.326                            | 0.045 | 5.255                | <0.001 | Accepted |
| H4         | CT                      | <--- | EI                        | 0.391                            | 0.048 | 5.909                | <0.001 | Accepted |
| H5         | PI                      | <--- | BW                        | -0.216                           | 0.066 | -4.126               | <0.001 | Rejected |
| H6         | PI                      | <--- | CT                        | 0.146                            | 0.057 | 3.251                | 0.001  | Accepted |
| H7         | PI                      | <--- | EI                        | 0.403                            | 0.054 | 6.925                | <0.001 | Accepted |
| H8         | PI                      | <--- | IS                        | 0.497                            | 0.063 | 7.224                | <0.001 | Accepted |

Table 37 shows the results of a regression analysis with standardized coefficients ( $\beta$ ), standard errors (S.E.), critical ratios (CR), p-values (P), and decisions for several hypotheses testing relationships between dependent variables (DV) and independent variables (IV). The path from Influencer strategies (IS) to Engagement/interaction (EI) was significant ( $\beta = 0.745$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), implying that there is a strong and significant positive relationship between Engagement/Interaction (EI) and Influencer Strategies (IS), confirming H1

Likewise, the path from Influencer strategies (IS) to Brand Awareness (BW) was significant ( $\beta = 0.766$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), indicating a strong and significant positive relationship between Brand Awareness (BW) and Influencer Strategies (IS), supporting H2.

Similarly, the path from Influencer strategies (IS) to Consumer trust (CT) was significant ( $\beta = 0.326$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), implying a positive and significant relationship between Consumer Trust (CT) and Influencer Strategies (IS), validating H3.

Furthermore, the path from Engagement/Interaction (EI) to Consumer Trust (CT) was significant ( $\beta = 0.391$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), indicating a positive and significant relationship between Consumer Trust (CT) and Engagement/Interaction (EI), supporting H4.

The path from Brand Awareness (BW) to Perception and Purchase Intention (PI) was negative ( $\beta = -0.216$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), which suggests a significant but negative relationship between Perception and Purchase Intention (PI) and Brand Awareness (BW), failing to support H5

On the contrary, the path from Consumer Trust (CT) to Perception and Purchase Intention (PI) was positive ( $\beta = 0.146$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), indicating a significant and positive relationship between Perception and Purchase Intention (PI) and Consumer Trust (CT), validating H6.

The path from Engagement/Interaction (EI) to Perception and Purchase Intention (PI) was also positive ( $\beta = 0.403$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), implying a strong and significant positive relationship between Perception and Purchase Intention (PI) and Engagement/Interaction (EI), supporting H7. In addition, the path from Influencer Strategies (IS) to Perception and Purchase Intention (PI) was positive ( $\beta = 0.497$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), suggesting a strong and significant positive relationship between Perception and Purchase Intention (PI) and Influencer Strategies (IS), confirming H8.

In summary, the regression analysis revealed several significant relationships between key variables in the study. It confirmed a strong and positive association between Influencer Strategies (IS) and Engagement/Interaction (EI), supporting the first hypothesis (H1). Similarly, it demonstrated a substantial positive connection between IS and Brand Awareness (BW), confirming the second hypothesis (H2). Additionally, a positive relationship between IS and Consumer Trust (CT) was identified, validating the third hypothesis (H3). Moreover, the analysis highlighted a positive link between EI and CT, supporting the fourth hypothesis (H4). However, it contradicted the fifth hypothesis (H5), revealing a negative relationship between BW and Perception and Purchase Intention (PI). Conversely, it supported H6, H7, and H8, indicating positive associations between CT, EI, IS, and PI. This suggests that while brand awareness might not directly influence purchase intention perceptions, consumer trust, engagement, and influencer strategies significantly contribute to shaping consumer perceptions and purchase intentions.

## 7.7 PEARSON CORRELATION

**Table 38: Association among the constructs in the MM**

| Correlations                                                 |                     | IS     | EI     | BW     | CT     | PI     |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| ISS                                                          | Pearson Correlation | 1      | ,711** | ,701** | ,586** | ,710** |
|                                                              | Sig. (2-tailed)     |        | <,001  | <,001  | <,001  | <,001  |
|                                                              | N                   | 475    | 475    | 475    | 475    | 475    |
| EII                                                          | Pearson Correlation | ,711** | 1      | ,660** | ,553** | ,684** |
|                                                              | Sig. (2-tailed)     | <,001  |        | <,001  | <,001  | <,001  |
|                                                              | N                   | 475    | 475    | 475    | 475    | 475    |
| BWW                                                          | Pearson Correlation | ,701** | ,660** | 1      | ,556** | ,528** |
|                                                              | Sig. (2-tailed)     | <,001  | <,001  |        | <,001  | <,001  |
|                                                              | N                   | 475    | 475    | 475    | 475    | 475    |
| CTT                                                          | Pearson Correlation | ,586** | ,553** | ,556** | 1      | ,578** |
|                                                              | Sig. (2-tailed)     | <,001  | <,001  | <,001  |        | <,001  |
|                                                              | N                   | 475    | 475    | 475    | 475    | 475    |
| PII                                                          | Pearson Correlation | ,710** | ,684** | ,528** | ,578** | 1      |
|                                                              | Sig. (2-tailed)     | <,001  | <,001  | <,001  | <,001  |        |
|                                                              | N                   | 475    | 475    | 475    | 475    | 475    |
| **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). |                     |        |        |        |        |        |

Table 38 shows correlations (Pearson Correlations) between different constructs in the MM. The results show that there is a strong positive correlation ( $r = 0.711$ ) between Influencer Strategies (IS) and Engagement/Interaction (EI), and this correlation is statistically significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). There is a strong positive correlation ( $r = 0.701$ ) between Influencer Strategies (IS) and Brand Awareness (BW), and this correlation is statistically significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). There is a moderately strong positive correlation ( $r = 0.586$ ) between Influencer Strategies (ISS) and Consumer Trust (CT), and this correlation is statistically significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

There is a strong positive correlation ( $r = 0.710$ ) between Influencer Strategies (IS) and Perception & Purchase Intention (PII), and this correlation is statistically significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). There is a strong positive correlation ( $r = 0.660$ ) between Engagement/Interaction (EI) and Brand Awareness (BW), and this correlation is statistically significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). There is a moderately strong positive correlation ( $r = 0.553$ ) between Engagement/Interaction (EI) and Consumer Trust (CT), and this correlation is statistically significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). There is a strong positive correlation ( $r = 0.684$ ) between Engagement/Interaction (EI) and Perception & Purchase Intention (PI), and this correlation is statistically significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

There is a moderately strong positive correlation ( $r = 0.556$ ) between Brand Awareness (BW) and Consumer Trust (CT), and this correlation is statistically significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). There is a moderately strong positive correlation ( $r = 0.528$ ) between Brand Awareness (BW) and Perception & Purchase Intention (PI), and this correlation is statistically significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). There is a moderately strong positive correlation ( $r = 0.578$ ) between Consumer Trust (CT) and Perception & Purchase Intention (PI), and this correlation is statistically significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

## 7.8 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DEMOGRAPHIC AND VALIDATED CONSTRUCTS IN THE MM

**Table 39: Relationship between demographic variables and the MM constructs**

| Demographics                   | Influencer strategies |       | Engagement and Interaction |      | Brand awareness |      | Customer Trust |      | Perception and Purchase intention |      |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------|-------|----------------------------|------|-----------------|------|----------------|------|-----------------------------------|------|
|                                | (IS)                  |       | (EI)                       |      | (BW)            |      | (CT)           |      | (PI)                              |      |
|                                | M                     | SD    | M                          | SD   | M               | SD   | M              | SD   | M                                 | SD   |
| Gender                         |                       |       |                            |      |                 |      |                |      |                                   |      |
| Male                           | 3.48                  | 0.103 | 3.41                       | 1.06 | 3.74            | 1.00 | 3.69           | 0.94 | 3.37                              | 0.90 |
| Female                         | 3.28                  | 0.97  | 3.36                       | 0.97 | 3.70            | 0.89 | 3.54           | 0.76 | 3.25                              | 0.87 |
| Other                          | 3.43                  | 0.19  | 4.13                       | 0.35 | 4.09            | 0.04 | 4.85           | 0.42 | 3.83                              | 0.07 |
| F ratio                        | 2.243                 |       | 2.304                      |      | 0.721           |      | 10.725         |      | 2.399                             |      |
| Sig.                           | 0.107                 |       | 0.101                      |      | 0.487           |      | <0.001**       |      | 0.092                             |      |
| Age                            |                       |       |                            |      |                 |      |                |      |                                   |      |
| 27-30 years                    | 3.47                  | 1.03  | 3.42                       | 0.97 | 3.79            | 0.97 | 3.62           | 0.91 | 3.28                              | 0.89 |
| 31-35 years                    | 3.20                  | 1.00  | 3.30                       | 1.02 | 3.71            | 0.88 | 3.61           | 0.82 | 3.30                              | 0.78 |
| 36-43 years                    | 3.42                  | 0.83  | 3.49                       | 1.05 | 3.60            | 0.94 | 3.67           | 0.76 | 3.39                              | 1.02 |
| F ratio                        | 3.608                 |       | 1.252                      |      | 1.268           |      | 0.169          |      | 0.470                             |      |
| Sig.                           | 0.028**               |       | 0.287                      |      | 0.282           |      | 0.844          |      | 0.626                             |      |
| Race                           |                       |       |                            |      |                 |      |                |      |                                   |      |
| African                        | 3.19                  | 1.04  | 3.24                       | 1.03 | 3.59            | 1.03 | 3.49           | 0.90 | 3.15                              | 0.87 |
| Indian                         | 3.50                  | 0.66  | 3.45                       | 0.60 | 3.81            | 0.71 | 3.77           | 0.59 | 3.46                              | 0.68 |
| White                          | 3.51                  | 0.81  | 3.31                       | 0.89 | 3.86            | 0.65 | 3.61           | 0.70 | 3.27                              | 0.88 |
| Coloured                       | 3.74                  | 0.75  | 3.85                       | 0.94 | 3.98            | 0.56 | 3.88           | 0.61 | 3.71                              | 0.81 |
| F ratio                        | 6.948                 |       | 6.813                      |      | 3.842           |      | 4.996          |      | 8.367                             |      |
| Sig.                           | <0.001**              |       | <0.001**                   |      | 0.010**         |      | 0.002**        |      | <0.001**                          |      |
| Highest level of qualification |                       |       |                            |      |                 |      |                |      |                                   |      |
| Less than Certificate          | 3.66                  | 0.25  | 3.98                       | 0.75 | 3.77            | 0.60 | 3.97           | 0.17 | 3.65                              | 0.43 |

|                      |       |       |       |      |       |      |                |      |       |      |
|----------------------|-------|-------|-------|------|-------|------|----------------|------|-------|------|
| National certificate | 3.53  | 0.87  | 3.43  | 1.02 | 3.71  | 0.79 | 3.40           | 1.02 | 3.36  | 1.02 |
| National Diploma     | 3.34  | 0.102 | 3.28  | 0.98 | 3.51  | 1.06 | 3.52           | 0.99 | 3.29  | 0.95 |
| Bachelor's Degree    | 3.32  | 0.106 | 3.45  | 1.04 | 3.68  | 1.02 | 3.49           | 0.96 | 3.20  | 0.80 |
| Post-graduate        | 3.36  | 0.98  | 3.36  | 1.00 | 3.84  | 0.84 | 3.76           | 0.68 | 3.36  | 0.89 |
| F ratio              | 0.649 |       | 1.751 |      | 2.196 |      | 3.756          |      | 1.283 |      |
| Sig.                 | 0.628 |       | 0.138 |      | 0.068 |      | <b>0.005**</b> |      | 0.276 |      |

The relationship demographic variables in relation to different constructs (Influencer Strategies, Engagement and Interaction, Brand Awareness, Customer Trust, Perception and Purchase Intention) were tested using ANOVA. The results in Table 39 indicate that there is no statistically significant difference (Sig. > 0.05) in mean scores among genders for Influencer Strategies, Engagement and Interaction, Brand Awareness, and Perception and Purchase Intention. However, there is a significant difference for Customer Trust ( $p < 0.001$ ), with a significantly higher mean score for the "Other" gender category.

In terms of age, there is a statistically significant difference in mean scores among different age groups for Influencer Strategies (Sig. < 0.05), with the age group "27-30 years" having a higher mean score ( $M=3.47$ ). There is no statistically significant difference in mean scores among age groups for Engagement and Interaction, Brand Awareness, Customer Trust, and Perception and Purchase Intention.

Regarding race, there is a statistically significant difference in mean scores among different race categories for Influencer Strategies, Engagement and Interaction, Brand Awareness, Customer Trust, and Perception and Purchase Intention (Sig. < 0.05). Coloured respondents consistently have higher mean scores across all constructs, implying higher level of agreement among them.

With respect to education level, there is no statistically significant difference in mean scores among different qualification levels for Influencer Strategies and Engagement and Interaction ( $P > 0.05$ ). There is a statistically significant difference in mean scores among qualification levels for Brand Awareness, Customer Trust, and Perception and Purchase Intention (Sig. < 0.05). In particular, respondents with less than certificate groups tend to have higher mean scores in these constructs.

In summary, the demographic variables of gender, age, race, and highest level of qualification have varying impacts on different constructs. While gender and age do not significantly affect most constructs, race and qualification levels appear to influence Brand Awareness, Customer Trust, and Perception and Purchase Intention.

## 7.9 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The above chapter presents an in-depth examination of the effect influencer marketing has on consumer behaviour. A wide range of constructs, including Influencer Strategies (IS), Engagement and Interaction (EI), Brand Awareness (BW), Consumer Trust (CT), and Perception and Purchase Intention (PI), were analysed to understand their interrelationships and effects on consumer preferences. A series of hypotheses were tested to determine the significance of these constructs on consumer decision-making. The data collection involved demographic variables such as gender, age, race, and highest level of qualification to observe how these factors influenced consumers' attitudes towards influencer marketing. The key findings showed that gender had a significant impact on various constructs, especially Consumer Trust (CT). Males exhibited higher trust in influencers' brand promotions compared to females. Age played a role in shaping consumers' perceptions. The younger age groups, particularly the 27-30 years old, showed greater trust in influencer-driven decision-making.

Racial differences were observed, with Coloured respondents having higher scores in multiple constructs, indicating a stronger influence of influencer marketing in this group. Highest Level of Qualification: Consumers with less formal education (Less than Certificate) exhibited stronger favourability towards influencer marketing in several constructs. Furthermore, and in terms of hypothesis testing, all the hypotheses excluded H5, which aimed to determine the relationships between various constructs, were accepted. This suggests a significant and positive impact of influencer marketing on consumer behaviour. The structural model, validated by CFA, confirmed that the proposed relationships between the constructs are statistically significant and can be relied upon for understanding the consumer behaviour influenced by influencer marketing.

In summary, the analysis confirms that consumers are influenced by influencers in their decision-making processes, with each of the examined constructs playing a role in shaping their attitudes and preferences. The findings emphasise the importance of influencer marketing for brands looking to connect with their target audience effectively. The following chapter will provide the conclusions propose recommendations consequent to this study which will steer the research towards possibilities for future research.

## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **8.1 INTRODUCTION**

The main aim of this study was to analyse the role of influencer marketing on Generation Y consumers' brands perceptions and purchase intentions. The critical evaluation and discussion of findings were presented in the two preceding chapters. The conclusions of this study and recommendations for future research will be presented in this chapter. The chapter also highlights the contributions of this study to the body of knowledge. Although the study was confined only to the Generation Y cohort, the findings are generally important to influencer marketing practices targeted at other generation cohorts particularly those active within the social media environment. This concluding chapter reflects on the key findings of this study, assesses how the research objectives were met, and offers recommendations for marketing practitioners and future research in influencer marketing, particularly in the context of Generation Y consumers in South Africa.

#### **8.2 OVERVIEW OF THEORETICAL STUDY**

Influencer marketing has emerged as a potent strategy for swiftly and effectively amplifying brand recognition. South Africa is home to a sizable population of Generation Y, exceeding ten million individuals. Many of them are deeply entrenched in a tech-driven lifestyle, making them an alluring market segment for brands. Despite their diverse backgrounds and values, these individuals share striking commonalities in their attitudes, language, preferences, and global brand inclinations. Brand recognition holds paramount importance for Generation Y consumers in South Africa, well-known for their astuteness and unwavering loyalty to favoured brands. Notably, South Africa houses numerous influential social media personalities with substantial followings. While these influencers often showcase their opulent lifestyles, they concurrently exploit their platforms to endorse diverse brands and products.

Despite historical economic challenges, South Africa's potential for upward mobility presents a distinctive opening for marketers to engage with consumers across various economic strata. A comprehensive exploration of influencer marketing's theoretical foundations, particularly concerning Generation Y, emphasized the indispensable nature of understanding these theories. The study scrutinized pivotal theories like Generational Cohort Theory, serving as the grand theory, along with metatheories such as Communication Accommodation Theory, Social Influence Theory, Social Learning Theory, and Source Credibility Theory. These theories furnish valuable insights into the complex mechanisms of influencer marketing and its efficacy. Influencer marketing has

demonstrated its advantages for both marketers and consumers by amalgamating pertinent and valuable content with strategic promotional endeavours. For consumers, this approach grants access to reliable recommendations and relatable content, steering away from conventional, intrusive advertising methods. This symbiotic relationship between influencers, brands, and consumers underscores the efficacy and mutual benefits derived from influencer marketing strategies. Chapter one presented the background of the study. Chapter two, three and four reviewed literature underpinning this study. Chapter five discussed the methodology employed in this study and chapter six presented the qualitative analysis that which explored the concept of influencer marketing from influencers lived experiences. While chapter seven presented the quantitative analysis and results of the study.

## **8.3 EMPIRICAL STUDY**

Presented below is a summary the key findings of the qualitative and quantitative data analysis.

### **8.3.1 Summary of qualitative study**

Qualitative data were presented using the themes. The findings of qualitative data convincingly pointed out how influencers strategically navigated various social media platforms, tailoring content to specific audience preferences and platform intricacies. By aligning their content with these preferences, influencers fostered stronger connections with their followers, enhancing engagement. This understanding of audience demographics and tailored content creation underscored the importance of relatability and engagement. Diverse niches and content strategies among influencers contributed to their distinct approaches in engaging their audiences. Adaptability to evolving trends and platforms was crucial, indicating the need for a refined and adaptable approach in influencer marketing. Authenticity emerged as a pivotal factor, fostering trust and credibility between influencers and their followers. This authenticity, combined with aligned values in brand collaborations, drove successful partnerships. Additionally, influencers' credibility and expertise significantly influenced consumer purchase decisions, highlighting the importance of authentic relationships and influencer credibility in marketing.

### **8.3.2 Summary of quantitative study**

The research findings suggested that female voices might have had a significant influence in the influencer landscape, potentially offering brands a chance to collaborate with them and connect with the majority audience. However, it is crucial not to overlook the male and other gender categories, as they also represented a substantial portion of the audience. Embracing diversity in influencer partnerships, encompassing various genders and racial groups, could help brands engage with a broader spectrum of the South African audience. Crafting influencer campaigns that resonated with

different age brackets, particularly Generation Y, could enhance engagement and foster better connections. Understanding the educational background and social media usage patterns of this demographic is crucial for tailoring influencer strategies that effectively reach and engage this diverse audience. The data highlighted the need for influencers to have a presence across multiple social media platforms to effectively connect with the multifaceted social media preferences of Generation Y in South Africa.

The findings revealed that Generation Y consumers prefer using electronic communication over face-to-face interactions, particularly on social media, for various purposes such as collaboration, networking, staying connected, and decision-making. Generation Y consumers heavily rely on influencers on social media, highly valuing their opinions and content, and actively engaging with different types of posts. Influencers strongly influence Generation Y consumers' perceptions of brands and products, making the brands they endorse appear more trustworthy and appealing. Generation Y consumers actively seek influencers' opinions before making purchases and consider influencers to play a significant role in their brand choices. This data indicates that social media influencers wield a substantial impact on the behavior of Generation Y consumers, influencing their perceptions of brands and their decisions to make purchases.

Furthermore, the study strongly shows how Generation Y consumers highly rely on social media influencers to shape their perception of brands and guide their purchasing decisions. Influencers help Generation Y consumers discover new brands, stay informed about sales and trends, and easily remember different brands. They even play a role in making certain brands stand out by making their logos more memorable. When Generation Y consumers decide what to buy, they often think about brands that influencers talk about first. This demonstrates the significant influence social media influencers have on the preferences and purchasing choices of Generation Y consumers. Overall, this study reveals that Generation Y consumers place a lot of trust in influencers. They see influencers as experts and trust what they say about products more than traditional advertisements. Trust in influencers is influenced by factors such as authenticity, perceived honesty, and experience with the products they promote. This trust underscores the influential role of influencers in shaping the opinions and purchasing behaviors of Generation Y consumers. These strategies include live videos, influencer collaborations, and sponsored content, testimonials or storytelling. Hudders, et al (2021:338) concurred that there has been a notable rise in the variety of influencer marketing strategies observed in recent times across diverse social media platforms. Influencers now endorse sponsored content through their blogs, Twitter, Instagram posts and stories, as well as in YouTube or TikTok videos. A current trend in influencer marketing involves live streaming videos, where influencers broadcast live content to their followers and feature sponsored material.

There's also been a sharp increase in the utilization of referral links, directing users to external sites, within the description boxes of YouTube videos. Furthermore, there's been a positive upturn in the number of product mentions, not necessarily sponsored, verbally highlighted in these videos. This is also confirmed by the findings of the survey conducted with consumers which indicated that substantial influence and favourable attitudes consumers hold towards various identified influencer-initiated strategies on social media platforms.

**Objective 2: To determine if influencer marketing has changed the way in which brands interact with consumers.**

The findings from this study highlighted that people eagerly interact with different types of influencer content on social media, underlining the important role influencers play in shaping how consumers see things and communicate in online spaces. This data indicates that individuals are very involved with influencers representing brands on social media. They value what influencers share, appreciate when influencers engage with them, and actively take part in different ways, like asking questions, liking, commenting, and sharing content. The findings also revealed that consumers are highly engaged and responsive to influencer content on social media, altering the way brands connect with their audience. This level of involvement signifies a transformation in the mode of interaction between brands and consumers, suggesting that influencer marketing has indeed impacted the way brands engage with their audience. This is in line with Gomez et al. (2019:198) who maintain that there is a significant shift in how brands interact with consumers due to social media. With consumers actively seeking and creating brand information, brands now engage with consumers in more interactive ways. Instead of solely directing communication, brands participate in conversations shaped by consumers on social media. This demonstrates that influencer marketing has altered the traditional model of brand-consumer interaction, giving consumers more power in shaping brand communication.

**Objective 3: To determine the extent to which influencer marketing sways consumer brand perceptions and purchase intentions.**

This objective was directly addressed by the findings of this study which indicated that influencers have a powerful influence on how consumers view brands and make purchasing choices. The findings showed that social media influencers significantly impact how consumers see brands and make choices. Consumers strongly trust brands endorsed by influencers, finding these products more trustworthy and appealing compared to regular ads. Influencers using different media formats like live videos and multimedia content actively influence how consumers make decisions.

They can even change personal decisions and how consumers view certain brands, affecting what brands consumers prefer. Influencers are crucial in getting consumers interested in brands, shaping what they want to buy, and deciding which brands they prefer. The data collected from both the quantitative and qualitative discussions indicated that Gen Y consumers are highly influenced by authentic and trustworthy influencers, leading to positive changes in their perceptions and increased purchase intent (Lim et al. 2018:724).

**Objective 4: To identify the level of brand awareness created through brand influencers.**

The study found that brand influencers play a pivotal role in raising brand awareness among Gen Y consumers. The findings of this research met this objective by highlighting the critical role that social media influencers play in building brand awareness and shaping how consumers perceive brands. Consumers regularly learn about brands, promotions, and emerging trends through content created by influencers, showcasing their substantial impact on brand visibility and trend awareness. Additionally, influencers are instrumental in educating consumers about product advantages, aiding in quick brand recall and recognition. They enhance the memorability of reviewed brands, even making their logos stand out among other brands. The data further indicates that brands promoted by influencers often come to consumers' minds first when they're considering purchases, demonstrating the influencers' profound influence on brand recall and recognition. According to Chopra et al. (2021:85) influencers are seen as trend-savvy individuals, often considered trendsetters because of their deep understanding of technology, the newest beauty products, and similar areas. They are regarded as authorities delivering information that their followers could easily grasp and appreciate. Therefore, these research findings directly address the objective of identifying the level of brand awareness established through brand influencers, as they highlight influencers' roles as knowledgeable trend leaders who effectively convey information to their audience.

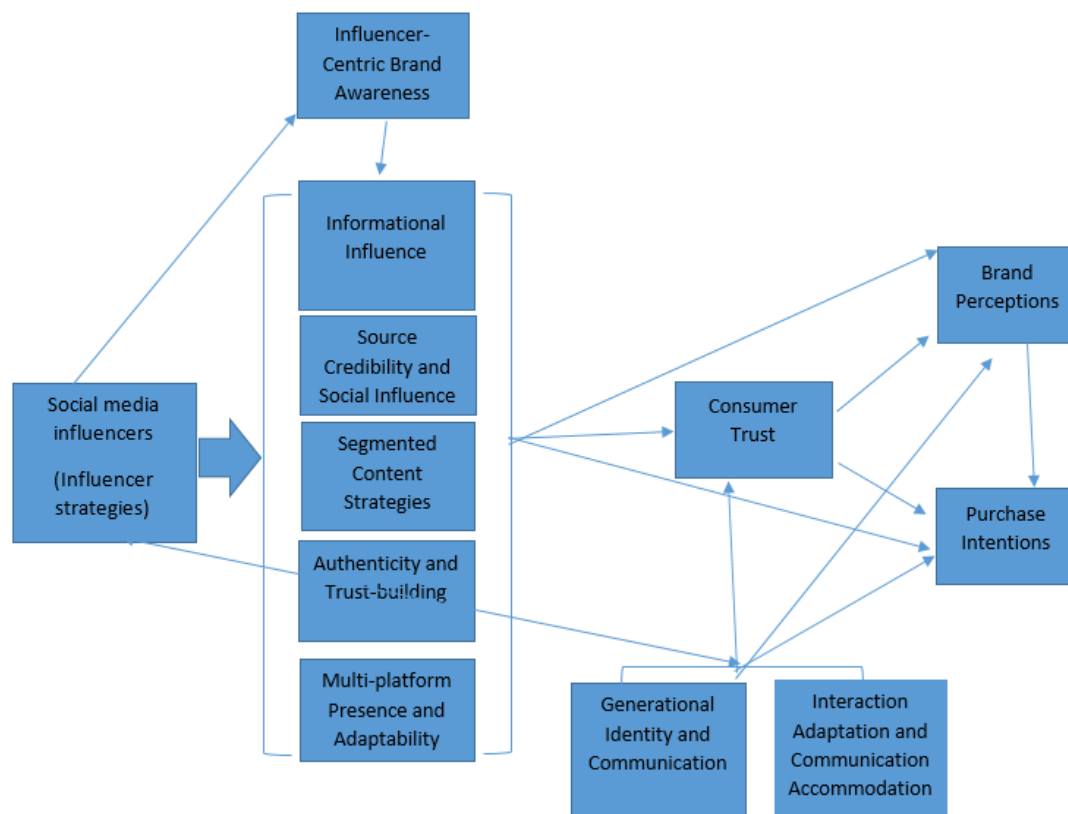
**Objective 5: To evaluate the degree of Generation Y consumers' trust in brand influencers.**

The results provide insight into the complex aspects of trust and reliability connected to social media influencers. Generation Y consumers typically view influencers as authorities in their specific fields, seeing their content as sincere and trustworthy. Gen Y consumers exhibit a substantial level of trust in brand influencers who align with their values and exhibit authenticity as trustworthiness is a key factor in their decision-making process when considering influencer-endorsed products or services. Interestingly, influencers' viewpoints often hold more influence compared to traditional brand ads, especially when influencers are verified or collaborate with renowned brands, which further bolsters trust. Traits like dependability, honesty, and integrity significantly shape influencers' reputations,

alongside firsthand experience and ethical conduct, all contributing to the establishment of trust among consumers. These findings effectively address the objective of evaluating the extent of Generation Y consumers' trust in brand influencers by highlighting the factors that contribute to their trust in influencer content and are supported by Lee and Eastin (2021: 826) who point out that consumers seek an emotional connection with Social Media Influencers (SMIs) and expect authenticity. This authenticity is crucial, not just in being trustworthy and genuine, but also in fostering a real, relational bond between the audience and the influencer. This insight demonstrates how authenticity plays a significant role in determining the level of trust Generation Y consumers place in brand influencers, aligning with the objective of evaluating their degree of trust.

**Objective 6: To develop a framework for optimizing influencer marketing when engaging consumers in social media platforms.**

The study culminated in the development of a comprehensive theoretical framework designed to optimize influencer marketing strategies for engaging Generation Y on social media platforms. This framework was guided by the research objectives, the tested hypotheses, and the reviewed literature. It also considers the theories underpinning this study as well as the findings of this study. The proposed theoretical framework is presented in Figure 8.1 below:



**Figure 8.1: Proposed framework**

Influencers should strategically tailor their content for specific social media platforms in order to meet specific preferences and behaviors of Generation Y consumers. Recognising the diversity within this cohort, influencers must adapt their strategies to resonate with different age brackets, educational backgrounds, and gender categories within Generation Y. By aligning content with audience preferences, influencers can foster stronger connections, enhance engagement, and broaden brand reach. Authenticity emerges as a critical factor for influencers engaging with Generation Y. Creating genuine, relatable content aligned with shared values between influencers and brands cultivates trust and credibility. Brands should prioritize partnerships with influencers who exhibit authenticity, ensuring that influencer collaborations align with the values and aspirations of Generation Y consumers. Given the diverse social media preferences within Generation Y, influencers need a robust presence across multiple platforms.

Understanding the subtle usage patterns and preferences of this demographic is essential for tailoring influencer strategies effectively. This adaptability ensures that influencers can engage Generation Y consumers across various social media channels, maximizing reach and impact. Leveraging influencer strategies to enhance brand awareness among Generation Y consumers is crucial. Influencers significantly shape perceptions and product recall, making brands more recognizable. This is supported by Lou and Yuan (2029:62) who suggest that brands using influencer marketing aim to achieve brand awareness, reaching new audiences, and increasing sales. Although, brand awareness might not directly influence purchase intentions Lou and Yuan (2019:62) further suggest that by collaborating with influencers, brands seek mentions that can raise awareness among their intended customers and ultimately lead to more purchases. Since brand awareness is crucial in how people decide to buy things, it's a primary focus for brands using influencer marketing strategies. Instead, influencer trust, engagement, and strategies also play pivotal roles in shaping consumer perceptions and purchase decisions. Recognizing Generation Y's techno-centric nature and their communication preferences rapid, playful, collaborative, expressive, responsive, and flexible brands should adapt their communication strategies. Understanding Generation Y's interconnectedness and comfort in expressing opinions on social media is vital for effective brand engagement and interaction.

Influencer credibility plays a pivotal role in influencing Generation Y consumer behavior. Consumers perceive influencers as trustworthy and credible sources of information, impacting their opinions about brands. Brands should focus on partnering with credible influencers to positively influence consumer perceptions and behaviors. Understanding social learning processes and informational influences on Generation Y consumer behavior is key because when consumers trust influencers, they are ready to imitate their actions and embrace the products or brands they endorse (Audrezet et al. 2017:558). Observing others' experiences with products or services influences Generation Y consumers' adoption behavior. Brands can leverage social influence strategies to reduce perceived risk and encourage innovation adoption among Generation Y consumers. On the other hand, Employing Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), influencers should adapt their communication style when engaging with Generation Y consumers. Aligning linguistic and communicative behaviors with the preferences of this cohort fosters better understanding and acceptance, facilitating influencer-consumer relationships. In summary, optimizing influencer marketing strategies for engaging Generation Y consumers involves tailored content strategies, authenticity, multi-platform presence, influencer-centric brand awareness, understanding generational identity, leveraging source credibility, social learning, and adapting communication for better interaction. This theoretical framework integrates insights from the objectives, literature, tested hypotheses, study outcomes and grounding theories, offering a comprehensive approach for marketers aiming to optimize influencer marketing strategies targeting Generation Y consumers in the dynamic social media environment.

## **8.4 HYPOTHESES ASSESSMENT**

The study evaluated eight hypotheses that guided the research.

**H1:** There is a positive relationship between influencer marketing and brand perception.

**H2:** There is a positive relationship between influencer marketing and purchase intention.

**H3:** There is a positive relationship between influencer marketing and brand awareness.

**H4:** There is a positive relationship between influencer marketing and Generation Y consumer trust.

**H5:** There is a positive relationship between brand awareness and brand perception.

**H6:** There is a positive relationship between brand awareness and purchase intention.

**H7:** There is a positive relationship between Generation Y consumer trust and brand perception.

**H8:** There is a positive relationship between Generation Y consumer trust and purchase intention.

A regression analysis was conducted, and it confirmed several significant relationships between the key variables in the study. It supported the first hypothesis, revealing a strong and positive association between Influencer Strategies and Engagement/Interaction. Similarly, it demonstrated a substantial positive connection between influencer strategies and Brand Awareness, confirming the second hypothesis. The analysis also identified a positive relationship between influencer strategies and Consumer Trust, validating the third hypothesis. Additionally, it highlighted a positive link between engagement/interaction and consumer trust, supporting the fourth hypothesis. However, it contradicted the fifth hypothesis, indicating a negative relationship between brand awareness and brand perception and Purchase Intention. On the contrary, it upheld hypotheses six, seven, and eight, demonstrating positive associations between consumer trust, engagement/interaction, influencer strategies, and purchase intentions. Therefore, while brand awareness might not directly influence purchase intention and brand perceptions, consumer trust, engagement, and influencer strategies significantly contribute to shaping consumer perceptions and purchase intentions. These results highlight the influential role of influencer marketing in shaping consumer behaviour and brand-related outcomes.

## **8.5 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

Although appropriate statistical methods have been applied to the data, the sample of the study consisted of 475 Generation Y consumers residing in South Africa. However, more research, with a bigger sample, is essential so that the results can be generalised with greater confidence. The sample size in this research was focused specifically on Generation Y consumers, limiting the generalizability of the findings to the broader South African consumer market demographics. The study also did not explore the influence of different types of influencers and the potential differences in impact between micro and macro influencers, limiting a comprehensive understanding of influencer marketing. And due to the rapidly changing nature of social media trends and consumer behaviours, the study's findings might be time-bound. As a result, future studies might yield different results due to changes in technology or social media platforms.

## **8.6 CONTRIBUTION TO ACADEMIC KNOWLEDGE**

This research significantly contributes to academic knowledge in several ways:

1. **Influencer Marketing Framework:** The development of a comprehensive framework for optimizing influencer marketing tailored to the South African context provides a practical tool for academics and practitioners alike. It offers a structured approach to understanding and implementing influencer marketing strategies.

2. **Empirical Evidence:** The study provides empirical evidence of the positive impact of influencer marketing on consumer behavior, particularly among Generation Y consumers. This evidence fills a gap in the academic literature regarding the effectiveness of influencer marketing in emerging markets.
3. **Integration of Theories:** The research integrates established theories, including social influence theory, source credibility theory, and social capital theory, into the context of influencer marketing. This integration enriches the theoretical foundation of influencer marketing research.

## 8.7 GENERAL CONTRIBUTION TO THE MARKETING INDUSTRY PRACTICES

The findings of this study hold significant implications for marketing industry practices:

1. **Strategic Decision-Making:** Marketers and brands can make more informed strategic decisions when considering influencer marketing as a part of their marketing mix. The developed framework guides the selection of influencers, content creation, and campaign evaluation, resulting in more effective campaigns.
2. **Consumer-Centric Approach:** Understanding the impact of influencer marketing on Generation Y consumers allows brands to adopt a consumer-centric approach. They can tailor their messaging and campaigns to align with the values and preferences of this influential demographic.
3. **Ethical Practices:** The study emphasizes the importance of transparency and authenticity in influencer marketing. Practitioners are encouraged to adhere to ethical practices, including clear disclosure of sponsored content, to maintain trust with consumers.
4. **Measurable Outcomes:** The use of analytics tools to measure campaign success is highlighted. Marketers are encouraged to invest in these tools to track key performance indicators and make data-driven decisions.

## 8.8 AMPLIFICATION OF THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

Various theories underpinning this study were discussed. However, communication accommodation theory (CAT) Communication stood out as a significant framework, emphasising adaptability in communication to align with social norms. .Accommodation Theory, as posited by Topaloglu and Dass (2021:754), emphasizes individuals' adaptability in adjusting verbal and nonverbal communication to align with prevailing social norms. This principle extends to written communication, enabling the assessment of whether brands modify their communication approaches akin to

influencers' methods when engaging with consumers. Such adaptations could potentially transform brand-consumer interactions, consequently fostering and heightening brand awareness. In order to increase brand awareness, it is significant to use social media in relaying up-to-date brand information to consumers as it continues to gain prominence in marketing. The incorporation of entertaining elements in social media brand communication, such as engaging photos and videos on platforms like Facebook and Instagram, effectively captures the attention of pleasure-seeking consumers. This exposure to entertaining brand content, comprising videos, images, and stories, potentially strengthens brand recall and recognition. Thus, engaging with enjoyable elements on social media brand pages contributes to creating a positive experiential link in consumers' minds, increasing the likelihood of brand awareness (Cheung, Pires, and Rosenberger 2018:7). Based on the findings the aspect of Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) appears to be particularly amplified in the study. The study explored the application of CAT in the context of social media communication and consumer behaviours. Below are the key aspects that were emphasised in the:

- Digital Communication Accommodation:

The study explored how individuals adapt their communicative behaviors in the digital realm, especially on social media platforms. It highlights the importance of communication accommodation in maintaining social valence within the digital space. These findings underline the importance of tailoring content strategies to both the influencers' personalities and their audience preferences. The variation in coverage, content types, and tone exposed the need for influencers to adapt their approaches to resonate with their specific audience demographics and interests including audience preferences, ranging from informative to relatable approaches. This diversity demonstrates that successful influencer strategies are distinct and should align with both the influencers' authentic voice and the audience's expectations, ensuring both engaging and informative content while fostering relatability and connection with their followers.

- Influence of Social Media Platforms:

The qualitative research findings highlighted the role of social media platforms, primarily focusing on human-like engagement, influencers, and the significance of emoticons. It discusses how communication accommodation processes occur within online environments, particularly in global online networks. The qualitative findings of this research highlight the strategic interplay between social media platform selection, niche focus, content strategies, and audience demographics in influencer marketing. Participants strategically utilize different platforms to leverage their strengths. Influencers who customise their content to resonate with specific platforms and audience preferences are better positioned to create engaging, relatable, and valuable content, thus fostering a stronger connection with their followers.

- Influencers and Communication Efficiency:

The study discusses the growing influence of influencers on social media, aligning with the principles of communication accommodation for enhancing communication efficiency. It emphasises that influencers play a vital role in disseminating user-generated content and fostering positive user experiences. Influencers employ diverse strategies to engage their audience and create compelling content. Participants alluded to covering various topics, from faith and natural beauty to lifestyle, humor, tech, travel, and outdoor experiences in their influencer strategies. Engagement techniques involve relatability, authentic storytelling, educational content, interactive questions and answer sessions, and responding to comments. Methods range from sharing personal experiences, providing detailed tutorials, offering product reviews, to showcasing lifestyle and fashion choices. Their strategies vary based on the influencers' personalities and content focus, balancing seriousness with entertainment and information sharing.

- Emphasis on Non-Verbal Communication:

The literature reviewed emphasizes the importance of non-verbal communication among Generation Y consumers and influencers on social media platforms. They utilize emoticons, emojis, and stickers as tools for effective interpersonal communication, aiming to attract attention, evoke emotions, and convey affection in their interactions. These non-verbal cues constitute a significant aspect of communication on social media, aligning with the principles of communication accommodation.

Communication accommodation theory's application in brand-consumer interactions, particularly in influencer marketing, highlights the need for brands to adapt their communication strategies akin to influencers' methods. This adaptability could transform brand-consumer interactions, ultimately enhancing brand awareness. Social media emerges as a pivotal platform for brand communication, offering avenues to relay up-to-date information in engaging formats. The integration of entertaining elements, such as captivating visuals on platforms like Facebook and Instagram, proves effective in capturing consumer attention and fostering brand recall and recognition. In addition, non-verbal communication tools like emoticons and emojis significantly contribute to effective interpersonal communication on social media, aligning with CAT principles. Overall, these insights underscore the importance of tailored content strategies, influencer-platform alignment, communication adaptability, and non-verbal cues in enhancing brand awareness and engagement in the digital realm.

## 8.9 IMPLICATIONS FOR BRANDS

The identified implications for brands emphasize the strategic importance of influencer marketing in shaping brand perception, consumer trust, and overall brand success. By recognizing and acting on these implications, brands can harness the full potential of influencer marketing in the digital age.

- **Brand Alignment:** Ensure that influencer partnerships align with the core values and identity of the brand. Collaborations with influencers whose values resonate with the brand's mission can lead to more authentic and impactful campaigns.
- **Trust Building:** Recognize the importance of trust in influencer marketing. Invest in influencers who have a proven track record of trustworthiness and authenticity, as consumer trust significantly influences brand perceptions and purchase intentions.
- **Brand Awareness and Recognition:** Leverage influencer marketing to enhance brand awareness and recognition. Influencers can play a pivotal role in introducing the brand to a wider audience and creating a lasting impression.
- **Consumer Engagement:** View influencer marketing as a means to foster meaningful consumer engagement. Encourage influencer collaborations that encourage two-way communication between the brand and its audience, creating a sense of community and connection.
- **Long-Term Brand Building:** Consider influencer marketing as part of a long-term brand-building strategy. Building enduring relationships with influencers can result in sustained brand advocacy and loyalty among consumers.

## 8.10 IMPLICATIONS FOR ACADEMICS

The implications for academics highlight opportunities for further research and theoretical development in the realm of influencer marketing. By addressing these implications, scholars can contribute to the growing body of knowledge surrounding influencer-brand relationships and their impact on consumer behavior.

- **Theory Advancement:** Researchers can build upon the theoretical framework developed in this study to advance influencer marketing theories further. Explore how theories such as social influence, source credibility, and social capital can be refined and extended in the context of influencer marketing.

- **Cross-Cultural Studies:** Investigate the applicability of influencer marketing theories and practices across different cultural contexts. Comparative studies can provide insights into how cultural factors influence consumer responses to influencer marketing.
- **Interdisciplinary Research:** Encourage interdisciplinary research that combines marketing, communication, psychology, and sociology perspectives. Such collaborations can offer a more holistic understanding of the complex dynamics in influencer marketing.
- **Consumer Behavior Research:** Explore in-depth the psychological and behavioral aspects of Generation Y consumers' interactions with influencers. Investigate the underlying motivations, cognitive processes, and emotional responses involved in influencer marketing.
- **Ethical Considerations:** Delve deeper into the ethical considerations in influencer marketing, including issues related to transparency, authenticity, and consumer rights. Academic research can provide valuable guidance on ethical practices in this evolving field.

## 8.11 RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are provided for marketers, brands, and future research:

### 8.11.1 Recommendations for Marketers and Brands

- **Leverage Influencer Strategies:** Invest in influencer marketing strategies that resonate with Generation Y consumers. Collaborate with influencers who align with the values, interests, and preferences of this demographic. Engage influencers who can authentically connect with Generation Y's diverse interests and engage them through relatable content.
- **Focus on Engagement and Trust:** Prioritize building consumer trust and fostering engagement. Create influencer-led campaigns that prioritize building trust with Generation Y consumers. Influencers with genuine interactions, responsiveness, and empathetic approaches tend to build stronger connections and trust among this audience.
- **Emphasize Consumer Education:** Develop influencer-driven content that educates Generation Y consumers about product benefits, features, and values. Informational content focusing on the utility and practical aspects of products tends to resonate well with this demographic.

- **Diversify Content Formats:** Experiment with various content formats such as videos, multimedia posts, and interactive content. Generation Y consumers appreciate diverse and engaging content. Influencers using different formats can capture attention and maintain interest among this audience.
- **Integrate Brand Awareness and Trust Building:** Align influencer campaigns to not only increase brand awareness but also emphasize trust-building elements. Influencers should authentically endorse brands, focusing on the reliability and authenticity of the products or services they promote.
- **Measure and Adapt Strategies:** Continuously analyze and assess the effectiveness of influencer marketing campaigns among Generation Y consumers. Use data analytics to measure campaign performance, engagement metrics, and consumer sentiments to adapt strategies for better resonance and impact.
- **Collaborate for Long-Term Partnerships:** Foster long-term relationships with influencers rather than one-off campaigns. Building enduring partnerships allows influencers to become brand advocates, strengthening their influence and credibility among Generation Y consumers.
- **Stay Updated and Agile:** Keep up with evolving trends and preferences within Generation Y. The digital landscape and consumer behaviors change rapidly, necessitating agile and adaptable marketing strategies to remain relevant and appealing.

#### 8.11.2 Recommendations for Future Research

- **Long-term Impact Analysis:** Conduct longitudinal studies to assess the enduring effects of influencer marketing on Generation Y consumers. Investigate how prolonged exposure to influencer-driven content influences brand loyalty, purchase behaviors, and long-term brand perceptions.
- **Cross-Cultural Influencer Strategies:** Assess the cross-cultural implications of influencer marketing on Generation Y across diverse regions and cultures. Analyze how cultural differences impact the effectiveness and reception of influencer campaigns among this demographic.
- **Influencer Authenticity and Trust:** Investigate thoroughly into the aspects of influencer authenticity and trust-building. Explore the factors contributing to influencer credibility, how influencers can maintain authenticity over time, and the subsequent effects on consumer trust and engagement.

- **Innovative Content Formats:** With technology continuously evolving, there is a need to explore the effectiveness of emerging content formats in influencer marketing, such as augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), and interactive content. Investigate how these innovative formats influence engagement and purchase intentions among Generation Y.
- **Influence of Micro and Nano Influencers:** Examine the influence and effectiveness of micro and nano influencers (individuals with smaller but highly engaged audiences) in comparison to macro influencers. Assess how these smaller-scale influencers resonate with Generation Y consumers.
- **Comparative Studies with Traditional Marketing:** Conduct comparative studies between influencer marketing and traditional marketing approaches (TV commercials, print media) to understand the relative effectiveness, reach, and engagement among Generation Y consumers.
- **Consumer Empowerment and Co-Creation:** Explore how Generation Y consumers engage in co-creating content with influencers and brands. Investigate the extent to which consumer empowerment through participatory content creation affects brand perceptions and loyalty.
- **Psychological and Behavioral Aspects:** Research on the psychological and behavioral aspects of Generation Y consumer decision-making influenced by influencers. Understand the cognitive processes and emotional triggers behind their responses to influencer-driven content.
- **Sustainability and Social Responsibility:** Investigate the role of influencers in promoting sustainability and social responsibility. Analyze the impact of influencers endorsing ethical and sustainable practices on Generation Y consumers' attitudes and purchase intentions.

## 8.12 CONCLUSION

This study is a pioneering endeavour in the South African marketing industry. Very little scholarly research has been published regarding an influencer marketing in the South African context and with reference to generational cohorts. This study has shed light on the transformative role of influencer marketing in shaping the brand perceptions and purchase intentions of Generation Y consumers in South Africa. The study also appreciates the role of social media in promoting influencer consumer engagement. By aligning influencer marketing strategies with the preferences, values, and behaviours of Generation Y consumers, brands can effectively harness the influential power of this demographic, building lasting connections and driving meaningful engagement and purchase intentions. On the other hand, these exploring these recommended areas can provide valuable insights into the evolving landscape of influencer marketing among Generation Y consumers, enhancing our understanding of their behaviours, preferences, and the dynamics of influencer-consumer relationships.

This study contributes to the evolving field of influencer marketing by offering practical insights for marketers and brands. By understanding the unique characteristics of Gen Y and harnessing the power of influencer marketing, brands can effectively engage with this influential demographic. The developed framework provides a valuable tool for optimizing influencer marketing strategies in the South African context. As influencer marketing continues to evolve, future research can delve deeper into its multifaceted aspects and ethical considerations. This study is expected to serve as a foundation for further exploration, innovation, and ethical practice in influencer marketing. Ultimately, the successful integration of influencer marketing into marketing strategies can lead to enhanced brand success and consumer engagement in the digital age. Lastly, the research objectives of this study were met, and the hypotheses were established, providing empirical evidence of the positive role played by influencer marketing in Generation Y's brand perceptions and purchase intentions. The empirical data used during this study were based on questionnaires that were administered amongst Generation Y consumers residing in South Africa as well as interviews conducted with South African Social media influencers. The recommendations and conclusions discussed in this chapter represent some of the actions that could possibly be taken to improve marketing practices in South Africa.

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## APPENDIX A:

### LETTER INFORMATION (INTERVIEW)



### LETTER OF INFORMATION

**Title of the Research Study:** The role of influencer marketing on South African Generation Y consumer

**Principal Investigator/s/researcher:** Paballo Patience Ntobaki, Master of Management Sciences: Marketing

**Co-Investigator/s/supervisor/s:** Prof Padhma Moodley, Doctor of Philosophy: Communication Science

**Brief Introduction and Purpose of the Study:** The emergence of social media marketing has posed both challenges and opportunities for brands locally and globally. The aim of this study is analyse the value of influencer marketing and its effect on Generation Y consumer perceptions and purchase intentions from a South African perspective.

**Greeting** Hello,

**Introduce yourself to the participant** I am studying towards a Doctoral Degree in Marketing at the Durban University of Technology. As per the requirements of the programme, a research project needs to be conducted. I am therefore conducting a study titled, the role of influencer marketing on South African Generation Y consumers.

**Invitation to the potential participant** I kindly request you to partake and contribute to this research by Participating in an interview which will only take fourty five minutes to an hour of your valued time.

**Outline of the Procedures:** This interview will take place on Ms Teams. The interview will be semi-structured and you will be able to answer in a way you are comfortable. You will be allowed to ask question where you need clarification during the interview. Participation is voluntary and you will be anticipated to respond all questions honestly and truthfully for the research to produce the desired results. The interview will take about 30 minutes to an hour to complete.

**Risks or Discomforts to the Participant:** There are no known and predictable risks or uneasiness associated with the study.

**Explain to the participant the reasons he/she may be withdraw from the Study:** Participation in this research may be terminated early under circumstances such as Non-compliance, illness, or any

adverse reactions. Contribution to this study will be completely voluntary, and you can pull out at any time without any opposing consequences for the partaker.

**Benefits:** The expected output is tremendous improvement of the marketing used by South African brands and Marketers and in communicating with consumers in social media platforms. The dissertation will be available in DUT Library and available online via the repository. Potential article in accredited journal

**Remuneration:** There will be no remuneration for the participants.

**Costs of the Study:** No expenses associated with the study will be sustained by the respondents.

**Confidentiality:** In this study, confidentiality is of supreme significance. All information received will be used only for the research determinations. The questionnaire does not comprise names and any personal identification details.

**Results:** The results of the research will be available in the dissertation and will be accessible to participants after the examination of the dissertation, I will send the link to the research, to everyone that participated in the research.

**Research-related Injury:** There are no identified or foreseen risks and discomforts related to participants in this study, nevertheless, if so, no compensation will be presented.

**Storage of all electronic and hard copies including tape recordings** (A USB and Cloud (Onedrive) are to be used to store the information, after which the flash drives will be formatted and the recordings deleted from the cloud. The information will be accessible to me and my supervisor. For security purposes, the information will be encrypted with a password. We will keep the information for five years before it is deleted permanently.

**Persons to contact in the Event of Any Problems or Queries:** Please contact me (researcher); Paballo Ntobaki (cell no. 0714474648), Supervisor Prof P. Moodley (tel. No. 011 559 3613) or the Institutional Research Ethics Administrator on 031 373 2375. Complaints can be reported to the Director: Research and Postgraduate Support Dr L Lingano on 031 373 2577 or [researchdirector@dut.ac.za](mailto:researchdirector@dut.ac.za).

## APPENDIX B:

### LETTER OF INFORMATION (QUESTIONNAIRE)



#### LETTER OF INFORMATION

**Title of the Research Study:** The role of influencer marketing on South African Generation Y consumers.

**Principal Investigator/s/researcher:** Paballo Patience Ntobaki, Master of Management Sciences: Marketing

**Co-Investigator/s/supervisor/s:** Prof Padhma Moodley, Doctor of Philosophy: Communication Science

**Brief Introduction and Purpose of the Study:** The emergence of social media marketing has posed both challenges and opportunities for brands locally and globally. The aim of this study is analyse the value of influencer marketing and its effect on Generation Y consumer perceptions and purchase intentions from a South African perspective.

**Greeting** Hello,

**Introduce yourself to the participant** I am studying towards a Doctoral Degree in Marketing at the Durban University of Technology. As per the requirements of the programme, a research project needs to be conducted. I am therefore conducting a study titled, the role of influencer marketing on South African Generation Y consumers.

**Invitation to the potential participant** I kindly request you to partake and contribute to this research by completing this questionnaire which will not take more than 15 minutes of your valued time.

**Outline of the Procedures:** You will be given ten working days to complete the questionnaire and send them back to me after responding. Participation is voluntary and you will be anticipated to respond all questions honestly and truthfully for the research to produce the desired results. The questionnaire will take about 15 minutes to complete

**Risks or Discomforts to the Participant:** There are no known and predictable risks or uneasiness associated with the study.

**Explain to the participant the reasons he/she may be withdraw from the Study:** Participation in this research may be terminated early under circumstances such as Non-compliance, illness, or any adverse reactions. Contribution to this study will be completely voluntary, and you can pull out at any time without any opposing consequences for the partaker.

**Benefits:** The expected output is tremendous improvement of the marketing used by South African brands and Marketers and in communicating with consumers in social media platforms. The dissertation will be available in DUT Library and available online via the repository. Potential article in accredited journal

**Remuneration:** There will be no remuneration for the participants.

**Costs of the Study:** No expenses associated with the study will be sustained by the respondents.

**Confidentiality:** In this study, confidentiality is of supreme significance. All information received will be used only for the research determinations. The questionnaire does not comprise names and any personal identification details.

**Results:** The results of the research will be available in the dissertation, and will be accessible to participants after the examination of the dissertation, I will send the link to the research, to everyone that participated in the research.

**Research-related Injury:** There are no identified or foreseen risks and discomforts related to participants in this study, nevertheless, if so, no compensation will be presented.

**Storage of all electronic and hard copies including tape recordings** (A USB and Cloud (Onedrive) are to be used to store the information, after which the flash drives will be formatted and the recordings deleted from the cloud. The information will be accessible to me and my supervisor. For security purposes, the information will be encrypted with a password. We will keep the information for five years before it is deleted permanently.

**Persons to contact in the Event of Any Problems or Queries:** Please contact me (researcher); Paballo Ntobaki (cell no. 0714474648), Supervisor Prof P. Moodley (tel. No. 011 559 3613) or the Institutional Research Ethics Administrator on 031 373 2375. Complaints can be reported to the Director: Research and Postgraduate Support Dr L Langaniso on 031 373 2577 or [researchdirector@dut.ac.za](mailto:researchdirector@dut.ac.za).

**APPENDIX C:**  
**CONSENT FORM**



**CONSENT**

**Full Title of the Study:** The role of influencer marketing on South African Generation Y consumers.

**Names of Researcher/s:** Paballo Patience Ntobaki

**Statement of Agreement to Participate in the Research Study:**

- I hereby confirm that I have been informed by the researcher, Paballo Patience Ntobaki, about the nature, conduct, benefits and risks of this study - Research Ethics Clearance

Number: \_\_\_\_\_,

- I have also received, read and understood the above written information (Participant Letter of Information) regarding the study.
- I am aware that the results of the study, including personal details regarding my sex, age, date of birth, initials and diagnosis will be anonymously processed into a study report.
- In view of the requirements of research, I agree that the data collected during this study can be processed in a computerised system by the researcher.
- I may, at any stage, without prejudice, withdraw my consent and participation in the study.
- I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and (of my own free will) declare myself prepared to participate in the study.
- I understand that significant new findings developed during the course of this research which may relate to my participation will be made available to me.

|                                 |             |             |                    |              |
|---------------------------------|-------------|-------------|--------------------|--------------|
| _____                           | _____       | _____       | _____              |              |
| <b>Full Name of Participant</b> | <b>Date</b> | <b>Time</b> | <b>Signature /</b> | <b>Right</b> |

## Thumbprint

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (name of researcher) herewith confirm that the above participant has been fully informed about the nature, conduct and risks of the above study.

\_\_\_\_\_ **Full Name of Researcher** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_ **Signature**

\_\_\_\_\_ **Full Name of Witness (If applicable)** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_ **Signature**

\_\_\_\_\_ **Full Name of Legal Guardian (If applicable)** \_\_\_\_\_



## APPENDIX D:

### INTERVIEW GUIDE



#### INTERVIEW GUIDE

##### Interview questions

1. Which social media platforms are you active on?
  2. What features do you like the most on the social media channels you are active on?
  3. Would you briefly describe your social media usage pattern?
  4. Can you describe the category of influencer marketing you fall on?
  5. Can you describe your audience or followers?
  6. What do you think your audience likes?
  7. How do you connect with consumers?
  8. What communication strategies do you use to engage with your followers?
  9. What do you think really makes an impact on your followers?
  10. Which category of brands do you focus on?
  11. What do you think brands care about most when deciding which influencers to work with?
  12. What do you care about most when deciding which brands to work with?
  13. What differentiates a good experience working with a brand from a great one?
  14. What do you think is the significance of personal passion and authentic relationships in influencer marketing?
  15. What do you think sets you apart from other influencers in the same category as you?
-

## APPENDIX E:

### QUESTIONNAIRE

#### Questionnaire

Please tick where appropriate

#### 1. Demographic data

|            |               |             |               |
|------------|---------------|-------------|---------------|
| <b>1.1</b> | <b>Gender</b> | <b>Male</b> | <b>Female</b> |
|------------|---------------|-------------|---------------|

|            |             |                |               |              |                 |
|------------|-------------|----------------|---------------|--------------|-----------------|
| <b>1.2</b> | <b>Race</b> | <b>African</b> | <b>Indian</b> | <b>White</b> | <b>Coloured</b> |
|------------|-------------|----------------|---------------|--------------|-----------------|

|            |                  |               |                |              |
|------------|------------------|---------------|----------------|--------------|
| <b>1.3</b> | <b>Age group</b> | <b>27 -30</b> | <b>31 - 35</b> | <b>36-43</b> |
|------------|------------------|---------------|----------------|--------------|

|            |                |               |                |                 |                |
|------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|-----------------|----------------|
| <b>1.5</b> | <b>Marital</b> | <b>Single</b> | <b>Married</b> | <b>Divorced</b> | <b>Widowed</b> |
|------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|-----------------|----------------|

|            |                          |                              |                             |                         |                          |                      |
|------------|--------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|
| <b>1.6</b> | <b>Educational level</b> | <b>Less than Certificate</b> | <b>National certificate</b> | <b>National Diploma</b> | <b>Bachelor's Degree</b> | <b>Post-graduate</b> |
|------------|--------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|

#### 2. Value of social media

**2.1** Are you active on social media? Yes/No .....

**2.2** Which social media networks(s) are you active on?

|          |  |         |  |         |  |           |  |        |  |
|----------|--|---------|--|---------|--|-----------|--|--------|--|
| Facebook |  | Twitter |  | YouTube |  | Instagram |  | Others |  |
|----------|--|---------|--|---------|--|-----------|--|--------|--|

*Please specify your view on the following statements*

|                               |                    |                    |                  |                            |
|-------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|------------------|----------------------------|
| <b>SD – Strongly Disagree</b> | <b>D- Disagree</b> | <b>N – Neutral</b> | <b>A – Agree</b> | <b>SA – Strongly Agree</b> |
|-------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|------------------|----------------------------|

**2.3** How important is social media to you?

|  |                                     |           |          |          |          |           |
|--|-------------------------------------|-----------|----------|----------|----------|-----------|
|  | <b>Please show the best opinion</b> | <b>SD</b> | <b>D</b> | <b>N</b> | <b>A</b> | <b>SA</b> |
|--|-------------------------------------|-----------|----------|----------|----------|-----------|

|        |                                                                                                                 |  |  |  |  |  |
|--------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|--|--|--|--|
| 2.3.1  | Social media is important to me because I prefer socialising through electronic communication than face to face |  |  |  |  |  |
| 2.3.2  | Social media is important to me because I like collaborating with like-minded individuals                       |  |  |  |  |  |
| 2.3.3  | Social media is important to me to build my network of contacts and friends                                     |  |  |  |  |  |
| 2.3.4  | Social media is important to me to remain connected with others                                                 |  |  |  |  |  |
| 2.3.5  | Social media is important to me to stay abreast of trends                                                       |  |  |  |  |  |
| 2.3.6  | Social media is important to me to hear the views of others                                                     |  |  |  |  |  |
| 2.3.7  | Social media is important to me to see the preferences of others                                                |  |  |  |  |  |
| 2.3.8  | Social media is important to me to help me make decisions                                                       |  |  |  |  |  |
| 2.3.9  | Social media is important to me to share my opinion with others                                                 |  |  |  |  |  |
| 2.3.10 | Social media is important to me to share my preferences with others                                             |  |  |  |  |  |
| 2.3.11 | Social media is important to me to influence others                                                             |  |  |  |  |  |

### 3. BRAND AWARENESS (OBJECTIVE 4)

|     | Please show the best opinion                                                                                | SD | D | N | A | SA |
|-----|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|---|---|---|----|
| 3.1 | I become aware of certain brands through social media influencers                                           |    |   |   |   |    |
| 3.2 | I become aware of brand promotions through influencers' social media posts                                  |    |   |   |   |    |
| 3.3 | I get updated on new trends by influencers                                                                  |    |   |   |   |    |
| 3.4 | I learn of certain products' benefits through influencers                                                   |    |   |   |   |    |
| 3.5 | After going through influencers' social media pages, some characteristics of brands come to my mind quickly |    |   |   |   |    |
| 3.6 | I can recognize brands that influencer post on social media among other competing brands.                   |    |   |   |   |    |
| 3.7 | The brands of products reviewed by influencers on social media are very familiar                            |    |   |   |   |    |
| 3.8 | I can remember the brands of a                                                                              |    |   |   |   |    |

|             |                                                                                                                       |  |  |  |  |  |
|-------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|--|--|--|--|
|             | product that were reviewed by influencers on social media                                                             |  |  |  |  |  |
| <b>3.9</b>  | I can quickly recall the symbol or logo of brands influencers post about on social media                              |  |  |  |  |  |
| <b>3.10</b> | Products of brands influencers post about are the first I think of when I want to buy items in same products category |  |  |  |  |  |

#### 4. INFLUENCER STRATEGIES (OBJECTIVE 1)

|             | Please tick the most appropriate                                                  | SD | D | N | A | SA |
|-------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|---|---|---|----|
| <b>4.1</b>  | Discount codes posted by influencers prompt my purchase intentions                |    |   |   |   |    |
| <b>4.2</b>  | I like to buy brands that influencers mention in their social media conversations |    |   |   |   |    |
| <b>4.3</b>  | I like influencers' campaigns involving more than one brand                       |    |   |   |   |    |
| <b>4.4</b>  | I get inspired by influencers' brand testimonials                                 |    |   |   |   |    |
| <b>4.5</b>  | Influencers' product demonstrations help me in my purchase decision               |    |   |   |   |    |
| <b>4.6</b>  | I like joining brand competitions that influencers post about                     |    |   |   |   |    |
| <b>4.7</b>  | I like influencers' posts about product promotions                                |    |   |   |   |    |
| <b>4.8</b>  | Influencers' comparison of brands motivates my brand choice.                      |    |   |   |   |    |
| <b>4.9</b>  | I prefer brands that re-share influencers content on their social media pages     |    |   |   |   |    |
| <b>4.10</b> | I enjoy influencers' live video collaborations with other followers               |    |   |   |   |    |
| <b>4.11</b> | I like when influencers collaborate with other influencers                        |    |   |   |   |    |
| <b>4.12</b> | I like when influencers take over brands' social media pages                      |    |   |   |   |    |
| <b>4.13</b> | I like when influencers tell stories about brands                                 |    |   |   |   |    |

#### 5. ENGAGEMENT/INTERACTION (OBJECTIVE 2)

|            | Please tick the most appropriate                                                       | SD | D | N | A | SA |
|------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|---|---|---|----|
| <b>5.1</b> | Social media is the best communication channel for interacting with brand influencers  |    |   |   |   |    |
| <b>5.2</b> | I prefer influencers' brand posts on social media compared to advertisements by brands |    |   |   |   |    |
| <b>5.3</b> | I like that influencers are able to empathise with me                                  |    |   |   |   |    |

|             |                                                                      |  |  |  |  |  |
|-------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|--|--|--|--|--|
| <b>5.4</b>  | I like that influencers respond to my questions and comments         |  |  |  |  |  |
| <b>5.5</b>  | I ask influencers questions on their social media posts              |  |  |  |  |  |
| <b>5.6</b>  | I like, comment or share influencers' posts that I find useful to me |  |  |  |  |  |
| <b>5.7</b>  | I like influencers who share detailed videos                         |  |  |  |  |  |
| <b>5.8</b>  | I like influencers who post pictures and text                        |  |  |  |  |  |
| <b>5.9</b>  | I like influencers who share plain text                              |  |  |  |  |  |
| <b>5.10</b> | I am able to engage with influencers on their live videos            |  |  |  |  |  |

## 6. Which social media platform do you engage with your influencers? (OBJECTIVE 2)

Please rank each of the following items in order of importance with **#5** being the most important social media platform to **#1** being the least important social media platform.

|            |           |          |          |          |          |          |
|------------|-----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| <b>6.1</b> | Platform  | <b>5</b> | <b>4</b> | <b>3</b> | <b>2</b> | <b>1</b> |
| <b>6.2</b> | Facebook  |          |          |          |          |          |
| <b>6.3</b> | Instagram |          |          |          |          |          |
| <b>6.4</b> | Twitter   |          |          |          |          |          |
| <b>6.5</b> | YouTube   |          |          |          |          |          |
| <b>6.6</b> | Other     |          |          |          |          |          |

## 7. CONSUMER TRUST (OBJECTIVE 5)

|             |                                                                               |           |          |          |          |           |
|-------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|----------|----------|----------|-----------|
| <b>7.1</b>  | I think influencers are experts                                               | <b>SD</b> | <b>D</b> | <b>N</b> | <b>A</b> | <b>SA</b> |
| <b>7.2</b>  | I think the influencers I follow are sincere.                                 |           |          |          |          |           |
| <b>7.3</b>  | I think influencers are more trustworthy than brand-controlled advertisements |           |          |          |          |           |
| <b>7.4</b>  | I trust the opinions of verified influencers                                  |           |          |          |          |           |
| <b>7.5</b>  | I prefer opinions of influencers working with well-known brands               |           |          |          |          |           |
| <b>7.6</b>  | It is important that influencers are reliable in brand promotions             |           |          |          |          |           |
| <b>7.7</b>  | Influencers' reputation is based on their honesty                             |           |          |          |          |           |
| <b>7.8</b>  | I think the influencers I follow are credible in their social media posts     |           |          |          |          |           |
| <b>7.9</b>  | I review influencers to determine their integrity                             |           |          |          |          |           |
| <b>7.10</b> | I trust influencers that have experienced the product they are promoting      |           |          |          |          |           |

|             |                                                                                     |  |  |  |  |  |
|-------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|--|--|--|--|
| <b>7.11</b> | I trust influencers that post brand-sponsored content                               |  |  |  |  |  |
| <b>7.11</b> | I trust influencers that promote brands they find trustworthy                       |  |  |  |  |  |
| <b>7.12</b> | I think a brand is more trustworthy if it is recommended by my favourite influencer |  |  |  |  |  |
| <b>7.13</b> | I think that influencers I follow are convincing                                    |  |  |  |  |  |
| <b>7.14</b> | I think that influencers I follow are genuine when promoting a product or a brand   |  |  |  |  |  |
| <b>7.15</b> | I think the influencers I follow are ethical by being honest.                       |  |  |  |  |  |

## 8. CONSUMER BRAND PERCEPTION AND PURCHASE INTENTION (OBJECTIVE 3)

|             | <i><b>Please indicate your opinion</b></i>                                                         | <b>SD</b> | <b>D</b> | <b>N</b> | <b>A</b> | <b>SA</b> |
|-------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|----------|----------|----------|-----------|
| <b>8.1</b>  | A brand used by an influencer is more reliable                                                     |           |          |          |          |           |
| <b>8.2</b>  | I find brand products promoted by influencers to be more appealing                                 |           |          |          |          |           |
| <b>8.3</b>  | Influencers represent a brand's character                                                          |           |          |          |          |           |
| <b>8.4</b>  | If my favourite influencer recommends a brand, I am more likely to try it                          |           |          |          |          |           |
| <b>8.5</b>  | I seek influencers' reviews before making purchase decisions                                       |           |          |          |          |           |
| <b>8.6</b>  | I make purchases based on online recommendations                                                   |           |          |          |          |           |
| <b>8.7</b>  | I usually engage with a brand following an influencers recommendation                              |           |          |          |          |           |
| <b>8.8</b>  | I always depict alternative brands to purchase through social media influencers                    |           |          |          |          |           |
| <b>8.9</b>  | I disregard a brand because of negative influencer reviews                                         |           |          |          |          |           |
| <b>8.10</b> | Interactions with influencers cannot influence my purchase intention                               |           |          |          |          |           |
| <b>8.11</b> | My personal decisions are always transformed after going through an influencers' social media page |           |          |          |          |           |
| <b>8.12</b> | I seek specific qualities in a brand                                                               |           |          |          |          |           |
| <b>8.13</b> | I purchase a brand that meets my quality criteria that is mentioned by the influencer              |           |          |          |          |           |
| <b>8.14</b> | I purchase a brand if I perceive it adds value to me                                               |           |          |          |          |           |
| <b>8.15</b> | I purchase a brand based on the positive qualities mentioned by the influencer                     |           |          |          |          |           |
| <b>8.16</b> | My perception of brands is easily influenced by influencers                                        |           |          |          |          |           |
| <b>8.17</b> | Influencers have changed my brand preferences                                                      |           |          |          |          |           |

The end

Your contribution is exceptionally valued

## APPENDIX F:

### ETHICAL CLEARANCE LETTER



24 June 2022

Ms P P Ntobaki  
163 Botanic Road  
Durban  
4001

Dear Ms Ntobaki

#### **THE ROLE OF INFLUENCER MARKETING ON SOUTH AFRICAN GENERATION Y CONSUMERS**

I am pleased to inform you that Full Approval has been granted to your proposal.

The Proposal has been allocated the following Ethical Clearance number **IREC 023/22**. Please use this number in all communication with this office.

Approval has been granted for a period of **ONE YEAR**, before the expiry of which you are required to apply for safety monitoring and annual recertification. Please use the Safety Monitoring and Annual Recertification Report form which can be found in the Standard Operating Procedures [SOPs] of the IREC. This form must be submitted to the IREC at least 3 months before the ethics approval for the study expires.

Any adverse events [serious or minor] which occur in connection with this study and/or which may alter its ethical consideration must be reported to the IREC according to the IREC SOP's.

Please note that any deviations from the approved proposal require the approval of the IREC as outlined in the IREC SOP's.

Yours Sincerely

Prof J K Adam  
Chairperson: IREC

## APPENDIX G:

### ETHICS TRAINING CERTIFICATE



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**Certificat**

**Certificado**  
**Certificate**

Promouvoir les plus hauts standards éthiques dans la protection des participants à la recherche biomédicale  
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#### **Certificat de formation - Training Certificate**

Ce document atteste que - this document certifies that

**Paballo Patience Ntobaki**

a complété avec succès - has successfully completed

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[REV : 20170310]

## APPENDIX H: TURNITIN REPORT

### Similarity Report

PAPER NAME

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AUTHOR

-

WORD COUNT

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CHARACTER COUNT

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