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The impact of social media marketing on brand perception and purchase intention of South African consumers

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A research proposal submitted to the Faculty of Commerce, Law and Management, University of the Witwatersrand, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master in the field of Business Administration

Johannesburg, 2024

ABSTRACT

This study examines the use of social media marketing (SMM) tactics employed by businesses and how these impact consumer perceptions of brands and purchase intentions within the South African context. Grounded in the Uses and Gratifications model, the Theory of Reasoned Action and De la Roche's conceptual model, the study aims to explore the intricate relationships among social media marketing activities (SMMAs), consumer brand perception (CBP), and purchase intention (PI).

The intention was to collect quantitative data from a minimum of 100 participants, primarily university students, utilising a convenience sampling technique to ensure varied perspectives from a demographically diverse population sample. As part of the data collection process, participants received self-administered online questionnaires via email invitation.

The research hypotheses sought to reveal a positive correlation between SMMAs and consumer brand perception (CBP), consumer brand perception (CBP) and purchase intention (PI), as well as between SMMAs and consumer purchase intention (PI) with CBP as a mediator. The study results suggests that CBP is positively impacted by SMM efforts, particularly through electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). Moreover, CBP significantly impacts purchase intention. That being said, it's important to highlight that brand perception only mediates the relationship between eWOM and purchase intention. The outcomes of this research will contribute valuable insights to the existing body of information on SMM, and consumer behaviour and brand management. This will empower businesses to make informed decisions when formulating their SMM strategies.

KEYWORDS

Social media marketing, brand perceptions, purchase intention, social media influencers, eWOM, online brand communities, South Africa

DECLARATION

I, Nondumiso Ndlovu, declare that this research report is my own work except as indicated in the references and acknowledgements. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master in business Administration (MBA) at Wits Business School, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in this or any other university.

Nondumiso Ndlovu

Signed at ……. Date ……

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I am deeply grateful to the Almighty for the countless blessings in my life. Reflecting on the past two years and beyond, I acknowledge the challenges of my journey, yet each step was profoundly rewarding, affirming the power of dedication and determination.

My heartfelt appreciation goes to my family, especially my husband Makhosini and our three beautiful children, Olwethu, Lwandile, and Oluhle, for their unwavering love and support despite the sacrifices of late nights, school commitments, countless meetings and time away from home. To you, I owe immeasurable gratitude. Your presence in my life is a blessing beyond words. Love you always.

I also extend my sincere appreciation to the academic and administrative staff at Wits Business School and my friends and colleagues who shared this journey with me, whose guidance and wisdom have enriched my learning experience.

In closing, I draw inspiration from Dan Rather's words: "If all difficulties were known at the outset of a long journey, most of us would never start out at all." I am grateful for taking the leap and embarking on this journey, hoping to inspire others that no matter your circumstances, anything is achievable with determination and courage.

DEDICATION

This research is dedicated to my late father, Mduduzi Cyprian Maziya. Throughout this journey, I faced many challenges, but I found inspiration in the life lessons you taught me. Your brilliance in business and the wisdom you imparted continue to guide me. I hope I've made you proud. Thank you for everything. Love you always.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

CBP	Consumer Brand Perception
e-WOM	Electronic Word Of Mouth
PI	Purchase Intention
SM	Social Media
SMI	Social Media Influencer
SMM	Social Media Marketing
SMMAs	Social Media Marketing Activities
TRA	Theory of Reasoned Action
U&G	Uses and Gratifications

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Statement of purpose

This research uses a quantitative approach to explore how social media marketing activities (SMMAs) impact consumer brand perception (CBP) and purchase intention (PI) among South African consumers. The study focuses on analysing data collected from a sample of respondents to identify trends and patterns in their interactions with brands on social media platforms. The results of the research will provide valuable insights for marketers looking to enhance their brand strategies in the South African market.

1.2. Background and context of the study

Many authors have hypothesised a series of stages or periods in which marketing has evolved. At the heart of this evolution is the transition from transactional to relationship marketing (Lindgreen et al., 2004) Transactional marketing, often known as the 4Ps or traditional marketing, is widely considered inadequate in today's economic environment (Lindgreen et al., 2004). This inadequacy is highlighted by several factors, which include the transition from post-industrial/service economies to information economies, industry maturation, market saturation, increased competition, deregulation, increased customer sophistication, the gradual decline of socialism and the rise of market economies and capitalism, as well as digitization and rapid innovation (Lindgreen et al., 2004). As a result, there is an urgent need for novel marketing methods. Contemporary marketing allows businesses to explore new ways to engage with clients, maintaining ongoing brand awareness. As such, organisations have increased their international expansion efforts, crossing geographical barriers to reach previously untapped client segments, accelerating the trend towards globalisation (Lindgreen et al., 2004).

Contemporary marketing includes digital marketing, sometimes known as online marketing. It makes use of captivating material in visual, written, or aural formats, which is transmitted via digital systems such as the internet, email, browsers, applications, and social media (McKinsey website, 2023). Digital marketing is characterised by its customer-centric focus, which allows organisations to innovate, personalise offerings,

create digital experiences, foster cultures, and use data and analytics to efficiently distribute content for educational, entertainment, or targeted product marketing (McKinsey website, 2023).

Without a doubt, social media is one of the most popular digital marketing mediums. Social media marketing is defined by Chikandiwa et al. (2013) as a framework that allows marketers to participate, interact, collaborate, and utilise collective intelligence and crowdsourcing for marketing goals. Companies use a variety of communication tactics to engage their audience on social networks, such as online PR campaigns, rich multimedia content, product reviews, and influencer marketing (Chikandiwa, 2013).

Effective social media content is essential for building a brand's image, drawing customers, and fostering an engaged brand community. According to Azionya and Everton-deKlerk (2021), this kind of engagement plays an essential role in a brand's global expansion, overall value, and presence. As social media continues to gain popularity, businesses increasingly recognise the need to leverage SMM tools. The objective is to enhance consumer awareness, loyalty, perceived value, and associations with the brand, all of which are important components of Customer Based Brand Equity (CBBE). This is corroborated by a study by Azzari & Pelissari (2020) which shows that brand equity affects customer buying intent and several other parameters in a favourable way.

This study's main objective is to investigate the relationship between social media marketing, consumer perceptions of brands, and purchase intentions. To substantiate our research, we will draw on various theories and concepts that demonstrate how individuals form networks, express opinions, circulate, and disseminate information, and how this essentially influences their behaviour towards brands. These theories include the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory, the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA), and the conceptual framework put forth by De LaRoche et al. (2022).

1.3. Research problem

Despite social media's growing popularity, there is still much to be learned about how SMM impacts consumers perceptions on brands marketed on social media (SM)

platforms and if this influences their buying behaviour. It is important for marketers to understand this relationship so that they can leverage SM by targeting the right audiences and increasing their brand equity and profitability.

Over the years, analytics and content have typically predominated, with social media influencer marketing and social media banner ads receiving notable recognition (Ornico and World Wide Worx, 2021). According to Velocity (2024), data analytics is crucial for making sound decisions and maintaining competitiveness in South Africa's dynamic digital marketing landscape. Businesses can project consumer trends and modify their tactics by utilising both historical and current data (Velocity, 2024). Analytics can also provide insights into the customer journey, which can enhance the customer experience and optimise interactions (Velocity, 2024).

Mabizela (2017) claims that because of South Africa's poor internet speeds and expensive mobile data costs, consumers seek relevant and captivating content. Thus if a company chosen influencer connects with the target audience, influencer marketing can increase ROI and brand exposure; but, if the two are not aligned, it could backfire (Mabizela, 2017). With the use of extensive research and social media analytics, brands must carefully select influencers, align them with the right product and target audience, to create content that is both tailored and relevant (Mabizela, 2017).

De la Roche et al. (2022) alluded to the fact that this plethora of online marketing tools has disrupted and challenged the current status quo of marketing as industries progress into a digital future. This, among other factors, is due to lower operational (usage) costs and barriers to entry, greater brand awareness, and overall higher returns that are associated with digital platforms (De la Roche et al., 2022). Content and communication between companies and their consumers is disseminated swiftly, transcending time and location barriers.

According to Meltwater (2023), about 52% of businesses worldwide acknowledge the importance of social media in marketing strategy formulation. New opportunities and challenges emerge daily as social media adopts new functions, develops new trends, and changes both the world outside and inside the platforms (Meltwater, 2023). To succeed

in the ever-changing social media landscape, organisations must be prepared to adapt and upskill (Meltwater, 2023).

According to the research report by Meltwater (2023), the following are the most popular SM platforms for organisations in Africa: Facebook (88%), Instagram (76%), LinkedIn (74%), Twitter (67%), WhatsApp (58%), and TikTok (28%) are rapidly increasing (Meltwater, 2023). Refer to the Figure 1 below.

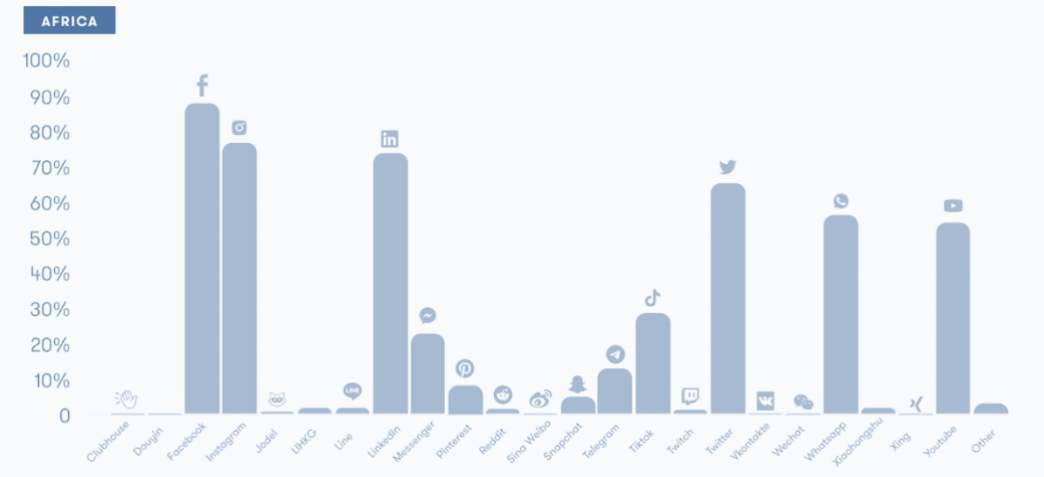


Figure 1: Most used social media platforms in Africa (Meltwater, 2023)

Businesses in developed countries generally use social media marketing (SMM) to gain a competitive edge and generate significant financial gains on a global scale (Nkosana, 2022). Conversely, companies in less developed economies encounter difficulties with utilising social media and adopting ICT, which makes it hard for them to establish their position in the global economy (Nkosana, 2022). Notwithstanding this, research shows that in South Africa, just 41% of B2B and 73% of B2C businesses have a social media strategy (Mabizela, 2017).

Dlamini and Johnston (2018), suggest that many South African businesses use social media for free marketing, customer relationship management (CRM), and advertising. Ornico and World Wide Worx (2021) reported that when questioned about their use of social media, most South African businesses identified it as an essential component of their marketing campaigns. Refer to Table 1 below.

Table 1: Why S.A. companies are using social media (Ornico and World Wide Worx, 2021)

	2021	2020	2019	2018
Core part of marketing campaign	77.5%	69.7%	78%	82%
Customer lead generation	50.5%	44.4%	51%	47%
Effective PR channel	36.9%	23.2%	32%	27%
To lower cost of communication	27%	12.1%	19%	16%
Competitors are using it	12.6%	46.5%	46%	50%
Other	5%	6%	7%	11%

South African consumers admitted to being more responsive to what brands were saying, according to a Geopoll (2021) research, and about 68% of the population across genders and age groups received much of this material through social networking sites (Geopoll, 2021).

According to McCrocklin (2021), about 95% of South Africans own mobile phones, and about 91% of mobile phones are smartphones (which allow users to access the internet through their smart devices). Approximately 42% of South Africans actively use social media platforms, signifying a considerable increase in usage (Ntobaki & Buthelezi, 2023). This surge in social media adoption acts as a stimulus for customer engagement, allowing for co-branding and co-creation (Ntobaki & Buthelezi, 2023). Through social media interactions, consumers partake in information sharing, skill acquisition, relationship building, and cultural formation, ultimately creating value not only for themselves but also for fellow consumers and brands (Ntobaki & Buthelezi, 2023).

Table 2 below, provides a brief overview of some of the key considerations associated with Social Media Marketing (SMM) in the context of South African companies. It highlights some of the various opportunities that SMM offers for influencing consumer attitude and behaviour, while also addressing challenges that companies may face when implementing SMM strategies.

Table 2: An overview of SMM opportunities and challenges

		IMPLICATIONS ON CONSUMER PERCEPTIONS AND BEHAVIOUR, AND COMPANY BRAND STRATEGY
SMM OPPORTUNITIES	**Customer-centricity and value co-creation**	The Internet, specifically social media in this context, is highlighted by Lorenzo-Romero et al. (2014) as an instrumental co-creation platform that facilitates global collaboration in product development between businesses and consumers. By using customers to help with idea generation, design refinement, and product testing, companies can satisfy unmet market demands and promote innovation through this trend also known as crowdsourcing (Lorenzo-Romero et al., 2014)
	Stakeholder engagement	Interaction within an online brand community (OBC) fosters member engagement, which reflects their desire to enhance the community's value (Prastowo, 2020).This engagement is strongly linked to social media, encompassing a wide range of behaviours, including word-of-mouth recommendations, assisting other consumers, blogging, and writing brand reviews (Prastowo, 2020). Additionally, Qureshi et al. (2012) reported that brand perception was positively and significantly impacted by customer engagement.
	Brand Image	A key component of social media marketing (SMM) is interaction, which allows users to connect with other individuals who share their interests in particular brands, exchange information, or engage in conversations (Bushara et al., 2023). These interactions shift the dynamics between businesses and customers, encourage user-generated content, and can have a significant impact on a brand's reputation and image—often more so than the brand's own messaging (Ntobaki & Buthelezi, 2023).
	Brand awareness	Brand awareness, brand image, and purchase intention are all impacted by social media marketing, according to a study by Faisal & Ekawanto (2022). Furthermore, evidence indicates that purchase intention is influenced by both brand awareness and brand image, and that these factors can further mediate the impact of social media marketing on purchase intention (Faisal & Ekawanto, 2022).
	Lead generation and sales	When making decisions about what to purchase, a lot of consumers consider electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), such as online reviews, and they frequently share their shopping or product experiences afterwards (Amin, 2019). Thus, through positive eWOM, social media marketing (SMM) can have a favourable effect on lead generation and sales.
SMM CHALLENGES	**Content control and brand vulnerability**	When customers interact with and share their interests on certain brands on social media, user-generated content (UGC) is created (Bushara et al., 2023). Customers can freely share their opinions on these platforms, making them accessible to a worldwide audience (Kumar & Nanda, 2023). Employees may also share offensive or critical content, which might impact the brand image of the company (Martin and van Babel, 2013). A brand's reputation can be greatly shaped or altered by these interactions, which frequently have a greater impact than the brand's own interactions (Ntobaki & Buthelezi, 2023).
	Data security	Customers are becoming less trusting of brands and social media platforms, which makes them reluctant to share their data for tailored experiences (Appel et al., 2020). Businesses and advertisers who depend on these channels to communicate with customers are facing difficulties in light of growing privacy concerns and fears about data loss or ownership issues, particularly on third-party platforms (Martin & Bavel van, 2013).
	Leadership buy-in and change management	Organisational norms and control mechanisms that are in place might conflict with the use of new social technologies (Martin and van Babel, 2013). It is particularly risky to implement these technologies using a passive rollout strategy. Martin and van Babel (2013) advise that organisations need to address key governance issue, which may include developing new regulations, defining usage criteria, and determining participation guidelines. They also suggest that leadership should actively engage with these new systems and highlight their value in order to manage these transitions effectively (Martin and van Babel, 2013).
	Digital divide	Economic and social disparities continue to be significant in South Africa. According to Duffett (2016), the black majority in South Africa continues to experience issues like widespread poverty, high unemployment, poor income, and inadequate education even after more than thirty years of democracy. These problems worsen the country's digital divide by impacting access to technology as well as its availability, including internet connectivity, digital literacy, and the calibre of digital content (Regent Business School, 2024).

De la Roche et al. (2022) state that consumers "are constantly monitoring brands" and forming perceptions based on their interactions with these brands and benchmarking them against other competing brands, leading to consumer-based brand equity (CBBE). However, due to the ubiquitous nature of digital information, consumers are most likely to constantly form biases, regardless of the information that companies may publish (De la Roche et al., 2022).

To preserve their existence, firms must today, more than ever, keep up with the current developments in the global marketplace and respond to customer demands through the proper channels. Thus, given the above, it is also important for companies to understand how SMM impacts customer perception and behaviour and if value can be derived through these relationships.

1.4. Research objectives

The main objective of this study is to determine whether social media marketing activities adopted by companies, such as, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), social media influencers (SMI) and online brand communities (OBC), have an impact on South African consumers and if this has a favourable impact on the consumer perception of brands and their purchase intentions.

Sub- objectives;

OB1 To investigate the impact of social media marketing activities on consumer brand perception.

OB2 To investigate the impact of consumer brand perception on purchase intention.

OB3 To investigate the mediating role of brand perception in the relationship between SMM activities and purchase intention.

1.5. Research questions

The following research questions will drive the study to address the primary research problem:

- RQ1 Do social media marketing (SMM) activities influence consumer brand perceptions (CBP) among South African consumers?

Sub questions:

- *RQ1a: Is there a relationship between electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and CBP?*
- *RQ1b: Is there a relationship between social media influencers (SMIs) and CBP?*
- *RQ1c: Is there a relationship between online brand communities (OBC) and CBP?*

- RQ2 Does CBP of South African consumers influence their purchase intentions (PI)?
- RQ3 Does CBP mediate the relationship between SMM activities (eWOM, SMIs, OBCs) and PI among South African consumers?

1.6. Contribution of the study

Several limitations and research gaps were identified during the empirical literature review of the study. Future research aimed at addressing these knowledge gaps is likely to have an impact on several stakeholders, particularly those working in the fields of consumer psychology and computer science, as well as government policymakers (such as those in the Ministries of Commerce as well as Information, Communications, and Technology), academia, and numerous industries in general. The following research gaps were identified:

1.6.1. *The focus of SMM research on specific elements of consumer behaviour*

Most research studies when examining the relationship between SMM and consumer behaviour, focus on specific elements of the consumer journey, such as brand awareness or brand loyalty. This focus on specific elements, limits the scope of the research, as other elements of the customer journey are overlooked. Aishwarya and Krishnan (2018) advocate for a more in-depth research stance and indicate that further research should also consider such elements as the antecedents and long-term effects of brand perception and its role on consumer behaviour (Aishwarya and Krishnan, 2018). This study focuses on the function of SMM and its impact on South African consumer behaviour, with a particular emphasis on consumer perceptions and purchase intentions.

1.6.2. *A multigenerational population of interest*

Most of the studies that were reviewed considered research participants from the Generation Y and Z cohorts as the population of interest. This includes studies by Duffett (2016), Sundaram et al. (2020), De la Roche et al. (2022), Zollo et al. (2020), Azionya, and Overton-de Klerk (2021), among others. Researchers like Azionya and Overton-de Klerk (2021) advise that future studies should take a broader age range into account. The aim of this research initiative was to recruit a multi-generational population of interest using convenient sampling methods.

1.6.3. *Developing theoretical underpinnings is a laborious process*

Duffett (2016) states that there is a scarcity of conclusive theoretical opinions in terms of social media as a marketing communication platform because developing theoretical underpinnings takes time and it is a cumulative process. Looking ahead, marketers should consider putting more resources into SMM research, as studies like this are reflective of our current and future realities and can only contribute positively to cognitive research on social media and marketing.

This study will enhance the current academic research on SMM and consumer behaviour by focusing on the South African context. This study's findings will aid South African businesses by offering suggestions on how to implement effective SMM strategies that

can favourably influence consumer behaviour. Furthermore, the research will aid in the identification of standard practices for SMM that can be used to improve brand perception and purchase intentions and promote the overall achievement of corporate goals.

1.7. Delimitations of the study

This study has significant delimitations, which present opportunities for future research. For example;

- This study does not assess the CBPs of a particular brand or examine a specific company or business segment. Instead, it undertakes a general investigation of CBPs influenced by SMM communications within the wider South African business environment. Perhaps future researchers can consider a more focused approach.

- South Africa, like many developing economies, boasts a youthful demographic, with almost two-thirds under the age of 34 and approximately 40% aged 19 or younger (Duffett, 2016). Generation Z, born after apartheid, is a cohort with unprecedented opportunities and access to technology (Duffett, 2016). The cohort is also known as "screenagers,", distinguished by their independence, ambition, and fluency in digital technology (Duffett, 2016). Generation Z is a highly lucrative market segment due to its greater access to information and expanding e-commerce activity (Duffett, 2016). While Generation Z represents a valuable business segment, this study expands its scope beyond that generation and considers a broader age range.

- Instead of conducting the study in a digitally mature country or region, the present research focused on South Africa, a developing country with diverse and distinct cultural influences. However, South Africa represents an economy that has uneven digital engagement due to constraints such as limited digital infrastructure availability, high data costs, and low literacy rates. In the current study these factors were not the key focus and thus were not considered.

- Lastly, this study, from a South African perspective, focused mostly on demographics and did not delve deeper into the impact of language and cultural subtleties on social media marketing (SMM), CBP, and purchase intentions. Cultural norms and even language can have a huge impact on how people interact with SMM and how they

perceive brands. However, these elements were not thoroughly investigated during the course of this investigation.

In a nutshell, the study's delimitations were purposely determined to provide a highly focused investigation within this particular setting. By focusing on South Africa, a developing economy with distinct cultural and socioeconomic characteristics, the study recognises the significance of understanding the impact of SMM within this context. However, by restricting the study's scope to demographic variables and excluding further examination of language and cultural variables, a thorough knowledge of how SMM affects CBPs and purchase intentions may have been compromised. Furthermore, while Generation Z is a large demographic with strong digital participation, the study chose to cover a broader age range, potentially overlooking crucial insights that could have been gathered through a more targeted approach. These delimitations clarify the study's boundaries and suggest opportunities for future research to further investigate the multifaceted dynamics of SMM in a South African setting.

1.8. Definition of terms

The following operational definitions are adopted in the study:

- **Social media marketing (SMM)**: Chikandiwa et al. (2013) define SMM as a framework that allows marketers to participate, interact, collaborate, and utilise collective intelligence and crowdsourcing for marketing goals. Companies use a variety of communication tactics to reach their audiences on social platforms, including online PR campaigns, rich multimedia content, and influencer marketing, among others (Chikandiwa et al., 2013).

- **Consumer Brand perception (CBP):** is the totality of a consumer's feelings, experiences, and views regarding a product or service (Kirsch, 2022). It is what people believe a brand stands for, not what the brand purports to stand for. Even though brand image is a mental association, it is crucial to establishing emotional connections with clients. Individuals evaluate their brand attitudes when picking between rival products (Kirsch, 2022).

- **Purchase intention (PI):** According to Pena-Garcia et al. (2020) and Li et al. (2022), PI is the deliberate action that customers take to decide which goods or services to purchase. Nguyen et al. (2022) define PI as a measure of how likely it is that consumers will plan or be willing to make a future purchase of a specific good or service. This intention may be created when the impression or attitude that is conveyed to consumers fulfils their expectations (Pena-Garcia et al., 2020; Li et al., 2022).

  In the context of advertising, Li et al. (2020) believe that commercials that are broadcast through advertising platforms can prompt consumers purchase intentions and, thus, their future purchase behaviour. Therefore, online purchase intention, according to a study by Pena-Garcia et al. (2020), is the likelihood that a customer will acquire a product from an online retailer. The authors conclude that purchasing intent is a good predictor of purchasing behaviour.

- **Social media influencers (SMI):** According to the Influencer Marketing Hub (2023), SMIs are people who have built massive, loyal followings and a reputation for their knowledge and expertise on a specific topic on particular social media platforms. Their followers pay close attention to their thoughts, as they regularly publish updates about that specific brand. Companies value SMIs because they are not just marketing tools but social connection assets that have the authority, expertise, status, and networks to spark trends and encourage their followers to buy the brands they promote (Influencer Marketing Hub 2023). Organisations may collaborate with them to achieve their marketing goals (Influencer Marketing Hub 2023).

- **Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM):** According to Chu (2021), "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company that is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet" can be theoretically described as electronic word-of-mouth. Therefore, eWOM happens when users share information online, and it may be obtained from a variety of sources, such as user-generated content, product evaluations on the internet, private emails, and social media posts (Chu, 2021). Because eWOM distributed through friends and family is viewed as more trustworthy and reliable than advertising

by marketers, it is thought to be more influential than advertising and marketing messaging (Chu, 2021).

- **Online brand communities (OBC):** are defined by Brogi (2014) as "brand communities that take place in specialised, non-geographically bound virtual community settings based on a structured set of social relations among brand aficionados." Due to their commercial nature and members' devotion to a brand, these consumer communities are different from conventional communities (Brogi, 2014). Customers that participate in OBCs typically demonstrate their love for a particular brand, share information and knowledge, and engage in social interactions that have an impact on their perception of the company (Brogi, 2014).

1.9. Study Outline

The paper is organised as follows: in chapter two, a comprehensive review of the literature is conducted and the theoretical foundations that provide the basis for the study validated. In chapter three, the research methodology section that follows, a quantitative research approach was used to collect data with the use of questionnaires. Chapter four then provides an analysis of the research using SPSS statistical methods that were used to evaluate, interpret, and present the data. Chapter five summarises the findings and key insights from the paper and states the implications of the study. Chapter 6 then concludes with recommendations and the study's limitations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Overview

The key objective of this literature review is to provide a thorough and critical analysis of current academic and industry literature on the impact of social media marketing (SMM) on consumer perceptions of brands and subsequent purchase intentions. The literature review focuses on understanding the theoretical frameworks, methodology, significant findings, and gaps in current literature on the impact of SMM on South African consumer behaviour. This review seeks to provide a solid theoretical foundation for the research, determine applicable theories and models, and highlight crucial variables investigated in prior studies. Moreover, it attempts to justify the need for empirical research by demonstrating its contribution to the existing body of knowledge and possible significance for firms and marketers operating in the South African market.

The chapter's organisation is as follows: the first section will focus on the theoretical underpinnings of the study, then the contextualization of SMM. Following this is an assessment of the elements influencing the efficacy of SMM. Then an assessment into the significance SMM has on South African companies. The next section thereafter will look at the relationship between SMM and Consumer Brand Perception (CBP), CBP and Purchase Intention (PI), and SMM and PI with CBP as a mediating factor. And finally, an overview of the conceptual framework and hypothesis development. Chapter two then concludes with a summary of the key points discussed in the chapter.

2.2 Theoretical underpinnings

The conceptual foundations of this study are founded on the following theories: the Uses and Gratifications model (U&G), the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA), and the De la Roche et al. (2022) conceptual model to explain how the use of SMM strategies (eWOM, OBCs, and SMIs) by companies can influence CBP and PI in the South African market. The following section outlines the above-mentioned theories and model in more detail.

2.2.1 Uses and Gratifications (U&G) Theory

Ko et al. (2005) state that the primary goal of the U&G theory is to explain the psychological requirements that influence why individuals use a particular medium and the gratifications that are driven by underlying needs that they seek to fulfil. Hossain (2019), in a similar vein, describes the U&G theory as an investigation of the gratifications that draw and maintain consumers to diverse media and content that satisfy their psychological and social demands. It seems natural that the U&G theory may be extended to the more modern internet and social media platforms, even if it has been widely used in studies on the more conventional media (Moon et al., 2022). Furthermore, it has been described as an axiomatic theory because its principles are widely recognised and applicable to a variety of circumstances that involve mediated communications (Ko et al., 2005).

The U&G theory is founded on three assumptions, according to Moon et al. (2022):

- Users are active players in the media ecosystem; this contrasts with other mass communication theories. Users utilise media to satisfy their intrinsic desires, or motives, which lead to the creation of expectations and their fulfilment (Moon et al., 2022). The motivations for using media include social interaction, entertainment, convenience, and information.
- Their use is aimed, deliberate, and motivated (Moon et al., 2022).
- They engage in extensive communication and media interaction (Moon et al., 2022).

This theory places a strong emphasis on the individual media consumer and their preferences and uses, positing that consumers are aware of their own needs and would consciously choose the media that is best suited to fulfil their specific needs. Additionally, it claims that the same media can be used for completely different purposes by different audiences with the same content (Ko et al., 2005).

Ko et al. (2005) focus their research on four essential elements taken from the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory: motivations, uses, gratifications, and an active audience. Whereas Moon et al. (2022) present a more extensive evaluation of the U&G theory, analysing five important topics, including:

- **Active audience**: An active audience member actively chooses what media to consume (Moon et al., 2022). As a result, perception is one of the most important aspects and characteristics of active audiences. In deciding which medium to utilise and how a certain message can be received in a particular circumstance, audiences' views of media behaviour and expectations are considered (Moon et al., 2022).

- **Origins in the social and psychological sphere**: Audiences do not use the media as solitary consumers but rather as participants in groups that engage in social interactions (Moon et al., 2022).

- **Strong motivations for media usage**: the U&G theory states that motives are general dispositions that influence people's actions taken to fulfil need or want (Moon et al., 2022).

- **Expectancy (Potential gratifications):** according to Moon et al. (2022), media consumers respond in accordance with a belief that a certain course of action will result in a particular outcome.

- **Gratifications**: consumers select their media platforms with a certain aim in mind and the expectation that it will be met; this fulfilment is what is known as gratification (Moon et al., 2022).

Refer to Figure 2.

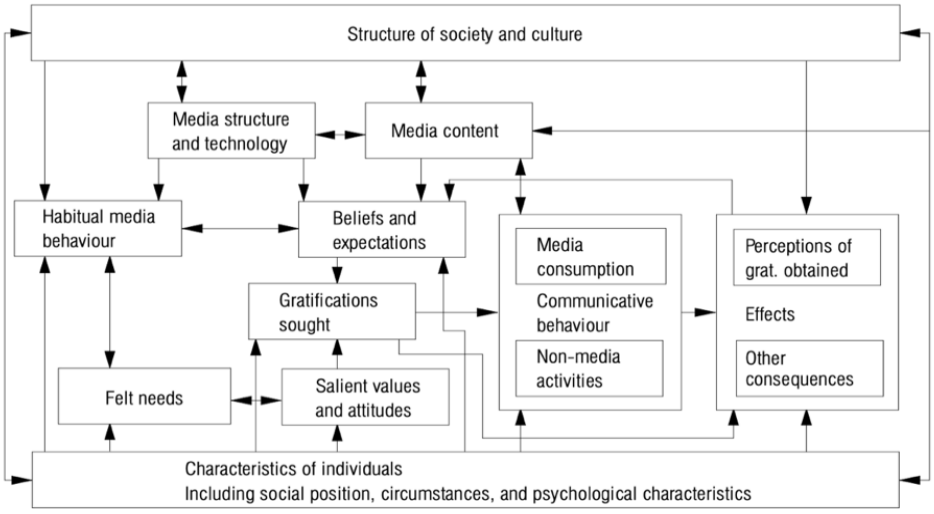


Figure 2: Uses and gratifications model (Van De Wijngaert, n.d.)

Zollo et al.'s (2020, p. . 26–p. 27) emphasises "the psychological dynamics among brand identity (salience), brand meaning (performance and imagery), brand reaction (judgement and sentiments)," and brand connections. They also show that brand meaning, and brand response are significantly influenced by psychological and experiential factors in social media, such as consumers' cognitive, social, personal, and experiential benefits, and how "SMM activities perceived by consumers, perceived benefits, and brand experience are discrete constructs that jointly affect brand equity." This theory is significant for this current study as it assists in defining the relationship between SMM and CBP.

2.2.1.1 The limitations of the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) Theory

The limits of the uses and gratifications approach to media consumption have drawn much criticism. According to Gordon (2022), the following are the main critics of the Uses and Gratifications Theory:

- James Lull (2002) argued that consumers don't always accept content that is presented on media, benefit from the use of media, or engage in media consumption voluntarily and independently, nor are all media intended to satisfy gratification or an entertainment need, and thus criticised the underlying presumption that individuals use media to fulfil a personal need.
- Ien Ang (n.d.) contends that the theory frequently ignores social context in favour of focusing on the individual. Additionally, media content is also disregarded.
- Gordon (2022) pointed out that the theory depends solely on the self-reports of those who consume media, which may be skewed because of human error as well as external factors.

2.2.2 Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA)

In 1975, psychologists Martin Fishbein and Icek Ajzen developed the Theory of Reasoned Action, which is often extended to the Theory of Planned Behaviour (SimplyPsychology.Org, n.d.). This idea arose as an extension of information integration theory, another paradigm aimed at comprehending human behaviour (SimplyPsychology.Org, n.d.). Nickerson (2023) identifies beliefs, attitude, and intention as the three most crucial elements of the theory of reasoned action.

- Belief: This refers to the likelihood that an object exhibits a particular attribute. Generally, it refers to an individual's view about the consequences of a specific action or behaviour (SimplyPsychology.Org, n.d.).

- Attitudes are our positive or negative assessments of specific behaviours. The TRA's core principle is that beliefs shape attitudes (SimplyPsychology.Org, n.d.).

- Intention: This shows the individual's willingness to engage in a behaviour and their anticipated likelihood of carrying out the act in question (SimplyPsychology.Org, n.d.).

- Subjective norms: These refer to the collective influence and expectations of significant people in one's life for how a behaviour should be performed (SimplyPsychology.Org, n.d.).

Refer to Figure 3. The behavioural, normative, and control beliefs underlying these are influenced by external variables such as demographics, personality, and the expectations of other people (Nickerson, 2023).

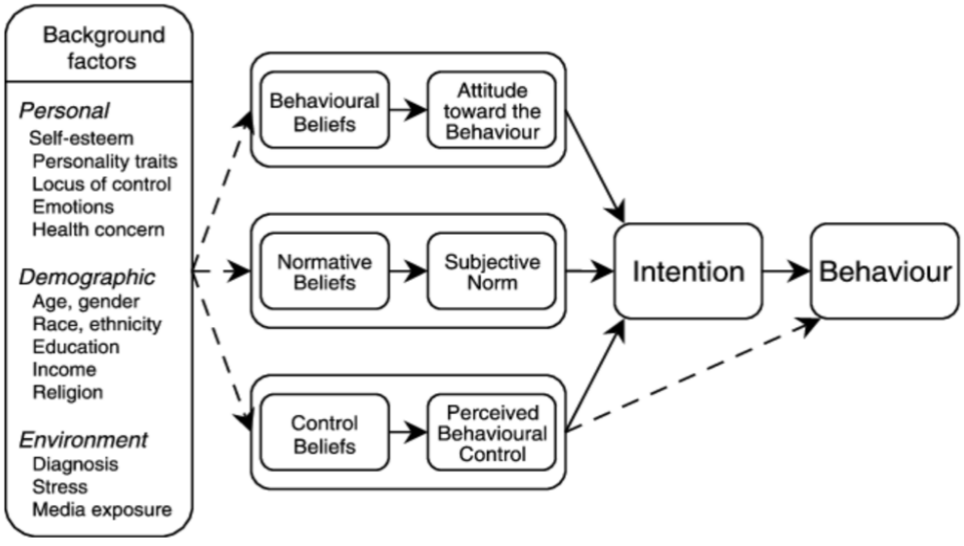


Figure 3: Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) (Tourani, 2023)

Attitudes, norms, and perceived control collectively influence intentions, which, while not always perfect, tend to drive behaviours (SimplyPsychology.Org, n.d.). Behavioural

scientists frequently use these aspects as variables in an equation aimed at predicting human behaviour, emphasising their interconnection and function as determinants of behaviour (SimplyPsychology.Org, n.d.).

According to Qureshi et al. (2019), the fundamental tenet of TRA is that people absorb information rationally and employ the knowledge at their disposal in a methodical way. SMM strategies (eWOM, SMIs, and OBCs) can play a role in defining normative beliefs and subjective norms within a certain platform or context, which may have an impact on consumer behaviour (purchase intention). Based on the TRA, the output variable in this study will be purchase intention. This theory is applicable for this current study as it will assist in defining the relationship between SMM and purchase intention.

2.2.2.1 The Limitations of the Theory of Reasoned Actions?

The TRA has its limitations.

- Firstly, there is a significant potential for ambiguity between attitudes and norms, as attitudes are frequently interpreted as norms and vice versa (SimplyPsychology.Org, n.d.). For example, when someone displays a preference for recycling, they may be conforming to the perceived standard of environmental concern within their social group rather than developing an independent attitude towards recycling.

- Secondly, practical constraints impede the TRA, such as researchers' limited resources to accurately measure the model's contributing factors, as well as environmental or organisational constraints and unconscious habits that limit individuals' freedom to act. To address these limitations, the TRA incorporates the notion of perceived behaviour control (SimplyPsychology.Org, n.d.).

2.2.3 De la Roche et al.'s Conceptual Model

De la Roche et al. (2022) studied consumer views of email and SMM in the South African advertising landscape, with a focus on their impact on purchase intentions and post-purchase behaviour. Their study sought to fill research gaps identified by previous studies, which investigated perceived risk and benefit as factors influencing online

purchase behaviour but were unable to establish a link between a company's SMM efforts and consumers' perceptions of risk and benefit (De la Roche et al., 2022). Furthermore, previous research frequently neglected post-purchase behaviour, instead focusing solely on purchase intentions (De la Roche et al., 2022). De la Roche et al. (2022) sought to enrich this field by investigating the role of post-purchase behaviour in their conceptual model, with the goal of understanding the long-term effects of social media marketing.

De la Roche et al. (2022) evaluated the effects of perceived benefits, perceived risk, and organisational trust on customer attitudes towards SMM and email marketing, as well as their impact on purchase intention. . Refer to Figure 4. The results indicated several essential relationships.

- Higher perceived benefits of SMM and email marketing resulted in more positive customer attitudes towards these platforms, whereas perceived risk had the opposite effect (De la Roche et al., 2022).

- Increased organisational trust was linked to more positive consumer sentiments about SMM and email marketing (De la Roche et al., 2022).

- Positive attitudes towards SMM were associated with higher purchase intentions, implying that favourable perceptions influence purchasing behaviour (De la Roche et al., 2022).

In a nutshell, the study reveals that consumers who have favourable perceptions of brands following exposure to email or social media advertising are more likely to make repeat purchases, emphasising the necessity of cultivating positive consumer attitudes to drive long-term customer loyalty (De la Roche et al., 2022).

De la Roche et al.'s (2022) approach is important for this study in that it provides insight into the relationship between consumer perceptions towards SMM and purchase intention. This framework helps us understand how perceived risk, perceived benefits, and organisational trust influence this connection (De la Roche et al., 2022). Consumer attitudes towards a brand are influenced by attribute perceptions as well as the consumer's

general acceptance or aversion to the commercial and the visual stimuli it contains (De la Roche et al., 2022).

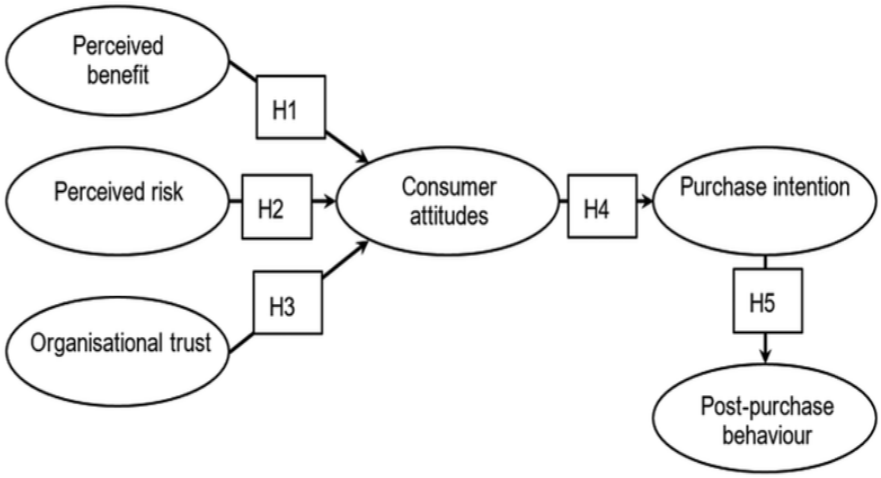


Figure 4: Consumer perceived risk, perceived benefits and organizational trust and their influence on consumer attitudes (De la Roche et al., 2022).

2.2.3.1 The Limitations of De la Roche et al.'s Conceptual Model

While the study provided useful insights, a few limitations were considered for comprehensive understanding:

- First, the research focused primarily on two digital marketing platforms: email and social media marketing. This limited the scope of insights that could have been gained from the study, potentially excluding other influential platforms (De la Roche et al., 2022).

- Second, the study used a quantitative approach, using Likert-scale questions that limited respondents to predefined available options (De la Roche et al., 2022). This hampered respondents' capacity to accurately express their viewpoints (De la Roche et al., 2022). Alternatively, a qualitative methodology with open-ended questions could have yielded more detailed insights into users' perceptions (De la Roche et al., 2022).

Furthermore, in the age of pervasive social media and digital platforms, individuals have unprecedented access to information, resulting in the prevalence of biases, regardless of

a company's marketing efforts (De la Roche et al., 2022). As a result, a more in-depth investigation is required to determine the most effective medium for marketers to communicate with their clients and successfully manage these hurdles (De la Roche et al., 2022).

2.3 Contextualizing Social Media Marketing (SMM)

The following section aims to introduce the concepts of SMM by providing detailed definitions and an overview of SMM. It then goes on further to provide an overview of the SMM activities that influence the efficacy of SMM. And lastly, the significance of SMM for South African companies.

2.3.1 Overview and Definitions

2.3.1.1 The objectives of Digital Marketing

Duffett (2017) highlights a few primary objectives of digital marketing, which include the stimulation of online traffic and increased customer engagement through the dissemination of information and electronic word-of-mouth; increased brand awareness while generating leads, demand, and increased sales; providing customer service; and establishing brand loyalty. Underlying these objectives is the element of customer attitudes, which has been the focus of many research studies.

(Kannan and Li, 2017), on the other hand, highlight value creation (for organisations and their customers) as the primary objective of digital marketing. In their research paper, Kannan and Li (2017) outline and develop a research framework that is inspired by the various touchpoints in the marketing and consumer buying processes. These touchpoints include "awareness, familiarity, consideration, evaluation, and purchase" (Kannan and Li, 2017, p. 8). The authors look at how digital technologies have affected value creation across the board, including:

- value creation for customers "through value equity, brand equity, relationship equity, and customer satisfaction,"
- customer equity creation "through strategies for acquisition, retention, and higher margin," and,

- firm value creation "as a function of sales, profits, and growth rate" (Kannan and Li, 2017).

2.3.1.2 Social media marketing (SMM)

According to Ahmad & Guerrero (n.d.), p. 6), "social media are web-based services that allow individuals, communities, and organisations to collaborate, connect, interact, and build communities by enabling them to create, co-create, modify, share, and engage with user-generated content that is easily accessible.".

In their paper, Chikandiwa et al. (2013) define SMM as " a system that integrates social media principles with marketing communications elements... that allows marketers to engage, collaborate, interact, and harness collective intelligence crowdsourcing for marketing purposes. Olotewo (2016) describes SMM as the creation of appealing content and the marketing and promotion of organisational products, services, and brands through different social media sites like social networks and online social brand communities to create awareness and customer attention. Content that is shared via social media can either be paid social media, owned social media, or earned social media.

2.3.2 The elements that influence the efficacy of social media marketing

Unlike traditional branding approaches, social media's primary objective is to shape a brand's image and reputation by considering what consumers say about it, which is often more influential than the brand's own messaging (Ntobaki & Buthelezi, 2023). Interaction is a key component of SMM, allowing consumers to share information, engage in interactive conversations, and network with others who share their interests in specific offerings, or brands (Bushara et al., 2023). These interactions alter the dynamics of business-to-customer relationships and propel the creation of user-generated content (UGC) in social networks (Bushara et al., 2023).

SMM, according to Bilgin (2018), is important to business from two perspectives. First, it influences consumers attitudes or perceptions about products and brands because social media makes it possible for people to share their knowledge and experiences, which affects how much trust they place in brands and how likely they are to make a purchase. Second, by enabling companies to cross boundaries imposed by time and geography

through direct marketing activities, SM bridges the gap between companies and their customers (Bilgin, 2018). Furthermore, meaningful interaction allows organisations to successfully communicate the benefits of their brand and product attributes, promoting consumer awareness and encouraging brand loyalty(Bushara et al., 2023). Bilgin (2018) further states that due to cheaper implementation costs and simpler access to competitor activity on SM, social media (SM) has acquired increasing momentum and appeal in corporate marketing plans (Bilgin, 2018).

In business, there are numerous ways to use social media. Social media platforms are used for customer communication, brand establishment, brand awareness, and reputation evaluation through customer interactions, according to Ahmed and Guirrero (2020). Businesses can gather information from users' normal behaviour and activity, which enables them to examine users' behaviour patterns through friend requests, follows, likes, or tweets (Ahmed and Guirrero, 2020). This makes it possible for companies to reach out to consumers fast and directly, at a more affordable cost, and more effectively than they could with conventional marketing strategies. (Ahmed and Guirrero, 2020).

In this study, the focus is on three popular SMM strategies that companies can adopt as part of their digital marketing strategy, namely; electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), social media influencers (SMI), and online brand communities. The study will also assess the duration and frequency of consumer SM usage and its possible effect on consumer behaviour.

2.3.2.1 Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM)

Individuals utilise social media platforms for a myriad of purposes, all stemming from innate psychological desires to share, connect, and feel a sense of belonging within communities. Three primary digital communication scenarios were identified by Appel et al. (2019). These scenarios include interacting with known contacts, interacting with unknown individuals who share same interests, and creating and consuming online content (e.g., news and product reviews), all of which are essentially word-of-mouth interactions. Digitally transmitted word-of-mouth is known as electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) (Budiman, 2021).

Recent research highlighted the importance of (e-WOM), which includes both positive and negative comments posted by customers regarding a company's products and services on various online platforms (Bushara et al., 2023). Maintaining a positive e-WOM suggests consumer satisfaction and increased perceived value of the company offerings(Bushara et al., 2023).

SMMAs play an important role in shaping e-WOM. Previous research revealed that the influence of SMMAs on e-WOM largely depends on the nature of the activities and the intended audience (Bushara et al., 2023). According to Budiman (2021), consumers prefer to seek advice online through a variety of channels, such as product or service review platforms, and they value authentic human opinions over commercials or the descriptions of products on company websites. Social media platforms allow firms to cultivate relationships with these customers while also establishing credibility as reliable sources of information (Bushara et al., 2023). Strengthening these relationships helps to develop positive sentiments and encourages customers to engage with the brand's content more regularly, increasing the possibility of sharing it (Bushara et al., 2023). Moreover, effective use of SMMAs that correspond with consumer preferences and demands can have a positive impact on e-WOM. Conversely, poorly implemented SMM activities may result in negative e-WOM (Bushara et al., 2023).

Although this current definition of WOM seems logical, it only takes social media into account from a communications standpoint, yet as social media develops, greater societal impacts become apparent (Appel et al., 2019).

2.3.2.2 Online brand communities

According to Olotewo (2017), social media platforms may be thought of as places where users produce and disseminate information and share consumer experiences with other users in their social networks. This trend has facilitated the emergence of virtual brand communities, where members, even if they've never met in person, can foster a strong sense of community (Chen & Lin, 2019). As per Zollo et al. (2020), online brand communities are characterised by a grouping of self-nominated individuals who share common interests and connect with one another about a specific brand through digital communications. These communities, operate much like traditional communities,

meeting members' needs for self-identity, shared experiences, and social support (Chen and Lin, 2019). However, they differ due to their commercial nature and core focus on a specific brand (Brogi, 2014). These brand communities encourage community engagement, and social integration, which helps members develop trust and a sense of belonging (Ahmad & Guerrero (n.d.); Zollo et al. (2020); Brogi (2014)).

Social media has enhanced the interactivity of online brand communities as it enables instantaneous sharing and dissemination of content and information among brands and different stakeholders (Zollo et al., 2020). Research indicates that consumers participate in online communities in order to access relevant information, which is made possible by SMM initiatives that enhance communication between brands and consumers (Zollo et al., 2020).

Online brand communities are a fascinating aspect of social media, as they are essential to SMM through customer relationship management and brand promotion (Chen & Lin, 2019). Brands need to pay attention to consumer conversations on social media, and actively participate in these discussions in order to successfully identify and address consumer requirements, influence consumer perceptions and promote brand success (Ntobaki & Buthelezi, 2023).

2.3.2.3 Social Media Influencers

Social media influencers (SMI) are independent third-party brand endorsers who use social media sites like Twitter and blogs to sway public opinion (Sijabat et al., n.d.). They are recognised as influential individuals whose authority and credibility impact consumers decisions (Sijabat et al., n.d.). Brands basically, leverage well-known opinion leaders with high social worth to influence others, such as celebrities in consumer markets or well-known corporate leaders in business markets (Appel et al., 2019). Micro-influencers are influencers who are less well-known than celebrities but who yet have devoted, loyal followings that are typically more concentrated (Appel et al., 2019).

Influencers are perceived as more genuine and trustworthy than traditional celebrities, which is why influencer marketing has become increasingly popular among marketers (Appel et al., 2019).

They develop material attachments between products and messaging (Jaitly & Gautam, 2021). These techniques include electronic word-of-mouth, the use of sponsored posts, and emphasising authenticity and reliability in communications. Additionally, influencers use persuasion knowledge tactics to increase customer engagement and impact brand perception by becoming aware of persuasive messages and effectively demonstrating product value (Jaitly & Gautam, 2021).

Selecting the appropriate influencers is essential for preserving brand coherence and building credibility with consumers (Sijabat et al., n.d.). Influencers use a variety of content formats, including images and videos, to draw in customers and build relationships with the brand (Sijabat et al., n.d.). Because of the parasocial bond that exists between influencers and their followers, followers are more likely to trust and form favourable opinions about branded postings due to influencer-generated content, trustworthiness, attractiveness, and relatability (Sijabat et al., n.d.). The accessibility and attractiveness of this strategy has greatly risen because of social media's pervasiveness.

2.3.2.4 SM usage - duration and frequency

Social media usage entails the engagement among users on social networking sites (SNS). These behaviours can be divided into active and passive patterns, with commenting classified as active and activities such as just viewing images as passive(Trifiro & Gerson, 2019). The Facebook Passive Active Use Measure (PAUM) categorises social media use into three distinct categories: active social, active non-social, and passive (Trifiro & Gerson, 2019). Active social usage comprises direct written interactions, such as comments and wall posts, whereas active non-social use includes activities such as liking posts and RSVPing to events that do not require any written content (Trifiro & Gerson, 2019). Passive use, on the other hand, refers to consuming content without engaging with other users on the site (Trifiro & Gerson, 2019).

Previous research indicates a significant association between SM usage patterns and consumer attitudes and behaviours (Duffett, 2016). Increased participation in SMM ought to have a significant positive impact on customer behavioural intentions, including purchase intents, and electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) (Bushara et al., 2023). As SMM becomes more prevalent, communities gain access to a variety of information,

which enhances customer perceived value (PV) and increases their willingness to engage in transactions online (Bushara et al., 2023).

Frequency and duration are common measures of social media usage (Maree, 2017).For instance, Duffett (2016) found that adolescents who used social media platforms more frequently had more favourable predispositions towards SMM communications, as well as positive cognitive, affective, and behavioural attitudes towards marketing communications. Furthermore, Duffett (2016) found that teenagers who spent more time on social media platforms were more likely to use commercial content available online to assist them with purchasing decisions.

2.3.3 The significance of Social Media Marketing for South African companies

Among several factors, the COVID-19 pandemic has spurred digitization in South Africa and other regions, particularly in online shopping, banking, and other sectors, with major increases in AI, robotics, and digital automation. Concurrently, social networking has increased, with a greater emphasis on lifestyle-oriented social media marketing. This trend involves families, couples, celebrities, influencers, and other individuals using social media platforms to share content, develop communities, and commercialise their online presence. These advancements provide organisations with chances to enhance their digital presence through partnerships and collaborations, while also emphasising the significance of managing brand perception to increase sales, profit margins, and continuous stakeholder engagement (Foroudi et al., 2018). The following are some of the factors that influence the South African commercial digital space.

2.3.3.1 South Africa's history and cultural diversity

South Africa, sometimes known as the 'Rainbow Nation,' is a multicultural democracy that values diversity. However, the long-term consequences of centuries of racial prejudice persist in society, necessitating more than three decades of democracy to overcome (Duffett, 2016). The black majority continues to suffer enormous challenges, with the lowest average income, education, and employment rates, and one in five individuals living below the poverty line (Duffett, 2016). Nonetheless, South Africa's rich history, diversity, and cultural tapestry provide marketers with an interesting backdrop in which to develop marketing tactics that resonate with and engage their target audience.

2.3.3.2 Digital divide and access to technology

Social inequities in South Africa, such as limited access to data or internet services, which are sometimes regarded as a luxury accessible only to a privileged few, remain significant challenges. In contrast to first-world countries, where technology adoption is more rapid, South Africa struggles to keep up with international trends, frequently taking 5 to 7 years to catch on (Starbright, n.d.). Regardless of this lag, local businesses may leverage it to analyse successful digital initiatives in other countries and adapt them to the local market, establishing themselves as industry leaders (Starbright, n.d.). However, it is critical to recognise that approaches from developed countries, impacted by greater digital infrastructure and accessibility, distinct web usage patterns, and cultural influences, may not always reflect the realities of the SA situation.

2.3.3.3 Privacy vs personalization

Research in marketing and related fields has investigated privacy and trust issues, including the relationship between personalisation and privacy, the impact of privacy on customer trust and business performance, and the ethical and legal implications of data collection and digital privacy (Appel et al., 2019). Despite the proven value of customisation tactics, consumers' confidence in social platforms and businesses is declining, making them hesitant to share their data for customised interactions (Appel et al., 2019). As privacy concerns rise, so do negative perceptions of organisations and social media platforms, providing issues for businesses and advertisers who rely on these channels to reach customers (Appel et al., 2019).

Addressing personal information, intellectual property, and information security concerns is critical for reducing these fears and restoring trust (Appel et al., 2019). South Africa's Protection of Personal Information Act (POPI Act) governs the handling of personal information by public and private agencies, with the goal of protecting individuals' privacy rights (Marthinusen, 2023). The act creates an information regulator to enforce compliance and compels website owners and digital marketers to follow its guidelines when collecting, using, and storing personal information for marketing purposes (Marthinusen, 2023). Compliance with the POPI Act is critical to ensuring the lawful and ethical use of personal data in marketing practices (Marthinusen, 2023).

By adhering to the guidelines set forth in the POPI Act, businesses can build trust with their customers, demonstrate a commitment to respecting individuals' privacy rights, and maintain a positive reputation within the industry. Ultimately, integrating data privacy measures into marketing strategies not only safeguards against potential legal repercussions but also fosters stronger relationships with customers based on transparency and accountability.

2.4 Analytical Framework

2.4.1 Conceptual Framework

The focus of the study is to evaluate how social media is used as a communication, advertising, and branding channel and how this can impact consumer perception and purchase intention. The proposed framework of the study aims to delve deeper and expand further on prior research founded on the constructs of the U&G theory , the TRA, and De la Roche et al.'s (2022) conceptual model used to explain the relationship between SMM, consumer brand perceptions, and purchase intentions.

- According to Ko et al. (2005), the U&G theory successfully offers one of the most pertinent viewpoints to explain psychological and behavioural aspects of communication through media. The Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory analyses how consumers actively choose and use media to meet their individual needs or gratifications, rather than passively consuming media content. Understanding U&G allows marketers to customise their messaging and content, so it aligns with customer motivations, resulting in improved brand perception and engagement. Zollo et al.'s (2020) framework, which is based on the U&G theory and the Multicomponent Model of Attitudes, offers supportive viewpoints in explaining the relationship between SMM and consumer brand perceptions.

- Whilst the TRA proposes that an individual's behaviour, such as purchase intentions, is influenced by their attitudes towards the behaviour and the subjective norms around it. Essentially, people are more likely to purchase a product if they have a positive attitude towards it and perceive that those whose opinions are important to them approve of the purchase.

- The conceptual model developed by De la Roche et al. (2022) demonstrates how perceived risk, perceived benefits, and organisational trust influence customer attitudes towards SMM platforms. It reveals that favourable attitudes towards SMM platforms lead to increased purchase intentions, with perceived risk, perceived benefits, and organisational trust all playing important roles in shaping these attitudes.

Thus, the study reviews the following relationship aspects that constitute the different elements of the proposed theoretical framework, analysed through the review of literature by Zollo et al. (2020), Qureshi et al. (2019), Qureshi et al. (2012), Bilgin (2018), Ko et al. (2005), Feroudi et al. (2018), and Aiswarya and Krishnan (2019) :

- The relationship between SMM activities and consumer brand perception.
- The relationship between CBP and purchase intention.
- The relationship between brand perception and purchase intention, as mediated by consumer brand perception.

Refer to Table 2 and Figure 5 below.

Table 3: Framework constructs

Construct	Interpretation	Measures	References
Consumer motivations and gratifications	Consumer decisions are influenced by the preconditions (motivations) and postconditions (gratifications) of media consumption.	Users actively engage with media in order fulfil their innate motivations or needs. These include information-seeking, entertainment, socialising, and for convenience. Individual gratifications may be quantified through advertising outcomes, such as attitude towards the site, attitude towards the brand, and purchase intention.	Ko et al. (2005) (Moon, An, & Norman, 2022) (Zollo et al., 2020)
Attitudes and subjective norms	Attitudes are a person's assessment of a behaviour based on their perceptions of the behaviour's outcomes and their subjective importance. Subjective norms are a reflection of the felt social pressure from family and close acquaintances to engage in the behaviour.	Subjective norms and attitudes jointly serve to influence how people perceive behaviour as well as their motivation to follow social norms, which in turn affects behavioural intentions. By understanding how subjective norms and attitudes impact consumer behaviour, marketers may develop compelling campaigns that align with both individual preferences and social norms, thus increasing the probability of customer adoption and engagement.	Simplypsychology.Org-Theory of Reasoned Action Fishbein and Ajzen 1975 (n.d.); Nickerson (2023)
Perceived risks and benefits	Perceived risks and benefits are the constructs to how a consumer perceives SMM and how these consequently develop into perceptions about the brands advertised on the SM platforms. Ultimately, the consumer perceptions influence purchase intent.	Perceived risk pertains to the concerns of consumers regarding possible negative outcomes or losses, whereas perceived benefits comprise the gains or advantages they expect from their engagement in social media marketing.	De la Roche et al.'s (2022)
e-WOM	E-WOM is the term used to describe the recommendations, experiences, and views that people share about goods, services, or brands on online platforms including social media, blogs, forums, and review websites. It encompasses electronically disseminated user-generated content that influences consumer perceptions, purchase decisions, and brand reputation.	Includes both positive and negative comments posted by customers on various online platforms. Maintaining a positive e-WOM suggests consumer satisfaction and increased perceived value of the company offerings.	Bushara et al. (2023) Appel et al. (2019) Budiman (2021)
Social Media Influencers (SMIs)	SMIs are independent, third-party brand advocates who utilise blogs and social media platforms like Twitter to influence the views of others. They are acknowledged as influential figures whose reputation and authority affect the choices made by consumers.	Influencers utilise a variety of content formats, including photos and videos, to draw followers and create relationships with brands. In addition, they employ persuasive strategies that increase consumer engagement and influence the perception of the brand. Influencers can effectively influence consumer perceptions and behaviours by mastering persuasive messaging and effectively showcasing the value of their products.	Sijabat et al. (n.d) Appel et al. (2019) Jaitly & Gautam (2021)
Online Brand Communities	Online brand communities are constructed up of self-selected individuals with similar interests that engage digitally around a particular brand.	SMM relies heavily on online brand communities since they make customer relationship management and brand promotion easier. Brands must monitor and engage in customer conversations on social media channels so that they can discern and cater to consumer requirements, mould their perceptions, and eventually propel brand success.	Chen & Lin (2019) (Zollo et al., 2020),Ahmad & Guerrero (2020) Ntobaki & Buthelezi (2023), Brogi (2014)
Consumer Brand Perceptions	Brand perception encompasses every aspect of a consumer's emotions, experiences, and opinions towards a brand. It represents what consumers think of a brand, not what the brand claims to represent.	Marketers can monitor and analyse consumer perceptions of brands that are promoted on social media by using web analytics tools and social media listening platforms. These resources can offer insightful analyses of customer interactions, remarks, and feedback on social media platforms. Customer feedback can also offer more insight on the perceived benefits that consumers derive from the brands.	de la Roche et al. (2022), Aiswarya & Krishnan (2018), Azionya & Overton-de Klerk (2021), (Foroudi et al., 2018), Qureshi et al. (2019)
Purchase Intention	Positive consumer perceptions towards a brand, lead to a higher intention to purchase the brand.	This can be measured by measuring online metrics to determine the number of consumers who were exposed or who reacted to marketing on SM platforms and also measuring the units sold after the SMM campaign was implemented.	de la Roche et.al (2022), Bilgin, (2018), Aiswarya & Krishnan, (2018).

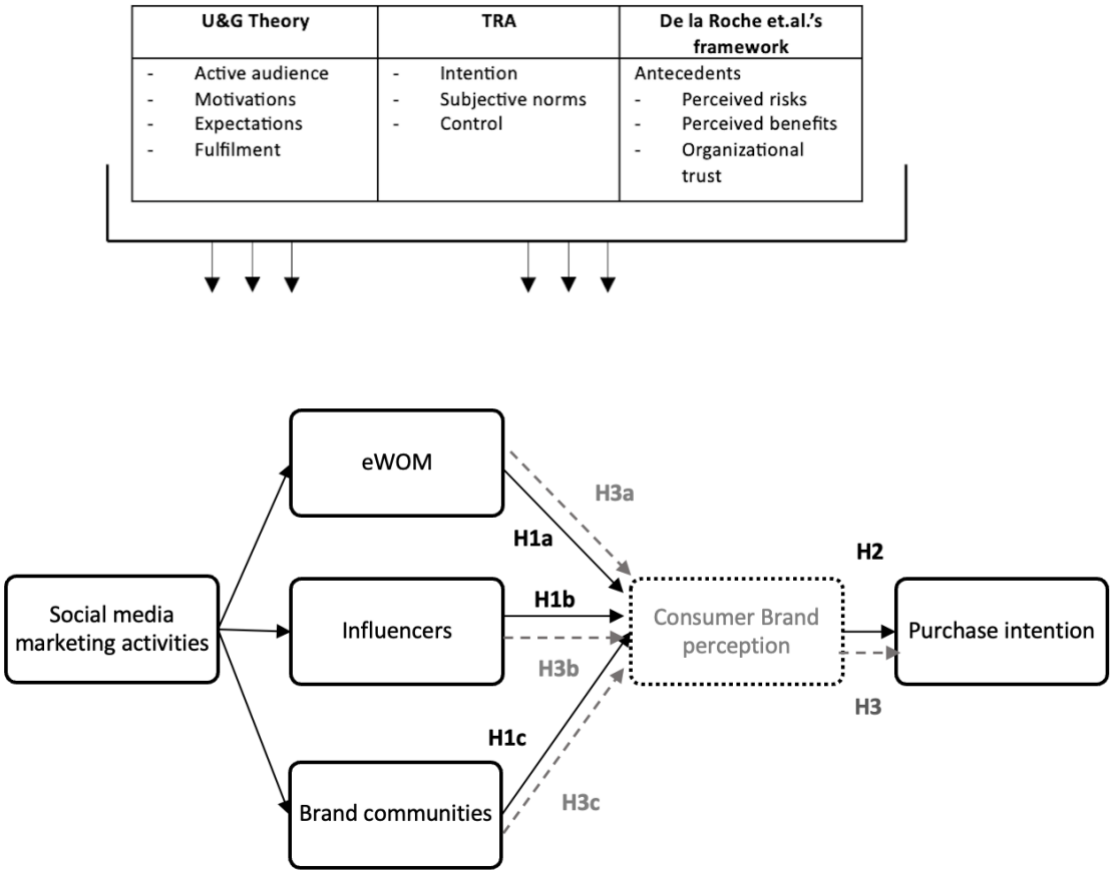


Figure 5: Theoretical Framework

Using complexity theory as a framework, Feroudi et al. (2018) sought to emphasise to managers the importance of comprehending both the behavioural and perception elements of brand equity. They emphasised how consumer decision-making is influenced by brand perception, which may increase sales margins while lowering marketing costs. Building on this premise, our research will look at how the use of SMM by South African brands can influence consumers' perceptions of brands and intents to purchase.

2.4.2 Hypothesis development

2.4.2.1 The relationship between SMM and brand perception

Perception is the process through which the brain organises and interprets sensory data from the environment to create a meaningful experience of the world (Shultz, n.d.).
In line with Shultz's definition, Montemayor and Haladjian (2017) define perception as the sensory systems' processing of external stimuli, such as visual or auditory data. Twedt

and Proffitt (2013) interpret perception as the process by which sensory data is transformed into perceptual experiences.

Consumer perception of a brand refers to how "consumers feel or think about the brand." Aiswarya and Krishnan (2018) claim that brand perception is "the culmination of all customer experiences with the brand." All the sensory data collected is converted into a mental impression, which establishes the product's quality, importance, and credibility in the eyes of the buyer (Aiswarya and Krishnan, 2018). According to Azionya and Overton-de Klerk (2021), brand perceptions are moulded through time into an overall appraisal based on trust, respect, admiration, and a positive feeling about a brand and its actions online and offline. Each person's perception of a product depends on a variety of variables, including social class, the physical properties of the product, pricing, packaging, promotional efforts, and merchandising (Aiswarya and Krishnan, 2018).

According to Foroudi et al. (2018), consumers express their personality through products that reflect their self-image, and when they view a brand as high-quality, their affinity and allegiance to it grows. Brand perception, which is largely impacted by self-concept, is shaped by consumers' subjective beliefs rather than objective measures (Foroudi et al., 2018). Marketing strategies that target these perceptions influence the consumer's brand preference (Foroudi et al., 2018). Marketing strategies, especially communication efforts (i.e. SMM), have a significant impact on consumer perceptions and behaviours towards brands, hence influencing brand choices and brand equity (Foroudi et al., 2017).

Leveraging social media to enhance a company's brand perception is a very effective method for creating long-term sales growth. Brands that consistently participate in social media conversations are more likely to garner endorsements because they remain top-of-mind with consumers (Ntobaki & Buthelezi, 2023). Maintaining a strong social presence allows firms to tailor their content and voice, reinforcing their narrative through frequent posts and targeted hashtag usage across social networks (Ntobaki & Buthelezi, 2023). Overall, a combination of marketing strategies that appeal to consumer perceptions and attitudes helps to develop positive brand perceptions and, consequently, increases brand equity(Foroudi et al., 2018).

Qureshi et al. (2019), describes consumer perception in accordance with the S-O-R paradigm and the TRA, as marketing stimulus (i.e., SMM strategies) interacting with an organism (consumer) causing the establishment of perception, which then progresses to form an intended action.

Brand perception encompasses the value individuals attribute to a brand, and it is influenced by factors like product quality and emotional engagement (Foroudi et al., 2018; Qureshi et al., 2019). Value, according to Qureshi et al. (2019), is "the consumer's holistic evaluation of a product's usefulness, which is shaped by perceptions of benefits received versus sacrifices made." In the study by Qureshi et al. (2019), consumer value is defined as "an interactive relativistic preference experience." (2019). The Users and Gratifications (U&G) theory states that social media followers are value-conscious, and their opinions impact brand interaction within online communities (Zollo et al., 2020). Zollo et al. (2020) present a conceptual framework, drawing on U&G theory, in which perceived value from social media use impacts Consumer Based Brand Equity (CBBE) and purchase intention.

While prior research concentrated on perceived risk and perceived benefit as drivers of online purchasing behaviour, de la Roche et al. (2022) identified a gap in understanding how SMM affects consumer perceptions of both risks and benefits when making online purchases. According to their findings, perceived benefit positively influences consumer attitudes towards social media marketing; however, perceived risk also plays a role, implying that customer trust and perceived benefits have a major impact on attitudes towards SMM(de la Roche et al., 2022). Finally, consumer attitudes impact their view of a brand, and social media provides numerous options for brand promotion and changing customer perceptions (Sundaram et al., 2020).

Hypothesis 1: There is a positive relationship between SMM and consumer brand perception.

2.4.2.2 The relationship between consumer brand perception and purchase intention

According to research by De la Roche et al. (2022), consumers are more inclined to make repeat purchases from a brand if they have a positive attitude towards brand marketing via social media or email. The experience gained from the brand is stored in the minds of

the consumer as brand perception, and this mental state helps trigger the purchase decision (Aiswarya and Krishnan, 2018). On the other hand, negative perceptions about a brand impact future buying intentions, according to Feroudi et al. (2018).

According to Silverman et al. (2016), the TRA by Ajzen and Fishbein (1975, 1980) contends that a person's behaviour is governed by their intention to carry out the behaviour, which is in turn a consequence of their attitude towards the behaviour and subjective norms. Accordingly, Silverman et al. (2016) contend that an intended or desired behaviour is best predicted by intention. The three factors that determine someone's intention are their perception of the particular behaviour, their own subjective norms, and how much control they think they have over the said behaviour. An individual's intention to engage in the behaviour will be stronger; the more favourable the attitude, the more favourable the subjective standards, and the larger the perceived control (Silverman et al., 2016).

Aiswarya and Krishnan (2018) concluded in their study, that among other brand elements, purchase decisions positively affect PI by playing a mediating role between brand perception (an independent variable) and purchase intention (a dependent variable).

Hypothesis 2: *There is a positive relationship between Brand perception and purchase intention*

2.4.2.3 The relationship between SMM and purchase intention, with consumer brand perception serving as a mediating variable

According to research, consumers demonstrate a stronger desire to purchase goods when they have more information about them via social media channels, but less information may reduce their intent to purchase (P. Ntobaki & Buthelezi, 2023). Thus, using SMM effectively has the potential to exert a big impact on consumer purchase intentions (Bilgin, 2018).

PI occurs in the decision-making process of consumers who are ready to move towards a particular product or brand (Putri & Ratni, 2022). The purchase decision is the process that leads a consumer to identify a need, generate options, and choose a specific product

or brand (Aiswarya and Krishnan, 2018). In the decision-making process, consumers who are prepared to commit to a specific brand or product express their intention to purchase it (Putri & Ratni, 2022). Aiswarya and Krishnan (2018) further state that individual attitudes and contextual circumstances influence the degree of purchase intention, which can be classified as unplanned, somewhat planned, or completely planned.

Numerous research studies have examined the impact of SMM on purchase intention. While some studies (Gautam & Sharma (2017); Liu and Qureshi (2023); De la Roche et al. (2022); Salhab et al. (2023) indicate a positive relationship, others (Moslehpour et al., 2021; Ali & Naushad, 2023; Emini & Zeqiri, 2021; Vidyanata, 2022) indicate no discernible relationship. There is however, a recurrent theme that highlights the existence of a mediating variable between SMM activities and PI in studies that show no significant effect.

A mediation variable, as defined by Aiswarya and Krishnan (2018), accounts for the relationship between two other variables. Stronger brand perception among consumers, for example, can increase the impact of SMM on consumer behaviour (Liu and Qureshi, 2023). Similar to this, Ali & Naushad (2023) found that, when full mediation is present, SMM favourably affects purchasing intention. Other studies have found that brand participation and perceived value, respectively, are important mediating elements between PI and SMM (Vidyanata, Emini and Zeqiri, 2021). Thus this suggests that a positive relationship may exist between SMM and purchase intention, when mediated by consumer brand perceptions.

Hypothesis 3: *There is a positive relationship between SMM and purchase intention, with CBP serving as a mediating variable.*

The following hypotheses (for a quantitative study) are generated from the above relationships:

- H1: There is a positive relationship between Social Media Marketing (SMM) activities and consumer brand perception.
    - H1a: There is a positive relationship between eWOM *and consumer brand perception.*

- *H1b: There is a positive relationship between Social Media Influencers and consumer brand perception.*
- *H1c: There is a positive relationship between Online Brand communities and consumer brand perception.*

- H2: There is a positive relationship between CBP and purchase intention.
- H3: *There is a positive relationship between SMM and purchase intention, with CBP serving as a mediating variable.*

2.5 Conclusion of Literature Review

In closing, the proposed theoretical model draws on the U&G theory, the TRA, and De la Roche et al. (2022) conceptual model. The hypotheses generated from this framework imply a favourable relationship between SMMAs and customer brand perception (H1); CBP and purchase intention (H2); as well as between SMMAs and purchase intention with the mediating effect of CBP(H3).

Marketers may improve CBP and PI by understanding the variables that influence brand perception and how they affect consumer behaviour. The proposed framework emphasises the necessity of understanding consumer motives and adjusting SMM strategies accordingly. It also emphasises the strategic use of social media channels throughout the customer experience to increase brand awareness, brand exposure, and brand influence. Furthermore, enhancing brand perception can increase the brand's value, contribute to Consumer Based Brand Equity (CBBE), and influence consumer purchasing intentions.

Nonetheless, the limitations presented by this study may prompt further research to explore how SMM strategies influence post-purchase behaviour and provide a more comprehensive understanding of SMM's impact on consumer behaviour.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The objective of this study was to determine the relationships between SMM strategies that are utilised by South African businesses and the impact they have on consumer behaviour, such as how customers perceive those companies' brands and their purchase intentions. The proposed conceptual framework is founded on the User and gratification (U&G) theory, the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA), and De la Roche et al.'s (2022) conceptual model, which was used to test these relationships. According to Wilson (2014, p. 30), research methodology is 'the approach and strategy used to conduct research'. The purpose of the research methodology chapter's is to specify and detail out all the specific components within the research methodology as well as the techniques used.

According to Neville (2007), research is built on gathering data, using a variety of analytical techniques to analyse it, and then interpreting the findings to address several research questions. It offers the reader an opportunity to evaluate the research's overall reliability (Libguides, 2023). An overview of the methodology is provided in this chapter, together with information on the setting for the study, its design, target audience, methods, sampling strategies, data collection processes, data analysis tools and techniques, and ethical issues (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

The chapter aims to provide an analysis using a quantitative research methodology and to offer statistical support for the association between SMM tactics, CBP, and the purchase intention of South African consumers.

3.1 Research approach

The context of the study is focused on SMM strategies adopted by South African companies and their impact on CBP and purchase intention. In a deductive approach, hypotheses were developed based on an existing theory, and then a research strategy was developed to test the hypothesis and guide the remaining phases of the research process (Wilson 2014). According to Wilson (2014), this kind of research is frequently related to quantitative research. The quantitative approach involves gathering precise numerical data that doesn't change over time and analysing it using statistical techniques, particularly statistics that answer questions such as who, what, when, where, how much,

how many, and how (Mohajan, 2020). Thus, a quantitative research methodology in this case was used to collect the data. IBM SPSS software's statistical support was used to carry out the quantitative analysis. This software allows for the application of various statistical techniques to examine the relationships between variables and test hypotheses.

In quantitative research, a large, representative sample of the population of interest is drawn, its behaviour and attributes are measured, and generalisations about the population are proposed (Williams, 2014). The quantitative research methodology enabled numerous variables that affect CBP to be tested. In this study, the variables of interest included consumer motivations and how they impact consumer social media platform choices, the impact of SMM strategies on brand awareness, brand perception, customer-based brand equity (CBBE), and purchase intention.

However, it is important to note that the choice of quantitative research methodology may not fully capture the complex relationships that emanate from SMM strategies and their impact on CBP. To complement the quantitative approach, researchers may consider employing qualitative research methods or a mixed research methodology.

Qualitative research involves gathering and analysing non-numerical data. It can provide valuable insights and an in-depth understanding of consumer perceptions and experiences related to SMM strategies. Mixed-methods research combines both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis approaches (Schoonenboom, 2023). A framework for interpreting the different interactions impacted by SMMAs has been developed using the current U&G theory, the TRA, and De la Roche et al.'s (2022) conceptual model. As a result, the quantitative approach is appropriate for determining and quantifying variables in the context of this study.

3.2 Research paradigm

"What is acceptable knowledge?" is a question that epistemology tries to answer by examining the nature of knowledge, which is defined through how we conceptualise our environment (Wilson, 2014, p. 32). Positivism, constructionism, critical realism, and pragmatism are some of the methodologies that can be used to apply epistemology

(Sekaran and Bougie, 2016). Positivism adopts an unbiased perspective when conducting research because the researcher is thought to be independent of the study, meaning that personal prejudices don't affect the research effort and the researcher is disassociated from the study participants (Wilson, 2014).

By using statistical and numerical measurements as opposed to qualitative approaches, the analysis of data is likely to be measurable (Wilson, 2014). This research paradigm also depends on the study's reproducibility and reliability and the generality of the results (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016) in various contexts. The study's goal was to investigate the causal link between SMM activities, consumer perceptions of brands and purchase intentions. Therefore, the positivist paradigm was found suitable for this investigation, considering the research objectives and the design of the study.

The positivist paradigm was selected for this study due to its emphasis on empirical observation, hypothesis testing, and the search for patterns and causal linkages (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016). This paradigm made it possible to collect and analyse data using quantitative research techniques while still being in line with the goals of the study. Moreover, given the positivist research approach's highly structured methodology, the study's findings are anticipated to have a high degree of reliability (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016).

3.3 Research design

According to Sekaran and Bougie (2016) and Wilson (2014), creating a study design increases the possibility that your research questions will be answered by providing a precise blueprint or framework for data collection, measurement, and analysis.

The different issues connected to the research design include decisions about the research strategy, the level of researcher interference, the study setting, the unit of analysis, and the time horizon (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016). In addition to the above considerations, decisions were also taken regarding the data collection method to be employed (in this case, the use of surveys or questionnaires), the sample design, the measurement method, and the data analysis (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016). Quantitative data was gathered and subjected to statistical analysis to summarise the numerical information.

Deductive reasoning was used in the study to construct a framework that took influence from the U&G theory, the TRA, and De la Roche et al. conceptual model. Deductive, theory-testing, and causal research do in fact require the formation of a theoretical framework (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016). This framework was then used to investigate the causal relationship between variables "by means of a fixed, predetermined research design and objective measures" (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016). The basic U&G theory served as the study's starting point, then was coupled with the TRA and De la Roche et al.'s conceptual model to further expand and incorporate additional aspects of the consumer experience before being further honed into more focused hypotheses that were put to the test. In the end, it was anticipated that the study of these particular findings would either confirm or reject the original theories (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016).

3.4 Data collection methods

In this study, a primary data collection method was considered. In other words, the primary data that was collected is unique to this study. Given that a positivist paradigm was chosen for this study, a self-administered online questionnaire that serves as the main source of data collection was sent as part of the quantitative survey approach. A questionnaire is a technique for gathering data that entails a series of questions created to produce information useful for fulfilling the goals of a research study and necessitates that the respondents complete it without the aid of an interviewer (Wilson, 2014). According to Sekaran and Bougie (2016), a questionnaire is a prewritten collection of questions to which respondents record their responses, typically within a limited range of options. Given that the target audience was diverse and geographically distributed, an electronic questionnaire was appropriate in this instance (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016).

According to Wilson (2014), surveys are frequently used as the primary method of data gathering for descriptive studies. Researchers can collect data through surveys that can be subjected to descriptive statistical analysis, including means, frequencies, percentages, and correlations. Through answering the "what, how, when, who, and where" questions, descriptive studies provide insightful information and support well-informed decision-making. Wilson (2014) highlights that to guarantee the precision and applicability of the data collected, careful questionnaire design, testing, and administration are essential. Because of this meticulous process, there are advantages to employing survey methods,

as they tend to be effective as well as economical when gathering large amounts of quantitative data.

As such, the questionnaire that was employed focused on understanding the factors that determine how SMM strategies adopted by South African companies' impact CBP and customer purchase intentions.

This data gathering strategy has limitations, as noted by Andrews et al. (2003), including poor response rates and a lack of interviewer interaction. It is essential to preserve respondent anonymity in order to reduce social desirability bias.

3.5 Population and sample

3.5.1 Population

According to Sekaran and Bougie (2016), the term "population" refers to the full set of individuals, occasions, or objects of interest that the researcher desires to examine and draw inferences about (using sample statistics). Given the study's focus on SMM strategies and CBPs, the target population was social media users within the South African market. The study recruited 179 participants from the University of Witwatersrand, with varying demographic profiles, social media exposure and usage.

3.5.2 Sample and sampling method

A portion of the population is called a sample. Sampling is the process of choosing the appropriate people, things, or events to serve as a representative sample for the total population (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016). According to Sekaran and Bougie (2016), the sampling frame is a (physical) representation of all elements of the population from which the sample is taken. In order to determine the representativeness of the sample for the generalizability and reliability of the study findings, both the sampling design and sample size are key (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016).

Various contextual factors were considered when determining the appropriate sample frame and size for this research, including the:

- Diverse participant demographics, i.e., age, gender, level of education, etc.
- Variation in social media usage of participants
- Impact of diversity on participant cultures
- Influence of the economic environment on participants
- The popularity of SMM among South African businesses

The study also considered the accessibility and feasibility of reaching respondents across the various social media platforms to choose an adequate sample size. The sample was drawn up via convenience sampling approaches, targeting the students of the University of Witwatersrand. Malhotra (2010) pointed out that convenience sampling makes use of elements that are easily available and accessible. This method was chosen due to its practicality and efficiency in reaching a large number of potential respondents within a short period of time. By focusing on students at the University of Witwatersrand, the study aimed to gather insights from a diverse group of individuals who are likely to be active users of social media.

To ensure a diverse representation, a quota of 100 respondents was set for Qualtrics. This sample size was deemed suitable for the study's objectives, enabling the gathering of insightful data and the extrapolation of the findings to the larger South African consumer market. The final response rate was well above 100%, with 179 questionnaires being completed.

3.6 The research instruments

The quantitative research methodology employed in this study, which seeks to gain insight into how South African businesses are using social media advertising strategies and the way this is impacting consumer perceptions of brands and purchase intentions, is described in the section that follows. Data from participants was gathered through a structured questionnaire. This questionnaire was the main tool used to gather data from respondents, giving insights into their attitudes, behaviours, and views on social media marketing. Valuable insights and conclusions were derived from the survey by analysing the data obtained from the questionnaire using IBM SPSS software.

The questionnaire was divided into several sections that were designed to examine different facets related to SMM and how it influences customer perceptions of brands. The questions were also organised into the relevant subsection groups according to how they relate to the section and in a reasonable sequence. The questionnaire was made to be straightforward, succinct, and simple so that responders could complete it quickly and effectively, ensuring reliable and precise data gathering.

The subsections are as follows:

1. Demographic Information: The participants' basic demographic information such as, age, gender, race, annual household income, level of education and place of residence, was gathered in this section of the questionnaire, which was helpful in assessing the demographic profile of the participants and its potential impact on their responses.

2. SMM and consumer behaviour
   2.1. Social Media Usage: This section evaluated the respondents' social media usage habits and sought to provide insights into the respondents' familiarity with social media and the overall degree of exposure to SMM initiatives.

   2.2. Awareness and Perception of Social Media Marketing: This section tested the respondents' understanding of how South African businesses use SMM and how it affects how they perceive brands.

   2.3. Influence of SMM on Brand Perception: The purpose of this section was to gauge how respondents' attitudes towards SMM and how they perceive it has affected their perceptions of a brand.

   2.4. Effect of SMM on Purchase Behaviour: This section investigated the respondents' purchasing behaviours and the part SMM plays in their decision-making.

3. Feedback and recommendations: Respondents were urged to share any pertinent information or personal experiences that were not covered in the preceding parts in this final sub-section.

4. Concluding Statement: A statement thanking the respondents for their participation was included at the end of the questionnaire. Furthermore, the respondents were reassured that their responses would remain confidential and anonymous.

3.7 Procedure for data collection

To collect quantitative data, the study used an online questionnaire that was disseminated via Qualtrics, a digital survey platform, over the course of 48 days. Participants were invited via email, and consent to participate was requested prior to progressing with the survey. The survey was divided into two sections, which included a demographic information section and a survey section divided into four sub-sections on SMM tactics and consumer behaviour. Convenience sampling was used to choose participants from the target population, allowing for the inclusion of a wide variety of participants. A pilot test was carried out to further refine the questionnaire. Throughout the data collection procedure, participants were given the assurance that their participation was voluntary and that their rights and privacy would be protected. Descriptive and inferential analyses of the data were carried out using IBM SPSS statistical software. The findings of this research are then explained in detail in Chapter 5 of the study.

3.8 Data analysis strategies and interpretation

The data from the questionnaires was thoroughly screened and prepared through Qualtrics before analysis. According to Sekaran and Bougie (2016), data editing is the process of locating and fixing erroneous, illegal, or contradictory data, as well as omissions in the information that study participants have submitted. The response quality was 79% (143 of 179); there were 4 incomplete responses and 6 potential responses from bots. Each respondent receives a score from Google's invisible reCAPTCHA technology based on how they engage with the system. The respondent is marked as possibly being a bot if the score is less than 0.5. To maintain data quality, such responses were excluded from the dataset. In the survey, 29 responses were noted to contain ambiguous text, indicating that some respondents did not provide comprehensive answers to the text entry questions. It's important to note that this issue did not have a notable impact on the survey section of the

questionnaire, suggesting that despite the ambiguous responses, the survey's overall integrity and data collection process were not significantly compromised.

Overall, 134 responses were used in the final sample for analysis. Thereafter, IBM SPSS software was used to analyse the data that had been gathered. The demographic information and the usage habits of social media were compiled using descriptive statistics, such as frequencies and percentages. To investigate the relationships between SMM strategies, CBP, and purchase intention, a path analysis was conducted. The analytical techniques used in this investigation are described in the following sub-sections:

3.8.1. Pretesting the Research Instrument

The primary purpose of the pre-test was to validate whether the questionnaire was successful in obtaining the required data to fulfil the study's objectives. Prior to using the questionnaire in a larger study, a pilot study was carried out to correct flaws in the questionnaire's compilation and to assess its reliability and practicality. This pilot study was carried out with the participation of three respondents from varying backgrounds.

3.8.2. Descriptive Analysis

To offer an overview of the sample's characteristics and the key variables of interest, descriptive statistics were calculated. In doing so, calculations of metrics that measure central tendency and dispersion, like means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages were used to summarise the data. The use of these statistics allowed for a basic assessment of the data and the identification of any distinctive trends or patterns.

3.8.3. Path Analysis

To assess the causal relationships among variables, a path analysis was conducted using Amos version 25. According to Crossman (2023), path analysis is a statistical technique similar to multiple regression that is used to evaluate causal models by investigating correlations between a dependent variable and multiple independent variables. It can be used with statistical tools like SPSS and SPSS Amos to estimate the amount and significance of causal relationships between variables. While path analysis is useful for

evaluating causal hypotheses, it is important to note that it does not determine the direction of causality; rather, it clarifies correlations and indicates the strength of causal hypotheses (Crossman, 2023).This advanced statistical technique enables a thorough investigation of the proposed correlations between variables indicated in the theoretical model.

3.9 Possible limitations and challenges of the study

The following are a few of the study's limitations that were considered when interpreting the results from the data since they might have affected the study's robustness, and the validity, generalizability, and reliability of the findings.

- **Sample Selection Bias:** The findings of the research may be prejudiced by the characteristics of the sample population, which dominantly consists of university students. Consequently, the findings may not fully reflect the South African consumer population, market trends, and preferences, thereby limiting the study's generalizability.

- **Non-response Bias**: If any respondents opt out of the study, non-response bias may be a possibility.

- **Self-Reported Data**: The data obtained from questionnaires is based on consumer self-reported replies, which may be biased and misaligned with actual behaviour.

- **Causality and Directionality:** Correlation does not always indicate causation, complicating the issue of determining the causal relationship between SMM and consumer behaviour. It is possible that additional variables not considered in the study will influence both the adoption of SMM strategies and consumer behaviour. As a result, while the study may find correlations between SMM and consumer behaviour, determining causation necessitates careful evaluation of potential confounding variables and other factors that may influence the observed results.

- **External Factors**: Several external factors, such as macroeconomic conditions, health pandemics or political events, which could not have been fully considered in

the study, might have influenced the efficacy of SMM techniques and consumer behaviour.

- **Measurement Restrictions**: Because some of the variables are measured based on subjective evaluations, their complexity may not be fully reflected.

- **Time Restrictions and the Dynamic Nature of SM**: The study poses a few time restrictions, such as the time required for data collection and analysis and the fast-evolving nature of social media and digital marketing. This means that the results might not reflect the most recent trends.

- **Social desirability bias**: participants may be inclined to offer responses they perceive as socially desirable, rather than providing authentic and unbiased responses. This bias has the potential to impact the accuracy of the data collected.
- **Generalizability**: The study's conclusions might only be applicable to the South African context and are not necessarily generalizable to other countries or regions with different cultural and economic contexts.

3.10 Ethical considerations

The information gathered for this study, which sought to understand consumer sentiments towards brands promoted by South African businesses on social media, did not concern consumers' private information. Several ethical considerations were considered, which ensured that the study complied with ethical guidelines, thus maintaining its integrity; it protected the rights of participants; and it upheld the confidentiality of private consumer data. The significance of ethical considerations and how they were upheld in the study are covered below.

3.10.1 Permission to Conduct the Study

Permission was acquired from the appropriate authorities, including the Research Ethics Committee, before the study was carried out. This committee assesses research initiatives to make sure they adhere to ethical standards and safeguard the rights of participants. The

selected Research Ethics Committee was sent a thorough research proposal. The research objectives, methodology, data collection techniques, and ethical considerations were all covered in the proposal. The study was carried out in conformity with all applicable regulations and policies.

3.10.2 Informed Consent

Prior to their participation in the study, all individuals gave their informed consent. The study's objectives, methods, possible risks, benefits, participant rights, and freedom to leave the study at any time were all detailed to participants. These assurances are listed in the consent subsection of the questionnaire.

3.10.3 Voluntary Participation

Participants were given the chance to get more information and make a voluntary decision on participation without being subjected to any coercion or false representation.

3.10.4 Confidentiality and Anonymity

Participants' privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity were scrupulously upheld throughout the study, and any identifying information that was obtained was kept to a minimum. To prevent participants from being recognised in any published or shared reports, all acquired data was coded, anonymized, and securely stored.

3.10.5 Participant Protection and Well-being

Required precautions were taken to ensure the well-being and security of participants. This required refraining from sensitive or intrusive questions and making sure that the research processes didn't negatively impact participants physically, psychologically, or emotionally. At any point, participants had the choice to leave the study without suffering any unfavourable repercussions.

3.10.6 Research Integrity and Objectivity

Honesty, openness, and objectivity are just a few examples of the ethical standards that should guide every study. The research findings were not manipulated or subjected to bias during the research design, data collection, or analysis stages. All potential biases and conflicts of interest were disclosed and managed.

3.10.7 Data Management

The research findings were communicated clearly and transparently in a way that preserved the study's integrity and validity while also guaranteeing confidentiality and privacy protection. The data was appropriately protected and used only for the investigation.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS

The preceding chapter examined the research methodology, which included the study instrument and data gathering process. Chapter 4 presents the research findings drawn from the data, as well as an evaluation of the relationships between the dependent variable and the independent variables. The first section contains descriptive statistics, which are followed by a path analysis that is conducted using AMOS version 25. The chapter concludes with a summary of the tested hypotheses and accompanying findings.

4.1 Introduction

Chapter 2 establishes the theoretical underpinnings for this study, based on the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory, the Theory of Reasoned Action, and De la Roche et al.'s (2022) conceptual model. These theories are used to investigate the relationships between the implementation of SMM tactics, customer brand perception, and purchase intent. Recognising a void in the existing literature, this study seeks to fill that gap by providing insights from an African viewpoint, specifically from the perspective of a developing nation. The study focuses on a diverse, multigenerational population, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of how SMM influences the customer journey. Chapter 3 describes the data gathering methodology, including the development of the research instrument. Chapter 4 will go into the findings from the data gathered using Qualtrics, which was then exported into SPSS (originally, Statistical Package for the Social Sciences and now called Statistical Product and Service Solutions) software. The data analysis was conducted using SPSS and SPSS Amos version 25. The analysis includes:

a) Descriptive statistics: which provide an overview of the data presented.
b) Path analysis: to assess potential causal pathways between variables.

4.2 Data Screening

179 responses from social media users were collected using Qualtrics. However, one respondent declined consent and was consequently excluded from the sample. In addition, 44 unsuitable responses were also excluded from further analysis. As a result, the final dataset comprised 134 respondents for analysis.

4.3 Sample Characteristics / Demographic

4.3.1 Gender

According to the results illustrated in Figure 6, the sample was made up of 59% women, 40% men, and 1% non-binary/non-conforming people.

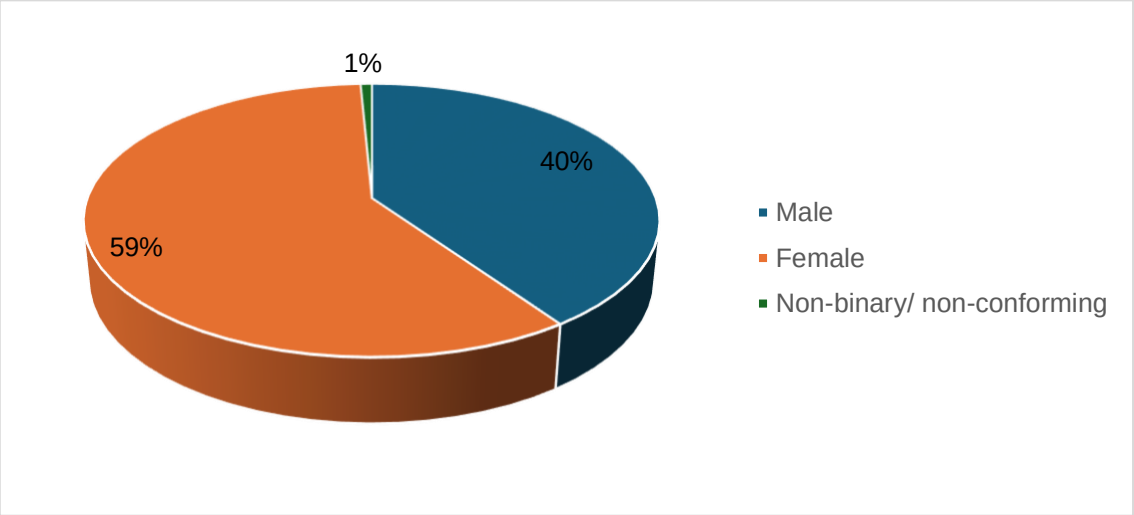


Figure 6: Respondent gender

4.3.2. Age

The age distribution of respondents presented in Figure 7, suggests that the majority (40 percent) are between the ages of 18 and 24 years old. Following this group, 31 percent of respondents are between the ages of 35 and 44 years old. Furthermore, the data covers participants aged 25-34 years old, accounting for 19 percent, while those aged 45-54 years old account for 7 percent. Lastly, respondents aged 55 years and older account for 3 percent of all participants.

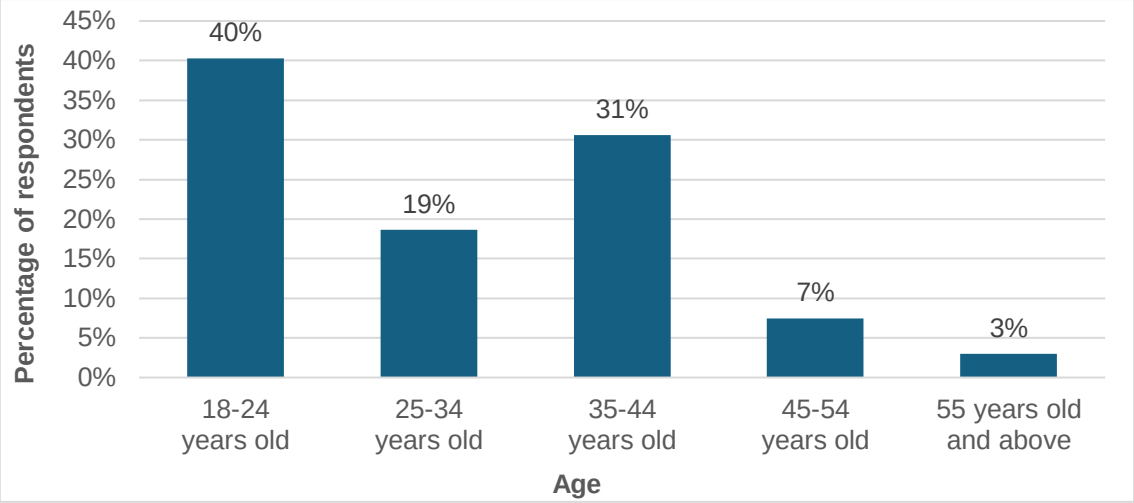


Figure7: Respondent age

4.3.3 Race

The data on racial classification indicate that Black African respondents account for 87% of the total participants. White respondents constitute 6%, with Asian, Coloured as well as the "Other" race category respondents accounting for 2% of the total surveyed population. Figure 8 illustrates the racial diversity within the respondent pool, with Black African respondents being the most predominant group.

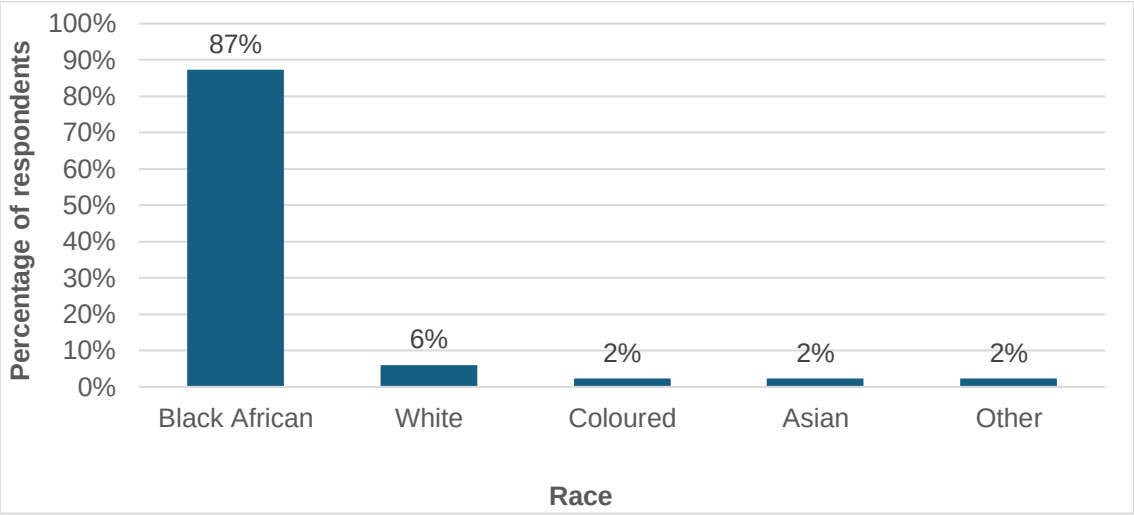


Figure 8: Respondent race

4.3.4 Annual Household Income

The data on annual household income presented in Figure 9 reveals a varied distribution among respondents. The highest proportion of respondents (25 percent) indicated an annual household income in the "ZAR501,000 to ZAR1,000,000" range. Following this, 21 percent reported an income of "less than ZAR100,000," 20 percent reported an income of "more than ZAR1,000,000," and 18 percent fell within the "ZAR251,000 to ZAR500,000" range. Furthermore, 14 percent reported earning "ZAR100,000 to ZAR250,000" in annual household income.

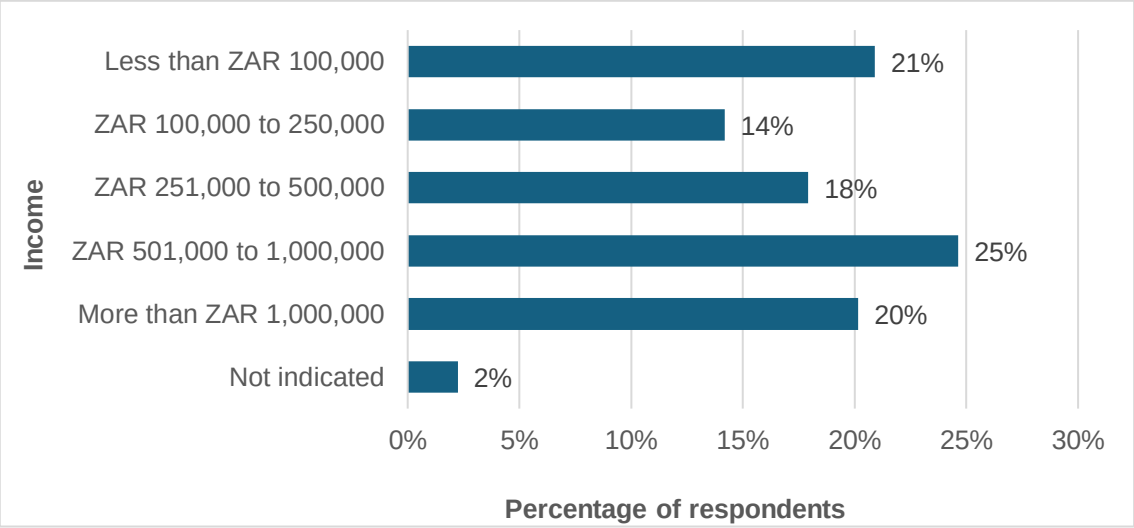


Figure 9: Annual Household Income

4.3.5 Highest Level of Education

The data presented in Figure 10 on the highest level of education attained by respondents reveals a diverse educational background. Notably, 37% of participants have completed Matric, whereas 29% have Honours Degrees or Postgraduate Diplomas. A significant number (18%) have earned a Master's Degree, suggesting an impressive level of educational achievement. Bachelor's degrees were reported by 9% of respondents, showing a sizable proportion with undergraduate qualifications. 4% of participants hold national diplomas, while 1% have certificates. The remaining groups, which include No Formal Education, Some Formal Education, Doctorate Degree, and Other, account for 1% of the sample, indicating a lesser prevalence.

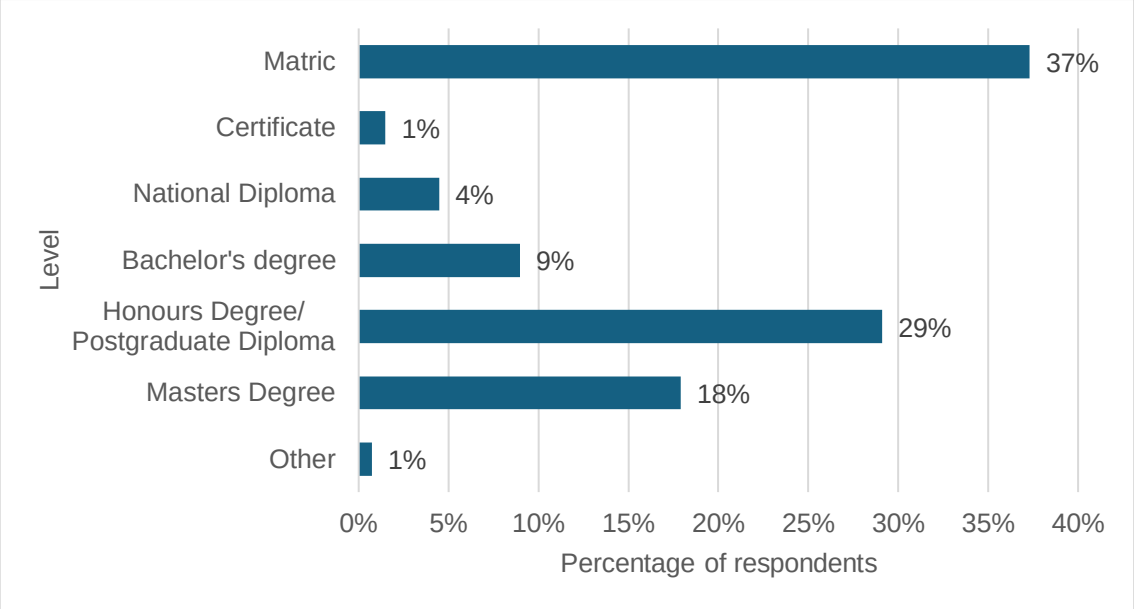


Figure 10: Highest Level of Education

4.3.6 Occupation

The occupation dataset depicts a diverse range of professional pathways, indicating that the surveyed participants have a wide range of skills and expertise.

The occupations cover a wide range of fields, including project management, finance (banker, finance manager), healthcare (medical doctor, nurse, pharmacist), engineering (rock engineer, mechanical engineer, energy specialist), and information technology. Individuals in government roles, as well as those working in environmental consulting, marketing, and education, are also included in the dataset.

Overall, the data covers an extensive spectrum of vocations, with a significant focus on student roles.

4.3.7 Place of residence

The data presented in Figure 11 on respondents' residency in South Africa show a diverse geographical dispersion. Gauteng Province is home to most participants (74% of the total dataset). Mpumalanga came in a distant second with 5% of the sample, followed by Limpopo, Eastern Cape, and KwaZulu-Natal with 4% apiece. North West trailed behind with 3%. The Free State reported 2% representation whilst, the rest (Northern Cape, Western Cape provinces and “not indicated”) all showed a 1% representation. Overall, the data shows a diverse distribution of respondents’ representation across provinces, with

Gauteng being the most prevalent province in the sample. The vast majority resided in cities, with Johannesburg being the most common location of residence.

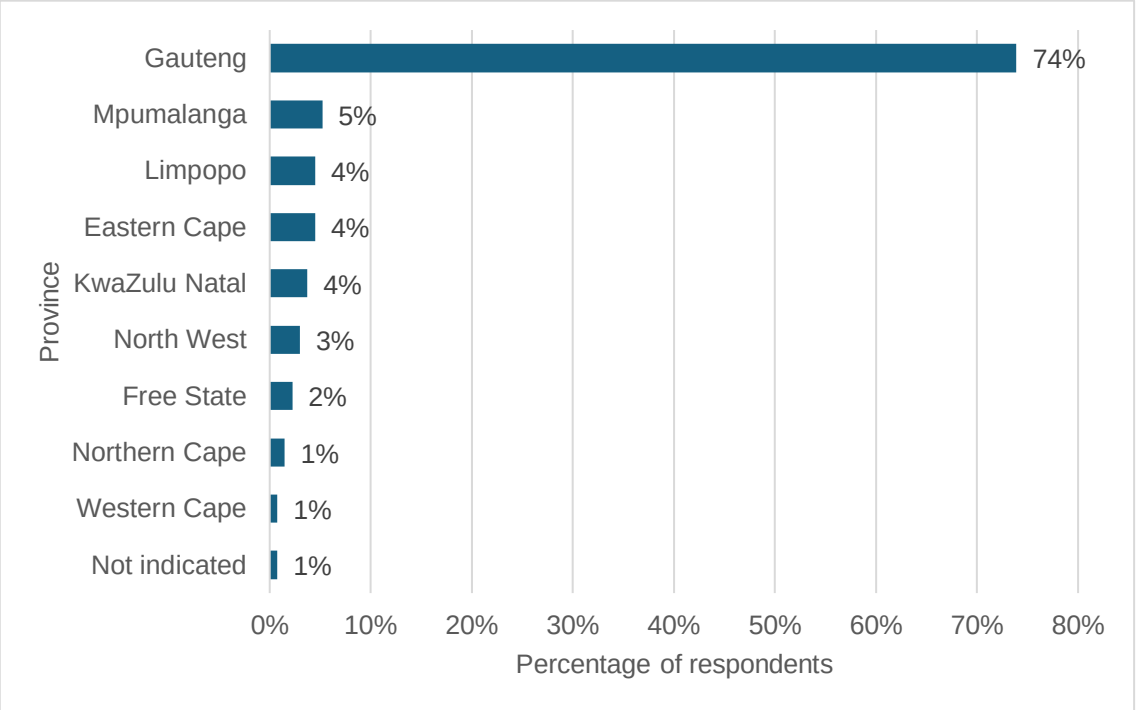


Figure 11: Province of residence

4.4 Social Media Usage

4.4.1 Social Media Platform usage

Figure 12 shows that YouTube was the most popular platform, with 87% of respondents acknowledging its use, followed by Instagram (75%). LinkedIn was also a popular choice, with 58% of respondents declaring they were active on the professional networking platform. TikTok, Facebook, and Twitter also retained significant user numbers, with 57%, 56%, and 51% respectively. However, Snapchat had a more modest usage percentage among the surveyed sample, with only 18% of respondents utilising it. In addition, 15% of respondents said they used other social media networking platforms.

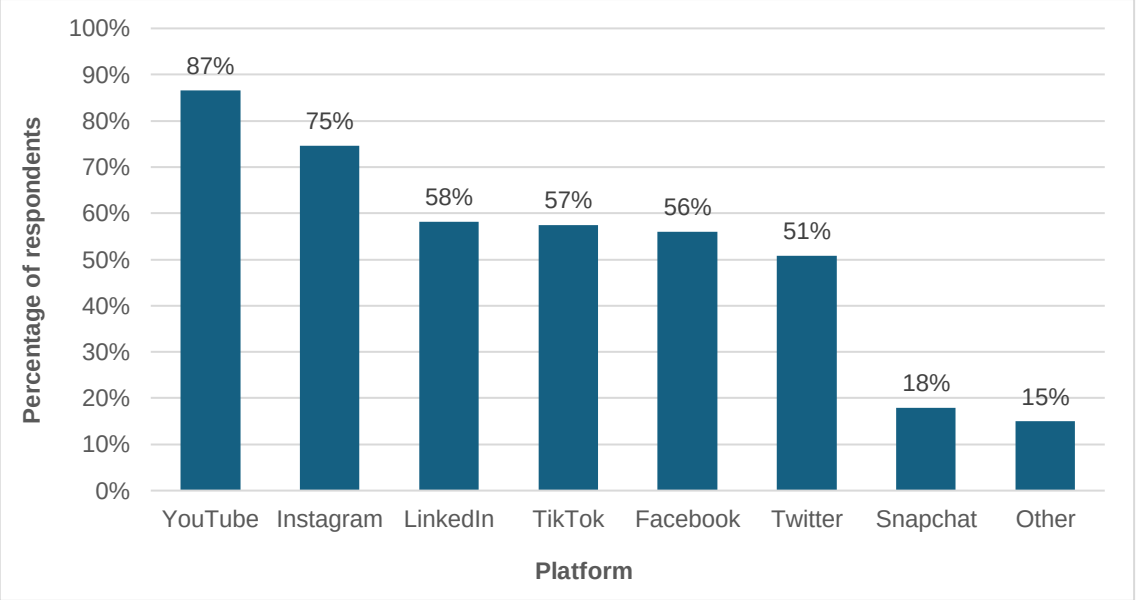


Figure 12: Social media platforms used

4.4.2 Primary Purpose of Social Media Usage

In response to the key purpose for utilising social media, a significant number of respondents, 86%, identified entertainment as their primary motive for engaging with social media platforms. Trailing closely, 72% of respondents indicated that they utilised social media to gather information, suggesting an affinity for knowledge acquisition and keeping up to date on wide-ranging issues. Furthermore, 68% of respondents engage with social media to maintain connections with family and friends, emphasising the platform's role in enabling social interactions and relationships. 52% of respondents said they use social media to discover new products or services, implying that these platforms may have an impact on consumer behaviour and purchasing decisions. Additionally, 45% of respondents use social media for professional networking purposes. Sharing personal experiences was ranked lower in terms of importance, with only 22% of respondents citing it as their primary purpose. Refer to Figure 13 below.

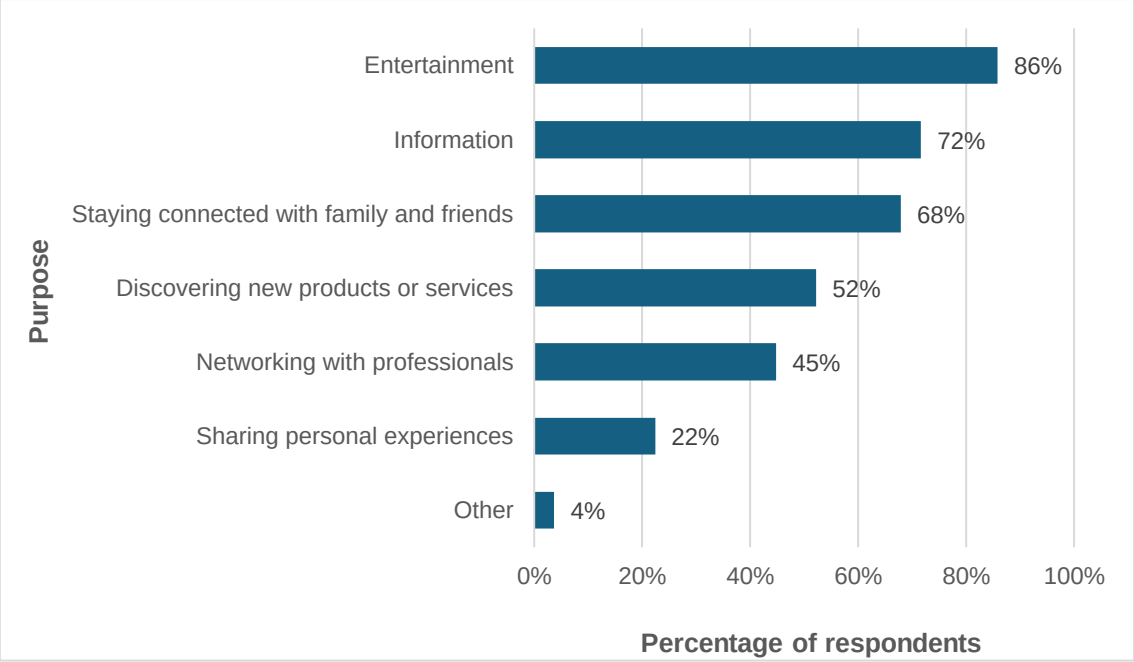


Figure 13: Primary purpose of social media usage

4.5 Elements Influencing The Efficacy Of Social Media Marketing

4.5.1 Factors affecting perception about a brand's effectiveness in social media marketing

Respondents ranked several factors that influence their perceptions of a brand's efficacy in SMM on a scale of 0 to 10. Refer to Table 3. The study found that visual appeal, including videos and images, was the most important factor (mean = 8.09 ± 2.341), indicating a particular emphasis on visually appealing content. The significance of content relevance and quality (mean = 8.01± 2.07) is close behind, emphasising the importance of providing useful and engaging content to the audience. Engagement with followers, such as responding to comments and messages, was rated as moderately important (mean = 6.38± 3.125). Personalised interactions were also acknowledged, albeit to a lesser extent (mean = 6.19±2.983). Influencer endorsements were evaluated as the least significant (mean = 3.92± 3.010), indicating that they may have some impact, but are surpassed by criteria such as visual appeal and content relevancy.

Table 4: Importance of elements in influencing perception about a brand's effectiveness in social media marketing

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Visual appeal (images/ videos)	8.09	2.341	-1.498	1.903
Content relevance and quality	8.01	2.070	-1.507	2.883
Engaging with followers (replying to comments, messages)	6.38	3.125	-.502	-.905
Personalised interactions	6.19	2.983	-.559	-.541
Frequency of posts	5.66	2.725	-.382	-.741
Influencer endorsements	3.92	3.010	.326	-.895

4.5.2 Type of content from brands on social media platforms considered most engaging

Figure 14 depicts a notable trend where 83% of respondents favour educational or informative content, indicating an overwhelming need for brands to provide valuable information or insights. Furthermore, 69% of respondents find humorous or entertaining content appealing, while 60% appreciate promotions and discounts. 43% of respondents engage with user-generated information, such as consumer testimonials and reviews. However, interactive polls or quizzes, as well as behind-the-scenes content, had lower engagement rates, with only 25% of respondents interested in each category. Finally, a small percentage of respondents, 2%, consider other types of content as engaging, demonstrating the diversity of audience preferences.

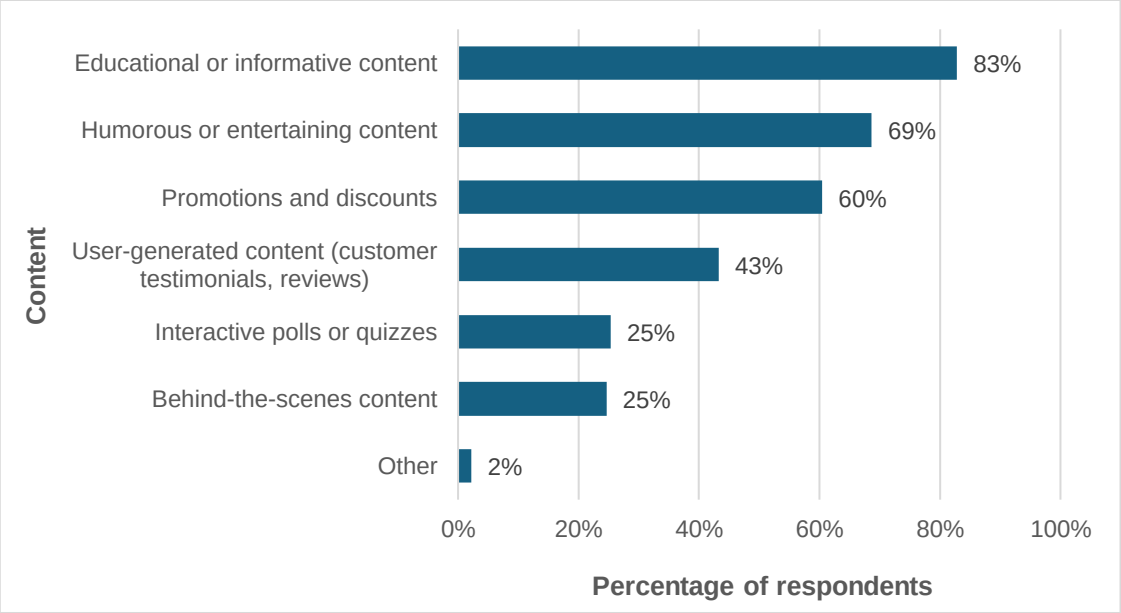


Figure 14: Type of content from brands on social media platforms respondents found to be most engaging

4.5.3 Social media marketing methods consumers recall encountering frequently and found to be most engaging

Figure 15 reveals that sponsored posts or advertisements are the most frequently recalled SMM tactics, with 83% of respondents recalling encountering them. Following closely after is SMI marketing, with 65% of respondents recalling encountered this marketing approach. Influencer collaborations are also cited significantly with 59% of respondents recalling encountering them. Notably, customer reviews and comments are identified as the most effective type of content for engaging audiences, with 51% of respondents recognising their importance. Sponsored posts or advertisements coming close behind at 40%, while 39% of respondents find SMI marketing highly effective in capturing their attention and interest. Content/giveaways and influencer collaborations were also highly engaging, at 38% and 37%, respectively. However, user-generated content campaigns and branded hashtags are seen as somewhat less effective, at (19%) and 16% respectively, in capturing respondents' attention and interest.

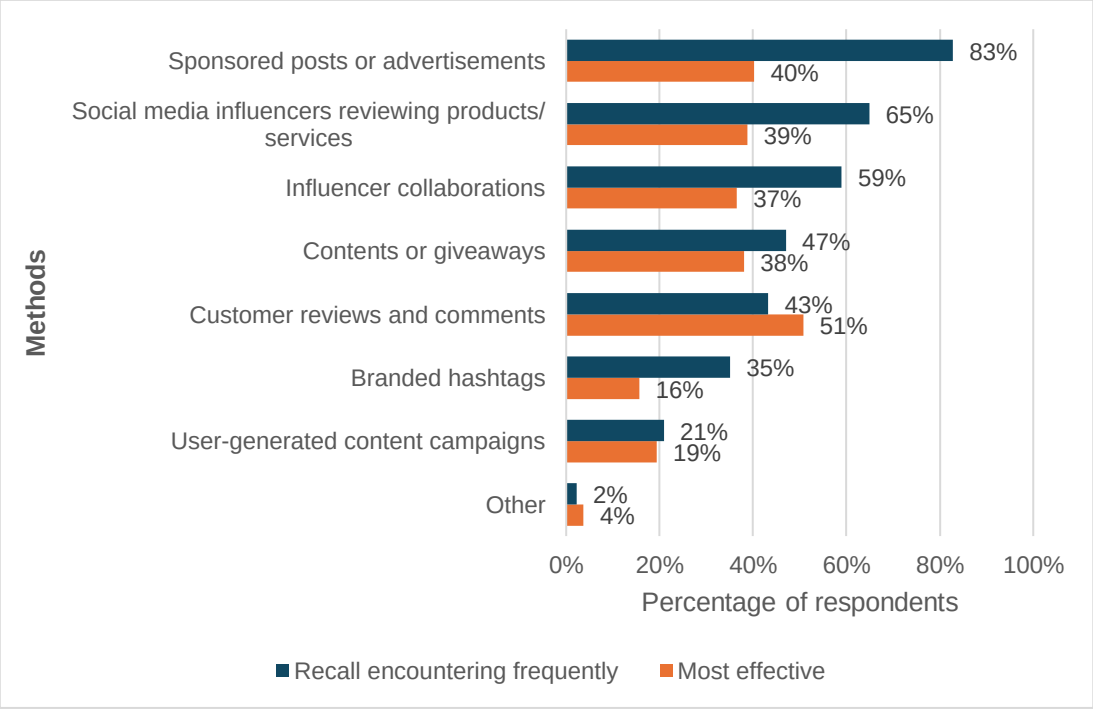


Figure 15: Social media marketing methods consumers recall encountering frequently and found to be most engaging

4.6 Awareness and Perception of SMM, SMM Effect on Consumer Brand Perception and Purchase Intentions

Refer to Table 4 which provides a comprehensive snapshot of respondents' perceptions and behaviours about the SMM methods used by South African businesses. Most respondents (86%) are aware of organisations that engage in SMM, with significant numbers (66%) saying that these companies use SMM effectively as a branding tool. The overwhelming majority (90%) also advocate that firms invest in SMM as part of their overall marketing plan.

When the data on participants' perceptions of brands actively engaging with consumers on social media is analysed, it appears that most respondents (91%) hold a positive attitude. Specifically, 43% of respondents evaluated their perception as "very positive," while another 48% viewed brands positively. In contrast, a small minority of respondents reported negative perceptions, with only 1% reporting "somewhat negative" or "very negative" attitudes. Furthermore, when assessing the impact of SMM on shaping participants' brand perceptions, a substantial number (92%) found it influential. Notably, 51% of respondents said SMM was "very influential," with 41% believing it was "somewhat influential." Furthermore, the majority (63%) of respondents reported no specific social media campaigns or strategies that had an impact on their perceptions of brands. However, a significant proportion (34%) reported that they were positively or negatively influenced by specific campaigns or strategies.

While some respondents (34%) are influenced by specific SMM campaigns or strategies, the impact of SMM in increasing awareness and engagement is widely acknowledged, with 90% of respondents rating it as somewhat or very effective. However, attitudes on the trustworthiness and credibility of organisations that effectively use social media vary, with 21% saying organisations that use SM effectively are more trustworthy and 57% recognising the significance of a strong social media presence to a brand's credibility. Furthermore, a substantial proportion of respondents (81%) said they are likely to engage with a brand's social media content, showing active consumer participation in SMM initiatives.

When the participants' purchasing behaviours related to SMMAs are analysed it shows that nearly half of the respondents (49%) have made purchases based on a company's SMM efforts. Furthermore, a significant number of respondents (51%) say SMM has some influence on their decision to purchase products or services, with an additional 23% stating it has a significant impact. Interestingly, a comparatively small minority of respondents (17%) remain neutral on the impact of SMM on their purchase decisions, indicating some uncertainty or lack of strong opinions on the matter. Furthermore, only a minority of respondents (9%) state that SMM has no influence on their shopping decisions, either moderately or strongly.

Table 5: Other results

Variable	Option	Frequency	Percent
Q17 Are you aware of South African companies that actively engage in SMM?	Yes	115	86%
	No	19	14%
Q18 Do you believe that South African companies effectively utilise SMM as a branding tool?	Yes	88	66%
	No	45	34%
	Not indicated	1	1%
Q19 Would you recommend brands to invest in SMM as part of their overall marketing strategy?	Yes	120	90%
	No	3	2%
	Not sure	11	8%
Q20 How would you rate your overall perception of brands that actively engage with consumers on social media?	Very negative	1	1%
	Somewhat negative	2	1%
	Neither positive nor negative	9	7%
	Somewhat positive	64	48%
	Very positive	58	43%
Q21 How influential do you find SMM in shaping your perception of brands?	Not influential	10	7%
	Somewhat influential	55	41%
	Very influential	69	51%
Q22 Are there any specific SMM campaigns or strategies that have positively or negatively affected your perception of a brand?	Yes	46	34%
	No	84	63%
	Not indicated	4	3%
Q23 In your opinion, how effective is SMM in promoting brand awareness and engagement?	Not effective at all	1	1%
	Somewhat ineffective	2	1%
	Neutral	11	8%
	Somewhat effective	40	30%
	Very effective	80	60%

Q24 Do you believe that companies that use social media effectively are more trustworthy than those that do not?	Yes	28	21%
	No	70	52%
	Not sure	36	27%
Q25 In your opinion, does a strong social media presence contribute to a brand's credibility?	Yes	76	57%
	No	40	30%
	Not sure	18	13%
Q26 How likely are you to engage with a brand's social media content (e.g. like, comment, share)?	Unlikely	34	25%
	Somewhat likely	57	43%
	Very likely	43	32%
Q27 Have you ever made a purchase based on a company's SMM efforts?	Yes	65	49%
	No	46	34%
	Not sure	23	17%
Q28 In your opinion, does SMM influence your decision to purchase products or services?	Strongly does not influence	5	4%
	Somewhat does not influence	7	5%
	Neutral	23	17%
	Somewhat influences	68	51%
	Strongly influences	31	23%

4.7 Validity Assessment

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted to assess whether the items that were rated for their influence on perception about a brand's effectiveness in SMM on a 10-point scale form a valid construct. The results are presented in Table 5 – Table 7 and Figure 16.

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy value was 0.731, which was above the minimum requirement of at least 0.5. This implies that the sample was adequate for applying EFA. The Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant since the p-value was less than 0.05. This indicates that the items were correlated strongly enough to allow for EFA to be conducted.

Table 6: KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.731
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	152.268
	df	15
	Sig.	.000

The total variance explained shown in Table 6, indicates that all the items loaded onto one factor (as indicated by one factor with an eigen value greater than 1. This factor explained 42.655% of variance in the initial 6 items.

Table 7: Total Variance Explained

Factor	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	2.559	42.655	42.655	1.890	31.508	31.508
2	1.000	16.660	59.316			
3	.857	14.283	73.599			
4	.645	10.750	84.349			
5	.524	8.727	93.076			
6	.415	6.924	100.000			
Extraction Method: Principal Axis Factoring.						

Below is Figure 16 representing a scree plot confirming that all the 6 items were in one factor as indicated by most of the variance being explained by factor 1.

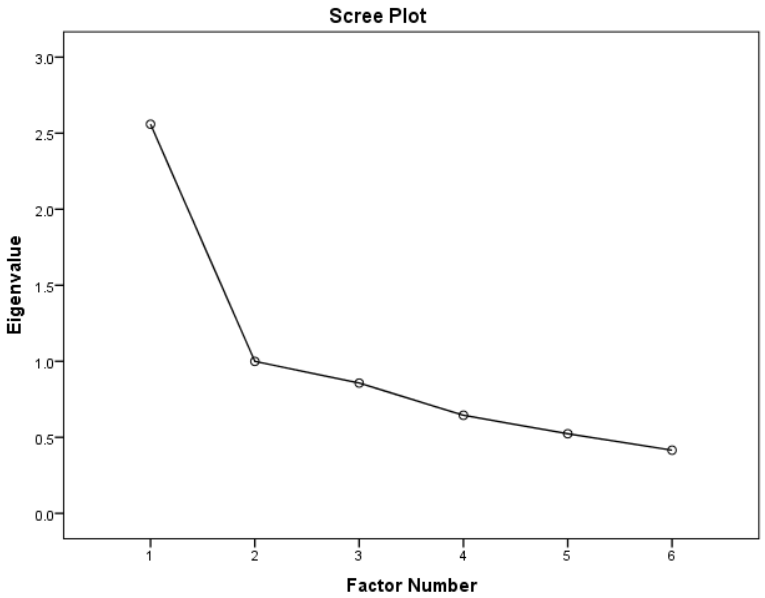


Figure 16: Scree plot

The Factor matrix presented in Table 7 show that all the items loaded highly onto the one factor, with a minimum factor loading of 0.429. This is higher than the minimum requirement of at least 0.4 (Balicki et al., n.d.). Thus, the retained factor was valid.

Table 8: Factor Matrix

Items		Factor Loading
Q13_3	Content relevance and quality	.654
Q13_4	Frequency of posts	.608
Q13_6	Visual appeal (images/ videos)	.573
Q13_5	Engaging with followers (replying to comments, messages)	.558
Q13_1	Influencer endorsements	.518
Q13_2	Personalised interactions	.429
Extraction Method: Principal Axis Factoring.		
a. 1 factors extracted. 5 iterations required.		

4.8 Reliability Assessment

Reliability of the scale was conducted for these 6 items retained during EFA using Cronbach's Alpha. The results presented in Table 8 show that the scale was reliable as the Cronbach's Alpha value was greater than the minimum requirement of at least 0.7. This means that the importance of social media was a valid and reliable construct. Since the construct was both reliable and valid, a composite scale was created for this construct by computing the average of the items in this construct.

Table 9: Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.723	.728	6

4.9 Correlation analysis

The correlation analysis results, refer to Table 9, revealed that there was a positive correlated relationship between eWOM and CBP($r = 0.\ 178$, $p < 0.05$); as well as SM influencers and online brand communities ($r= 0.245$, p-value < 0.001); and SM Frequency ($r = 0.188$, p-value < 0.05) and SM Duration ($r = 0.274$, p-value < 0.001). online brand communities and CBP($r = 0.173$, p-value < 0.05) were also significantly correlated. A positive correlation was also noted between CBP and purchase intention ($r = 0.435$, p-value < 0.001).

Table 10: Pearson's Correlation and Descriptive statistics

	Descriptive Statistics		Pearson Correlation						
Variable	Mean	SD	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1.eWOM	0.50	.502	1						
2.Influencers	0.76	.428	.000	1					
3.Online Brand communities	0.89	.316	-.024	.245**	1				
4.SM Frequency	4.74	.714	.010	.188*	.036	1			
5.SM Duration	3.51	1.296	-.035	.274**	.085	.355**	1		
6. Consumer Brand Perception	2.44	.631	.178*	.142	.173*	.007	.092	1	
7.Purchase Intention	3.84	.964	-.039	.164	.090	.038	.052	.435**	1

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

4.10 Hypothesis Testing

Path analysis was conducted using Amos version 25. The results are presented in Figure 17 and Table 10 and Table 11.

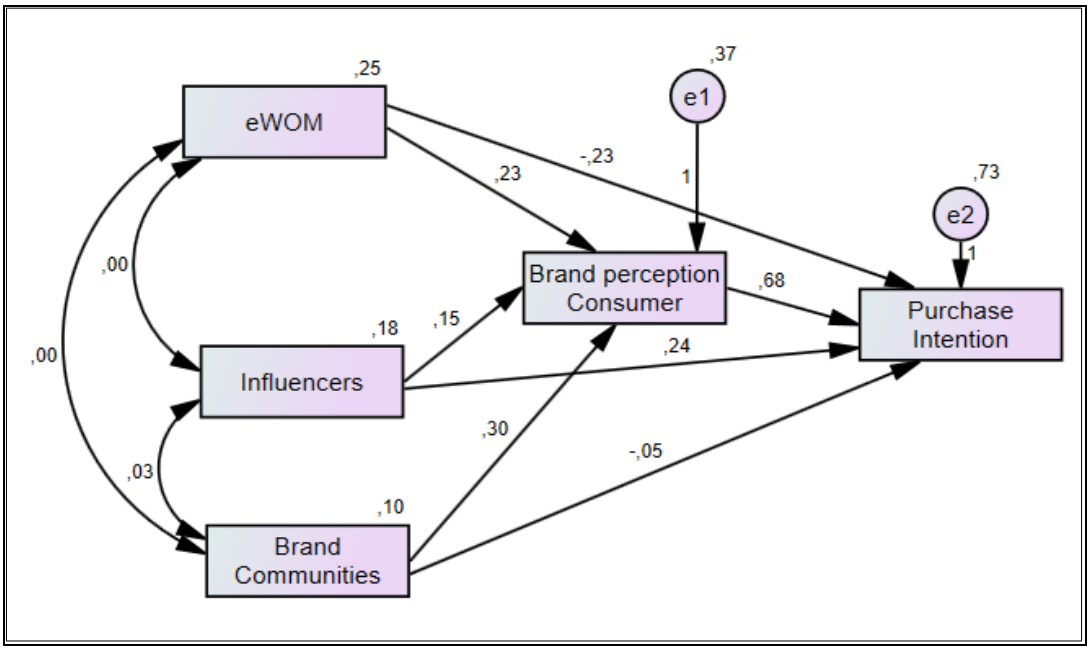


Figure 17: Path analysis

Table 11: Path Regression weights

Hypotheses / Path Analysis		Weights		T-value	P-Value	R-Square
		Unstandardised	Standardised			
eWOM	→ Consumer Brand Perception	,228	,182	2,174	,030	0.073
Influencers	→ Consumer Brand Perception	,154	,104	1,212	,226	
Brand communities	→ Brand Perception Consumer	,303	,152	1,764	,078	
eWOM	→ Purchase Intention	-,227	-,118	-1,511	,131	0.214
Influencers	→ Purchase Intention	,236	,105	1,311	,190	
Brand communities	→ Purchase Intention	-,047	-,015	-,193	,847	
Brand Perception Consumer	→ Purchase Intention	,678	,444	5,559	***	

Table 12: Direct and Indirect Effects for Mediation Testing

Hypotheses / Path Analysis	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Result	Hypothesis Supported
eWOM → BP → PI	-0.227 (0.131)	0.155 (0.048)	Full Mediation	Supported
Influencers → BP → PI	0.236 (0.190)	0.104 (0.153)	No Mediation	Not supported
Brand Communities → BP → PI	-0.047 (0.847)	0.206 (0.093)	No Mediation	Not supported

Notes: Estimate (p-value)

H1: There is a positive relationship between Social Media Marketing (SMM) activities and consumer brand perception.

This hypothesis was tested using three sub hypotheses as there were three independent variables namely; eWOM, Influencers and Brand communities.

H1a: There is a positive relationship between eWOM and consumer brand perception.

H0: there is no relationship between eWOM and consumer brand perception.
H1a: There is a positive relationship between eWOM and consumer brand perception.
The results presented in Table 3 show that eWOM (β = 0.182, t-value = 2.174, p-value = 0.030) had a positive and significant effect on consumer brand perception. The effect was positive because the standardised coefficient for eWOM (β = 0.182) was greater than

zero. This coefficient implies that for every unit increase in eWOM, the CBP increases by 0.182 of a unit. The effect was significant because the p-value was less than 0.05. Thus, the null hypothesis was rejected qin favour of the alternative hypothesis. It can be concluded that there is a positive relationship between eWOM and consumer brand perception.

H1b: There is a positive relationship between social media influencers and consumer brand perception.

H0: There is no relationship between social media influencers and consumer brand perception.
H1b: There is a positive relationship between social media influencers and consumer brand perception.
The results presented in Table 3 show that SMIs (β = 0.104, t-value = 1.212, p-value = 0.226) had an insignificant effect on consumer brand perception. This is because the p-value was greater than 0.05. Thus, the null hypothesis could not be rejected. It can be concluded that there is no sufficient evidence at 5% significance level to suggest that there is a positive relationship between SMIs and consumer brand perception.

H1c: There is a positive relationship between Brand communities and consumer brand perception.

H0: there is no relationship between Brand communities and consumer brand perception.
H1c: There is a positive relationship between Brand communities and consumer brand perception.
The results presented in Table 3 show that Brand communities (β = 0.152, t-value = 1.764, p-value = 0.078) had an insignificant effect on perception of brands that actively engage at 5% significance level. This is because the p-value was greater than 0.05. If this is looked from a 10% significance point of view, then the results will be significant. Thus, the null hypothesis could not be rejected at 5% significance level. It can be concluded that there is no sufficient evidence at 5% significance level to suggest that There is a positive relationship between Brand communities and CBP, but the relationship is positive and significant at 10% significance level.

Conclusion on H1:

Based on Hypotheses H1a – H1c, there is sufficient evidence that a positive relationship exists between SMMAs and CBP, and this is mainly through the positive relationship between eWOM and CBP and to a lesser extent due the positive effect of brand communities. However, there was not enough evidence to establish a positive relationship between SMM and SMIs.

H2: There is a positive relationship between Consumer brand perception (CBP) and purchase intention (PI).

H0: There is no relationship between CBP and PI.

H2: There is a positive relationship between CBP and PI.

The results presented in Table 3 show that CBP ($\beta = 0.444$, t-value = 5.559, p-value < 0.001) had a positive and significant effect on purchase intention. The effect was positive because the standardised coefficient for brand perception ($\beta = 0.444$) was greater than zero. The effect was significant because the p-value was less than 0.05. Thus, the null hypothesis was rejected in favour of the alternative hypothesis. It can be concluded that there is a positive relationship between brand perception and purchase intention.

H3: There is a positive relationship between social media marketing (SMM) and purchase intention (PI), with consumer brand perception (CBP) serving as a mediating variable.

This hypothesis was also tested using three sub hypotheses as there were three independent variables namely; electronic word of mouth (eWOM), social media influencers (SMI) and online brand communities (OBC).

H3a: Brand perception mediates the relationship between electric word of mouth (eWOM), and Purchase intention (PI).

H0: Brand perception does not mediate the relationship between eWOM and PI.

H3a: Brand perception mediates the relationship between eWOM and PI.

The results presented in Table 9 reveals a significant indirect effect of eWOM on PI through CBP (β = 0.155, p-value = 0.048). This means that the null hypothesis was rejected in favour of the alternative hypothesis. It can be concluded that CBP mediates the relationship between eWOM and PI. This is a full mediation since the direct effect of eWOM on PI (β = -0.227, p-value = 0.131) was not significant.

H3b: |Consumer brand perception (CBP) mediates the relationship between social media influencers (SMI) and purchase intention (PI).

H0: CBP does not mediate the relationship between SMIs and PI.
H3b: CBP mediates the relationship between SMIs and PI.

The results presented in Table 9 indicates that there was a non-significant indirect effect of SMIs on PI through CBP (β = 0.104, p-value = 0.153). This means that the null hypothesis could not be rejected since the p-value was greater than 0.05. was rejected in favour of the alternative hypothesis. Thus, it can be concluded that CBP does not mediate the relationship between SMIs and PI.

H3c: Consumer brand perception (CBP) mediates the relationship between online brand communities (OBC) and Purchase intention (PI).

H0: CBP does not mediate the relationship between OBCs and PI.
H3c: CBP mediates the relationship between OBCs and PI.

The results presented in Table 9 indicates that there was a non-significant indirect effect of OBCs on PI through CBP (β = 0.206, p-value = 0.093). This means that the null hypothesis could not be rejected since the p-value was greater than 0.05. was rejected in favour of the alternative hypothesis. Thus, it can be concluded that CBP does not mediate the relationship between OBCs on PI.

4.11 Social media usage, Consumer Brand Perception (CBP) and Purchase intention (PI) by Gender

Independent samples t-test was conducted to assess the rating of each of SM Frequency, SM Duration, CBP, and PI by the respondent's gender. The results are presented in Table 12.

It can be noted that only SM Duration differed significantly by gender, with female spending more time on social media (mean = 3.87.94 ± 1.202 out of 5) compared to mean = 2.94 ± 1.235 out of 5 for males, p-value < 0.001. The other variables SM Frequency, CBP, and PI did not differ significantly by gender as the p-values were greater than 0.05.

Table 13: Social media usage, Brand Perception and Purchase intent by Gender

Variable	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
SM Frequency	Male	54	4.69	.865	-.686	.494
	Female	79	4.77	.598		
SM Duration	Male	54	2.94	1.235	-4.328	.000
	Female	79	3.87	1.202		
Brand Perception Consumer	Male	54	2.35	.731	-1.318	.191
	Female	79	2.51	.552		
Purchase Intention	Male	54	3.87	1.100	.204	.839
	Female	79	3.84	.869		

SM Frequency, 1 = Rarely, 2 = Few times a month, 3 = Few times a week, 4 = Once a day, and 5 = Multiple times a day
SM Duration, 1 = Less than 30 minutes, 2 = 30 minutes to an hour, 3 = 1 to 2 hours, 4 = 2 to 3 hours, and 5 = More than 3 hours

4.12 Social media usage, Consumer Brand Perception(CBP) and Purchase intention (PI) by Age group

One Way Analysis of variance was conducted to assess whether the rating of SM Frequency, SM Duration, CBP, and PI by the respondent's age group. The one-way ANOVA was chosen because there were more than 2 age categories. The results are presented below. Like gender, only SM Duration differed significantly by age group. The post hoc analysis presented in Table 13 shows that the young respondents in the age group 18-24 years old (mean = 4.83 ± 0.541) used social media for significantly longer periods compared to the older age groups. The 25-34 years old (mean = 3.48 ± 1.262) was also significantly higher than the 35-44 years old (mean = 2.85 ± 1.174), The were no significant differences in the rest of the age groups.

Table 14: Social media usage, Brand Perception and Purchase intent by Age group

Variable	Age group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	P-Value
SM Frequency	18-24 years old	54	4.83	.541	.241
	25-34 years old	25	4.88	.440	
	35-44 years old	41	4.63	.915	
	45-54 years old	10	4.40	.966	
	55 years old and above	4	4.50	1.000	
	Total	134	4.74	.714	
SM Duration	18-24 years old	54	4.17	1.145	.000
	25-34 years old	25	3.48	1.262	
	35-44 years old	41	2.85	1.174	
	45-54 years old	10	3.10	1.101	
	55 years old and above	4	2.50	1.000	
	Total	134	3.51	1.296	
Brand Perception Consumer	18-24 years old	54	2.48	.540	.359
	25-34 years old	25	2.32	.748	
	35-44 years old	41	2.41	.670	
	45-54 years old	10	2.40	.699	
	55 years old and above	4	3.00	.000	
	Total	134	2.44	.631	
Purchase Intention	18-24 years old	54	3.96	.823	.629
	25-34 years old	25	3.72	1.100	
	35-44 years old	41	3.83	.892	
	45-54 years old	10	3.50	1.179	
	55 years old and above	4	4.00	2.000	
	Total	134	3.84	.964	

Table 15: Age multiple comparison for SM duration by gender

Dependent Variable			Mean Difference (I-J)	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
SM Duration	18-24 years old	25-34 years old	.687	.017	.13	1.25
		35-44 years old	1.313	.000	.83	1.79
		45-54 years old	1.067	.009	.27	1.86
		55 years old and above	1.667	.007	.47	2.87
	25-34 years old	18-24 years old	-.687	.017	-1.25	-.13
		35-44 years old	.626	.037	.04	1.21
		45-54 years old	.380	.387	-.49	1.25
		55 years old and above	.980	.122	-.27	2.23
	35-44 years old	18-24 years old	-1.313	.000	-1.79	-.83
		25-34 years old	-.626	.037	-1.21	-.04
		45-54 years old	-.246	.552	-1.06	.57
		55 years old and above	.354	.565	-.86	1.57
	45-54 years old	18-24 years old	-1.067	.009	-1.86	-.27
		25-34 years old	-.380	.387	-1.25	.49
		35-44 years old	.246	.552	-.57	1.06
		55 years old and above	.600	.388	-.77	1.97
	55 years old and above	18-24 years old	-1.667	.007	-2.87	-.47
		25-34 years old	-.980	.122	-2.23	.27
		35-44 years old	-.354	.565	-1.57	.86
		45-54 years old	-.600	.388	-1.97	.77

5. DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

5.1 Descriptive results

The primary objective of this study was to investigate if there are positive relationships between independent social media variables—namely, electronic word-of-mouth, social media influencers, and brand communities, —and the dependent variables of consumer perceptions and purchase intentions. This chapter discusses the important findings from the previous chapter on data analysis, shedding light on the fundamental impact of strategic SMM activities in altering consumer attitudes and behaviours towards brands.

The descriptive analysis demonstrates that respondents have a diverse demographic profile, as does their use of SMM. Women account for the bulk of participants (59%), followed by men (40%). The age distribution is variable, with the highest number falling within the 18-24 age bracket (40%) followed by 35-44 age group (31%). Black African respondents make up the majority (87%), followed by White respondents (6%), with lower presentation for other racial groups. Respondents had a varied distribution of annual household income, with a significant number (25%) falling into the middle-income brackets with income levels ranging from "ZAR501,000 to ZAR1,000,000".

Education levels vary as well with the majority having achieved Matric (37%) and different degrees and diplomas. This shows that SMM has the potential to affect people of all educational levels. Occupations include project management, finance, healthcare, engineering, and information technology. This diversification shows that SMM may have applications in a variety of businesses and professions. Gauteng Province is the most common place of residence (74%), indicating a primarily urban population.
This demographic diversity is reflective of a broad cross-section of the South African population.

The vast majority of respondents said they used multiple social media platforms, with YouTube being the most popular, followed by Instagram, LinkedIn, TikTok, Facebook, and Twitter. This widespread adoption implies that social media platforms are an intrinsic part of the surveyed participants' daily activity, creating significant opportunity for marketers to employ SMM strategies to reach and engage with their intended audience.

According to the Users and Gratification Theory, users deliberately choose media and content to meet their personal wants and desires (Moon et al., 2022). In the context of this study, the findings show that social media users predominantly use platforms for entertainment and knowledge, connecting with family and friends, discovering new products or services, and connecting with professionals, emphasising the importance of social media in providing these gratifications to users. These findings suggest that, while SM serves a variety of functions for participants, its role in facilitating entertainment and information is particularly important.

Entertainment-focused SMMAs according to Bushara et al. (2023) are particularly important in eliciting positive responses from consumers, increasing engagement, and driving repeat platform usage. Marketers use numerous social media channels to create appealing and engaging interactions for customers, including images, videos, and games (Bushara et al., 2023). This strategy not only elevates customer awareness, but it also fosters loyalty and positive behavioural intentions for the brand (Bushara et al., 2023). Vidyanata (2022) argues that entertainment can impact PI through brand engagement.

The analysis of the results for the hypothesis show the following relationships:

5.2 Hypothesis 1

The aim of hypothesis 1 was to determine if a relationship exists between social media marketing activities (SMMAs) and consumer brand perception (CBP). The results indicate that there is a significant relationship between e-WOM and CBP. This validates **hypothesis H1a** prediction that there is a positive relationship between SM electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and CBP. This finding implies that positive eWOM influences consumers' perceptions of brands in a positive way.

Several researchers have endorsed the hypothesis that eWOM has a significant impact on brand perception. Al Halbusi & Tehseen (2018) for example, corroborated this notion and showed that eWOM does, in fact, have a significant positive impact on brand perception. In a similar vein, this conclusion was confirmed by Krishnamurthy & Kumar (2018) study. According to their research, customers with high levels of involvement show a higher inclination to engage intensively in eWOM and devote more time to building brand

expectations. Consequently, these customers typically have higher standards and a more positive perception of the brand.

These findings present practical implications for marketers and brand managers. They propose that promoting positive e-WOM can play a significant role in influencing how consumers perceive a brand. Strategies such as social media discussions and online reviews that promote and regulate e-WOM have the potential to enhance consumer perception of brands and ultimately impact purchase decisions.

With regard to **hypothesis 1b**, which proposed a positive relationship between CBP and social media influencers (SMI), the analysis of the results points to an insignificant result. Although social media influencers are highly influential in contemporary marketing, their effect on consumer perceptions of brands might not be as significant as this study initially suggested. Brand perception is strongly influenced by mediating factors (Sijabat, Rantung, and Mandagi, 2022). In their study, Sijabat, Rantung, & Mandagi (2022) revealed that consumer brand engagement plays a mediating role between SMI and CBP. Research has particularly revealed a favourable association between SMI and brand perception, with influencer-generated content including variables such as credibility, attractiveness, and likeness to followers influencing trust in branded content and shaping perceptions (Sijabat, Rantung, and Mandagi, 2022).

Jaitly (2021) however, asserts that influencers with a sizable fan base offset the favourable perception consumers may associate with a product's perceived distinctiveness. Although the extent of an influencer's following is frequently given priority when establishing brand awareness, this focus might actually work against a business's perceived exclusivity or distinctiveness (Jaitly, 2021). Moreover, influencers with little experience promoting particular products could negatively impact consumers' perceptions of the brand and dissuade them from making a purchase (Jaitly, 2021). Furthermore, bad social media evaluations left by influencers can seriously damage a brand's reputation. To an extent, the inverse of this also holds true.

These findings imply that brands may not always benefit from using SMIs (SMIs). This emphasises how brands and marketers should carefully configure their marketing strategies when collaborating with SMIs. These view is further echoed by the current

study's participants. One participant expressed a reliance on personal recommendations rather than influencers for shopping decisions, stating,

"I do not rely on influencers to make shopping decisions. I rely on people's recommendations, people I know personally. Unless there is something specific I am looking for."

Another participant highlighted the potential negative impact of influencers who lack authenticity, remarking, *"I'd say sometimes the use of influencers who may not even be using the products can have a negative impact and yet it looks convincing to the public eye."*

Similarly, a desire for genuine representation was voiced, with a respondent stating, *"I just wish brands can use people who really relate to the products they are promoting. For instance with hair products, let them use people who really have hair damage not influencers that we already know that they have healthy hair."*

These perspectives underscore the importance of authenticity and relevance in influencer collaborations to ensure positive brand perception and consumer trust.

The findings for **hypothesis 1c** indicate that at the 5% significance level ($p > 0.05$), online brand communities (OBC) had an insignificant impact on CBP; but, at the 10% significance level ($p < 0.10$), the relationship became significant. Based on a significantly reduced significance level, it can be concluded that there is evidence of a positive relationship between CBP and online brand communities, even though the association is not strong enough to reject the null hypothesis at the 5% level.

Several researchers, such as Zollo et al. (2020), have validated that there is a favourable relationship between online brand communities and CBP. Online brand communities cultivate a sense of belonging, social identity, shared experiences, trust, loyalty, and value co-creation, all of which are critical factors in influencing CBPs. Recent research, however, warns that SMM initiatives may not always successfully encourage community engagement and potentially lead users to cease engaging in social media brand communities (Zollo et al., 2020). Brand managers should thus comprehend why customers join these kinds of communities and make sure that SMM initiatives fulfil certain customer needs and offer satisfying experiences (Zollo et al., 2020). Brands can

cultivate stronger relationships with consumers and enhance their reputation and brand image by leveraging and nurturing their brand communities.

HYPOTHESIS 1	**EFFECT**
Hypothesis 1a: eWOM & CBP	Positive and significant
Hypothesis 1b: SMI & CBP	Insignificant
Hypothesis 1c: OBC & CBP	Insignificant ($p<0.05$) Significant ($p<0.10$)

5.3 Hypothesis 2

The purpose of hypothesis 2 was to determine if a positive relationship exists between consumer brand perception (CBP) and purchase intention (PI). The results of the current study validate hypothesis H2 by showing a strong positive correlation between CBP and purchase intention. It may be inferred from this that consumers' perceptions of a brand have a significant impact on their decision to buy goods or services of that particular brand. Aiswarya G. (2019) study corroborates this result, that brand perception has a favourable impact on buying decisions. In addition, De la Roche et al. (2022) demonstrate that more positive consumer perceptions result in increased purchase intentions. Whilst, Qureshi et al. (2019), reports that perceptions generated through social media can easily translate into purchase intentions, emphasising the significance of using social networking sites to create favourable brand perception.

The research undertaken by Raoa et al. (2021) is consistent with the Theory of Reasoned Action's belief-attitude-intention model. It emphasises how positive reviews, product information, shared experiences and conversations on social media platforms enhance consumers' perceptions of a brand's credibility, which in turn increases their level of trust and willingness to make a purchase (Rao et al., 2021). The research highlights the beneficial effects of online positive word-of-mouth (ePWOM) on value co-creation (Rao et al., 2021). Winarno & Indrawati (2022)further corroborated that PI is significantly influenced by E-WOM. In order to improve value creation and strengthen customer engagement, marketers are urged to integrate consumer perspectives into the processes involved in product design and development, and service delivery (Rao et al., 2021).

HYPOTHESIS 2	EFFECT
Hypothesis 2: CBP & PI	Strong Positive and significant

5.4 Hypothesis 3

The aim of hypothesis 3 was to determine the impact of social media marketing (SMM) on purchase intention (PI) in the presence of consumer brand perception (CBP) as a mediating variable. SMM serves as an independent variable, PI as an dependent variable, and CBP as a mediating variable.

The findings for **hypothesis 3a** indicate that eWOM has a significant indirect impact on purchase intention (PI) through CBP. This implies that as eWOM increases, so does brand perception, which in turn increases PI. It appears that CBP fully mediates the relationship between eWOM and PI because the direct impact of eWOM on PI was not significant. This implies that eWOM acts as a catalyst to shape CBP, which in turn influences their PI.

Several studies confirm this hypothesis. For example, Ali and Naushad (2023) confirmed that SMM had no direct impact on customer purchase intentions. They concluded from mediation analysis that full mediation exists, implying that SMM influences PI only in the presence of mediation, which is consistent with previous research findings (Ali & Naushad, 2023). According to the findings of Suprapto et al. (2020),while SMMAs have no significant effect on PI, CBP does. CBP serves as an mediating variable, enhancing the relationship between SMM (i.e. Instagram promotion) and PI .

In terms of mediating elements, Moslehpour et al. (2021) identify entertainment and word of mouth (WOM) as the key influences on PI in SMM. They emphasise the need to create captivating content to pique consumer attention and encourage positive, brand information sharing (Moslehpour et al., 2021). This emphasises how crucial it is to successfully manage eWOM in order to improve CBP and eventually influence the purchasing decisions of consumers.

The non-significant indirect effect for **hypothesis H3b** suggests that CBP does not mediate the relationship between social media influencers (SMIs) and purchase intention

(PI). Similarly, **hypothesis H3c** posits that there is insufficient evidence to substantiate the notion CBP mediates the relationship between online brand communities (OBC) and PI. In both cases, this implies that other factors may play a more significant role in shaping PI in relation to SMIs and OBC.

For example, Vidyanata (2022) asserts that SMM has no significant effect on PI. However, it has a significant impact on perceived value, which subsequently influences PI (Vidyanata, n.d.). Notably, perceived value completely mediates the effect of SMM on PI (Vidyanata, n.d.). Similarly, Emini and Zeqiri (2021) reported no favourable correlation between SMM and PI. Their findings also demonstrated a mediation effect, which suggests that brand involvement mediates the relationship between SMM and PI(Emini & Zeqiri, 2021).

According to Ntobaki et al. (2022), social media has a significant impact on consumer product selection since it shapes perceptions and demonstrates product usability. Its influence on customer decision-making processes can determine whether a product succeeds or fails in the marketplace (Ntobaki et al., 2022).The TRA also emphasises how attitudes and subjective norms influence behavioural intentions.

While brand perception significantly mediated the relationship between eWOM and PI, it did not serve as a mediator for the relationships between SMIs and PI, and OBCs and PI. The results of this study suggest that whereas eWOM plays a role in influencing CBP, the impact of OBCs and SMIs on PI may be attributed to varied mechanisms or factors such as, perceived value, brand image, brand engagement, customer relationships, among others other than brand perception. In order to impact consumer behaviour, marketers should therefore take a comprehensive approach when utilising these many SMM components and consider a more tailored approach to their marketing strategies to effectively leverage each channel.

HYPOTHESIS 3	**EFFECT**
Hypothesis 3a: eWOM - CBP - PI	Significant indirect
Hypothesis 3b: SMI - CBP - PI	Insignificant indirect
Hypothesis 3c: OBC – CBP - PI	Insignificant indirect

5.5 Other factors

Several other factors may influence how firms in South Africa use SMM and how this impacts consumer perceptions and behaviour. Among these factors is brand trust and social media usage habits.

5.1.1 Brand trust

De la Roche's (2022) conceptual model—which takes into account perceived benefits, risks, and organisational trust—was examined in chapter two of the study, as being pertinent to understanding consumer trust in SMM. According to this framework, customer trust is positively impacted by perceived benefits and organisational trust, and trust must be maintained by managing perceived risks. Furthermore, positive consumer perceptions towards SMM and email marketing initiatives were linked to higher organisational trust, highlighting the importance of developing trust in marketing techniques. Sijabat, Rantung, and Mandagi (2022) on the other hand discovered that brand trust acts as a mediator between SMM attributes (such as interactivity and awareness) and purchase decisions.

The element of trust was explored in this study and the findings revealed insight into respondents' perceptions of the trustworthiness and credibility of companies based on their SM presence. According to the findings, only 21% of respondents believe that companies that use social media efficiently are more trustworthy, 52% disagree, and 27% are unsure. Similarly, 57% of respondents believe a strong social media presence improves the brand's credibility, 30% disagree, and 13% are unsure. These findings indicate a significant level of scepticism among respondents about the relationship between effective social media usage and trustworthiness, as well as the impact of a strong social media presence on brand credibility.

The focus on brand trust is consistent with de la Roche et al.'s (2022) conceptual model, which emphasises the mediating role of brand trust in the relationship between SMM activities and purchase decisions. By examining the significance of brand perception and trust in affecting consumer attitudes and behaviours, the study supports the essential components of de la Roche et al.'s model and emphasises the need of taking these factors into account when analysing the impact of SMM on customer behaviour. Further research

is needed to understand the underlying variables impacting these attitudes and the ramifications for organisations who use SMM strategies.

5.1.2 SM usage duration and usage frequency relative to age and gender and the impact on consumer brand perceptions and purchase intentions

Interesting insights into the relationship between social media usage, brand impression, purchase intention, and demographic parameters like gender and age can be gained from examining the results of the independent samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA testing.

The study's findings regarding gender disparities revealed that the only factor that really varied between males and females was the duration of time spent on social media, with females engaging social media more frequently than males. Other variables, like the frequency of social media use, brand perception, and purchase intention, weren't significantly affected by gender.

The findings showed that the duration of time spent on social media differed significantly among age groups, with younger respondents using social media for longer than older respondents. Furthermore, there were no notable variations in brand perception or PI between age groups according to the findings of the study.

This study focused on a multigenerational research cohort, whereas the other studies—by Duffett (2016), Sundaram et al. (2020), De la Roche et al. (2022), Zollo et al. (2020), and Azionya and Overton-de Klerk (2021)—focused on younger demographics. The study's findings emphasise how crucial it is to include participants of various ages. Future research endeavours ought to take into account a wider age range, surpassing the Generation Y and Z cohorts alone, as per the conclusions drawn from the gender and age-based analysis. The notable variations in social media usage patterns among age cohorts suggest that marketing tactics should be customised to cater to the distinct preferences and behaviours of heterogeneous age groups.

Overall, the study's findings are consistent with U&G theory, TRA, and de la Roche et al.'s conceptual model, emphasising the necessity of examining user motives, attitudes, and perceptions when assessing the impact of SMM on consumer behaviour. These

theoretical frameworks provide useful insights into the intricate interplay between social media activity, consumer perceptions, and purchase intents, allowing for a more complete understanding of the dynamics at work in digital marketing.

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the discussion has shed some insight into several aspects of social media marketing (SMM) and its implications on consumer perceptions and behaviour. The empirical evidence Hypotheses H1a–c point to a favourable relationship between SMM activities and consumer perception of brands, mostly via eWOM and, to a lesser degree, brand communities—but not SMIs. H2 emphasises how brand perception positively affects purchasing intention. H3a-c indicates that the relationship between eWOM and PI is mediated by brand perception, but it did not serve as a mediator for the relationships between SMIs and PI, and OBCs and PI. These interactions between variables are complex and may be further influenced by factors such as brand value, brand trust and credibility, consumer gender and SM usage habits.

It is critical to recognise the inherent limitations in the research as well as the direction of future research into the topic. Below are several limitations and recommendations.

6.1 Limitations

- The findings may not be generalizable across industries or geographical regions, necessitating additional research to investigate contextual variances.

- Furthermore, using self-reported survey data may induce biases and restrictions in result interpretation.

- Cultural diversity within the country presents complexity that can influence how people interact with SMM and perceive brand messages. Different cultural norms, beliefs, and manner of interaction may have an impact on the effectiveness of SMM tactics, necessitating organisations to modify their approaches accordingly. However, these factors were not considered in this study.

- Socioeconomic factors such as income, education, and technological access can have an impact on people's digital literacy, online behaviour, and purchasing power. These

variables may make it difficult to effectively reach out and engage with target audiences, particularly those who are marginalised or underserved.

6.2 Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, several recommendations for organisations involved in SMM emerge.

- Firstly, a key mediator between SMM initiatives and purchase intents is brand trust (De la Roche et al., 2022). Organizations should prioritize building trust and credibility on social media platforms through transparent and authentic interactions. This could entail sincerity in your interactions with customers, responding to problems promptly, and consistently upholding promises made on the SM platforms. Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) or user-generated content (UGC) on social media, especially from reputable sources, are important factors in building consumer attitudes towards a company since they are seen as dependable and trustworthy (Rao, Rao, and Asharyulu, 2021). The informativeness and integrity of brand communication are further enhanced by online evaluations and feedback on brand fan pages, which increases trust (Rao, Rao, and Asharyulu, 2021). Trust has a direct impact on purchase intentions and lowers perceived risk; nevertheless, worries about privacy and security can have the opposite effect on trust (De la Roche, 2022).

- Furthermore, organisations should focus on generating value-driven content and overall brand value that resonates with their target audience. Brands should adopt a customer-centric approach that promotes cooperation and knowledge sharing with customers in new product development (NPD) processes, as opposed to a firm-centric view that sees value creation as occurring exclusively within the firm and assigns distinct roles to producers and consumers (Lorenzo-Romero et al., 2014).Co-creation, in which customers actively choose and shape new items, is similar to crowdsourcing in that it uses user feedback as a means of enhancing goods and services. According to Lorenzo-Romero et al. (2014), social media is essential for co-creation because it offers interactive platforms that link individuals worldwide and allow them to work together to create value. According to Hussain et al. (2022), brands can also add value by actively engaging customers in advertising value-creation through the use of social media tools like live sessions and feedback polls, thereby increasing positive word-

of-mouth (WOM) and brand value. Companies need to understand how to encourage customers to engage in co-creation activities in order to support their value creation processes and leverage positive electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) to drive positive brand perceptions and online brand purchase intentions (Hussain et al., 2022).

- The COVID-19 epidemic has drawn attention to South Africa's digital divide, which is a result of a severe disparity in the country's access to and literacy in technology (Innovation Edge, 2022). In low-income areas in particular, inadequate ICT infrastructure, high data costs, and poor internet access aggravate this divide, making it difficult for many to engage in remote employment and e-learning or upgrade their skills (Innovative Edge, 2022).This is a complicated problem which requires innovative solutions. To produce content that appeals to South Africa's diverse population, marketers should perform in-depth research on their target audience, taking into account factors like language preferences, cultural diversity, and demographics (Flume, 2023).

- Future research should incorporate these elements, as well as employ mixed-method research approaches, to obtain a better understanding of the complex dynamics between SMM, CBP, and consumer behaviour in South Africa. According to Manjengwa (n.d.), mixed methods research combines qualitative and quantitative techniques in a single study to attain a comprehensive and profound comprehension. This method offers objectivity through quantitative methods and explanatory power through qualitative methods by combining real, non-quantitated qualitative data with quantitative data (Schoonenboom, 2023; Manjengwa, n.d). Compared to using either strategy alone, the combination of two approaches enables a more thorough comprehension of complicated events and research challenges (Manjengwa, n.d.). Furthermore, combining the findings from both approaches strengthens the validity of conclusions, improving comprehension of the study (Manjengwa, n.d.).

Thus, while SMM provides significant opportunities for businesses to engage with consumers and influence their perceptions and behaviours, successfully navigating this landscape requires an in-depth awareness of the factors at play, as well as a strategic approach to communication and relationship-building. Organisations may use social

media to foster trust, improve brand credibility, and promote significant consumer outcomes by focusing on transparency, authenticity, and value creation.

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