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Edited for Instagram: The impact of curated social media influencer profiles on self-representation

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DECLARATION

I, LIJENG PATRICIA RANOOE, hereby declare that this research report is my work. It is being submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, School of Arts, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in fulfilment of the requirements for a Master's degree in Digital Arts. I declare that this research report has not been submitted previously, in part or in full, for any other degree or examination in this or any other university.

Lijeng P. Ranooe
Day of 2 February 2022

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ABSTRACT

The increased popularity of social media in the past decades has turned it into an integral function of online communication and presentation around the world. This has led to the prevalence of social media influencers that can impact society through their actions and opinion thus having an impact on social media usage. This research discusses topics surrounding whether social media influencers impact the Instagram content of active social media users. The research has considered the social media patterns and choices of active Instagram users. This is loosely based on the hypothesis that active social media users in South Africa use social media to have as many followers as possible or even become social media influencers themselves. The study revealed that although influencers set an idealized standard for content quality; active Instagram users do not view it as necessary to create content that has that quality despite the pressures and standards that social media presents; which most users cannot keep up with. Although this research cannot be a conclusive representation of all Instagram users in South Africa it depicts a different perspective about the use of social media that broadens it to be more diverse than numbers and interaction. There is a call for authentic representation of the regular realities that society faces for the normal to be acceptable. It is predictive of a shift towards the intent of using social media applications being geared towards the intent of its use for each user. The study also indicated that the relationship that users have with social media can directly correlate to how they perceive the content of others.

Keywords: *Instagram, social media influencers, digital manipulation, social media, editing*

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This chapter covers the background and the contextualization of the specific focus and topics that the research covers and entails. It will detail the purpose of the research; present the research question and hypothesis for the study.

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND SOCIETY

The development and growth of digital media and technology have prompted the need for people to have a digital presence on the internet. In the decades before social media gained popularity, there were traditional mass media outlets that were at the forefront of creating cultural narratives that contributed to the conception of social identities through the digital manipulation of media content. Society has often adjusted and adapted to the demands and developments of technology by embracing creativity and innovation. For the most part, this has been to facilitate so-economic growth and opportunities for all. This study acknowledges the role that the internet, more specifically how social media has contributed so-economic growth of netizens and sets the foundation for the exploration of the impact that social media influencers have on social media users in South Africa.

Social media[1] has changed the way society functions and relates to one another in many aspects and this has been by the availability and access to vital resources on the internet as Richard Perloff explains in the 2014 article called *Social Media Effects on Young Women's Body Image Concerns: Theoretical Perspectives and an Agenda for Research*. This form of mass media is vital because it provides information on multiple platforms that are easily accessible if one has an internet connection. Social media has provided public access to relations and contacts for personal and professional purposes irrespective of geographical location making easy public access

[1]There are various definitions and explanations as to what social media is. In their journal article called *The use of social media by South African organisations* Nomusa Nomhle Dlamini and Kevin Johnston (2018: 198) stated that "Social media is defined as social interaction using online social media tools; these could be blogs, microblogs such as Twitter, social sharing services such as YouTube, text messaging, discussion forums, collaborative editing tools such as wikis and virtual worlds and social networking services such as Facebook."

to useful information a reality. There are some social media sites and profiles that cater to specific niches and curate content that is explicitly for that audience and industry; offering an array of content that is relatable to that niche or market. Social media has created a platform for unconventional careers that have now become part of social norms e.g., YouTubers, Instagram models, social media managers, content marketers or content creators and even professional meme creators. Many career paths have solely been viable because of the internet and social media, which have allowed ordinary citizens to collaborate with major and start companies.

In the 2015 dissertation, *Magazines' representation of women and the influence on identity construction,* Nereshnee Govender emphasises that magazines were known for the digital manipulation of the images to fit a certain aesthetic and representation. This has also been heavily adopted in the social media space. This may have been fuelled by the prevalence of social media influencers in the present digital society. The increased use of content-driven media platforms over the past decades has turned social media[2] into an integral function of online communication and self-presentation (Perloff, 2014). Therefore, social media which has a wider global reach has even more dire consequences within society. It is therefore not surprising that in the journal article *The Impact of Social Media on Economic Growth: Empirical Evidence of Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Pinterest,* Prince Asare Vitenu-Sackey (2020: 222) stated that:

> the rise of social media is largely attributed to the unthinkable and extraordinary change, and transformation of social behaviour because about a generation ago social media was not part of human life. Now it has transformed the daily lives of one-third of the global populace.

Social media could even be considered a necessity for individuals to be a functional and active part of current society in particular regard to so-called millennials[3] (Perloff, 2014) seeing that they are the demographic that uses social the most closely followed by generation z[4] which this the key demographic that the study is focused on. The

[2] According to lexico.com social media platforms are “websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking”.

[3] Lexico.com defines a millennial as “A person reaching young adulthood in the early 21st century”.

[4] Lexico.com defines generation z as “The generation reaching adulthood in the second decade of the 21st century, perceived as being familiar with the internet from a very young age”.

popularity and growth of social media networks are evident in the statistics which show that as of "2009, Facebook had a market share of 48.14% and as of March 2020 has increased its market share by 74.07% to 64.99%, Pinterest has increased its market share by 8.31% and Twitter has also increased its market share by 50.5%." (Vitenu-Sackey, 2020: 223). It can be argued that social media has become a central part of how the world functions within a very short space of time because it also comes with the economic opportunities that have widely available on social media. Which can cause active social media users to seek attention and/or expose themselves to opportunities that social media avails to them for monetary gain and the opportunity of having a significant impact on societal culture through social media.

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON SOCIETY

Media content distributed by mass media institutions is often regarded as what is important to audiences that consume the content regularly as Rita Barnard (2000) states in her chapter on *Senses of Culture. South African Culture Studies* book called Contesting Beauty. To this effect, Govender (2015: 16) argues that the medium has a vital position within society as "it is a dominant and influential tool and source of information, that often influences how we understand, interpret and view ourselves and those around us". Highlighting that media has always contributed to our understanding of the world; shaping the conception of our individual and social identities and with the prevalence of social media networks it is even more influential to the very fabric and function of society.

Since the occurrence and development of the internet in the 1990's people have been self-publishing through an array of publications including but limited to newsletters, emails, self-published magazines, and pamphlets then blogs, and websites as technology[5] advanced and developed; this further enabled the internet entrepreneurship as Emily Hund explains in the 2019 article *The Influencer Industry:*

[5] According to Perloff (2014:365) contemporary media technologies "encompass the Internet, Websites, and an array of social media sites—Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram and Pinterest—that allow for the rapid creation and sharing of user-generated messages, as well as instantaneous communication with other uses on a plethora of hand-held devices".

Constructing and Commodifying Authenticity on Social Media. Social media has emerged as a "new channel for the accumulation of human and intellectual capital, as evidenced by the proportion of people who use social media to learn, share knowledge and access expertise" Roberto Dell'Anno, Thierry Rayna and Offiong Helen Solomon (2016: 634) state in the article *Impact of Social Media on Economic Growth - Evidence from Social Media*. This is supporting the notion that social media has become a place to source diverse information and knowledge that has an extensive reach and access the world over. There is an array of social media content that is created to inform and educate; support and aid social causes and curate activism all of which can be fuelled by a single hashtag and go viral[6]. Information spreads at an unprecedented rate because of this and "the rapid increase in social media penetration sparks fears in relation to the negative effects that could arise because of their usage. These negative effects could range from psychological and economic impacts" (Vitenu-Sackey, 2020: 223). Which has been the focus of much research with regards to mass media and social media.

The 'digital economy' as Brooke Erin Duffy and Emily Hund (2019: 4983) call it in their journal article *Gendered Visibility on Social Media: Navigating Instagram's Authenticity Bind* creates a race for 'digital visibility' on social media at all costs. This is one of the reasons why this research is significant in the field of digital media. Social media exposure can potentially lead active users to go to extreme lengths for social media popularity (Duffy & Hund, 2019). Social media has also made it easier to critique and praise, which has increased the pressure to curate an altered representation of the self. It has often appeared that social media success is due to the instant interaction and feedback that it provides to users.

It is worth noting that before the instant gratification and easy access associated with social media became so rampant; its very foundation is derived from traditional mass media; which has continually been an influential part of how society functions. The internet has just expanded the reach and impact of the idealised depiction of bodies and ideals whereas "in comparison to conventional mass media, social media are

[6] Lexico.com defines viral as: (of an image, video, piece of information, etc.) circulated rapidly and widely from one internet user to another.

interactive, allowing individuals to create their own personal profiles and share information and photos with users" as Jennifer S. Mills, Sarah Musto, Lindsay Williams and Marika Tiggemann (2018: 86) state in their journal article *"Selfie" harm: Effects on mood and body image in young women.* Thus, allowing better control of their social media feeds and what they consume regularly. This ability to create and share culture through technology has been woven into the very fabric of our society; the very concept of free speech and opinion is at an all-time high and vigilantly practised and normalized.

This, however, can sometimes not directly translate to an acceptance of individuality; especially if most of the public opinion is not in agreement with it. It solicits a concern about whether conforming to social media standards is the fastest way to gain social media traction. This has indeed become a norm as Liselot Hudders, Steffi De Jans and Marijke De Veirman indicate in the article *The commercialization of social media stars: a literature review and conceptual framework on the strategic use of social media influencers* state that in the past decade "many social media users have gained online fame, expressed by a significant number of followers, by building attractive and appealing social media profiles" (2021: 1-2). Therefore, social media representation has become exceedingly important with regards to the social perceptions that society forms from what they see represented online; be it about a company or individual. Social media insights can now determine the socio-economic significance of an individual as well as the market value of a company through social media presence and impact. Therefore, influencer marketing has become so widely used as a strategy to increase brand value and curate profits and some predictions suggest that influencer marketing could be valued at $15 billion[7] by 2022 (Hudders et al., 2021).

In the case of people with careers that are based on social media analytics and data it is a prerequisite to be as vulnerable and transparent as possible with an audience – to a certain degree- to be relatable to them (Duffy & Hund, 2019). It is what has been termed 'visibility labour' which is the efforts that are adopted by social media influencers and content creators when creating content in hopes of presenting themselves in a certain way to stand out to prospective followers, clients...etc (Duffy

[7] This translates to about ZAR 240 billion

& Hund, 2019). They are under constant surveillance because the success of their careers is determined by the traction they get from their platforms (i.e., followers, likes, story impressions and comments); which are used by companies to determine the reach of their influence (Duffy & Hund, 2019). This means that they are often under coercion to present their best selves on their social media platforms because they are not just representing themselves but the companies they are under contract with. It can be argued that companies use the "digital advertising economy that propels these sites, moreover, constructs visibility in an unabashedly data-driven way by financially incentivizing indexes of attention and reputation" (Duffy & Hund, 2019: 4985) and utilize that data for the potential profit and exposure the social media influencers bring to the company by merging it with how they represent themselves via social media.

SOCIAL MEDIA REPRESENTATION

The rise of this social media presence and the research towards self-presentation and how it can be linked to the representation through the content that active media users have become accustomed to are not new concepts to investigate in some regions of the world. However, the technological advances that have been developed to accommodate this requirement have resulted in the abundant availability of software and/or apps for effortlessly editing content on social media which might not have been as widely considered yet, especially in South Africa. In their 2019 article *Fake images: The effects of source, intermediary, and digital media literacy on contextual assessment of image credibility online*, Cuihua Shen, Mona Kasra, Wenjing Pan, Grace A Bassett, Yining Malloch and James F O'Brien indicate that these easy-to-use applications have led to a decrease in the expertise involved to produce convincing visual manipulations. To further explain the degree of exposure to content on the internet Shen et al. (2019: 1) also emphasise that often these digitally edited images are repeatedly "distributed through trusted sources such as mass media outlets, perhaps unknowingly, these manipulated images propagate across social media with growing frequency and sophistication". The notion of technology has become so fundamental and powerful that it has changed perceptions about how society presents a certain narrative or lifestyle and has led to the phenomena of social media

influencers. In a research article called, *The impact of new media on intercultural communication in global context*, Guo-Ming Chen (2012: 2) states that:

> because of its new functions that enable individuals to equally control messages in interpersonal media, new media not only influences the form and content of information/messages, but it also affects how people understand each other in the process of human communication.

This could be an indication that the ability to create or control a certain perception on social media could generate narratives that are meant to be understood or controlled in a certain respect. Therefore, social media perception might directly influence what is considered common or presentable. Social media can perpetuate, underscore and even construct certain narratives about what is the norm in society and lead to greater conversations that are highly required for a more progressive world; not just solely to push specific narratives.

Initially editing photographs and videos was something known to be of high prevalence in traditional mass media outlets; however, in recent years it has become more common practice on social media especially because of social media influencers. This could lead one to conclude that the reputation and perceived reliability of a source could directly impact what is considered normal or standard in society depending on how it is presented and what it is intended to represent as ideal.

SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF EDITED SOCIAL MEDIA CONTENT

This idealism could also make their followers[8] feel obliged to digitally manipulate their social media content with the expectation of gaining similar popularity as the social media influencers leading to comparison and self-discrepancy[9]. Social comparison has various psychological effects in the case of social media Instagram (and other) posts can potentially lead to negative affect regarding individual mindsets, particularly with regards to the representation of luxury lifestyles which are often depicted by social media influencers. Hund (2019: 1) states that "the rise of the digital influencer during the first two decades of the twenty-first century has propelled billions of marketing and advertising dollars into the social media economy and helped instigate a chain of events that are fundamentally altering the production of culture". With this noted it is vital to clarify that whether the conations of this are positive or negative can vary from person to person. It is important for the sake of this study to be clear that the impact of social media is not linear and different contingencies apply to how it affects certain individuals. Influencers present specific images to construct a predominant impression of the desired lifestyle. To this notion Seunga Venus Jin, Aziz Muqaddam and Ehri Ryu (2019: 567) build an argument in their article *Instafamous and social media influencer marketing* on the premise that "attractive and popular Instagram influencers would have stronger effects on consumers with lower self-confidence and higher self-discrepancy". The idealism that has been built around social media influencers is contingent on them being perceived as ordinary people sharing their everyday lives on social media and is the core basis of this research.

Social media personalities can impact society through their actions and opinion and are often classified as social media influencers. On the impact of social media, Vassilis Poulopoulos, Costas Vassilakis, Angeliki Antoniou, George Lepouras, Anastasios

[8] Lexico.com defines followers as 'someone who is tracking a particular person, group, organization, etc. on a social media website or application… or … "a person who supports and admires a particular person or set of ideas.

[9] Self-discrepancy is one of the outcomes of comparing oneself to media figures. Jin et al. (2019: 567)

Theodoropoulos and Manolis Wallace in their 2018 article called *The Personality of the Influencers, the Characteristics of Qualitative Discussions and Their Analysis for Recommendations to Cultural Institutions* explain that "it is a common occurrence that certain individuals can influence society in various ways. Some people can affect us more than others, while there are several people that can possibly impact numerous other people easily through their opinion" (2018: 240). Social media influencers operate through an interaction that shifts perceptions in ways that challenge current conceptions of the authenticity surrounding them. In the thesis *Correlation of Selfie and Self-Esteem,* Caryl Louise B. Isuan (2015: 4) further states that "by visually expressing selves through profile photographs and other images, users engage in the social construction of reality, crafting digitally mediated identities in interaction with online social relations". Social media is altering common views through opinion sharing and the easy availability of information as it has become such a prominent part of society's everyday routine.

The normalization of "fake or manipulated images propagated through the web and social media have the capacity to deceive, emotionally distress, and influence public opinions and actions" (Shen et.al., 2019: 1). They spread a particular perception and create a certain belief or standardised norm (Shen et.al., 2019). These narratives are shared with photos, and videos and are emphasized by captions thus creating a very direct form of online self-presentation which is why they have become an increasingly powerful form of social online currency as indicated by Lee Rainie, Joanna Brenner and Kristen Purcell in their research *Photos and Videos as Social Currency Online*. This could allude to the perception or idea that the amount of interaction that a social media post obtains – likes, comments, views acts. - the more valuable it is hence why the content of social media influencers is often monetized[10] (Rainie et al., 2012).

The digital manipulation of images of social media influencers on Instagram could be portraying a standardised representation of an image and lifestyle; that could result in the increased use of digital editing applications or software by active social media users and several studies have shown a correlation between social media and low self- esteem due to comparison which is why digitally manipulated social media

[10] According to lexico.com to monetized means "convert into or express in the form of currency".

profiles could be a cause of concern. It is known that adolescents are regularly exposed to visual media content that has been digitally edited across all mass media platforms. This has shown to be problematic in research addressing adolescent development and the concern is not only the effect this exposure has on their confidence and perception of self but that they develop with edited images presented as realistic or the normal standard. In their article called *Virtually Perfect: Image Retouching and Adolescent Body Image* Kristen Harrison and Veronica Hefner (2014: 137) state that being constantly exposed to seemingly "perfected human images should be processed by the average viewer in an upward-comparison fashion, increasing appearance-related self-consciousness [..] and decreasing physical self-esteem via critical assessment of personal appearance". The lines of what is real and edited are getting more blurred with each generation that comes as technology advances and makes the once impossible easily possible. Social perceptions shift with each new development that is introduced. So, considering this; to determine whether social media influencers contribute to or prompt the use of digital editing applications or software to convey a social aesthetic to gain social media popularity. I ask the question **-** do active social media users feel that the quality of social media influencers' content is required standard on social media?

SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS

The idea of a better alternative representation (one that might not be an accurate reflection of the actual reality) of who one is as an individual is a notion that has seemly led to the development of what society calls social media influencers. The pixlee.com - *which is the oxford Dictionary's online platform* - definition of a social media influencer is "a user on social media who has established credibility in a specific industry". It is, therefore, no surprise that "influencers gain popularity through their participation on social networking sites and achieve fame through online media, such as blogs and online videos on sites like YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram." as Kristen Forbes (2016:79) stated in the article *Examining the Beauty Industry's Use of Social Influencers*. A social media influencer has access to a large audience and can persuade others by virtue of their authenticity and reach. Hund (2019: 27) observes that "influencers are means of sorting information; their easily digestible personal

brands signal what type of content they provide. More recent technological development has allowed them to offer seamless integration of content with the ability to shop". Social media influencers could be viewed as people that gain monetary benefits through the curating or representation of a certain perception, lifestyle, or image on social media platforms.

In turn, our standards of popularity and self-worth and our self-representation are now digitalized creating what I would term digitized idealism. Suffice it to say, social media influencers can be classified as modern-day trendsetters and are impactful to societal norms by sharing content that is meant to reflect their lives through social media. Influencers amass followers through the content that they cultivate themselves, allowing audiences to step into their narratives. To this accord, Mehita Iqani in the research article called *Picturing luxury, producing value: The cultural labour of social media brand influencers in South Africa* (2019: 230) states:

> a huge amount of cultural production in service of corporate messaging takes place on social media, in particular on Instagram. In South Africa, a number of high-profile social media influencers and brand ambassadors have active Instagram profiles with followers in the hundreds of thousands. Although ostensibly offering a visual diary of their glamorous lives, the profiles also increasingly serve as platforms for punting brands and commodities.

The perceived authenticity of influencers can help them gain traction and have more impact intimate and authentic information with their followers can attract more followers and accumulate trust from their followers, hence helping them gain more popularity; Hudders et al. (2021: 7- 8) state that "Influencers who are perceived as experts and who share and have a stronger impact on those followers' decision-making". This is the basis and inspiration of this dissertation to explore the extent that social media influencers impact self-representation.

SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS IN SOUTH AFRICA

The popularity of social media influencers in South Africa has grown exponentially in the last decade. In a blog article called *What South African social media users think of influencers* by Anne Dolinschek (2019) provides a breakdown of the opinions and behaviour of South African social media users towards social media influences' content. One of the main disclosures of the articles is that 78% of social media users surveyed cited Instagram as their favourite social media platform hence the rapid growth of Instagram in South Africa despite Facebook still being the most popular at the time of the survey (Dolinschek, 2019). This is an indication that due to authentic and relatable content users can be introduced to new brands through influencer marketing; the authenticity of influencers, and their transparency concerns about social media having fake followers. Using inappropriate influencers with the wrong form of content can influence campaigns not to gain the right type of traction.

South African influencers are having an impact in the social media space through the content they share regularly. Although the eight hundred and eight (808) participants of the digital survey conducted by Nflu#ntial which was summarized and analysed by Anne Dolinschek (2019) for themediaonline.co.za is not a full indication of the sentiments of the 23 million-plus active social media users in South Africa. It certainly provides insight into the consensus of the relationship that exists between influencers and social media users; one that from the analysis of the survey is most beneficial to both parties when based on the authenticity of the influencer.

Instagram is a relatively new form of communication launched in October 2010 that has seen rapid growth in users over the years. In South Africa alone it is the fourth (4^{th}) most used social media platform with approximately 4 million people that use Instagram monthly. According to napoleoncat.com[11]:

> there were 5 427 000 Instagram users in South Africa in January 2021, which accounted for 9.1% of its entire population. Most of them were women - 53.8%. People aged 25 to 34 were the largest user group (1

[11] NapoleonCat is an online social media management tool that for businesses, e-commerce, agencies, and individuals providing social media analytics tools, social media performance reports and statistics, observations based on data.

750 000). The highest difference between men and women occurs within people aged 25 to 34, where women lead by 110 000.

This means that it is appropriate data to suggest that Instagram is of significant usage in South Africa adding to the validity of this research.

INSTAGRAM

Instagram is very different compared to other social networking sites, particularly Facebook and Twitter. The significance of images on Instagram uniquely separates it from text-based social media platforms, which could be an indication of its vast impact in society as image-based social media content has noticeably prompted different effects from users' than those on text-based social media posts as Yuheng Hu, Lydia Manikonda and Subbarao Kambhampati indicate in their 2014 report called *What We Instagram: A First Analysis of Instagram Photo Content and User Types.* Instagram is a social media site that allows users to instantaneously share content with the option of modifying them using built-in filters and the hashtag # symbol; users can also tag or mention other users by using the @ symbol (which effectively creates a link from their posts to the referenced user's account) before posting them (Hu et al., 2014). This could be a factor about Instagram to consider as Hu et al. (2014: 1) conclude "that the size of a user's audience (followers) is independent of his/her shared photos on Instagram". This could be inciting that there is a strategic way that social media influencers post and it is more than optics and the aesthetic appeal of their Instagram feed because they run it like a business. In support of this notion Hu et al. (2014: 1) also emphasize that "a deep understanding of Instagram is important because it will help us gain deep insights about social, cultural and environmental issues about people's activities (through the lens of their photos". This is an indication that studies that pursue the complexities of social media are delving into the very fabric of the day-to-day functions of culture in society and Instagram has become one of the benchmarks of societal standards Jin et al. (2019: 567) all emphasize:

> that Instagram is a platform that is based on visual aesthetics and filtered images, which makes it a suitable ecosystem for promoting beauty products, popularizing certain body images and advocating luxurious lifestyles and prominent luxury brands.

Influencers can create content that presents a particular aesthetic, they can assert their opinions and have mastered taste discernment derived from their preference and experiences particularly in the lifestyle, fashion, and beauty sectors as Alice Audrezet, Gwarlann de Kerviler and Julie Guidry Moulard explain in their 2018 journal article called *Authenticity under threat: When social media influencers need to go beyond self-presentation*. Considering this, Audrezet et al. (2018: 557) are of the notion that "influencers can complement traditional branding communication by serving as an embodied presentation of their personal tastes and clothing choices". It indicates that companies collaborate and endorse social media influencers that are a representation of what the brand stands for or an influencer that is an embodiment of their ideal customer, someone that will advocate for the product or service and convince their followers to utilize what the company offers.

Content creators are entailed to present themselves as authentically as possible while remaining aware of the requirements of the self-brand they have curated (Duffy & Hund, 2019). However, on Instagram the idea of authenticity being achievable on the application has been challenged since it was launched in 2010; making it harder to differentiate between what is authentic and what is doctored with photo editing software or filters the app itself presents with a variant of different building filters at the user's disposable.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The central objective of this research was to determine the bearing social media influencers' Instagram profiles have on how their followers edit and share their images. The research will investigate whether social media users in South Africa feel the need to digitally model their social media profiles after those of social media influencers. Social media has given those fortunate enough to have access to the internet a chance to impact human culture, influence, and craft a message about who they are and what they stand for. It has therefore had a certain role in motivating individuals on how they present themselves to the world. This digitally driven culture has come to seem like an alternate universe where reality is presented in the most idealized manner possible.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will discuss research literature that has been conducted on social media influencers, digital photograph manipulation and the various effects that manipulated photographs have on social media users' perceptions and social media patterns. The literature reviewed is centred around the overall experiences that society has across the various social media platforms while determining the parallel between digitally manipulated images and decision-making patterns of the audience collectively with social media marketing. It discusses the concept of representation on social media and self-perception with attentiveness to the function that social media influencers have in the social media marketing space. It also suggests that social media influencers have become digital representations of identity. The chapter provides an in-depth context of the ideas and academic observations and concepts that support the aim of this research.

SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS

Considering the importance of social media influencers for this research it is necessary to further explain what a social media influencer is. The most widely referred the definition of social media influencers is by Karen Freberg, Kristin Graham, Karen McGaughey and Laura A. Freberg in an article called *Who are the social media influencers? A study of public perceptions of personality* was published in 2010. Freberg et al. (2010: 2) explain that "social media influencers represent a new type of independent, third-party endorsers who shape an audience's attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media channels". The concept of influencers being endorsers that can independently have an impact on society is the foundation of what makes them of socio-economic value, especially within the context of marketing. As discussed in earlier chapters influencer marketing has become a fundamental part of marketing strategies adopted by companies across the globe and has been discussed further in this chapter.

In the study Freberg et al. (2010) distinguished the characteristics that appealed most to the audiences of social media influencers; among them were outspoken, ambitious, smart, productive, and self-assured as attributes they admired most in both the influencers and the services and products; they advocate for. One could argue the

more apparent these attributes are in a social media influencer the more they can attract a lucrative following. These attributes are found to be of importance because influencers are in a certain manner a representation of what can be achieved if one strives to accomplish their goal. This is especially interesting to note if the influencer is in the same industry as their followers and the of basis their content is advice and tips on how to navigate that career path. Some of the most successful social media influencers either educate advice or relate to their audience in a transparent entertaining manner. Despite this with so much content freely available to the audience, it is important to attain their attention and that is where the aesthetic appeal of the content plays a role.

In *Digital Fame and Fortune in the age of Social Media: A Classification of social media influencers,* Alexandra Ruiz-Gómez (2019: 9) indicates that:

> throughout time, the concept of celebrity has evolved to include new forms of fame created with each new technology. In today's increasingly digital world, we are witnessing the explosive growth of this generation's new idols who owe their fame to social media and are better known as social media influencers.

Simply put the growth of social media has made it easier to be seen by the internet masses, therefore, has made it easier to attain a certain level of fame. The difference between "traditional celebrities" and a "social media influencers" is that celebrities are customarily meant to be known for their talents more than their advocacy or options. Although this is essentially no longer the case due to the growing popularity of mass media productions and publications – commonly known as tabloid[12] magazines - such as *People Magazine* and *Us Weekly* or specifically *Drum* in the case of South Africa which have made it their business to profit from reporting on the personal lives of public figures, which now include social media influencers. This has since been intensified as social media has allowed celebrities to directly respond to reports and claims made about them which just most likely leads to more prying from the pop culture[13] journalists. This might lead to their followers being able to somehow deduce their

[12] According to lexico.com a tabloid is "A newspaper having pages half the size of those of the average broadsheet, typically popular in style and dominated by sensational stories."
[13]According to lexico.com a pop culture is "modern popular culture transmitted via the mass media and aimed particularly at younger people".

personalities; as Mehita Iqani (2019: 239) indicates in *Picturing luxury, producing value: The cultural labour of social media brand influencers in South Africa* "in the digital media age, celebrities have often used social media platforms in order to build a sense of intimacy, showing domestic scenes and glimpses into their private lives". This has been centred or attributed to the interest in celebrity scandals and of course the growth of social media which has created a place for celebrities to divulge any information surrounding their personal and professional lives. The space of social media has enabled celebrities to show their more domestic side, but one cannot negate that social media influencers are more relatable. Furthermore, their lifestyles are often depicted as extravagant which in countless ways can render celebrities almost unrelatable and inaccessible to society. To this effect, Ruiz-Gómez (2019: 11) also elucidates that according to Chris Rojek's three-part model of fame stating:

> celebrities can be classified into three categories: ascribed (inherited from famous parents or relatives), achieved (those who become famous due to their talent, such as an athlete) and attributed, which are fabricated or staged by industry mediators or people who attract a lot of media attention.

Consequently, one can then classify social media influencers as content creators that have obtained esteem and popularity through attribution[14]. In perspective they have built a self-made brand and online presence from the ground up till it reaches the criteria and social media insights to be monetized; of course, each social media platform has a different set of criteria. The deliberation that surrounds what constitutes one to be classified as a social media influencer is ever constant especially as their popularity increases and economic contribution gains more significance within society and the value that they can bring to the brands that they work with through social media campaigns (Ruiz-Gómez, 2019). The work that social media influencers put into their content is part of their success and Iqani (2019: 239) observes that:

> social media influencers seem to devote a great deal more energy to creating a glossy aesthetic that positions them as celebrities with the necessary status to represent high-end brands. From this perspective,

[14] Ruiz-Gómez (2019: 15) indorses that "social media influencers (SMIs) currently include many types of users who have achieved recognition on social media which implies that these content creators have created a community of followers that transcends well beyond friends and family".

> significant energy is required to present the self in ways that mesh with the aesthetics of mainstream, commercial media.

This speaks to the efforts and lengths that social media influencers will go to create content that represents digital persona and /or brand to gauge the interest of high-end brands to employ them. The universal term 'digital content creators' has been adopted as the industry term used for all users producing and posting content on social media; regardless of the response, it manages to accumulate (Ruiz-Gómez, 2019). "Therefore, not all content creators are influencers, but all influencers are content creators who get attention and build social capital" (Ruiz-Gómez, 2019: 14-15). This indicates that the effort that social media influencers put into the content must be of commercial value and significance, which can ultimately lead to the monetization of social media influencer content and more brand recognition.

In the article *Examining the Beauty Industry's Use of Social Influencers,* Kristen Forbes (2016: 79) states that social media influencers "are often seen as more "organic", with many of them leading normal lives, not as established celebrities or actors, making them more relatable to the everyday consumers watching their content". This organic feel is what makes it possible for them to develop a niche for the content they create; and able to cultivate a personal brand. Their content seems often effortless as if it is a realistic depiction of their day-to-day lives from how they look, their daily interactions and general lifestyle, especially through Instagram stories[15]. In actuality, it cannot be an authentic depiction since Instagram stories last fifteen (15) seconds and frame them are just snippets of a twenty-four (24) hour day.

Influencers have been known to present and construct a predominant impression of the desired lifestyle, particularly on Instagram It is, therefore, safe to say that "crafting a brand persona in social media implies aspects such as certain looks and projecting a distinct style coherent with the content topic where the content creator wants to position himself as a credible source for marketing purposes" (Ruiz-Gómez, 2019: 15). The importance of branding and persona development cannot be underestimated in its value. However, apart from the courted presentation that social media influencers

[15] Whatis.com states that "Instagram Stories is a feature within the Instagram app where users can capture and post related images and video content in a slideshow format. Stories can be modified with the typical features of the popular social media app."

put forth on social media; influencers gain popularity through relatability. This relatability can also have bearing on the interaction and experience that active social media users have with social media influencers. In the 2018 journal article, *The Influence of Social Media Influencers: Understanding Online Vaping Communities and Parasocial Interaction through the Lens of Taylor's Six-Segment Strategy Wheel*, Emory S. Daniel Jr., Elizabeth C. Crawford Jackson and David K. Westerman indicate that a follower's relation and interaction with a media personality is a Para-Social Interaction (PSI) particularly when it feels relatable and intimate to the audience. Influencers are then sequentially associated with a specific cause or lifestyle. Whether they are known to advocate for body positivity like @thickleeyonce or @misscurvylala, or promote health and fitness like @thebodycoach. The focus of these influencers' content on Instagram is what they advocate for or promote for monetary gain that can be directly determined by their social media engagement and impressions. This means that their professional careers can sometimes have very little to do with their popularity on social media but more to do with how they relate to their followers through their content.

A major component of a social media influencer's career is being able to gain the trust of their followers because they are perceived as reliable sources of information regarding the brands they are associated with. Iqani (2019: 239) further highlights that "the influencers are at once working as models and working on presenting their personal brands in such a way as to align with the brands that they wish to attract and work with". This alignment and reliability stem from the perception that they are ordinary people sharing their everyday lives on social media and are often transparent about certain social issues or personal passions. This means social media influencers are transparent with their followers especially if it aligns with an issue that they directly advocate for or against and they sometimes disclose their current mood; sometimes they are very vague and hardly disclose what exactly made them feel a certain way, but it allows them to engage and relate with their followers, creating that element of perceived friendship and transparency.

In the research paper *The Impact of Social Media Influencers on Purchase Intention and The Mediation Effect of Customer Attitude*, Xin Jean Lim, Aifa Rozaini bt Mohd Radzol, Jun-Hwa Cheah and Mun Wai Wong (2017) discuss the importance of social

media influencers being trustworthy arguing that trust and credibility are cooperative and give the misconception of expertise of social media influencers on the cause or products that they create content about. The credibility of social media influencers stems from the idea that they are just talking from respective experiences and giving their inclinations that then cause their audience to act on their recommendations. Recommendations stem from them having tried out a product or service. In *Social media influencers – why we cannot ignore them: An exploratory study about how consumers perceive the influence of social media influencers during the different stages of the purchase decision process*, Linda Gashi (2017) highlights the impact of social media influencers on the purchase decision process of consumers and indicated that a social media influencer's ability to produce content, expertise it, create their own social identity and gain public trust is evidence of how influencers are a key part of the purchase decision process of consumers. This is a suggestion of the power influencers have on the choices and perceptions of their followers, this is the reason they are called "influencers". They have an influential impact on what people do and purchase and have the potential to set societal standards. However, Daniel et al. (2018) suggest that one-sided relations can develop into a social activity for the followers; where they share emotions, social interactions, and other similarities with the social media influencers. This is a further indication of the relevance of this research which investigates the potential choices active social media users in South Africa make when posting their Instagram content and whether they feel the need to digitally model their social media profiles after those of social media influencers to potentially achieve social media popularity. The research available on social media influencers leads me to deduce that influencers set social media standards for content so it would be expected that some active social media users would try to mirror that; especially if they are trying to achieve influencer status themselves.

In their 2019 article *Fake images: The effects of source, intermediary, and digital media literacy on contextual assessment of image credibility online*, Cuihua Shen, Mona Kasra, Wenjing Pan, Grace A Bassett, Yining Malloch and James F O'Brien indicate that visual information on social media networks can deceive and prompt emotional distress through comparison and impact opinions, actions, attitudes. This has never been more evident in society seeing that social media only gets a more predominant part of social culture. With this note, one can conclude social media

normalizes and/or popularises things until they become a societal standard practice. It is no wonder Freberg et al. (2010) further imply that social media influencers are endorsers who shape attitudes through blogs, tweets, and other uses of social media. Further emphasizing that social media influencers are the elucidation that various organizations have strategically navigated towards to impact the decisions of their target market, drive purchases, and generate awareness to their brands (Gashi, 2017); which has, in turn, increased the popularity of influencer marketing.

INFLUENCER MARKETING

In his journal article, *The Rise of Social Media Influencer Marketing on Lifestyle Branding*, Morgan Glucksman (2017: 77) indicated that "the use of social media influencer marketing in public relations initiatives has broken the wall between the consumer and the brand thus changing the way the two interact". This denotes that the use of social media influencers as a marketing tool gives a consumer a relatable point of reference that does not feel motivated by capitalism because of the para-social interactions between the customer and the influencer. This cements the idea that social media influencers can be considered a tangible representation of the experience a consumer can expect to have if they were to purchase or invest in the product or service. Glucksman (2017: 77) indicates that influencer marketing is "the process of identifying, engaging and supporting individuals who create conversations with a brand's customers". The focus of influencer marketing is on the niche of individuals that relate to the influencer, not the overall generalization of a global target market or demographic. Influencer marketing on social media can lead to more ways for brands to relate with consumers directly, in their everyday lives, making them more relatable to the specific consumer.

In *The use of social media by South African organisations* Nomusa Nomhle Dlamini and Kevin Johnston (2018) *e*xplain that at a distinct core the function of social media within organizations is to facilitate direct communication; this indicates that the basic function of social media is to provide direct communication between the company and the targeted customer; while having or creating a competitive edge in the market due to the facilitation of real-time communication that the internet provides. Influencers

truly can serve as the ultimate connection between a brand and a consumer especially given their distinctive ability to reach niche markets that were inaccessible a few years ago (Glucksman, 2017). Influencer marketing also entails working with the key leaders in a specific market to translate and advance the marketing message of a brand to the social media influencer's followers (Gashi, 2017). This means that brands and companies collaborate or enlist social media influencers to represent their specific target market to use and review their product or service using their personal experience.

In the 2017 journal article *Marketing through Instagram influencers: the impact of number of followers and product divergence on brand attitude* by Marijke De Veirman, Veroline Cauberghe and Liselot Hudders as cited Lovisa Gunnarsson; Alena Postnikova and Anna Folkestad (2018: 6) in their thesis *Maybe Influencers Are Not Worth The Hype: An explanatory study on influencers' characteristics with perceived quality and brand loyalty* indicated that "Influencer marketing is accomplished by using trusted online personas (influencers) to distribute a brand's message or products (personalized by the influencer or not) to their followers (the brand's target group) and can then influence attitudes, decisions, and behaviours". This then directly impacts influencers; who have managed to establish themselves as the new opinion leaders; this used to be a designation reserved for traditional celebrities (Gashi, 2017). This trust they build is because of how they relate to their followers which helps them gain credibility. What gives social media influencers credibility? And as this study asks do active social media users feel that the quality of social media influencers' content is required standard on social media?

Thus, Freberg et al. (2010) argue that the so-called key leaders have in essence managed to grow on social media over the years and are now known as social media influencers. In referring to Eric Burgess's blog post called *Social Media Creators Are More Influential than Celebrities* Gashi (2017) noted that traditional celebrities have come to be less influential throughout the years due to the unrealistic ideals and standards that are associated with them. This is due to the lavish lifestyles, exclusive custom-designed outfits and the coverage they get on traditional mass media platforms.

In the article *The Power of Influence: Traditional Celebrity vs Social Media Influencer* by Melody Nouri (2018) it is indicated that although traditional celebrities had a significant influence on society's pop culture trends in the past, influencers can establish a relationship with their followers and have an impact on a more intimate level than a traditional celebrity can. Burgess (2017) also views that in contrast, social media influencers inhabit a place between celebrities and friends. They are aspirational figures and public figures with whom the consumer has built a relationship through regular interaction. The attention influencers have gained can be attributed to their popularity and influence in various markets. They are considered more authentic and experts at creating 'valuable' content on social media platforms (Burgess, 2017). They also could influence a brand's reputation (Freberg et al., 2010). On the impact of social media influencer marketing research Lim et al. (2017: 209) state that:

> despite marketing practitioners' increasing adoption of influencer marketing and its reportedly strong effects, academic research has yet to provide an holistic description of the way SMIs influence their online peers. To our knowledge, no research to date has provided an overarching mechanism of influence founded upon a solid theoretical framework that describes the way target audiences perceive, think, and behave.

In *Instafamous and social media influencer marketing,* Seunga Venus Jin, Aziz Muqaddam and Ehri Ryu (2019: 570) discussed how the phenomenon of being 'instafamous' has developed specifically off the impact of Instagram as a social media platform built on the social media marketing efficacy influencers a defining component of the marketing campaigns stating that "this platform due to its unique features: the ability for social interaction and aesthetical presentation, which allow users to build personal narratives and showcase identities that attract audiences". This is further indication that the narratives shown are used to shape opinions within society.

IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS' CONTENT

In their research on social comparison patterns on the social media platform, Facebook called *Social Comparisons on Social Media: The Impact of Facebook on Young Women's Body Image Concerns and Mood*, Jasmine Fardouly, Phillippa C.

Diedrichs, Lenny R. Vartanian and Emma Halliwell (2015a) found that social media users assess themselves based on pictures of their peers, not necessarily models or celebrities. With social media influencers being considered more relatable and popular because of their content; their followers could consider them their peers. It can be concluded that social media influencers are penned to be more relatable because they often focus on specific lifestyle portrayals and social issues, and therefore attract some followers with similar lifestyles or backgrounds (Nouri, 2018; Freberg et al., 2010). Which in turn might create a para-social interaction for their followers.

In *The effects of blogger recommendations on customers' online shopping intentions* Chin-Lung Hsu, Judy Chuan-Chuan Lin and Hsiu-Sen Chiang (2013) explain that due to the personal nature of the content influencers share online it allows followers to feel a closer connection to them. Gashi (2017) indicates that this has set the standards for self-regard and identity within society as social media users are likely to purchase products or follow their suggestions based on wanting to be comparable social media influencers. Considering how easily a social media influencer could be able to sway their followers it is assumed that they are authentic in the content that they create so as not to mislead their audience. However, this might not be the case as it is quickly becoming more of a career. Glucksman (2017: 83) stated that:

> authenticity allows an influencer to relate with followers on a new level and aids in building a relationship between followers and brands. Creating content … gives influencers the opportunity to share their personal thoughts, opinions, and style with their followers who may then take their lead.

In further highlighting the importance of the authenticity of content social media influencers and the impact it could have on their followers. In the article '*Instafamous' – credibility and self-presentation of micro-celebrities on social media* Elmira Djafarova and Oxana Trofimenko (2019: 1441) state that:

> followers deem high-quality pictures and engaging text to be essential elements of appealing Instagram profiles. Instagram filters are perceived positively by users and are, in fact, integral when using this type of social media as users want to see attractive images, despite knowing that at times it is not a true representation of self.

This further indicates that social media influencers are always depicting a certain aesthetic to engage and reach a wider audience; part of their allure is to be aspirational figures in a relatable way. They are selling aesthetics and lifestyle and their social media feeds are their tools to persuade and be noticed. Emily Hund (2019: 21) explains in the article *The Influencer Industry: Constructing and Commodifying Authenticity on Social Media* that:

> pervasive logic of celebrity culture, appropriation of academic influence theories, and beliefs about the meaning and value of authenticity have combined to birth an industry that is helping to guide the social and economic market of the internet—and spill out to shape cultural production more broadly.

The economic value of social media marketing cannot be denied as it has become one of the most effective ways to gain visibility in a competitive market. To this effect, Hund (2019: 73) states that "the tremendous growth and increased visibility of the influencer economy in the mid to late 2000s helped to cement its reputation as the most accessible pathway for creative success in an age of otherwise decreased opportunities". This solidifies that social media has created opportunities that have increased economic freedom for content creators in areas that would have otherwise not been feasible.

In their research article called *Persuasive Influencers and the Millennials: How their relationships affect brand, value, and relationship equities, and customers' intention to purchase,* Freddy Mgiba and N.Nyamande found that the more potential consumers are reliant on social media for information and reviews about brands to determine whether to purchase their products or not the more companies see the importance of online content (Mgiba & Nyamande, 2020). It has also been found that persuasive influencer marketing campaigns have favourable outcomes on brand equity and customer purchase intentions (Mgiba & Nyamande, 2020). It is evident that social media has become a great contributor to brand probability and "given a choice of which customer equity managers should concentrate on influencing, it makes sense to target these different forms in order of value equity, purchase intention, relationship equity, and lastly, on brand equity" (Mgiba & Nyamande, 2020:19). If a company discounts the value of social media within society, it is disregarding it as a potential to reach new customers.

The quality of the content is of relevance too; in their research article about social media marketing contribution to the sustainability and credibility of a brand called *The Impact of Social Media Content Marketing (SMCM) towards Brand Health* the author's Nur Syakirah Ahmad, Rosidah Musab and Mior Harris Mior Harun (2016) there is a consensus that social media marketing is dependent on the consistent distribution of quality content to reach the desired target market as well and increase social media engagement; stating that Ahmad et al. (2016: 334):

> in delivering the content marketing, the companies should provide the content that can answer all the consumers' queries in very attractive and creative ways to avoid the disinterest of consumers in visiting the site regularly which can ruin the brand health performance.

This is a very important notion to consider when considering the significance of influencers' content and the value they bring to the brands' overall social media presence. The investment in a social media marketing strategy that is specifically done through the lens of a social media influencer can drive up the market value and relevance of a company (Ahmad et al., 2016). The overall function is to make compact information that is readily accessible and can be regularly referred to. Using social media influencers is a productive way to let customers know that their needs are known and being catered to. In other words, "content that can answer all the consumers' queries in very attractive and creative ways to avoid the disinterest of consumers in visiting the site regularly which can ruin the brand health performance" (Ahmad et al., 2016: 334). The whole advantage of social media is that it can provide information in short form, which in turn can retain the attention of the audience and give out the necessary information needed.

IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION ON SOCIAL MEDIA

In the 2017 research on social media influencers called *Social Butterflies: How Social Media Influencers are the New Celebrity Endorsement,* Kayleigh E. Burke identifies them as the new celebrities and explores the concept of identity construction on social media. The study indicates that self-image is a result of how a person sees themselves through the eyes of others; but the social image is how they desire to be viewed by

others (Bruke, 2017). Social media has given everybody a chance to create a version of themselves they are comfortable with the world knowing. Perception is a key factor in the way one decides to portray themselves on social media. The narrative of what one's life is like and who they are is completely up to an individual because they decide who they want to be. They control when and how they post; negating whether it is authentic or not. It creates a certain perception for the audience, in other words, presents a certain image.

This construction of identity fuelled by perception often can become what one is known for and offer as an individual a self-curated brand so to speak. In *Self-branding, 'micro-celebrity' and the rise of Social Media Influencers* Susie Khamis, Lawrence Ang and Raymond Welling (2017) found that self-branding is a tool exploited to develop an idiosyncratic public persona for cultural relevance for a monetary gain. They further emphasize that "central to self-branding is the idea that, just like commercially branded products, individuals benefit from having a unique selling point, or a public identity that is singularly charismatic and responsive to the needs and interests of target audiences" (Khamis et al., 2017: 191). This means that there has to be a specific selling point for each social media influencer; hence influencer niches and marketing for brands that align with their hobbies and interests. The use of social media influencers as the new online opinion leaders has called for a need in academic research on their impact on society.

However, a lot of the research on social media influencers; heavily focuses on influencers as marketing tools (Bruke, 2017). Very little has been written about how they present themselves. According to Khamis et al. (2017:196):

> what matters is that they find a following through social media and thus stand out in the attention economy. Social media is driven by a specific kind of identity construction – self-mediation – and what users post, share and like effectively creates a highly curated and often abridged snapshot of how they want to be seen.

Bruke (2017) also predicts that pictures will eventually lose their credibility as it is becoming easier for people to manipulate images and control how their contents are perceived in the public sphere as it gets harder to gauge the authenticity of a picture.

In this light Burke (2017) further implied that picture manipulation suggests the improper control of perception and reality with images; a crucial point to my research that will further be discussed.

In The SAGE Handbook of Social Media called *Self-Representation in Social Media* Jill Walker Rettberg (2018) discussed the three modes of social media self-representation and identified them as: visual, written and quantitative. Rettberg (2018: 233) further notes that "representation cannot mirror reality because we all have different experiences and interpretations of 'reality'. Also, words and images and other representations can be interpreted very differently in different contexts or cultures".

This interpretation of self-representation can be referred to as "virtual identity"[16]. In the study, *Instagram, Social Media, and the "Like": Exploring Virtual Identity's Role in 21st Century Students' New Socialization Experience*, Mary Code (2015: 43) observes that:

> unfortunately, concepts of virtual identities have been put into simplistic binaries as having either a positive or a negative influence on youth, or as being completely truthful or entirely false representations of people.

Indicating that there can be positive and negative connotations to the content that social media influencers post to represent themselves. In the research *Explaining Females' Envy Toward Social Media Influencers,* Jiyoung Chae (2018: p.247) explains that:

> in responding to influencers' postings, some people might get vicarious satisfaction, but such postings can also arouse a negative emotion among ordinary people who cannot achieve such a luxurious life. That negative emotion is envy [….] Envy is produced when a person is aware of the advantageous status of another person or group of persons [….] Influencers are closer to ordinary people than traditional celebrities, suggesting that ordinary people might envy influencers more than celebrities.

It can be concluded that this is because social media users feel more connected to the influencers as they are viewed as ordinary than celebrities; because "mainstream celebrities are often seen as otherworldly. However, influencers are closer to their

[16] Virtual identity is defined as "the direct representation of how one portrays him or herself in an online or virtual context, including pictures, videos, audio files, profiles, avatars, games, chat rooms, personal websites" (Code, 2015:43).

followers than traditional celebrities. Although followers never meet influencers in person, but they can peep into their lives due to the online connection" (Chae, 2018: 249). The knowledge that active social media users have on the various technological advances and their impact on social media content creation is also a factor.

Shen et al. (2019: 1) researched digital media literacy and online image credibility and it showed that the:

> participants' internet skills, photo-editing experience, and social media use were significant predictors of image credibility evaluation, while most social and heuristic cues of online credibility, (e.g.source trustworthiness, bandwagon, intermediary trustworthiness) had no significant impact. Viewers' attitude toward a depicted issue also positively influenced their credibility evaluation.

These statements further indicate that the way an audience evaluates the credibility of a photograph is mostly based on their knowledge of the contents of the photograph, the conations associated with it and their proficiency in digital editing applications. A factor to consider during the data collection process. Especially given that the abundant accessibility of easy-to-use editing software was brought about by recent technological advances and has decreased the time, cost, effort, and skills needed to create digitally manipulated images (Shen et al., 2019). It also indicated that exposure to social media influencer content can have a bearing factor on what globally society considers acceptable or of relevance in the way they construct their social media profiles. Chae (2018: 249) theorises that:

> individuals must be exposed to comparison-related information and willing to make a connection between the information and the self. Then a) more exposure to influencers and b) a greater individual tendency to compare the self with influencers should lead to more frequent social comparison.

Observing the function of social media exposure people that habitually follow influencers on social media are more inclined to compare their lives to those of influencers and view it as a standard to uphold. In their article called *The impact of influencers from Instagram and YouTube on their followers,* Vaibhavi Nandagiri and Leena Philip (2018) found that the role of social media influencers in the mass media

has been positive and they have an impact on their followers; especially if the followers feel that they can trust their credibility. Moreover, Nandagiri et.al. (2018: 64) concluded that:

> social media users are very often exposed to marketing by social media influencers. The content presented by the influencer is more preferred than advertisements as it is more elaborate and unbiased in nature.

Although the study's data was collected to compare the impact of traditional advertising on followers to the impact that influencer marketing has on their followers. The fact that a social media influencer endorsing a product was considered more favourable is an extensive indication of the capability of social media influencers to affect mindsets.

In '*Follow' My Constructed Instagram Lifestyle! The impression management practices of lifestyle influencers on Instagram,* a research paper by Celeste de Beer (2017) found that it has been very apparent that influencers engage in the explicit creation of individual images to construct an overarching impression of the desired lifestyle. In some ways, social media influencers have become digital renditions of identity. To this effect, de Beer (2017:6) states that social media influencers "rely on the type of impressions they create and produce through Instagram in order to monetize from their brand partnerships and to control how they are portrayed to their audience". This is not only relevant on Instagram but across all social media platforms because they have an image to uphold to sustain their popularity which could lead to them digitally editing and manipulating their photographs to fit that image.

DIGITALLY MANIPULATED IMAGES

In their research on the effects, usage and popularity of filters on social media engagement called *Why We Filter Our Photos and How It Impacts Engagement*, Saeideh Bakhshi, David A. Shamma, Lyndon Kennedy and Eric Gilbert (2015) indicated that mobile phone photography has substantially grown in popularity due to a range of simple graphical filters that are readily available on smartphones that enable

users to enhance their pictures; the filters can often enhance, stylize, saturate a photo to the user's preference. Bakhshi et al. (2015: 2) also conclude that:

> part of the success of mobile camera phone sharing is attributed to the use of on camera visual effects. These effects, or filters, provide a quick pre-set path to an artistic rendering of the photo.

Social media platforms provide several filter options intending to give users selections for better-looking photos without professional training in digital image manipulation and processing (Bakhshi et al., 2015). The process of editing can change the pixels to enhance the image; the camera and the computer image editing software often has features that correct colour hue, adjust brightness, sharpness, and automatic cropping (Bakhshi et al.,2015). In *Photoshopping the Selfie: Self Photo Editing and Photo Investment are Associated with Body Dissatisfaction in Adolescent Girls*, Siân A. McLean, Susan J. Paxton, Eleanor H. Wertheim, and Jennifer Masters (2015:1133) suggest that "social media use may have stronger associations with body dissatisfaction than other Internet-related activities because it is highly interactive and self-exposing, with others commenting on postings in a public manner". Social media exposure to different images and content and the idea of free speech on social media platforms can lead to unwarranted comments about one's appearance whether positive or negative; this open dialogue on someone's looks can raise may lead to heightened awareness of their perceived imperfections. The way people use media in digital manipulation and the amount of investment in content altering before sharing on social media is a cause for these concerns (McLean et.al., 2015).

In *Virtually Perfect: Image Retouching and Adolescent Body Image, Kristen Harrison and Veronica Hefner* assess that the research that has been done on the media body ideal assumes that media images of thin public figures are the ideal or social norm; although they have several tools that help them achieve that perceived ideal which is by no means achieved through normal means (Harrison & Hefner, 2014). The study found and concluded "that showing adolescents retouched photos while identifying them as retouched primed thoughts of status or prestige because retouching lends an air of legitimacy to photographic subjects. Outside the context of social media, photos taken by a photographer and professionally retouched by a third party are

comparatively formal and intended to reflect people at their best for some legitimate purpose" (Harrison & Hefner, 2014: 147). This means that knowing photos have been retouched triggers thoughts of professionalism and in the context of this research it might mean that since it is widely known that social media influencer content is intentionally shot and doctored to the best quality possible their followers hold them to a higher standard because they are expected to create aesthetically pleasing content to keep their audience engaged.

In *Photo editing: enhancing social media images to reflect appearance ideals,* Ella Guest (2016: 3) also indicates that there is extensive research highlighting "the negative impacts that exposure to idealized images in the mass media although little research about the effects of digitally edited images on social media exists". Digitally altering images using photo-editing software has become increasingly customary to social media users it is almost anticipated (Guest, 2016). Moreover, Guest (2016: 446) further states that:

> while photo editing in the mass media can be regulated to some extent, it is near impossible to control the images that individuals share on social media. This may not only further reinforce appearance ideals in society but also add pressure for individuals to portray themselves in an idealized way.

Therefore, making them edit regardless. The fact that most social media users have photo-editing software readily available to them means altering their social media feed to appease or reflect ideals portrayed on social media platforms can be expected (Guest, 2016). To this effect, McLean et al. (2015:1139) also indicate that "self-photo sharing activities, self-image manipulation, and self-image investment relate to body-related and eating concerns and contributes new social media-focused measures with good psychometric properties". This could be an indication that regardless of the way that social media influencers present themselves; active social media users are prone to edit their content. However, this research is more interested in the manner and extent they have when editing their content.

The research that has been gathered about social media influencers is mostly from the perspective of them being a marketing tool for various businesses to promote their

products and services to their target market. There is growth in the research based on social media influencers' impact on marketing and brand correlation with influencers for maximum effectiveness. It has proven that research on their importance on social media patterns and trends has grown and there is still so much left to explore and research. Particularly when it comes to digital photo manipulation and self-representation to create a perceived brand and identity. This is an indication of the social-economic contribution that social media has on the world and the socially acceptable standards it depicts.

It has become harder to separate each everyday life from our social media presence especially given the function it can have in an individual's life. Whether we call it editing, photoshopping, retouching, digital enhancement, airbrushing or photo manipulation these are all a description of the process the altering photographs to modify or enhance certain components of the structure of an image or video (Harrison & Hefner, 2014). It further asserts that active social media users feel the need to edit their images on social media given that "in the digital age, image editing has become a requirement in the production of commercial images used to promote products and services for the fashion, health, entertainment, and beauty industries" (Harrison & Hefner, 2014:135). It is also evident that the access and advancement of technology have made digital manipulation easier to do and have been commonplace and expected in society, especially in the fashion, entertainment industry and on social media and dating applications (Harrison & Hefner, 2014). Especially as the public gets more accustomed to it and aware of it; although they might not be expertly trained to deduce the various aspects of what amendments the image has been given or needs (Harrison & Hefner, 2014). The relevance of this study lies in the realisation that images must be viewed as a (conscious or unconscious) view of reality and not an absolute truth.

CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter outlines and discusses the theoretical concepts that will be used as the foundation for analytical discussion of the findings to address the research question.

The function of theory is to explain, understand and interpret phenomena; putting them into perspectives that facilitate or reinforce the comprehension of various social issues. Theories can develop and adjust as global societal norms and narratives change. In the book, *Understanding Media Theory* Kevin Williams (2003: 15) concludes that the purposes of theories are to "put forward propositions" suggesting the reason why they have occurred the way they have. This then assists to give meaning, perspective, and reason to key structures in our society. In research, it creates a pertinent theoretical construct that enables concrete analysis of the data collected that the research encompasses.

In her thesis *Social media and their impact on organisations: building Firm Celebrity and organisational legitimacy through social media* Francesca Bria (2013) found that the socio-economic value and relevance of social media in addition to the constant improvements that are added to it frequently comes with a rise in the challenges and societal behavioural changes which in turn affects new media notions and theories within the global society. With the use of social media having grown over the years; the impact of social media has undeniably been cemented in the fabric of the daily norms and mass culture so much that it has become a form of income and revenue for social media influencers (Bria, 2013; Perloff, 2014).

Social media influencers support the creation of the value and reputation of a brand through the often impactful and expansive labour that afford brands recognition,influence and influence (Iqani, 2019). It is further explained by Iqani (2019: 240) that:

> whether or not the influencers are formally employed in order to represent the brand, in the images shared they perform an intimate knowledge of the brand and a close association with it, such that their own personalities are put into service of the brand messaging. Each of the personalities is for the purpose of the image presenting themselves

> as an employee of the brand, whose job it is to represent its lifestyle and bring to life its values.

This is indicative of the role that social media has played in the portrayal of different social classes with the assistance of social media influences. Social media has even been integrated into some of the academic programs in higher learning institutions. As such, it is important to know the impact of Instagram on the cultural norms that have come with social media.

The increased use of share driven media platforms over the past decades has turned social media into an integral function of online communication and presentation around the world (Perloff, 2014) and social media could even be considered a necessity for individuals to become a functional and active part of current society it could be classified as a form of social currency, although that can be heavily debated. Considering the purpose of this study the following theories and concepts have been chosen because of their relevance to this research and will assist in further contextualizing the importance of social media influencers in society. They will form the foundation and perspectives of which the data that has been collected will be analysed to reach a conclusion.

REPRESENTATION THEORY

The approach in which individuals choose to depict themselves on social media can potentially have a profound impact on the narrative of their identity within society and the value their contribution adds within society, which is also driven by popularity and status. To this effect, Ruiz-Gómez (2019: 15) states that “recognition is achieved by cultivating a network through content and self-representation techniques”; and social media effectively facilitates at its core. This is reflected in the monetary success of social media influencers. It is often represented through the content they create that depict a certain persona as Ruiz-Gómez (2019: 15) further certifies that “Influencers are do-it-yourself social media users that create their own digital persona, create their own content, and build their audience”. This digital persona can be highlighted as self-representation through personal branding on social media which is often dependent

on the development of a digital identity that attracts the attention of the public through various forms of content (Ruiz-Gómez, 2019). Creating this digital person requires social media influencers to treat themselves akin to a brand to curate a selling intention or unique niche that is coupled with consistency and relatability (Khamis et al., 2017; Ruiz-Gómez, 2019).

All the above considered, it is of crucial importance to understand the theory of representation for this study. Pioneered by Stuart Hall in his book *Representation – Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (1997: 15-16) who argued that "representation is the use of language, signs and images that conveys a certain meaning to an audience". This definition of the representation theory can almost be a direct reflection of the work that social media influencers carry out; with the use of captions; emojis, stories, and photographs. The means and modes of representation have shifted throughout the millennia. It has involved stone carvings, self-portraits, newspapers, and television. To now posting selfies on Instagram or Snapchat and updates on Facebook creating Tik Tok videos and much more. The ongoing popularity of social media has increased audience reach for active users and social media influencers (Rettberg, 2017). The widened reach of social media further amplifies the impact and control the media can have on the views, understanding and meaning perceived and understood in society.

Representation is a vital part of "how meaning is produced and exchanged" in society as Heidi Marie Nömm (2007: 14) indicates in the thesis *Fashioning the female: an analysis of the "fashionable woman" in Elle magazine–now and then*. It ties language and its meaning to the social culture of a society (Hall, 1997). The meanings attached to media texts by those who manufacture or create them is not necessarily the meaning drawn from them by the consumers (Nömm, 2007). The construct of representation on social media can include branding strategies, content creation and development. Social media has created anticipation and expectation of crafted and packed representation (Rettberg, 2017). Therefore, giving validity to the idea of self-representation. In the editorial article called *Self Representation in Social Media,* Siti Machmiyah (2019: 2) indicates that "self-representation on social media cannot be fully considered to be true or close to reality, it is not wrong for us to represent ourselves on social media by giving a good and positive impression". This of course is

contingent on the goal for the content created and what the goal is. This can have a direct effect on the reception of the content because the brand or individuals involved have set certain intentions of how they want to be perceived by the public and when it comes to social media, in particular, content is often embellished to show the best versions of themselves (Machmiyah, 2019).

SELF-PRESENTATION THEORY

Today social media is all about the representation of the self, a product or service and has shed light on many social issues. Social media has come a long way since its simpler times when it was about connecting to friends and reducing the barrier of communication between relatives and friends enabling more frequent exchanges. Although this has seemingly made the world feel like a smaller place; it has increased the need to stand out to millions which is why self-presentation is vital on social media. Discussing the complexities of representation in social media Machmiyah (2019: 2) rationalizes that "in this case, impression management is something that must be done by us on social media because social media is a representation of ourselves". The management of what one posts on social media is determined by the many variables and factors depending on the motivation for using social media.

Though social media self-representation cannot be proved an authentic reflection of reality. It is not erroneous to represent ones-selves on social media in a manner that creates a positive image for society. To this end, Khamis et al. (2017: 196) also assert that "social media is driven by a specific kind of identity construction- 'self-medication'- and what users post, share and like effectively creates a highly curated and often abridged snapshot of how they want to be seen". This actively demonstrates that the self-presentation theory has become of utmost importance from a social media perspective in terms of social media users extensively sharing content about themselves with others (Djafarova &Trofimenko, 2019). Therefore, is important to note that Erving Goffman's self-presentation theory indicates that when people interact or want to present a self-image that will be openly received it can have an impact on social-economic behaviour (Machmiyah, 2019). This 'self-presentation' is the presentation of, and by, an individual in a social setting. Theoretically "It is the way in which a person wants to be perceived by others. Self-presentation makes others

accept the images that individuals claim for themselves" (Djafarova &Trofimenko, 2019:1435). In explaining the concept of self-presentation concerning social behaviour in her chapter for the *Encyclopedia of case study research* called Self-Presentation Fiona Moore (2010: 850) further indicates that "Goffman's theory of strategic self-presentation has had a wide-ranging effect on the social sciences, influencing the analysis of individual behaviour in many fields. Goffman's research into self-presentation comes out of a tradition dating back to the sociology of the 1920s and the study of interaction and the role of the self". The theory of self-representation has been viewed as "the basis for a wider understanding of user behaviour and motivation known as impression management" explain Šlerka Josef & Lucie Merunková (2019:246) in their chapter of the *Masaryk University Journal of Law and Technology* called Goffman's Theory as a Framework for Analysis of Self Presentation on Online Social Networks. This speaks to the socio-economic relevance of social media influences and the internet. The idea that an individual can benefit from having a selling point and curating a public identity that speaks to the desired target audience and appealing to their interests is central to the work of a social media influencer and a form of cultural capital because of the financial and social benefits that accumulate because of the way they present themselves on their individual platforms (Khamis et al., 2017). There is of course more to it than just trying to appeal to a following for profit. Šlerka Josef & Lucie Merunková (2019: 246) also specify that:

> public self-presentation and a certain level of self-disclosure are necessary to create an online identity. The degree of self-disclosure and the content shared by users depend on their goals, motivations, and their audience as well as on their privacy concerns, the perceived value of personal information and the value of the service they receive in return.

This is an indication of how important a hint of vulnerability and transparency is to be relatable to the target audience. in O'Donnell's (2018) research called *Storied Lives on Instagram: Factors Associated With the Need for Personal-Visual Identity*, it indicated that the more frequently someone posts on their social media platforms, the more it had a direct impact on their need to curate a personal-visual identity[17]. This

[17] *Visual identity "*refers to the strategically planned and branded presentations of corporations shown through visual cues O'Donnell (2018: 132).

further emphasizes the notion that social media content is heavily reliant on perception and the need to be presented or viewed in a specific way

It is suggested that “individuals are simultaneously producers and consumers of personal-visual identity on Instagram” (O’Donnell, 2018: 139), as observers of other personal-visual identities this means that they are directly influenced by what other users post especially if it is viral content; validating that social media influencers can determine how they chose to curtate their visual identities. The study further suggests “that personal-visual identity on Instagram is planned and monitored, not just expressed. The stream of photos on an individual’s Instagram profile is a chronicle of the life they choose to display, and like other forms of presentation, this practice is prone to narrativization” (O’Donnell, 2018: 139). This is a testament to the notion that Instagram profiles are strategically curated; and because of the monetary value of influencer content, they certainly have the motivation to invest extra effort into curating their content on Instagram. The concept of personal-visual identity is not about “creativity but rather a descriptor for an individual’s need for uniqueness in presenting their visual self” (O’Donnell, 2018: 132). This implies a need to stand out to and be validated by the masses on social media and according to O’Donnell (2018:132) several researchers agree that “posting on social media influences the way individuals form and present versions of the self because digital spaces offer new geographies for identity”. It can also be noted that “recent studies show that the primary motivations for using Instagram are self-expression” (O’Donnell, 2018:131). This is indicating that the intrigue with social media networks content is that users can post what they feel is an accurate depiction of who they are and exercise their freedom of self-expression.

The application of these theories for this research; specifically, from an analytical perspective and approach will help make sense of the behaviours of the active social media users as it pertains to content creation. The two theories are used as a basis and foundation to gain understanding and analyse the data collected as it pertains to the representation of self on social media and the impact of social media influencers on that representation.

CHAPTER 4: DATA COLLECTION

This chapter outlines the methodological processes that have been applied to collect first-hand raw data and specify the analytical means that will be used to determine if active social media users feel that the quality of social media influencers' content is required standard on Instagram. The research problem addressed in this study is that digital manipulation of images of social media influencers on Instagram could be portraying a standardised representation of an image and lifestyle. Which could result in the increased use of digital editing applications or software for active South African social media users.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This section details the qualitative and quantitative research concepts, as well as the population and sample size, used to collect the data for the research.

QUALITATIVE VS QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH

To understand the methodological approach adopted for the research it is important to have a fundamental understanding of quantitative and qualitative methods of research and the different aspects they can bring to research. In their book called *Finding Your Way in Qualitative Research;* Elizabeth Henning, Wilhelm Van Rensburg and Brigitte Smit (2004:104) explain that it has long been established that quantitative[18] and qualitative[19] research "agendas require different philosophical stances, and likewise, work with different underlying assumptions". Therefore, research is often based on an underlying concern and patterns that demand the curiosity of a researcher. In the case of this research, the hypothesis is that active social media users - on Instagram - in South Africa have been prone to the psychological effects bought on by social media consumption, which could, in turn, lead to comparison and self-discrepancy with the potential of leading to negative self-

[18] Consists of the collection of numerical data organized to explain, predict and or control phenomena of interest; the data analysis is largely statistical. The result of quantitative research is numerical, given in tables, graphs, or other forms of statistics presentation (Flick, 2009: 124).

[19] Qualitative research methods are often used to develop understandings of underlying, opinions, purposes, and motivations and can be applicable in isolating intangible factors (Flick, 2009; Mack et al., 2005).

esteem habits and digital manipulation of their content that is ultimately fuelled by the emulation of social media influencers content.

It is important to note with regards to this study that "quantitative researchers are concerned with an objective reality and are constructive in finding specific trends that the researcher could overlook" (Henning et al., 2004:10). Therefore, although the quantitative data is not heavily relied on for this study there are quantitative methods that have been adopted due to the provision of numerical data to support the research and contribute to the identification of noticeable contingencies concerning active social media users in South Africa consider when they post[20] on or engage with social media. In the book, *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*; Uwe Flick (2009) suggested that it has often been noted that qualitative research can be more effective to uncover trends in thought and opinions which dive deeper into the problem by utilising analytical methods. These methods are important as Natasha Mack, Cynthia Woodsong, Kathleen M. Macqueen, Greg Guest and Emily Namey (2005:5) explain in the book *Qualitative research methods: A data collector's field guide* that they "provide information about the 'human' side of an issue and highlights often contradictory behaviours, beliefs, opinions, emotions, and relationships of individual". This research has applied qualitative methods to interpret and understand propositions presented to reach a logical viewpoint for analysis on the foundation of the theories adopted.

DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY

Digital ethnography is a form of doing research that considers the impact that the digital space has on our lives it surveys the magnitudes of the presence of digital media informing the techniques and processes that ethnography is experienced according to Sarah Pink, Heather Horst, John Postill, Larissa Hjorth, Tania Lewis and Jo Tacchi in their 2016 book called *Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practices*. It is further explained that to appreciate how "digital media forms part of everyday life and the way it connects and feeds into the various decisions and norms adopted within society; there must first be a fundamental understanding of how it works" (Pink et al., 2016:10).

[20] Lexico.com defines post as "a piece of writing, image, or other item of content published online, typically on a blog or social media website or application"

In doing so, we might focus specifically on those "domains of activity in which digital media are used rather than on the characteristics or use of media" (Pink et al., 2016:10). The intent that motivates the usage of digital media in the context of social media is important to note specifically because of the role that it has taken within society; and how digital media development has shaped society (Govender, 2015). The concept of digital ethnography has been particularly crucial to this research as it appertains to how the digital manipulation of photographs presented on Instagram create a certain narrative in the 'real world' and if it is essentially impacting the use of the digital manipulation software for content on social media. In her chapter on digital ethnography in the *Corvinus Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, Anna Fruzsina Győr (2017:132) explains that "the distinction between online and offline (or 'real world') has become a false dichotomy as they are seamlessly blended together to form the social worlds we inhabit". Therefore, indicating that the lines between digital media and reality have been blurred partly due to the prevalence of social media.

POPULATION AND SAMPLE SIZE

In qualitative research, the sample design depends on the aim of the researcher as Karina Kielmann, Fabian Cataldo and Janet Seeley explain in their 2012 book *Introduction to qualitative research methodology*. Further explaining the purpose of a sample size Mack et al. (2005: 5) explain that the criteria chosen can let the researcher focus "on people we think would be most likely to experience, know about, or have insights into the research topic". It is for this reason, a combination of purposive sampling[21] and quota sampling [22] was used. The population of the study is thirty-six thousand two hundred and forty-nine (36249) currently registered postgraduate students at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg to get a sample size. The survey was distributed via email through the Office of the Deputy Registrar at the University of the Witwatersrand and had five hundred and ninety-four

[21] Purposive sampling "a subset of units from the entire population being studied" according to Daniel Riffe, Stephen Lacy and Frederick Fico (1998:86) in the book *Analysing Media Messages: Using Quantitative Content Analysis in Research.*

[22] Quota sampling, on the other hand, is considered a variation of purposive sampling. It entails looking at how many people; the characteristics to include (Mack et al., 2005).

(594) responses which was the sample size. This sample size allowed for a relatively decent number of perspectives and options to draw the necessary enquiries. The University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg provided an adequate and more realistic population for sampling owing to the diversity of culture; ethnicities; background and ages the student population encompasses and has been more feasible with regards to the access and resources to collect data within the institution.

SURVEY

In the first phase of the data collection, a link to an online survey (see Appendix: 1) designed by me was emailed to the thirty-six thousand two hundred and forty-nine (36249) students currently enrolled at the University of the Witwatersrand, as they represented the core demographic contingent that would be most beneficial to the data-collection process. Those who chose to participate in the survey went through a guided set of fifteen (15) questions to determine the thoughts and patterns that they have adopted as it pertains to Instagram. The participants were a mix of males (M) and females (F) aged 18 -35 years old due to that age group having the highest prevalence of social media usage in South Africa and are often referred to as millennials[23]. The survey is designed to profile the participants and determine the following:

- Their general thoughts on what constitutes a social media influencer.
- If social media influencer content makes them compare themselves.
- Their social media patterns.

The patriciates were also given the option of providing their e-mails should they be interested in participating in the interview phase of the study. The participants that opted for the second phase totalled three-hundred and thirty-one (331) and were

[23] According to whatis.techtarget.com. “Millennials are generally comfortable with the idea of a public Internet life. Privacy, in the Millennial eye, is mostly a concern of functional settings limiting who sees their online shares. This comfort with social media means they are good at self-promotion and fostering connections through online media. But this approach often results in an issue when comparing themselves to peers. Millennials are sometimes frustrated by the grass seeming greener on the other side of the fence. That impression may be due to people’s image crafting, which emphasizes their good qualities and exciting parts of their lives”.

randomly selected to get thirty (30) participants for the second phase of which only fourteen (14) responded. Factors such as race and socio-economic background, cultural and or religious beliefs, and sexual orientation were not considered in the study as it purely seeks to determine if active social media users feel that the quality of Instagram influencer content is required standard to become popular on social media.

INTERVIEW

The second phase of the research is the most crucial to my hypothesis and to support the data collected from the survey. The interview was emailed to 30 participants to look at the impact that social media influencers have on the digital manipulation patterns (see Appendix: 3). It is important to note that this interview is used to determine the thoughts of the fourteen (14) respondents on content curation via Instagram and to what extent they edit their content. This was analysed against the backdrop of preliminary findings retrieved from the survey. It allowed for a formulation of whether there is a correlation between digital manipulation of photographs by social media influencers and how people that follow them edit their photographs for Instagram.

DATA ANALYSIS METHODS

FRAMEWORK ANALYSIS

Framework analysis was the selected approach for the assessment of the results. In their 2009 journal article called *Framework Analysis: A Qualitative Methodology for Applied Policy Research;* Aashish Srivastava and Stanley Thomson indicate that a method is used mostly to present specific questions or information. In the analysis, data is sifted, charted, and sorted by key issues and themes using five steps: familiarization; identifying a thematic framework; indexing; charting; and mapping and interpretation (Srivastava & Thomson, 2009:72). In the analysis stage, the gathered data is sifted, charted, and sorted under key issues and themes (Srivastava & Thomson, 2009:75). This means the data presented is exhibited in the form of graphs

and charts to illustrate and consolidate my assessments and findings along with written analytical discussion in accordance with the theories chosen for critical discussion to determine the importance and relevance of the questions and what the outcomes signify to facilitate a better understanding of the data that was collected. The key factors that have been identified based on the literature are as follows:

1. Quality of Content: This has many variables that range from lighting, quality of the camera and the consistency of posting. They might use filters and editing software to improve the aesthetic of a picture. This can also be associated with the altering of physical features. The information that is relayed through the content also contributes to the quality.

2. Authenticity: This involves posting realistic content that has minimum editing and is a real depiction of real-life; and not a fabricated lifestyle. Social media users post things that are authentic to them and share content that they care about so that they are realistic and do not perpetuate false narratives.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

This chapter consists of the findings derived from the raw data collected from the survey and interviews conducted with an in-depth discussion of the results to come to a reflective conclusion to answer the research question.

SURVEY RESULTS

In this section, the collected data is presented. Since the data has been collected through an online survey (see Appendix 1 and 2). The findings of each question are presented and interpreted through graphs and discussed to explain the importance and relevance of the question and what the outcomes signify to facilitate better understanding. There is then a discussion of the preliminary findings from the data collected from the survey relaying it back to the theory adopted and concepts centred around social media to address the research question at hand.

The survey for the research was disseminated to thirty-six thousand two hundred and forty-nine (36249) currently enrolled postgraduate students of the University of the Witwatersrand on the 10th of March 2021 and it received five hundred and ninety-four 594 responses as of 24th of April 2021. That is a less than 1.7% response to the survey. The students were sent clear indications via email with a link to the survey on google forums; it was explained to them that no names were required from the students nor was any directly identified information required from the students that have willingly chosen to participate in this first phase. These are the results from the survey (see Appendix: 2).

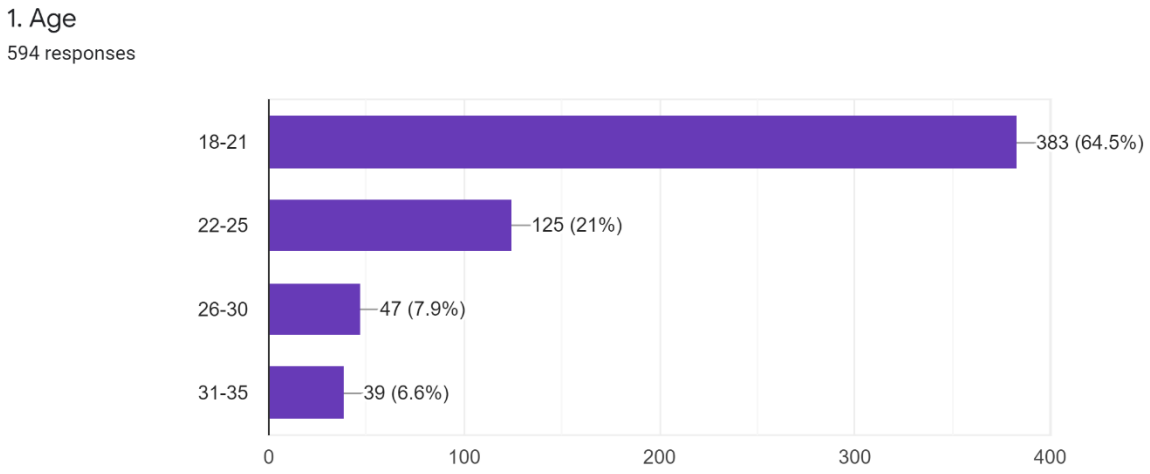


***Table 1**: Age Demographics of University of the Witwatersrand based Instagram users.*

The age of the respondents gives an indication and validity of whether social media is considered a necessity for individuals to be a contributing part of current society and if one must use it due to its prevalence and popularity; especially for millennials (Perloff, 2014). This also assists to determine if millennials are the demographic that uses social media the most along with or closely followed by generation z.

The results show that a majority (64.5%) of the participants that opted to answer the questionnaire were within the age group eighteen (18) to twenty-one (21) years of age followed by (21%) of the participants who are within the age group of twenty-two (22) to twenty-five (25). This is the age group that has the highest social media prevalence (Perloff: 2014); so, the focus must be within this age group.

The use of the internet can be blurred between the two generations depending on their age in addition to their experience with the technology. Which might slightly vary according to age (Perloff, 2014; Vitenu-Sackey, 2020). The older age groups - henceforth referred to as millennials - [twenty-six (26) to thirty (30) and thirty-one (31) to thirty-five (35)] - have known a world before the internet and social media became such a pivotal part of society and the younger age demographic - henceforth referred to as generation z- [eighteen (18) to twenty-one (21) and twenty-two (22) to twenty-five (25)] - only know a world where social media is such an integral part of everyday life and society(Vitenu-Sackey, 2020). This could be an indication as to the reason a

majority - three hundred and eighty-three (383) - of the active users of social media that were willing to participate in the survey were generation z - and why two hundred and eleven (211) millennials have participated in the survey meaning that approximately eighty-six (14.5%) participants were older than twenty-five (25). It should be noted for context that approximately 70% of respondents that use Instagram are under the age of 35. As a reminder, South African use of Instagram, according to napoleoncat.com, amounts to 5 427 000 Instagram users as of January 2021, which accounted for 9.1% of its entire population; most of them being women - 53.8%. The Instagram users aged 25 to 34 were the largest user group with 1 750 000 using Instagram. The highest difference between men and women occurs within people aged 25 to 34, where women lead by 110 000 on the platform. The data reflects this and shows that more generation-z participants answered the survey than the millennial participants. This then is indicating that as much as millennials are active participants on social media; generation-z might be more socially inclined to use social media due to it being a normalized part of their lives. In other words, it is what they are accustomed to so they might be more liable to share their knowledge of social media and how they use it.

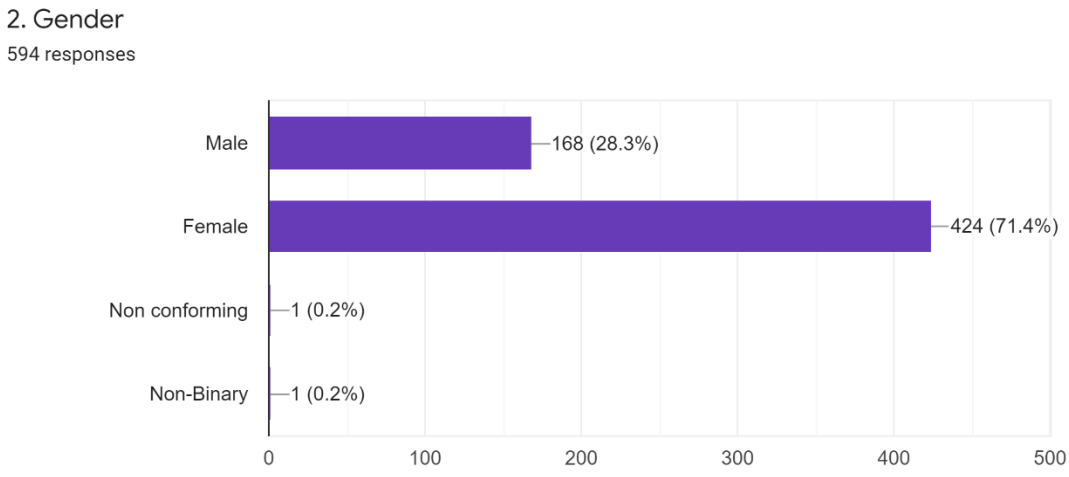


***Table 2**: Gender Demographics of University of the Witwatersrand based Instagram users.*

Distinguishing the genders is a part of acknowledging that there are various and specific ways social media impacts genders that could therefore affect their

*perspective when answering. Although gender is for this research, in particular, is not of significant importance to the outcome of the study. It is central to the global media experience because the race for 'digital visibility' and 'popularity' on social media at all costs is more prevalent amongst identifying females than males. This becomes especially important due to how public social networks have become, resulting in various forms of internet bullying and ridicule (*Duffy & Hund, 2019*). This is due to the constant comparison of social status, lifestyles and looks. This mainly affects females more because before social media was popular, traditional mass media outlets were at the forefront of creating cultural narratives that contributed to the conception of social identities of genders. This has led to women being more prone to being digitally manipulated in photographs and this has since been carried forth through social media. which is fuelled by the prevalence of Instagram models and the over-sexualization of female social media influencers in the present digital society.*

The majority (71.4%) of the survey respondents were female - four hundred and twenty-four (424) - whilst 28.3% - one hundred and sixty-eight (168) - were male. There have been statistics that indicate that women are more inclined to use social media than males as several studies have suggested [24]; therefore, it is no surprise that more females chose to participate in the survey. This could be an indication as to why most social media influencers are female making female active social media users more likely to compare themselves or try to emulate them. The average netizen[25] is more likely to be female based as the statistics show that over 53.8% of netizens in South Africa are female and the data reflects this statistic. In this regard it could be resolved that it is not necessarily that more women have more social media accounts but rather that they are more active and engage more than male users.

[24] This varies across social media platforms, country/and region, and reason for usage.

[25] Lexico.com defines a netizen as:" A user of the internet, especially a habitual or keen one".

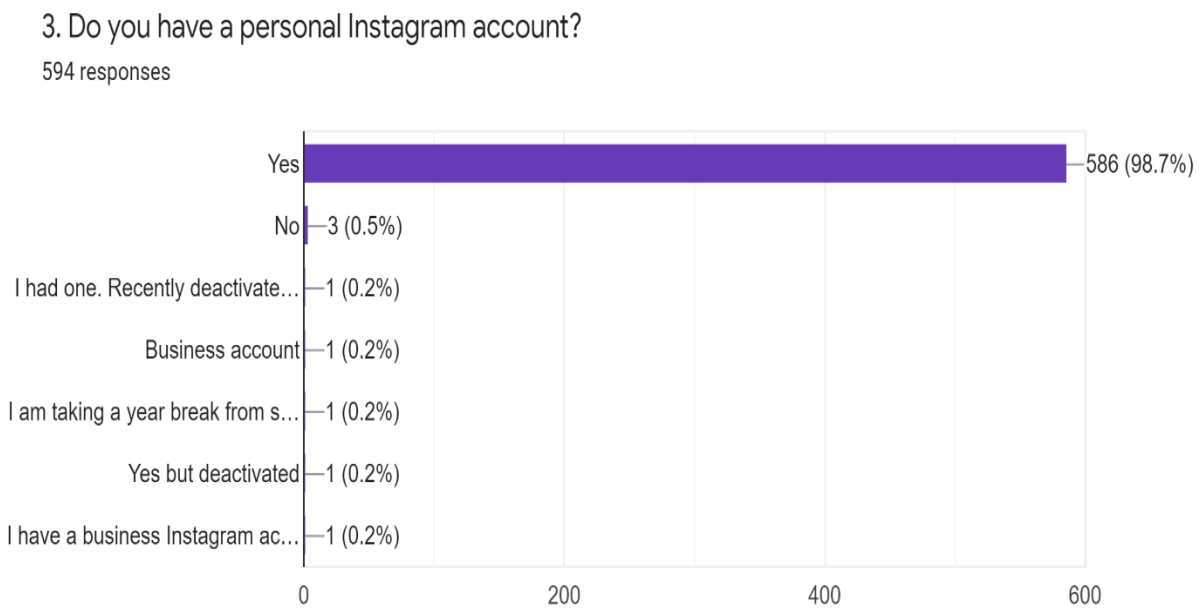


***Table 3**: The University of the Witwatersrand based Instagram users.*

Social media has given everybody a chance to create a version of themselves they are comfortable with the world knowing. The narrative of what one's life is like and who they are is completely up to an individual because they decide who they want to be when and how they post negating whether it is authentic or not and creating a certain perception for the audience, in other words, presents a certain image. Therefore, it is important to distinguish if their accounts were for business purposes or personal as the content will vary according to the purpose of the account.

All the respondents have had active Instagram accounts; with two (2) of them being business accounts. There were two (2) that have deactivated their accounts. This left five-hundred and eighty-six (586) respondents that had active Instagram accounts without taking into consideration whether they are private or public accounts. Social media algorithms and basic user's options on the Instagram application is often set up in a manner that allows social media users to choose the type of content they want to see on their feeds. This is by virtue of the people they follow and the type of content that they engage with regularly. It was not vital that the participants have public or private Instagram accounts because it still would not affect how they consume content

from social media influencers and does not affect the content available to them. It just has an impact on who can see their personal Instagram feed and content.

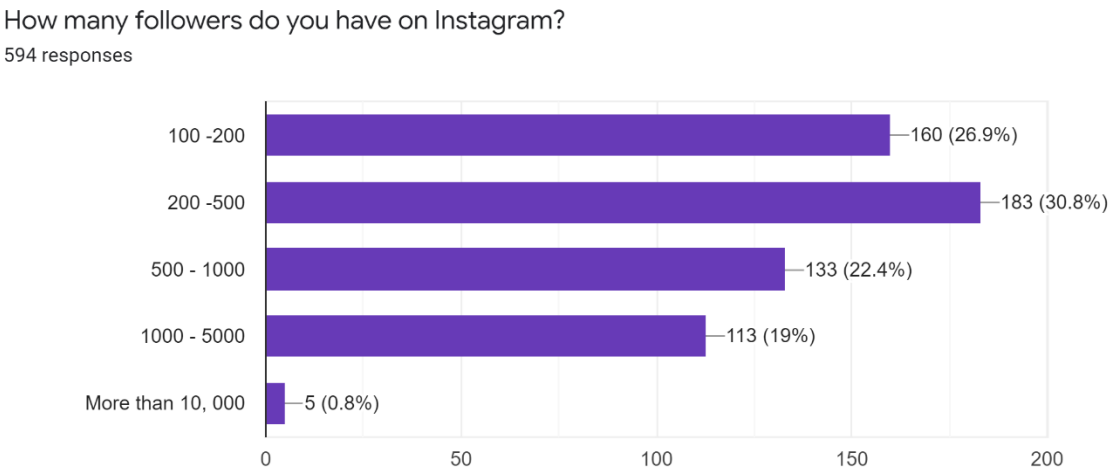


***Table 4**: The University of the Witwatersrand based Instagram users' followers' range.*

The number of followers an Instagram user has can have a lot of connotations as there are various factors attached to gaining followers. These include but are not limited to location, type of content, content quality, gender, having a private account and 'fake followers' (bots), etc. The number of followers a user has can be a combination of other factors other than the content shared on Instagram (Hu et.al., 2014). Gauging the number of followers, the users have can be an indication of their relationship with social media and if it affects how they view influencer content.

One-hundred and eighty-three (30.8%) of the participants had between 200 to 500 followers on Instagram. Then followed by one hundred and sixty (26.9%) of them having 100 to 200 followers. This indicates that over fifty per cent of them had between 100 to 500 Instagram followers. Five (0.8%) of the participants had over 10, 000 followers. This could be an indication of the dedication and effort it takes to gain a social media following as the majority of the participants had between 200 to 500 and only 0.8% had over 10,000 followers. This is a testament to the consistency social media influencers need to adopt to gain a substantial number of followers in a relatively short space of time; especially without having created viral content. To this effect, the smaller groups of followers are likely to be due to private accounts or low activity.

There are also several other factors such as hashtags, the algorithms that Instagram uses as well as engagement.

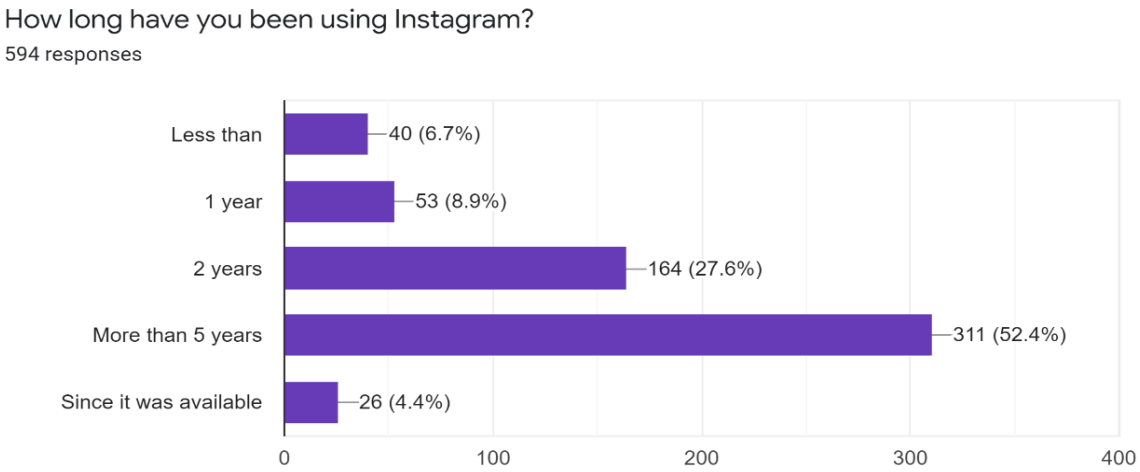


***Table 5**: Duration of active use of Instagram, the University of the Witwatersrand based Instagram users.*

The economic contribution of social media has been so significant that it is considered a functional and active part of current society and could be classified as a form of social currency (Perloff, 2014). Meaning the continuous use and presence of an active user on Instagram can have an impact on their socio-economic position in society; especially considering how social media content is so widespread and its influence can have deep roots. The very foundation of social media is derived from traditional mass media prevalence, which has continually been an influential part of how content distribution functions (Perloff, 2014).

The data might be an indication that social media has been a solid and functional part of society for more than a decade as three hundred and eleven (52.4%) of the participants have been active Instagram users for more than five years. One hundred and sixty-four (27.7%) have used Instagram for at least two years. Twenty-six (4.4%) of them have been using Instagram since it first launched in 2010. Ninety-three (15.6%) have only been using Instagram for a year or less.

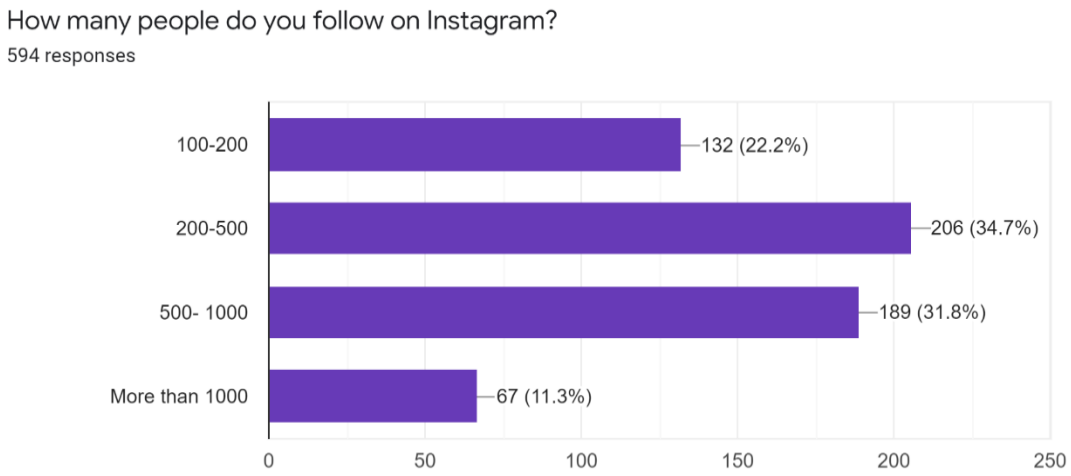


***Table 6**: Instagram profiles followed; the University of the Witwatersrand based Instagram users.*

The people that active Instagram users follow directly can impact their feed and explore page (Hu et al., 2014). *This then will impact their perspective of what is the normal standard for content in society depending on how it is presented and what it is intended to represent as ideal. The notion that the media contributes to societies understanding of the world and is constantly shaping the conception of our individual and social identities; and with the prevalence of social media networks, it is even more influential to the very fabric and function of society (Perloff, 2014; Govender, 2015).*

The data indicates that two hundred and six (34.7%) of the participants follow between 200 to 500 profiles on Instagram while one hundred and eighty-nine (31.8%) of participants follow 500 to1000 Instagram profiles. That is a total of 66.5 % that follow between 200 to 1000 people on Instagram. It is, therefore, safe to say that the average active Instagram user is following more than 200 Instagram profiles. There were one hundred and thirty-two (22.2%) participants that followed 100 to 200 and sixty-seven (11.3%) that follow more than 1000 people on Instagram. This shows just how much content is available on social media. It seems that all respondents are potentially exposed to well over a hundred (100) different forms of content on Instagram just based on the premise that they follow two hundred (200) or more accounts on

Instagram alone[26]. This is bound to have an impact on their perspective of the world and their self-perception in conjunction with what the content they consume normalizes for them within society.

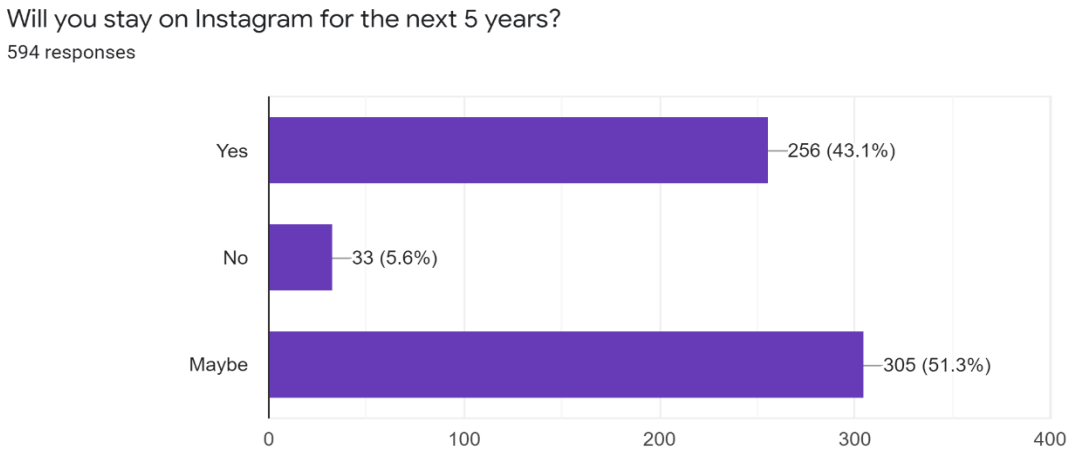


***Table 7**: The University of the Witwatersrand based Instagram users predictive use of Instagram.*

Instagram has been expanding and growing over the past decade. Therefore, the pressure of social media requires active users to adapt and develop along with the platform. The intention of an Instagram user to stay on the platform for an extended period of time indicates the deep roots and function of Instagram culture within society. This indicates that Instagram has become one of the benchmarks of societal standards (Hu et al., 2014). In South Africa alone it is the fourth (4th) most used social media platform there are approximately almost 4 million active users on Instagram monthly. In this regard, this could be an indication of how integrated Instagram has become in the participants' lives.

The survey indicated that two hundred and fifty-six (43.1%) of the participants indicated that they would still be using Instagram in the next five years. The majority of the respondents - three hundred and five (51.3%) - were not sure if they would still be using the platform. Only thirty-three (5.6%) would not stay on Instagram for the next

[26] This assuming that they are check their Instagram feed multiple times a day. It is assumed the content is available to them because as the data shows not all of them are regularly using Instagram throughout the day; in fact, 22.4% of them do not.

five years indicating that over half of the respondents have the intention of staying on the platform. This solidifies the notion that Instagram has become a part of the day-to-day functions of society and has an impact the societal norms. It is therefore bound to impact the way active social media users see the world depending on the content they consume.

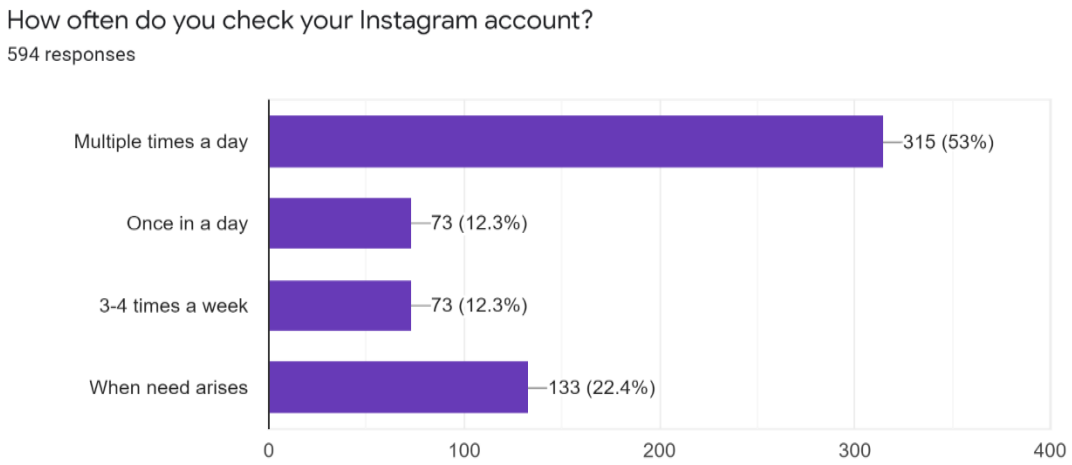


***Table 8**: Frequency consumption of content on Instagram, University of the Witwatersrand based Instagram users.*

The frequency and time spent on social media are important as it is known that adolescents that are regularly exposed to visual media content that has been digitally edited influence their perception of self (Hu et al., 2014). The edited images presented on social media as realistic or as the normal standard has shown to be problematic in research addressing adolescent development (Hu et al., 2014). It is important to know the frequency of which the respondents consume Instagram content.

The data reveals that over half of the participants check their Instagram accounts multiple times a day. The vast majority - three hundred and fifteen (53%) - of the participants said that they use their Instagram accounts multiple times a day. Which in this case would be more than twice in a 24-hour span. While seventy-three (12.3%) checked at least once a day and 3 - 4 weekly were the same with 12.3%. One hundred and thirty-three (22.4%) of the participants only checked their Instagram when the need arises. In this case, this would be only when they had to use Instagram. The more exposure to social media content one has the more impactful or influential it can

be. It can have both negative and positive outcomes in terms of the social media habits that could be developed and the pressure to produce a specific type of content.

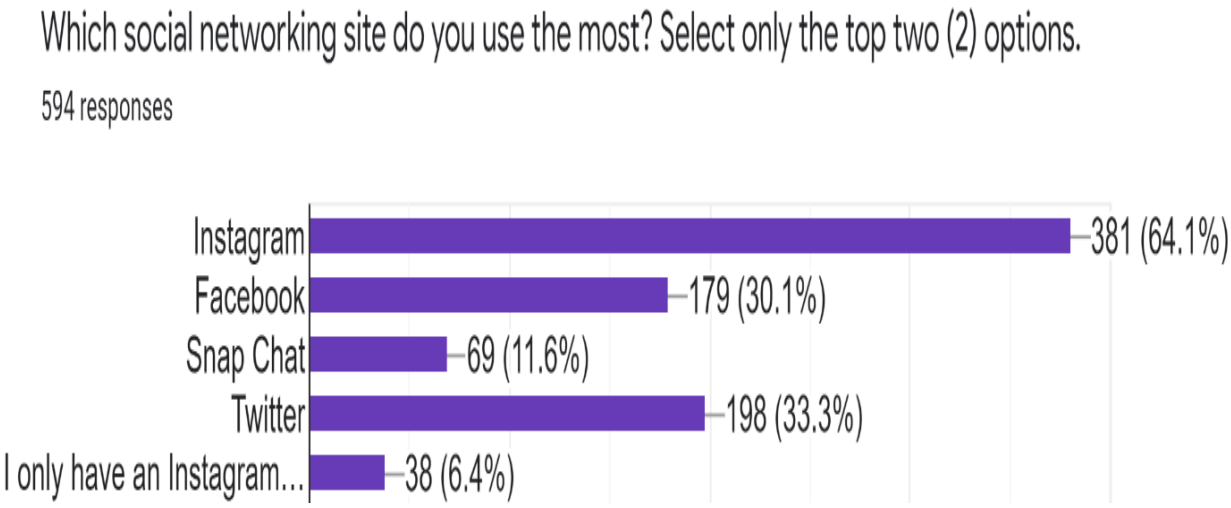


***Table 9**: Most used social media applications, University of the Witwatersrand based Instagram users.*

The significance of images on Instagram uniquely separates it from text-based social media platforms, which could be an indication of its vast impact in society as image-based social media content has noticeably prompted different effects from users' than those on text-based social media posts (Hu et al., 2014); this is fitting for the study to know how popular it is amongst the respondents. It also helps to determine their relationship with social media and how invested they are.

The data supports the statistic that Instagram and Twitter are the most used social media sites. Thirty-eight (6.4%) of the participants only use Instagram, which is quite a substantial amount considering the array of social media platforms that are available. It is no surprise that Twitter and Facebook follow a close second in with one-hundred and ninety-eight (33.3%) and one hundred and seventy-nine (30.1%) respectively. Sixty-nine (11.6%) of the participants indicated that Snapchat was one of the social media applications they use the most. It can be perceived that an active social media user interests and lifestyle have a bearing on the social media network they use, how often they use it and what they use social media for.

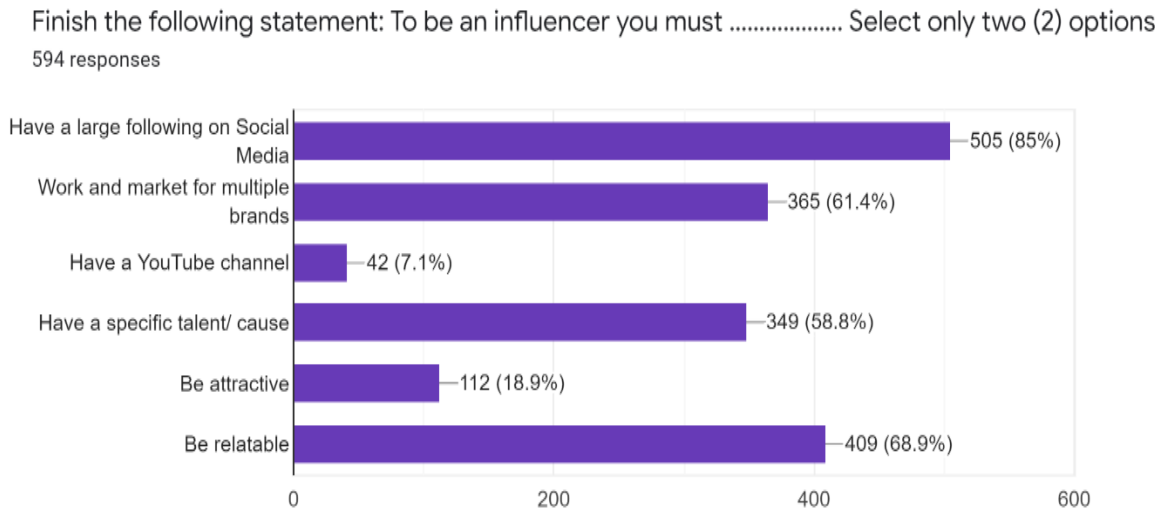


***Table 10**: Priority influencer characteristics according to the University of the Witwatersrand based Instagram users.*

Various components make one a social media influencer and various characteristics that appealed most to active users that follow social media influencers (Freberg et al., 2010). Amongst them was outspoken, ambitious, smart, productive, and self-assured as attributes they admired most in both the influencers and the services and products; they advocate for (Freberg et al., 2010). It could be argued that the more apparent these attributes are in a social media influencer the more they can attract a lucrative following. It sparks the idea that the attributes are important because social media influencers are a representation of what can be achieved if one strives to accomplish their goal. This is especially interesting to note if the influencer is in the same industry as their followers and the basis of their content is advice and tips on how to navigate that specific career path (Nandagiri et al., 2018). It is worthy to note that most successful social media influencers either educate advice or relate to their audience in a transparent entertaining manner (Nandagiri et al., 2018; Duffy & Hund, 2019).

The results indicate this as they reveal that the participants believe that to be classified as a social media influencer active social media users must have a) have a large following; according to five hundred and five (85%) of the participants and b) be relatable as selected by four hundred and nine (68.9%) the third most popular response was c) work and market for multiple brands as indicated by three hundred

and sixty-five (61.4%) of the participants. There also seems to be a large majority of participants - three hundred and forty-nine (58.8%) - that felt that d) having a specific talent or cause was an important part of being an influencer. The least popular responses were 1) be attractive and 2) have a YouTube channel with one hundred and twelve (18.9%) and forty-two (7.1%) respectively. Interestingly revealing that looks and gaining a significant amount of success on other social media networks does not guarantee influencer status. This could be a symptom of the pressure to have the perfect 'Instagram aesthetic' that people are no longer willing to subscribe to in order to fit in with people that are essentially strangers. In this regard, social media influencer popularity can be a combination of various factors which can reflect differently on social media sites depending on the type of content they produce to engage with their audiences to engage them enough to gain a following.

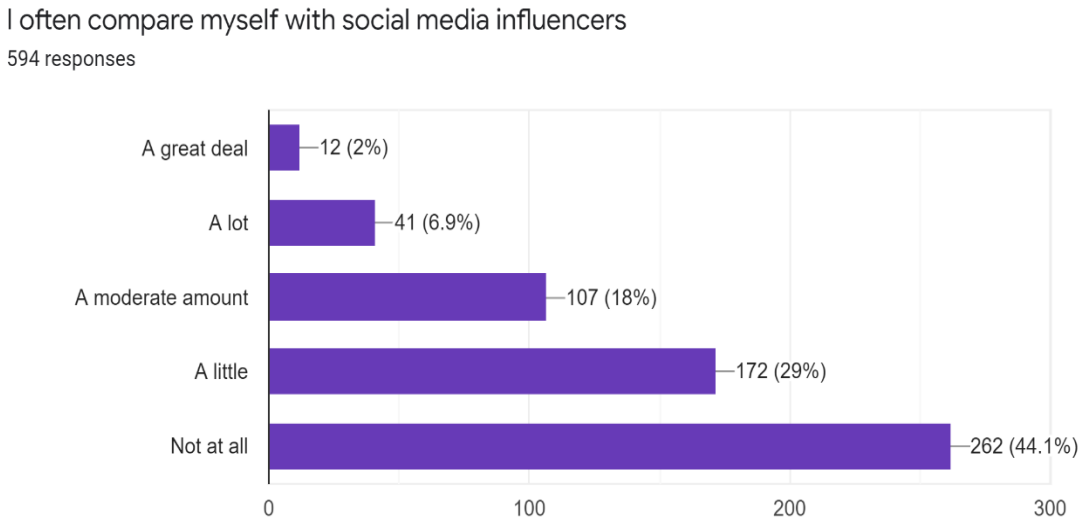


Table 11: The *University of the Witwatersrand based Instagram user, comparison pattern.*

It is evident that exposure to social media influencer content can have a bearing factor on what the global society considers acceptable or of relevance. It is in the way they construct their social media profiles (Nandagiri et al., 2018). The results of this question assist in observing the function social media exposure has on people that habitually follow influencers on social media and whether they are more inclined to compare their lives to those of influencers and view it as a standard to uphold.

The data indicated that most of the participants - two hundred and sixty-two (44.1%) - answered that they do not compare themselves to social media influencers at all. While twelve (2%) participants said they compare themselves a great deal and forty-one (6.9%) of the respondents said they compare themselves a lot. This means that there are fifty-three (8.9%) of the participants that heavily compare themselves to social media influencers. The number of respondents that compare themselves to social media influencers is unsurprisingly high as three hundred and thirty-two (332) compare themselves to some extent; indicating that influencer content is what they could consider as the acceptable standard for social media.

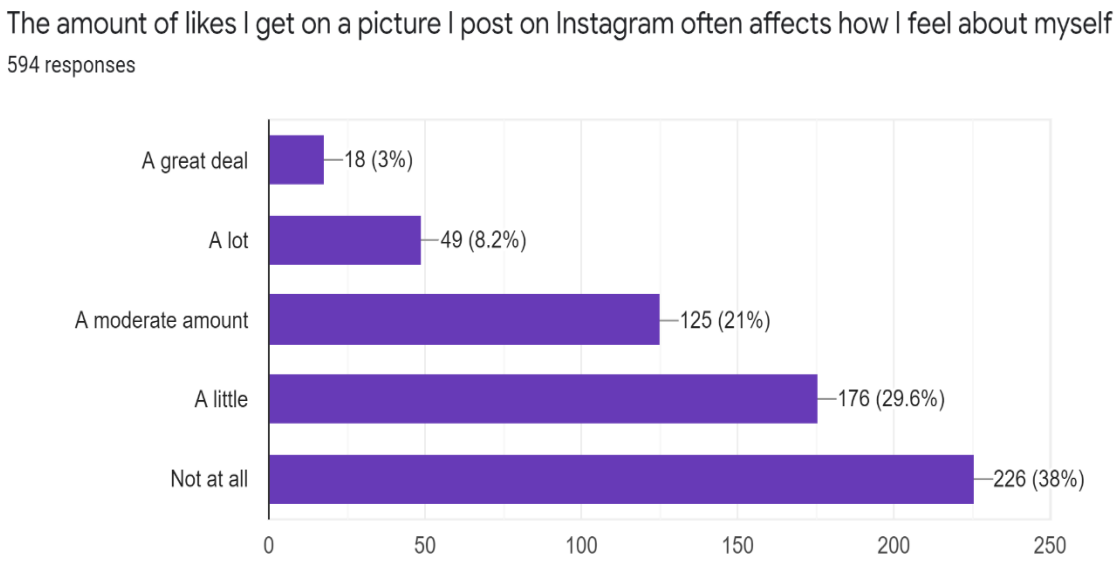


***Table 12**: Impact of "likes" on their Instagram posts, the University of the Witwatersrand based Instagram users.*

This will be an indication of how important social media popularity is to the respondent's confidence. There is a perception or idea that the amount of interaction that a social media post obtains - likes, comments, views ... etc - the more valuable it is. Hence why the content of social media influencers is often monetized (Rainie et al., 2012)*. This can have an impact on how social media users perceive themselves based on their insights.*

The results show that most of the participants - two hundred and twenty-six (38%)- answered that they do not get affected by the amount of 'likes' they get on social media at all. While eighteen (3%) participants said that it affects them a great deal and sixty-seven (11.2%) said the number of likes affects them a lot. This means that there are fifty-three (8.9%) of the participants that are heavily aware of the number of likes they get on social media posts. Three hundred and sixty-eight of the respondents are to some degree aware of the amount of 'likes' they accumulate on their posts. This highlights that engagement is a significant part of social media activity and that it has an impact on how they interact with social media but has very little impact on their perception of self.

In addition to the above questions, the survey asked: Which of these local Social Media Influencer's do you follow? (SPECIFICALLY ON INSTAGRAM). You can mention your favourite Influencer if she/he is not listed.

The participants had to choose between the influencers profiled below. I did not adopt any specific criteria in selecting the social media influencers other than that they needed to be from South Africa to adhere to the relatability aspect, since this research is South African based. It was also important that they gained status solely through social media not because they were celebrities. They also needed to have a significant amount of popularity on Instagram due to their large following, making them some of the biggest influencers in South Africa. It was important that they were not celebrities or well known for anything else other them being social media influencers across the board; meaning that their careers before social media did not have a bearing on the number of followers they have because they were not recognizable from any other form of media other than social media.

NAME/ INSTAGRAM HANDLE	Shaun Andlie Naki/Shaun Stylist (@shaunstylist)
INSTAGRAM FOLLOWERS	291k
NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS THAT FOLLOW	Ten (10)

Table 13: *Shaun Stylist (@shaunstylist) Instagram* statistics.

South African fashion stylist, image consultant and personal shopper Shaun Andile Naki; has cultivated an impressive following as a fashion influencer dominating the African fashion industry. He has cemented himself as one of South Africa's principal stylists and image consultants; having collaborated with an impressive list of local and international brands.

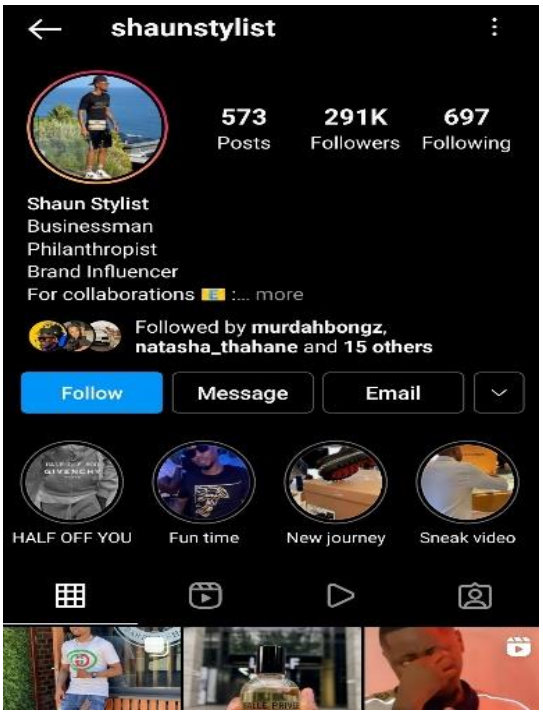


Figure 1: *Shaun Stylist (@shaunstylist) Instagram profile.*

NAME/ INSTAGRAM HANDLE	MENS FASHION by SERGIO INES (@whatmyboyfriendwore)
INSTAGRAM FOLLOWERS	578k
NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS THAT FOLLOW	Two (2)

Table 14: *MEN's FASHION by SERGIO INES (@whatmyboyfriendwore) Instagram* statistics.

Sergio Ines is a local style icon who runs the *What My Boyfriend Wore* website. He focuses on documenting his outfits and provides style tips and pioneered the trend #FancyFriday. He was also named GQ's second best-dressed man in South Africa; he is a professional art director based in Cape Town. The inspiration for *What My Boyfriend Wore* arose from his girlfriend at the time documenting his outfits and eventually he caved to its popularity and started the *What My Boyfriend Wore* blog.

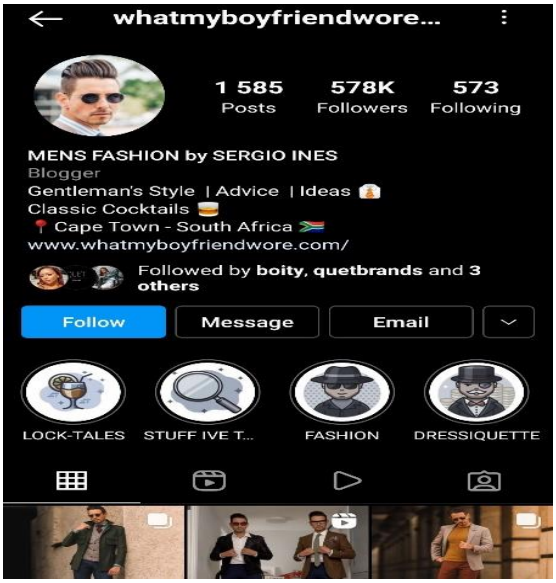


Figure 2**:** *MENS FASHION by SERGIO INES (@whatmyboyfriendwore) Instagram profile*

NAME/ INSTAGRAM HANDLE	Thulasizwe Siphiwe Dambuza / Lasizwe - (@lasizwe)
INSTAGRAM FOLLOWERS	1.3 million
NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS THAT FOLLOW	One hundred and twenty-nine (129)

***Table 15**: Lasizwe Dambuza (@lasizwe) Instagram* statistics.

Lasizwe whose real name is Thulasizwe Dambuza is a South African content creator. His popularity as a social media personality and comedian has led him to work in all aspects of the media from television, radio and acting. He has used the media exposure to cultivate his successes and even has a reality show on MTV called *@Lasizwe: Fake It till You Make It* amongst other major collaborations with various brands in different markets

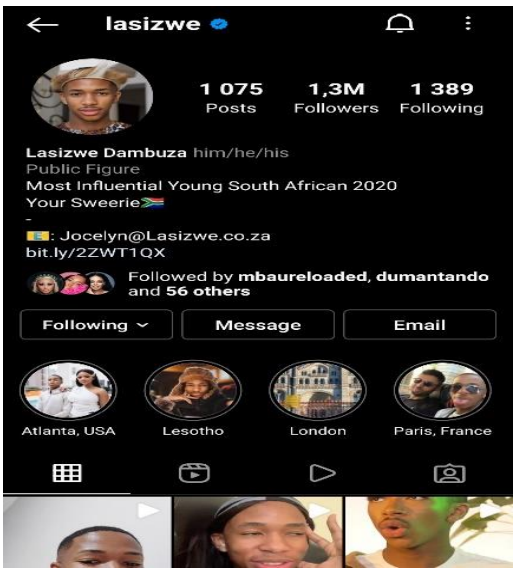


***Figure 3**: Lasizwe Dambuza (@lasizwe) Instagram profile.*

NAME/ INSTAGRAM HANDLE	Lesego Legobane/ thickleeyonce@gmail.com (@thickleeyonce)
INSTAGRAM FOLLOWERS	802k
NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS THAT FOLLOW	Sixty-four (64)

***Table 16**: thickleeyonce@gmail.com (@thickleeyonce)* Instagram statistics.

Lesego Legobane has attained a great following on different social media platforms due to her outspokenness concerning being comfortable in her body type. She is a body positivity advocate, photographer, model, entrepreneur, and content creator. She has shared her journey into loving her body, embraces womanhood and inspires other women, regardless of their sizes and shapes. She founded a plus-size clothing brand called LeeBex, with co-founder Rebecca Garande in 2016. Thickleeyonce was recently added as a model and partner to international brand Calvin Klein amongst other brand collaborations.

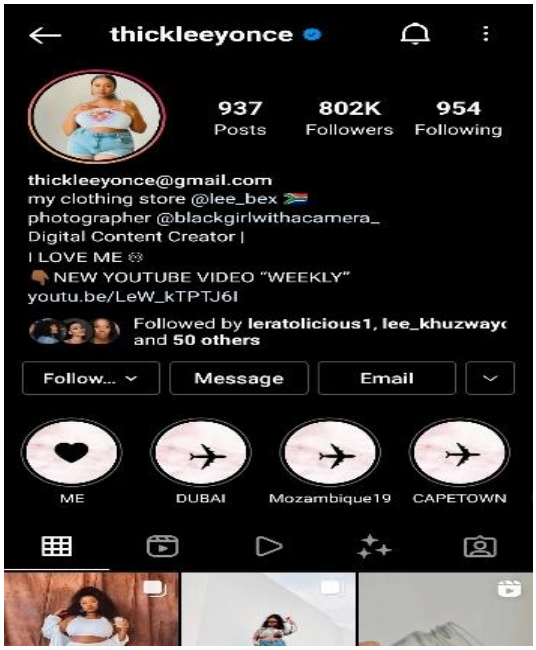


Figure 4: *thickleeyonce@gmail.com (@thickleeyonce) Instagram profile.*

NAME/ INSTAGRAM HANDLE	Mihlali Ndamase/ Mihlali Ndamase (@mihlalii_n)
INSTAGRAM FOLLOWERS	1.6 million
NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS THAT FOLLOW	One hundred and twenty-six (126)

Table 17: *Mihlali Ndamase (@mihlalii_*n) Instagram statistics.

Mihlali Ndamase is a South African content creator, makeup artist and CEO of MalakytSA. She is a certified professional makeup artist from the Leaders in The Science of Fashion (LISOF) institute. She has a passion for skincare, beauty, and fashion. Her popularity has led her to collaborate with major brands like MAC Cosmetics, Urban Decay, Aldo, Samsung, amongst others. She was also listed as part of the Forbes 30 under 30 class of 2021.

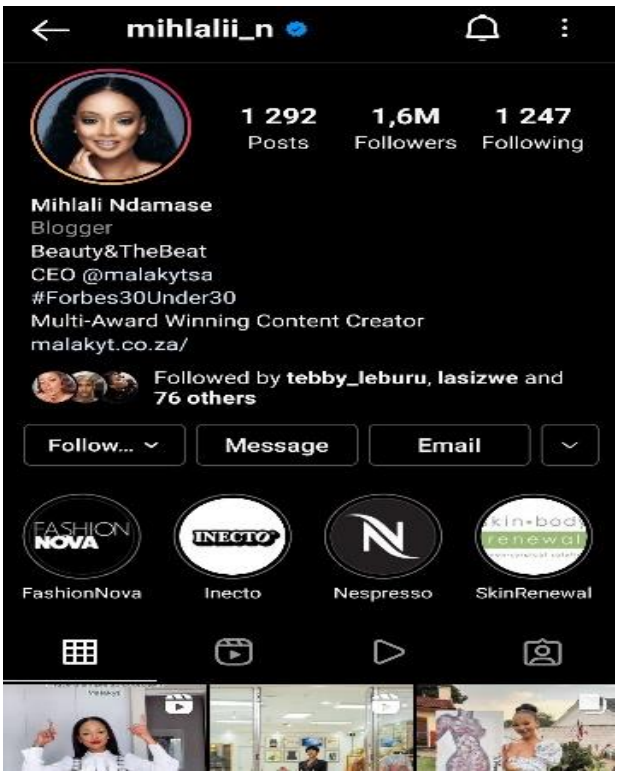


Figure 5*: Mihlali Ndamase (@mihlalii_n) Instagram profile.*

SURVEY PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Social media has created a digital environment where influencers can mediate and create through their platforms; the freedom of individual expression that comes with it has created deliberation about what exactly classifies one as a social media influencer. The research and studies that have been conducted on social media influencers, though limited has shown that they have become tools to share information and are representatives of the key demographics and audiences they attract. Economically this has translated into social media influencers being recruited by various brands to promote their services or products.

This is solidifying the notion that the reputation of a company is built through the content it is associated with or produces (Hudders et al., 2021). Therefore, when adopting influencer marketing a brand needs to target social media influencers that align with their standards and represent their average consumer (Jin et al., 2019). An article by Sabrina Trudeau H. and Saeed Shobeiri (2016: 98) called *Does social currency matter in creation of enhanced brand experience?* indicates that a 2013 research article by the Euromonitor concluded that:

> shows that more than one in every three consumers uses social media to learn more about a product or service or ask for advice during the purchase decision. In recent years, brand communities based on virtual platforms have become increasingly popular for a wide range of brands."

In *I Like What She's #Endorsing: The Impact of Female Social Media Influencers' Perceived Sincerity, Consumer Envy, and Product Type* Jung Ah Lee and Matthew S. Eastin (2020: 77) conclude that this means that a social media influencer's value is assessed by what they termed a "return on influence" and essentially means that it does not exclusively factor in the number of followers an influencer has but the quotient of impact, bond and influence that has developed between the social media influencer and their audience. This indicates that the fundamental premises of what constitutes one to be a social media influencer are creating content that leads to monetary gain and due to the monetary aspect of the work that social media influencers embark on Audrezet et al. (2020: 558) explain that a social media influencer:

> intrinsic desires to create content about their personal passions might be side-tracked by commercial opportunities to promote brands or products they would not ordinarily be interested in. Thus, SMIs' authenticity can be threatened by brands' encroachment into their content.

This calls into question whether the content of social media influencers can or should be viewed without scrutiny because for most influencers brand partnerships and marketing are their main source of income until they reach a point where their social media presence is large enough to ensure the success of their own companies should they embark on entrepreneurial journeys.

The data and literature collected for this survey solidifies that what active social media users believe constitutes a social media influencer is having a substantial following on social media and influencer marketing and/or partnerships as well as relatability as shown in table 10. The more relatable the content the more followers gained. This in turn leads to bigger brand deals and according to Thomson (2006) as cited in Sabrina Trudeau H. and Saeed Shobeiri (2020: 77) contextualises that most social media influencers are human brands and explains that:

> human brands refer to individuals whose career, public appearance, and endorsements are carefully controlled not only to enhance their personal appeal but also to distinguish them from others.

This appeal is an important aspect of creating a following on social media as it provides netizens with a reason to click the follow bottom. The survey data reflects this as three hundred and forty-nine (58.8%) have agreed that a social media influencer should have a specific cause or talent. The more seasoned social media influencers become the more they can develop and hone their skills to create various forms of content that become synonymous with their brand (Audrezet et al., 2020) as well as master their interests. The vast content that is available on the internet creates an environment for substantial growth and popularity of social media influencers and this is because of the wider audience social media provides (Audrezet et al., 2020).

This suggests that there needs to be a sell-point that triggers initial engagement from netizens to achieve constant content that has engagement that keeps them interested. It is clear from the data that this selling point is not the attractiveness of the influencer,

but the relatability of the influencer. The number of followers an influencer has from my observation merely serves as an indication of how many people's attention an influencer's content can retain. The logic is that the more attention you can sustain the more influence they could have on purchase intentions and trends.

The more authentic the message the more receptive the intended audience is to it. This then enhances the perception of value of the content, service and/or product, which in turn increases the interaction and leads to further engagement and purchases of the product and/or service (Audrezet et .al, 2020). Authentic content has become vital to the development of the digital marketing strategy adopted by brands in the fashion, beauty, and beauty industries. The content generated is a representation of what they have to offer to their target markets and therefore is essential for brand reputation (Audrezet et.al, 2020) and therefore social media influencers need to be authentic and transparent if they are to be part of a brands marketing strategy.

Through the lens of the data collected it seems that social media influencers are viewed as people that can contribute to your life through social media content. The most successful influencers are the ones that have consistency; stay true to their initial brand and maintain an element of authentic humanity. This authentic humanity would be best noted as when an influencer creates and shares content that dismantles the 'got it all together' image. Social media influencers share their personal tribulations and struggles and can admit that their content consists of highlights from their lives. This reminds their audience that perfection is an illusion that can be curated. This in turn indicates that influencer marketability requires editing and image manipulation because it communicates the best possible version of the influencer despite imperfections. The data solidifies the notion that influencers are popular because they reflect possibility, offer guidance and solutions to their followers by marketing for brands on their platforms. The heart of influencer relatability is dismantling perfection while making it marketable and as authentic as possible.

The relatability of an influencer is tied to their perceived personality which is expressed via the various forms of content on different platforms and becomes especially important as a marketing tool; as consumers often encounter new products via what influencers recommended (Jung Ah Lee & Matthew S. Eastin, 2020). These recommendations are adjusted based on user activity. Therefore, based on the data

on the survey; social media users follow influencers mostly because of their content and popularity on social media as three hundred and ninety-two (66%) of the participants indicated that they follow social media influencers because they create content that they enjoy the content and two hundred and twenty-four (37.7%) indicated that they follow them because they are very popular. Those being the top two responses is consistent with the data that also highlights that the most popular (in terms of followers) social media influencers on the list as Thulasizwe Siphiwe Dambuza and Mihlali Ndamas respectively. Although their content differs in several ways simply by virtue of their target; they create content that can relate to that specific demographic with ease. They know the issues that their counterparts face on a day to day, their interests as well as their concerns, making it more authentic. To this effect, they partner up with brands that address and gauge their needs and market by creating content that can engage and retain their audiences' interests. I am of the notion that influencer marketing is a company and/ or brand hiring the perfect representation of their ideal customer that will give an authentic account of their experience with their service or product. While Chia et al. (2021:4.) on the other hand state that "social media influencers (SMIs) refer to unique and attractive influential members of the social media community who frequently interact with other members of the community". In Acknowledging the impact of social media marketing, referring to it as 'social commerce' Chia, et. al. (2021:4) explain that:

> social commerce can leverage its distinctive presence and influence in the community to distribute new information or share new products with greater neutrality. This may potentially disrupt the existing marketing ecosystem and turn social commerce into an integral part of modern sociology and virtual business activities.

It has in my observation that social media has indeed greatly disrupted the marketing systems. Especially given the effectiveness' of social media marketing and influencer marketing for start-up companies as it has proved to be one of the most affordable forms of large-scale advertisement available to them.

It has been well documented through various studies that social media has a direct impact on the self-esteem, body image, life satisfaction of users and has often led to negative social comparison. The studies that have looked at the correlation between social media and self-esteem have proven the various effects of social media on

comparison and self-perception as Dion (2016:5) highlights *in The effect of Instagram on self-esteem and life satisfaction*:

> social media apps such as Instagram have been scarcely studied. Instagram differs as a social media tool unlike other platforms. Dissimilar to other social networking sites like Facebook or Twitter, Instagram is solely for posting pictures (and short video clips); people post pictures for their followers to view, “like” and comment on.

This has shown that social comparison is still a major outcome of social media usage for the majority as the self-esteem of the respondents has been impacted with 55.9% of them comparing themselves to social media influencers and 61,8% admitting that the ‘likes’ they get on Instagram has an impact on their self-esteem. This solidifies how much social media shapes our perception of self. Dion (2016:6) extensively explains the reason why the impact of content on Instagram may vary than on other social media platforms and states that:

> Unlike Facebook where most people mostly follow friends and family, Instagram allows you to follow celebrities and other famous people to see what they post about their day-to-day lives, whether it is selfies at their modelling photo-shoot, or pictures of their luxurious vacations in foreign beautiful countries. With Facebook, your social comparison group is mainly your friends and family. You compare yourself to others who are most likely similar to you in many ways. With Instagram, your social comparison group can become celebrities that have a lot more money and many more significant attributes valued by society than most who follow them. For those individuals who use Instagram often, they see what these celebrities post every day. If celebrities become their social comparison group; it is possible that this could have an even more negative effect on an individual’s self-report.

This statement is very potent in the grand landscape of the underlying factors that contribute to the way an audience experiences content on particular social media platforms. Social media influencers are in the spectrum of both social comparison groups because of the para-social interactions they have with their followers. This in turn will have a substantial impact on the self-perception that they form of themselves in comparison to the influencers.

This seems to translate into the expectations that they have of the content that they put on social media with three hundred and sixty-eight (368) of the participants indicating that their self-esteem is impacted by social media. One could consider self-

esteem as an important component of how people post on social media. It could also impact what they post, how much they post and their overall activity on social media platforms. As Briana Trifiro (2018) explains in research called *Instagram Use and Its Effect on Well-Being and Self-Esteem*; social comparison can be based on both physical attributes and comparing of life experiences. This goes to show that the spectrum of what triggers comparison is vast; there is mostly a focus on looks and the doctoring of images to fit a certain standard of beauty but very little focuses on the perpetuation of a certain lifestyle.

There is no one specific cause that can make social media users compare themselves as it a very layered and the impacts are quite complex. The data reflects this. One clear thing is that "individuals are prone to constantly compare their lives with those of others. Image-based social media, specifically Instagram, provides ample opportunity for individuals to engage in social comparison, as it is rife with carefully crafted and heavily edited images" (Trifiro, 2018: 20). This is an indication that the exposure to various forms of social media content reveals to the consumer's different lifestyles and what is possible for them. This is the reason representation is vital and contributes to the formulation of societal perspectives. It is well known that perspective is formulated by various factors that often precede media exposure; and as Desiree Schmuck, Kathrin Karsay, Jorg Matthes and Anja Stevic (2019:1) point out in their journal article called "*Looking Up and Feeling Down". The influence of mobile social networking site use on upward social comparison, self-esteem, and well-being of adult smartphone users* "social comparison is a human state of evaluating one's opinions and abilities in comparison with others and serves as an essential function for establishing self-identity". Social media has a substantial impact on self-perceptions and confidence. Therefore, self-perception and identity are an accumulation of social standards that are normalized within society and are often translated on social media as the acceptable norm causing individuals that deviate from that standardized expectation to develop insecurities.

However, the data also indicates that there are individuals that felt that social media content and insights had no bearing on how they viewed themselves as two hundred and twenty-eight (38%) of the participants were "not at all" impacted by the amount of

‘likes’ they get on posts. This highlights that an individual’s perspective and experience of social media are different and factors in the notion that active social media users have varying reasons for using social media and have varied expectations with regards to their experiences on social media.

The experience one has on social media can vary due to social media patterns and engagement. Active social media users are exposed to content more than passive users. The data indicated that (53%) of the participants check their Instagram accounts multiple times a day; this validates the correlation between social media usage and its impact on adolescents. The reality is that social media can normalize certain behaviours and what is acceptable varies differently on the different social media networks.

INTERVIEW ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the collected data in the interviews are presented. Since the data has been collected via email (see Appendix: 3 and 4). The findings of each question are presented and interpreted with a narrative discussion. The key responses for each question are also highlighted to determine what the outcomes signify. There is then a discussion of the findings in relation to the theory adopted for the study.

The central objective of this research was to determine the bearing social media influencers' Instagram profiles have on how their followers edit and share their images. The research investigated whether social media users in South Africa feel the need to digitally model their social media profiles after those of social media influencers. This is going off the assumption that active social media users in South Africa use social media to have as many followers as possible or even become social media influencers themselves. Social media has given those fortunate enough to have access to the internet a chance to impact human culture, influence, and craft a message about who they are and what they stand for. It has therefore had a certain role in motivating individuals on how they present themselves to the world. This digitally driven culture has come to seem like an alternate universe where reality is presented in the most idealized manner possible.

It is important to note that the purpose of this interview is to determine how much the participants edit their content on Instagram and will be analysed alongside the information retrieved from the survey they answered in the first phase of the research. It allowed for a formulation of whether there is a correlation between digital manipulation of photographs by social media influencers and how people that follow them edit their content for Instagram.

QUESTION 1: What would you say your main use for Instagram is?

i) Explanation of the purpose of the question

This question assists in deducing the function and/ or purpose that Instagram has for active users. Thus, contributes to the overall understanding of the function of Instagram and the value it may or may not add to users' lives and the contribution it has made to society.

ii) Responses

The respondents highlighted their various uses for Instagram. The most common being having access to their family, friends, and facilitating communication especially if they are geographically apart. As an Instagram user stated that '*I mainly use Instagram to keep up with my friends, in the sense of seeing what's going on in their lives'* and *'keeping in contact with friends who live in different places'* and '*keeping in touch*'. This is an indicator of the validity of what an integral part of society social media has become as two users also said, '*to be informed about how things are being run and what is happening in the world' and 'I also use Instagram for news*'. This makes it evident that Instagram is a source of information and keeps users aware of current affairs.

Using it for entertainment and keeping up to date with celebrity and influencer content that they can trust with one mentioning that '*Instagram for entertainment and for keeping up with some of my favourite celebs' and 'looking for online shopping, health, and beauty advice from trusted influencers*'; further highlighting that Instagram is home

to content that can have an impact of user decisions through influencer marketing. To add to forms of entertainment users said that 'short funny clips' and 'memes' was a common use of Instagram that was mentioned with users stating that '*I use my Instagram account because I look at memes and short funny clips. I also follow my friends and a few influencers to look at their pictures and view their stories daily*' and '*entertainment such as memes and reels*'. This means that content that has humour and is light-hearted is also popular on Instagram.

One Instagram user indicated that they use Instagram as a means of self-expression and self-presentation by posting pictures reflecting that; the respondent explained "*mainly use Instagram as a platform to post pictures of myself that I deem as artworks. I post these pictures to tell a story or to convey a message about myself and/or my personal life and to express myself* '. There is an element of importance for Instagram users that actively post that they represent their authentic best self.

QUESTION 2: Why did you join Instagram?

i) Explanation of the purpose of the question

This question will contribute to exploring the factors that go into choosing social media networks and what attracted active users to Instagram, to begin with; exploring the reasoning behind creating an Instagram account in the first place will indicate as to how social media has managed to become so prevalent.

ii) Responses

The primary reason for joining Instagram as indicated by users interviewed was 'peer pressure*'* eight of the users admitted to joining Instagram because it was popular amongst their friends or "a trend'. Two users have admitted that '*Honestly, I joined Instagram, because it was the trend*' and '*Honestly due to peer pressure. Most of my friends had it so I felt pressurised to get it as well*' and others responded that '*It was a popular social media app which many peers used and that influenced me to download it. I had Facebook before and friends believed Facebook was 'outdated' so you could say it was peer pressure*'; '*It was popular at the time'* and '*because my friends and*

classmates had it '. This testifies to the popularity of social media and a need amongst the majority of netizens to be active participants on social media networks.

Two active users indicated that joining Instagram meant being able to keep up with news and social trends stating that '*to keep up with latest social and fashion trends and be entertained*' and '*to see what is going on around the world of social media*. Indicating that Instagram can be an informative and educational platform; though social media information should or could be questioned on its reliability due to the high volume of misinformation that can be spread through social media.

One respondent was of the notion that '*I joined Instagram for the videos and the pictures. The pictures that are on Instagram they are aesthetically pleasing, and the quality of the pictures is superior to the pictures you can find on Twitter, Facebook and Google*'. Thus, giving validity to the term 'Instagram worthy' when referring to the quality of a piece of content. This solidifies the idea that Instagram has a prescribed aesthetic that is 'required' to gain popularity, raise one's analytics and insights numerically.

QUESTION 3: How often do you use Instagram to share content? Please explain and elaborate.

i) Explanation of the purpose of the question

The sharing of content can indicate the relationship that the user has with Instagram and their overall social media patterns and the question will assist in determining their goal on social media is in terms of self-representation, especially on Instagram. Algorithms can have an impact on the content that is consumed and are often based of general information about a user. The question highlights if the user is aware of how social media works and what can make content go viral. It is important to know if they understand that it is sometimes beyond their control wheatear their content gains a lot of like or not.

ii) Responses

It is clear that posting is not the priority for the respondents and many use it to consume content one user stated that '*I 'am on the app so that I can view the pictures short video*'. Many of the respondents indicated that they were not posting on Instagram as frequently or regularly as they used to explain that their social media habits change or fluctuate with time, two users said that '*I used to post once a month at minimum, at least 2 to 3 times a month but now I rarely post but I still use the app but not as often as I did a couple of months ago*' another further explained that '*It differs. Sometimes I share 2-5 times a week, sometimes I share once every three months'*, another respondent confessed that they '*used to be very regular, now it's once in months. I don't have the same interest in sharing*'. This indicates that social media users can eventually lose the intrigue in posting due to an array of underlying factors and mainly use Instagram for content. Some respondents indicated they feel their content would not suffice for Instagram and that the toll social media pressure has on their mental health was the main reason they opt to post indicating that '*The only time I share content is when I have experiences and pictures which are 'Instagram Worthy*.*' To elaborate I fear hate or negative comments so I only post when I feel others would approve of it. As unhealthy as it is I still weigh my self-worth on other opinions, so avoid putting myself in situations where the chance of hate is likely*' and another explained that '*honestly, I think that it is filled with so much pressure to have the perfect picture with the right angles, right camera, the right clothes, makeup, shoe and location. I really don't have time for that nor, do I have the state of mind to worry about that'*, further indicating that social media standards are creating pressure on active social media users to represent themselves in a certain manner.

QUESTION 4: According to you what makes great Instagram content? Please explain and elaborate.

i) Explanation of the purpose of the question

This question is posed to determine what content is deemed acceptable or greatly thought out and useful. It is necessary to highlight what type of content is likely to get the most traction on Instagram. Which in turn could indicate the type of content that is

most likely to be emulated by active social media users in order to gain better social media analytics and insights.

ii) Responses

It was made clear by respondents that great content is authentic, genuine, and raw - something that portrays real life experiences. As one active Instagram user described it as '*real-life stories make the content great, the natural part of it and experiences*. The curated content that is digitally manipulated is not considered authentic nor realistic as some respondents stated that '*genuine experiences, not flashy lifestyles. Content that does not have too much editing*' and another '*something that reflects your personality, things you value or things you enjoy* '. This solidifies the notion that there is a space for authentic and honest content on social media and that relatable content is important to regular social media followers; one respondent stated '*content that people can relate to, it has to be of quality '* and '*great content is what is relevant to the user*' further reiterating that social media is a platform created to be able to relate to a global audience and to create common ground specifically with regards to influencers.

There is also an opposing consensus that great social media content that has a particular 'aesthetic' with a respondent stating that good content is '*aesthetically pleasing '* and '*content that gives insight to influencer or celebrity lives*' and another detailing that it is '*content that has an aesthetic by influencer's straightforward, unapologetic content as well as the capitalist dream: travelling and taking aesthetic pictures in aesthetic clothes having the lifestyle that is somewhat unattainable to most. I do not desire that lifestyle but do enjoy the beauty and photography surrounding it'*. Many of the respondents should consider content that is *'aesthetically pleasing* and has what I would call 'influencer aesthetic' as great content because it is curated to have that impact and attract an audience through the depiction of '*the lifestyle of different favourite influencers'*. This indicates that although the luxurious lifestyle of the influencers might not necessarily be a personal goal; there is a general agreement that the quality of content matters and this is what well-established influencers can deliver because they often collaborate with brands that have the budget to and most invest in proper equipment. After all, this is their career.

Some respondents acknowledged that content that is created to educate, inform and disseminate knowledge is good content. Having access to '*informative and presentable posts*' was important to stay informed about the state of affairs the world over. In addition, content with humour and memes as one user indicated that 'the best content for me are memes and short funny videos '. The humorous content and memes have an element of real-life experiences and are relatable therefore making them popular amongst social media users across the board.

QUESTION 5: Do you edit your pictures before posting them? Please elaborate.

i) Explanation of the purpose of the question

A vital question to determine if it is a normal occurrence for users to edit their content before posting it on social media platforms.

ii) Responses

It was apparent that most of the users were not editing their content to hide 'flaws' but rather use filters for creative expression and colour adjustments and do not want anything drastic to change about their appearance. One respondent explained that '*pictures can often have faults like over/under exposure, over/undersaturation, over/under contrast etc. I edit my pictures to fix those faults. But as for editing my skin to look smoother, no, I don't do that* ' and another stating '*I do edit the pictures if the lighting was bad etc. but even then, I make use of a filter and that's it. I do enjoy being unapologetically natural on Instagram*'. These answers could indicate that colour and lighting adjustments are the reason why filters are more popular and universally accepted than editing software like photoshop because most just slightly adjust lighting not drastically change features as on user described I content manipulation and edit '*deceptive*'.

The majority of active users expressed that heavily filtered content does not '*really represent the true you, so now I no longer edit them, except for cropping them. I do, however, take the time to choose my lighting, poses and backgrounds carefully when*

taking photos. I also take photos mostly when I have make-up on, so it's not wasted on me, but shared with the world' and another saying 'Nope I do not edit my pictures. I just like to be seen as natural that I 'am.' The need to edit content is not a foreign experience to most social media users as respondents admitted '*I use to but do not feel the need to; like to be natural. want to be authentic*' and another stating that '*I have shifted from the need to look perfect*. This further highlights the pressure that social media places to create a viral persona or representation on oneself which active Instagram users are highly aware of and often feel the need to participate in.

QUESTION 6: Why do or don't you edit pictures before you post them?

i) Explanation of the purpose of the question

This question will facilitate the understanding of the logic and reasoning behind their decisions; regardless of if they edit or not. The question starts to delve deep into their relationship with content curation and if they deem it a necessity to curate a 'virtual persona' to conform to social media standards.

ii) Responses

Many of the respondents decide not to edit their content of the premise that content should be a true representation of true self to avoid misleading an audience as one respondent rightfully observed '*I realised that now, most of us only see each other online, so my pictures should be a close representation, so if one they do meet me again in person they do not feel I catfished and in that, maybe they'll realise I'm prettier in real life instead of have unrealistic expectations of me*' with another explaining that '*I create a preferable image for me. Yes. But I don't want to put myself in a position where I mess myself up aspiring to an unattainable, virtually inhuman image*'. These two respondents illustrate that there is an insecurity that festers around social media representation and what reality not being the preferred norm to see on social media feeds especially content on Instagram and users are aware of it with a respondent empathising that '*editing pictures makes you look different and fancy. Some other apps can even change the background of your picture. This is why more people are being misled by the social media because they like to copy'.* While other Instagram

users are refraining from succumbing to societal social media standards others explained that they edit their pictures '*because it brings out the pictures true quality' and 'adjusts the contrast of the pictures*'. This solidifies the notion that the quality and appearance of a picture is heavily important when curating a social media presence that is up to the socialized standard.

QUESTION 7: Do you use Instagram filters? Please explain/ elaborate

i) Explanation of the purpose of the question

This question is more specific to an editing tool that is readily available on Instagram and helps determine the attitude towards filters and underline the understanding active users have of filters as well as their attitude and/or relationship with them.

ii) Responses

The respondents stated that they used other editing software because the other editing tools look artificial and doctored one Instagram user claiming '*I find that when people use filters although the pictures are pretty you can tell that they have used filter because they sometimes look whitewashed and a bit fake' another user claimed that the quality of Instagram filter was not achieving the desired results. No, because they are terrible. I use Adobe Lightroom to attain the results I desire*'. The multiple forms of editing software that are available to the masses make it so easy for active social media users to choose an editing application that most suits their needs and capabilities and familiarities with the software. This is also a testament to how technology has become so embedded into the day-to-day norm in society.

The Instagram users that do use Instagram filters where mostly sing the filter fix or '*change the lighting'* of the content with one explaining that '*only the lighting filters. As I feel it adds dimension and enhances the picture*', further emphasizing the need to edit and fix '*perceived flaws*' being embedded within social media culture in order to curate socially accepted content. This again indicated the pressure that social media places to create a viral persona or representation. It also points to an instinct to access

and spot flaws in content. This could be because of relatively high exposure to social media influencer content.

QUESTION 8: Do you believe that the more editing tools/filters you use the more followers and likes you will get?

i) Explanation of the purpose of the question

This question is the nexus between social media self-presentation and if active social media users associate it with their analytics. It will give insight into their rationale with regards to social media expectations how they choose to respond to them.

ii) Responses

It is apparent that based on the responses of the previous three questions that content editing is a common occurrence on social media therefore, it is has developed into a tool to curate content that is more aesthetically pleasing as a respondent explained that '*people that edit their work get more likes, for example, I had once seen a picture of someone I knew and would see on a daily basis, and I saw a picture that she had posted and she looked like a Barbie doll she had a very slim waist and a bigger bum and she got quite a lot of likes although this was not a truthful representation of who she was*'. This is a brilliant example because it demonstrates how much social media validation active users seek through the digital manipulation of their content to look a certain way as a means to gain a larger following with two respondents agreeing '*Yes, but that's for a bad reason*' and '*I think so but I don't want to risk valuing external validation*' acknowledging that social media users get more engagement when they have manipulated content while another defended filters stating that '*if filters are used correctly and to a proper extent then it would influence others to follow you or like your pictures*'; echoing previous statements that explained the ability of editing software to improve the quality of the content.

Two respondents mention that they follow others they can relate to them '*I can relate to them, just like I will appreciate a celebrity more after I watch their reality show, people (such as myself) appreciate reality or at least the appearance of reality '* and another stating that '*followers are independent of most things, people follow you*

because they relate with your content or they know you, pictures have little if not at all any impact on this '. This circles back to the need for authenticity and relatability from a content creator with one respondent noting '*I have seen how influences have clearly edited their pictures and still get the likes and follows. Editing allows one to alter their reality and make their lives seem great, even if it isn't true, and most people enjoy that kind of content*'; this again feeds into the notion that influencers are creating content that has a particular aesthetic that is '*made to be more appealing*' on their social media feeds.

QUESTION 9: Do you believe that Instagram filters make your Instagram look more appealing? Please explain/ elaborate.

i) Explanation of the purpose of the question

This question tackles self-image: confidence further contributes to the nexus between social media self-presentation; relates to how they view content creation and if they associate it with representing a particular aesthetic.

ii) Responses

The majority of the respondents agreed that Instagram filters make for a more appealing Instagram feed one respondent acknowledged that '*pictures that are edited are more appealing because they look like high-quality picture, and the appeal makes it seem like the way the influencers look makes me think that maybe that kind of beauty is attainable*' and another revealing that filters and editing pictures '*romanticise your life it "filters it" and since people use Instagram to consume visuals the prettier the visual the better the response will be*'. This illustrates that there could be a direct association between the quality of the content and the interaction on social media, which could be a contributing factor in the popularity of social media influencers.

Some respondents felt that social media is better when the content is authentic to the user explained that '*the photos are very appealing but there's a certain level of inauthenticity I experience seeing a filtered selfie*' and '*no, filters sometimes just tamper with your authenticity of pictures. The less authentic the less appealing*'. This

further reiterates that being true to self is very important and authenticity is important to social media culture because it provides relatable content that is easy on the self-confidence of active Instagram users. Other respondents believed that it was all about how an individual wanted to present themselves on social media one user explaining '*one I don't believe so. I think it is about the way you carry yourself and present yourself in public. Your caption can make your page more appealing than the filters*' and another saying '*depends on what message you want to portray to your followers*' this is verifying that self-representation is a big part of social media and how it functions because it is a choice that active users can make for themselves.

QUESTION 10: Do you try and curate an Instagram feed that resembles that of a social media influencer? Please explain/ elaborate.

i) Explanation of the purpose of the question

This question contributes to determining if active social media influencers represent the socially accepted standard for content creation; it assists in determining whether social media curate an aesthetic that their follower's revere and desire to emulate.

ii) Responses

One of the respondents stated that '*an Instagram feed of a social media influencer has very high-quality pictures that seem to be taken by a photographer. The influencer wears the best clothes that you don't find at Mr Price or a regular shop. Influencers take pictures of food that they buy at lavish restaurants it seems like they show us every aspect of their lives, which is very lavish and that is filled with a lot of self-care regarding the body*'. This further demonstrates that there is a correlation between 'quality' content and social media influencer and their followers acknowledge that. The content then build's this perception of an influencers life that makes it enviable because of the strategic way it is depicted through social media because it is their job there was however a social media user that indicated that they '*like showing my life,*

unedited, unfiltered all messy and chaotic' indicating that not all Instagram users are willing to develop a virtual- persona.

Influencer content can be emulated as three respondents admitted to once trying to do it stating that '*in the past trying to resemble that has been very negative to my mental health*' and another explaining that '*I have done it once in the past [...] other than that I would post whatever I feel is good enough to post. While I don't try to curate others' feeds, I think that getting inspiration is completely fine* and the third '*no, at the beginning I did, but I realised I do not have the time or the emotional strength to be worried about what people think, how many followers like I have; but to be honest, if I did log on Instagram now, and found a 100 000 followers I would be excited and probably post more often because it would mean people want to see more of my content*'. This is an indication that some Instagram users associate influencers with social media content that can increase social media popularity.

QUESTION 11: Do you think social media influencers create the best content? Please explain/ elaborate.

i) Explanation of the purpose of the question

This question helps determine if the content presented by social media influencers present the standard of good quality content; and will indicate if their popularity is due to the quality of their content or other external factors contribute.

ii) Responses

Most of the respondents are aware that social media influencer content is curated as a career. One respondent explained '*their content is for monetary purposes. That factors in certain levels and kinds of censorship. I prefer content from regular users who do so for the fun of it. I know there's a higher chance of enjoying authenticity*' and another emphasized that '*it's their work*' while another respondent agreed that '*social media influencers create the best content because they put in a lot of hard work into achieving beautiful looking feeds. They work hard and it shows* '. This is an indication

that it is common knowledge that social media influencers are curating content for monetary gain and therefore strategically plan each post. There is an Instagram user that explained that '*they have to do so in order to stay relevant and top of their game*' which is why they invest in making the content and as a respondent explained '*that would depend on the type of content, for higher budget videos or high-quality content, social media influencers are able to create much better content than someone using their smartphone because they have better quality gear, better cameras, sound systems and editing software* '. This response is valid but is an oversimplification of why influencer content is seemly of higher quality than that of the average social media user; it negates the fact that social media influencers start from somewhere which is their appeal to relatability. One user addressed the lack of authenticity despite the great content explaining that '*they do produce aesthetically pleasing content but what they produce is not sincere, it is a narrative controlled by trends. Nothing is sincere about social media influencers, well majority of them*'. This is an indication that despite their efforts to be open and authentic; the monetary association tied to their content creates an element of untrustworthiness from an audience perspective.

QUESTION 12: What are you trying to achieve with the Instagram content you post? Please explain/ elaborate.

i) Explanation of the purpose of the question

This question will further indicate how active Instagram users view content creation and their thought process when curating their content and profiles and how they want to represent themselves as well as what influences their decisions.

ii) Responses

There were four respondents have indicated they used Instagram to share their lives and who they are with their audience; one respondent stated that '*just creating a digital presence and a virtual reflection of who I am in real life* ' and another '*to share my experiences* '. This is of course the main and original purpose of social media and is as one user indicated '*Instagram is there for me to share my memories with loved*

ones and '*archive*' and '*to share my views of life*'; this indicated that social media feeds into the innate human need to be seen and validated as another respondent mentioned '*that I want someone to relate to, and be inspired by my content*'. The foundation of the validity of social media influencers as they create a space for '*ordinary*' social media users - as in netizens that do not post content for monetary gain; - to care about social media presence and representation - which is why respondents stated that '*to make sure that I have an Instagram presence*' and '*I just like to let people know who is the real me and maybe that can make another person to gain confidence in themselves '*. This shows that social media was creating a place or opportunity to count as something according to the opinion of society and as one respondent rationalizes '*when I used to post, I believe subconsciously it was me just trying to achieve a lot of likes, I think it acts like a drug which many of us rely on to make us feel good, often when someone sees a notification that they got alike, it makes them feel joy like someone felt it worth their time to press the button instead of scrolling through. Additionally, it was me just trying to show that I'm active on the app which really wasn't good because almost all people aren't concerned*. This indicates that social media still contributes to the confidence that an active user has and that there is perceived value in positive interaction with content.

QUESTION 13: Do you think that the content you post online is a true reflection of who you are?

i) Explanation of the purpose of Question

This question is to gain an understanding of whether active social media users feel inclined to create content that depicts a curated virtual identity to gain social media popularity; delving into how social media affects their perception of self and the way they choose to represent themselves. The interaction and experience of social media users on the content they post can impact the way they choose to present themselves. the question will provide insight as to how they respond and their thoughts on others' opinions on social media.

ii) Responses

The importance of transparency to a majority of the respondents has been apparent so it is not a surprise that a majority of them want to be as authentic as possible one of the users indicated that '*I try by all means to post as authentic content about my life as possible*' and another claiming '*this has been and is the goal*'. This further indicates that social media users participate in authentic social media representation depiction of their lives, which of course is relative and not at all linear because '*a lot of the time people feel the need to adjust themselves or lives to fit societal pressures. So, what they share is not really their true selves* and this is a testament once again to the social media pressure that active users are subjected to daily as one respondent points out '*now I'm too old to care and I can post a make-up free, filter-free picture. I want to even try posting picture of my stretch marks and the likes, as soon as I get to a beach, so it'll make sense why I'm not dressed'*. This indicates that social media has a bearing on how active users choose to present themselves in relation to the relationship they have with it.

QUESTION 14: Does the number of followers you have on Instagram matter to you? Please explain/ elaborate.

i) Explanation of the purpose of Question

This question identifies how active Instagram users perceive having a following; and why it is important to them to have a following or feel that it is a requirement to have a large following. This is to get an idea of their social media analytics to establish their perspective. If they have decent social media analytics' they might have a more positive relation and/ or perspective on social media; if they have very little interaction on their content - making their analytics' numbers low – they could have an issue with social media content; therefore, impacting their answers.

ii) Responses

The number of followers they have has become irrelevant to most of the respondents as one explained that '*it used to until I realised that I had no use or purpose for them.*

I don't want to be an influencer so no. It doesn't matter ' and another stated that '*not anymore. I realised that it is just a number, and that number does not get to dictate my life and my feelings*' this indicates that some active social media users become disinterested in succumbing to social media pressure the longer they actively use the applications; it also indicates that the associate a substantial amount of followers with influencers and as one respondent indicated that '*my page is not for business and I'm not intending to become an influencer* 'and another simply stated that '*Instagram is not personal*'; meaning that they acknowledge the pressure that excites but have not allowed it to dictate their feelings as one user explained '*I do not allow the number of followers to dictate how I feel'*. There were however Instagram users that acknowledged that having a good number of followers can bring opportunities and stated that '*no, because I know I can live without Instagram. Yes, because the more followers I have, more opportunities will present themselves*. Highlighting the monetary potential of using social media.

Other users indicated the need for privacy and having intimate interactions on social media stating that '*absolutely yes. Adult life has shown me I want those that I know on my social media pages a crazy amount of people I do not know would make me very anxious*', and another stated that '*I follow people I know and the people I like. I am not trying to build a following or anything, but I am interested in what my friends and my favourite queer icons are up to*' and another indicated that '*yes, it matters but only because the more followers one has, the more followers become random people you don't even know, who have access to your life. and that is my problem. Otherwise personally getting more and more followers is not really my priority.* This again indicates that active social media users that are on social media to keep in touch with loved ones and are not interested in gaining social media popularity.

DISCUSSION OF KEY FINDINGS ARISING FROM INTERVIEWS WITH ACTIVE INSTAGRAM USERS

The purpose of this research was to determine whether social media influencers' Instagram profiles have an impact on how their followers edit and share their images. The feedback provided by the respondents have highlighted that content curation is not linear and users are aware that the intent behind influencer content is motivated by money. They also recognize that influencer content is considered the standard quality content and that it is a choice to subscribe to creating content of that quality or be authentic.

Quality Content Matters

The context of what makes for the content of ‘good quality can be deduced from two observations of different perspectives 1) the subject or object that is the main focus of the video and/or photograph 2) the digital quality and final presentation of the content. In simpler terms what is being shown and/or the pixel quality of the content are contributing factors to what makes ‘quality content’. Most active social media users place importance on the digital quality of the content as opposed to the contents of the content. The process of editing can change the pixels to enhance the image on the camera and the computer image editing software often has features that correct colour hue, adjust brightness, sharpness, and automatic cropping (Bakhshi et al., 2015). Therefore, this brings forth the observation that active social media users edit their content as an attempt to improve the perceived quality of the content. this has been made possible mostly because mobile phone photography has substantially grown in popularity due to a range of readily available smartphones with good quality cameras and filters that enable users to enhance their pictures. The filters can often enhance, stylize, saturate a photo to the user's preference; providing a quick solution to an artistic version of the content (Bakhshi et al., 2015).

The prioritization of image quality instead of the content by active Instagram users could derive from the notion that - as many of the users interviewed agreed - that social media influencers have good quality content but are not oblivious to the monetary

support that social media influencers acquire in the curation of their content. It is widely known that social media influencer content is intentionally shot and doctored to the best quality possible. Therefore, their followers hold them to a higher standard because they are expected to create aesthetically pleasing content to keep their audience engaged. Most social media users have photo-editing software readily available to them which means altering their social media feed to appease or reflect ideals portrayed on social media platforms can be expected (Guest, 2016). They do this regardless of influencer content and their primary focus is the digital quality of the content. This could lead one to conclude that the reputation and perceived reliability of a source could directly impact what is considered normal or standard in society depending on how it is presented and what it intended to represent as ideal.

This of course is concluded without negating the fact that the digital manipulation of images of social media influencers on Instagram could be portraying a standardised representation of an image and lifestyle; that could result in the increased use of digital editing applications or software by active social media users. Which has been indicated by the interviewed active Instagram users as there were interviewees that felt their content would not suffice for Instagram and that the toll social media pressure has on their mental health. This indicates that the expectations that they have of themselves concerning social media content curation are due to the standards that influencers have set with their content. This validates the notion that followers consider high-quality pictures and engaging text as essential elements of appealing Instagram profiles and are an integral part of social media despite the possibility of inauthentic representation (Djafarova et al., 2019). This verifies that active social media users feel the pressure to succumb to producing content that fits social media standards, which is often perpetuated by social media influencers through their content

The management of what one posts on social media is determined by many variables and factors depending on what the motivation for using social media is. As observers of other personal-visual identities, this means that they are directly influenced by what other users post especially if it is viral content. Validating that social media influencers can determine how they choose to curtate their visual identities the complexities of representation on social media indicate that “impression management is something that must be done by us on social media because social media is a representation of

ourselves" (Machmiyah, 2019:2). The digital economy creates a race for 'digital visibility on social media indicating that social media exposure can potentially lead active users to go to extreme lengths for social media popularity (Duffy & Hund, 2019). This actively demonstrates that self-presentation is of utmost importance in the social media perspective in terms of extensively sharing content about themselves (Djafarova and Trofimenko, 2019). It solicits a concern of whether conforming to social media standards is the fastest way to gain social media traction and according to the participants, conforming to social media standards and trends can gain one social media popularity solidifying Hudders et al. (2021: 1-2) thoughts that "many social media users have gained online fame, expressed by a significant number of followers, by building attractive and appealing social media profiles". Conforming to the social media standards is something a majority of the respondents acknowledged and participated in although they had no desire to be social media influencers.

The production of quality content is contingent on multiple factors much of which have been discussed throughout the study and whilst the digital quality of the content is important based on the appearance of the content, the purpose of the content is also important. Meaning that what is represented on social media is part of content curation and informs the audience. There are two types of content that according to the participants is good content 1) informative and 2) humorous. This reveals that there are active social media users that use Instagram as a platform to gain knowledge and stay informed verifying the notion that social media has become an essential part of how the world functions especially considering the economic opportunities that it has presented which can cause social media users to seek attention expose themselves to these opportunities for monetary gain (Khamis et al., 2017). Therefore having a significant impact on the societal culture of which social media influencers are at the forefront.

Media has always contributed to our understanding of the world; shaping the conception of our individual and social identities and with the prevalence of social media networks it is even more influential to the very fabric and function of society as "it is a dominant and influential tool and source of information, that often influences how we understand, interpret and view ourselves and those around us" (Govender, 2015: 6). This in turn has led conclude to the reputation and perceived reliability of a

source on social media directly impacting what is considered standard in society depending on whom it is presented by and what it intends to represent as ideal or the type of information it dispenses.

Authenticity Outweighs Perceived Perfection

Authentic self-representation and relatability through social media content have been highlighted as a vital component that contributes to the success of social media influencers' careers. The interviewees have adopted the same perspective acknowledging that transparency is important for a wholesome Instagram experience and renders it more genuine and organic. Social media is pushed by identity construction as well as self-medication where content and engagement effectively merge to create a representation of how a user wants to be seen (Khamis et al., 2017).

Though social media self-representation can often not be proven true or untrue as an authentic reflection of reality it still impacts the way netzines conceptualize certain social norms and groups within society. Social media influencers can direct and impact social norms within their audience niche. This is due to their ability to curate content that can reach a sizeable audience and can persuade others by their authenticity and reach. In addition, influencers have a manner of sorting information and curating content for their audience that renders it easily consumable through personal branding that signals the type of content they provide (Hund,2019). Therefore, social media influencers are classified as modern-day trendsetters and have drastically had an impact on societal norms by sharing content that is meant to reflect their lives and interest on social media which is what active social media users want to also achieve. The standards of popularity, self-worth and representation are formulated by creating through digitized idealism; Influencers amassing followers through the content that they cultivate themselves, allowing their followers some insight into their narratives and personalities.

The content of influencers may be somewhat doctored and carefully thought out. The foundation of the context and information they choose to share is based on their specific interests and hobbies in other words their influencer niches in various markets. This then connects them to an audience that shares similar interests that can relate to

them. This organic interest is what creates a platform that accumulates a large following and brand deals which then translates into monetary gain. This means that the authenticity of influencers can help them gain traction and use social media as a tool to share intimate and authentic information about themselves with their audience and develop the trust of their followers.

Though what is presented on social media has not always proved accurate or an authentic reflection of reality it has created a practice where self-presentation on social media is conducted to highlight the reality of one's life without being too reliant on digital manipulation and be a true representation of interests and it is obvious that active social media users want to create a space where a version of themselves they are comfortable with is represented on Instagram and this depends on their perception and motives to portray themselves on social media. The narrative of what one's life is like and who they are is completely up to an individual because they decide what they want to represent to their audience whether it is authentic or not. Social Media is a tool that can be used to distort the reality to be perceived the way the curator intends it to be presented. The concept of the intention behind the content and the need for it is one that Instagram social media users practice and understand. It is my understanding that social media can perpetuate, underscore and even construct certain narratives about what is the norm in society and lead to greater conversations that are highly required for a more progressive world; not just solely to push specific narratives, therefore there is focus on intent

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

A summary of the main insights and findings from the research and conclusive thoughts.

The research investigated whether active social media users feel the need to digitally model their social media profiles after those of social media influencers, specifically on Instagram. Social media users follow influencers mostly because of their content and popularity on social media. In a society that builds such importance around reputation and image, social media has certainly heightened the pressure to create a virtual persona. Social media influencers have since been at the forefront of perpetuating the social media aesthetic, especially on Instagram. Though the need to digitally model their social media profiles after those of social media influencers might not be a personal goal for some active social media users, there is a consensus that an influencer's content is of better quality than the average user. The factors that primarily make their quality better is because they invest heavily in the equipment and production required for their content and coupled with relevant information about the specific niche market that their content is targeted towards. This is because the intent they have in creating content is to foster an aesthetic that is marketable and relevant to their everyday interests. This driven by the digital economy creates a race for 'digital visibility on Instagram, primarily because of the monetary aspect of the job. In the context of this study, active Instagram users do not view it as necessary to create content that has similar perceptible quality despite the pressures and standards that social media presents, which most users cannot keep up with. This shows that individuals' perspectives and experiences of social media are different and have varied expectations concerning their experiences on social media.

Although this research cannot be a conclusive representation of all Instagram users in South Africa or that of the University of the Witwatersrand it depicts a different perspective about the use of social media that broadens it to be more diverse than numbers and interaction. It is predictive of a shift towards the purpose of using social media applications being geared towards the intent of its use. The relationship that users have with social media can directly correlate to how they perceive the content of others. This research is the foundation for further research on the meaning of

content and the impact it has as digital manipulation is especially pertinent on social media and the social comparison tendencies that moderate the relationship between social media influencers and their followers have long been debated by researchers across all fields of research around the world. There is room for further academic interest in social media representation and image curation, especially in South Africa.

The impact of social media is vast and the study proves that there is no universal way in which influencers impact social media users. It is all relative to the individual needs and purpose of using social media of the user. This means that users can effectively be influenced by different types of content deriving from several social media influencers. It all contributes to the way that they represent their lives and social media influencers are a major component and blueprint of how to represent and achieve what they want.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Commonly, research studies are confronted by several limitations, and it was no different for this one. The more notable limitations can be delineated as follows:

- The interviews being sent via email meant that recipients opted out of the request to complete the questions contributing to the low response rate. The data collected from the interviews therefore could not equally represent as many representatives as possible as planned.

- The sample size is limited to the University of the Witwatersrand due to a lack of funds and resources.

- Due to financial limitations and the overwhelming amount of data collected at the University of the Witwatersrand a thorough in-depth analysis of the multiple variables that it presented. Deeper engagement with the content was not

possible as it would have required a statistical data analyst to quantify the collected data first then leave the theoretical interpretation to the researcher.

- The topic of social media – specifically in terms of social media influencers - in academia [in my opinion] is still being explored and although there is research surrounding influencers and social media it is still limited; especially in the context of Africa in general; reducing the scope of discussion and analysis.

- The literature review was predominately based on research conducted outside of South Africa.. Therefore much of the information is based on a global North view of the issues concerning social media.

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