

**THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON BUYER CHOICES IN MASERU,  
LESOTHO**

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A field study submitted to the UFS Business School in the Faculty of Economic  
and Management Sciences in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the  
degree

Magister in Business Administration

at the  
UFS Business School  
University of the Free State  
Bloemfontein

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**Date:** 20 November 2020

## DECLARATION

I declare that the Field Study hereby submitted for the Magister in Business Administration at the UFS Business School, University of the Free State, is my own independent work and that I have not previously submitted this work, either as a whole or in part, for a qualification at another university or at another faculty at this university.

I also hereby cede copyright of this work to the University of the Free State.

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

My heartfelt thank you to my colleagues, friends and family for their support.

My gratitude goes to my supervisor, Mr Mark J. Peters, for the prompt responses, guidance, laughs and encouragement when I had lost my marbles, hope and near tears at times.

This degree would not be possible if it were not for my parents, 'Maitumeleng and Matebele Mochochoko's love and selflessness in dedicating themselves towards my education and well-being.

I will forever be grateful for my husband, Seth Putsoane's support, affection and encouragement and for being a loving and ever present parent to our boys when I could not be.

This humble effort is dedicated to my two greatest loves and privilege, my two April gifts, Hlalele and Bataung Putsoane, whose affection, love, inquisitiveness and intelligence have spurred me to reach for the best and boldest parts of myself. Follow your dreams, boys, the world is your oyster!

Above all and through it all, the glory goes to God. When I was weak and in despair, His power was greatest and His grace was all that got me through – 2 Corinthians 12:9. Thank you for making new wine out of me.

## **ABSTRACT**

### **Introduction**

The buying decision-making process can be quick, spontaneous and done without much thought. For some buyers however the deliberate intent to buy takes time as they first research and thoroughly investigate available options before making any commitment to buy. This study aimed to assess the influence of social media platforms on the ultimate buyer decisions made particularly by young, middle-class professionals in Maseru, Lesotho.

### **Aims and Objectives**

The aim of the study was to assess the influence of social media from the perspectives of young, middle-class professionals in Maseru, Lesotho on buyer choices. It explored critical factors that influenced buyer choices and also if increased social media participation yielded any better returns for businesses that use social media marketing.

### **Methodology**

The research was qualitative and the sample size was limited to 12 individuals. Convenience sampling was used as per the ease of accessibility of the respondents. The sample was based on middle-class professional individuals, young men and women aged between 25 and 45 years of age who reside in Maseru, Lesotho.

### **Findings**

The respondents displayed a great level of maturity, discernment and sensibility towards social media. Although people may have their eyes peeled to what is available in the market and may from time to time listen to or read review sections, they still prefer to dig deeper, to do their own research and to rely rather on their physical inner circles than online circles.

## **Conclusion**

The researcher has, therefore, come to the conclusion that social media does indeed have a great influence on buyer's choices. Whether they use it to seek inspiration or peer reviews on certain products, ultimately they rely on social media to validate their researches. It does also have a great impact on business's performance. Businesses that did not use social media to advertise their merchandise proved to be less successful than their counterparts who used it.

## **Recommendations**

- Draw up and invest in implementing a robust digital marketing strategy, as a big part and cornerstone of a business marketing and brand strategy
- Invest substantially in knowing and engaging the client and harnessing their insights and preferences for effective tailoring of marketing content.
- Ensure that prices are commensurate to the quality of the products/service being offered.
- Invest in a platform that is easy to use, that is attractive with good lighting and imagery and that offers convenience to buyers.
- Ensure the credibility and relevance of the chosen social media platform to the chosen demographic. A social media platform is seen as the cornerstone of good relationships and increased purchasing by clients (Hajli 2014).
- Invest in meaningful social interactions. Clients love being sincerely engaged instead of being promoted to.
- Make great customer service a cornerstone of the business to ensure repeat business and referrals. People's distrust of online businesses can be overcome by peer opinions and validation.
- User Generated content carries more weight on social media than generic, business generated content. Ensure therefore that clients have a good experience with your business, so that they can share stories, images and reviews of your product/service.

- Create a buzz using tailor-made marketing activations, around the product/service offered to increase engagement (Saravanakumar & SuganthaLakshmi 2012).
- Form authentic collaborative partnerships with other social media marketers, to have wide client reach, interact, connect and engage with them to form a strong reliable inner circle
- Invest in paid marketing such as affiliate marketing and social media ads, which ensure ability to drill down on appropriate demographic information, for targeted campaigns.

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## GLOSSARY

### Definition of terms

The following terms which are fundamental to the study are defined as follows:

- **4IR** – The Fourth Industrial Revolution defines the abrupt and radical changes that began at the turn of the 21st century and that built on the digital revolution to bring pervasive and mobile internet (Schwab 2016). It is revered for fusing technology across biology, physics and digital spheres.
- **Blogging** – The art of maintaining and adding content to a blog, as a means of communicating with the audience (investors, staff, peers and prospective clients) and forming the lifeblood of the company (Stokes & The Minds of Quirk 2013). Blogging provides a platform for instant feedback, therefore fosters a brand community.
- **eWOM (electronic word of mouth)** – Any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual or former customers about a product or company and made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the internet (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh & Gremler 2004:10).
- **Hashtags** – Originally used to put posts into categories, a hashtag is described by Antoine (2016) as ‘a metadata tag used on social networking sites to facilitate a search for a specified topic of interest’.
- **Influencer** – A specific key individual with a certain level of influence over potential buyers of a product, service or brand and with the intent to assist in the brand’s marketing activities (Evans, Phua, Lim & Jun 2017).

- **Internet** – ‘The worldwide network of computer networks’ (Hardy 2003) and backbone of the world wide web.
- **Selfie** – Described by Soranzo and Bruno (2020) as ‘photographic self-portraits’ usually taken using the front-facing side of the camera of a mobile phone.
- **Social media** – Online platforms used in everyday personal and business life for communication, collaborating and networking (Friedland 2013). It is used for finding jobs, making friends, making purchases, finding love and just about anything that one can do in their life.
- **UGC (user-generated content)** – ‘Media content created or produced by the general public rather than by paid professionals and primarily distributed on the internet’ (Daugherty, Eastin & Bright 2010); it includes any form of online content created, initiated, circulated and consumed by users.
- **www (world wide web)** – Or the ‘web’ as it is fondly known, is a finite and boundless collection of a plethora of high-speed digital interconnected media sources (Berghel & Cooper 2005). Web pages reside on a host computer, otherwise known as a server, permitting computers general access to the host network (Berghel 2002). ‘A mass communication medium and face of the internet’ (Franklin, Hogan, Langley, Mosdell & Pill 2009).

# **1 INTRODUCTION**

## **1.1 Purpose of the study**

The purpose of the research was to explore the power of marketing through social media. It aimed to discover what influence social media marketing had on buyer choices.

## **1.2 Context of the study**

Ever-changing trends in trade and globalisation expose people to a variety of new offerings and the buying choices of shoppers are affected. Nothing in recent history has had as much impact as social media. For as long as time, people have been consuming goods. In medieval times, there were no shops. People exchanged things – corn for oil, milk for grain – to secure their mere existence; sustenance was their priority. People lived and sustained themselves, their families and their communities through agriculture and everyone had something to eat and wear. Life was complete. Affirming this is McMillan (2002) when he says, ‘markets have been around as long as history and have been incessantly reinvented’.

With more of life's demands and advancements, the exchange moved from basics to societal demands – grain exchange for a service, a cow for clothing or to pay medical bills. This marked the birth of the Barter System at around 6000BC. Bartering took place within closed societies, among family and community members with the purpose of satisfying life's basic needs. Marketing as is known today was non-existent. Marketing and buying/selling were one and the same thing – acts driven by forces of the market with customer needs at the centre (Blythe 2009). With the improvement of food production and growing populations, Schwab (2016) notes that urbanisation and the industrial revolution followed.

Travelling between faraway places, countries and continents on some of the world's greatest expeditions – the Chinese silk trail, the Indian spice route, the Arabic caravan trade – brought a cross-pollination of cultures and wide exposure to and exchange of goods and commodities. The world became exposed to cotton from the

Americas and with it people could make a variety of clothes and discard cowhides. The East introduced the world to spices and fine silks; North Africa, Egypt in particular, brought perfumery to the trade exchange; Africa presented copper and bronze. Trade moved from a mere sustenance basis to a serious exchange in luxury goods. The advent of marketing and the transition from muscle power to mechanical power ensued (Schwab 2016).

Southern Africa is part of this larger trade context and it too contributes to and is affected by sales and marketing trends, which nowadays happen at the speed of the click of a button on a product or advert across seas and continents. Social media is so prevalent that as Sema (2013) stated 'we share our experiences, reviews, information, advice, warnings, tips and/or any kind of issues that are interesting to our social media connections'.

Lesotho was the focus of this study which sought to understand if and to what extent the buying choices of consumers have been influenced by social media.

### **1.3 Problem statement**

The buying decision-making process can be quick, spontaneous and done without much thought. However, for some buyers, research and the deliberate intent to buy takes time as they first investigate available options before making a firm commitment to buy.

Emerging social media platforms have provided additional opportunities over and above the traditional buying platforms such as brick and mortar stores and open markets for the sourcing of products. Social media platforms have demonstrated potential influence on buyer choices because they provide access to real-time and diverse information on a variety of products at a click of a button: Increasing engagement with customers and followers (Glosby 2015).

The shift from the use of traditional marketing strategies to the use of social media platforms has contributed to changes in buyer choices and patterns. Buyers tend to

change their usual ways of doing things due to access to a variety of information and this research intended to establish if buyers in Maseru, Lesotho were also affected by the evolving marketing strategies with particular focus on social media.

This study aimed to assess the influence of social media platforms on the ultimate buyer decisions made by particularly young, middle-class professionals in Maseru, Lesotho.

## **1.4 Objectives**

### **1.4.1 Primary objective**

The primary objective of the study was to assess the influence of social media from the perspective of young, middle-class professionals in Maseru, Lesotho on the choices buyers make.

### **1.4.2 Secondary objectives**

Secondary objectives were:

- To explore the critical factors of social media which influence the buyer choices of middle-class professionals in Maseru, Lesotho.
- To determine the critical factors of social media which influence the buyer choices of middle-class professionals in Maseru, Lesotho.
- To establish if increased social media participation by one business yields better returns than others that do not actively participate in social media.

## **1.5 Significance of the study**

The study filled a gap in that it explained the influences and attractions of a social media campaign. It shed light on whether certain attributes and features – colours and images – of a social media platform had more effect than others. It established if features had a positive influence on consumers' emotions. According to Kim and Johnson (2015), pleasure and cognitions evoked by a website are the most important elements in social media. Anyone who seeks to harness the power of social media and grow their business will need to be well informed and equipped.

The study provided guidance to businesses that sought relevant and effective social media marketing strategies to increase their exposure and sales in order to contribute to their business's bottom line. Spanning from the third industrial (digital) revolution to the fourth, 'technology is not just an exogenous force over which we have no control. It is an invitation to reflect about whom we are and how we see the world' (Schwab 2016) and how technology's power can be harnessed to remain useful, competitive and relevant.

### **1.6 Limitations of the study**

The aspects of the conduct of the research that impeded the process from the collection and interpretation to the presentation of the findings are listed below:

- Sample profile (limited to young upwardly-mobile professionals )
- Sample size was very small
- Social media savvy and active respondents
- Qualitative research which spoke to feelings and emotions of a limited number of people
- Data collection process was impeded/limited by COVID-19 restrictions
- Social distancing due to COVID-19 restrictions
- Timeframe of study was little (approximately 9 months)
- Timing of study was odd e.g. data collected due during COVID-19 lockdown restrictions.

### **1.7 Assumptions**

People love to be considered and treated as individuals and as independent and free from influences. As such, the possibility was high that respondents would discount eWOM as having any influence on their buying choices.

If indeed their interests emanated purely from social media hype, respondents may not have had enough intrinsic reasons to motivate their purchases and may not have been able to clearly articulate answers to the questions posed.

## **1.8 Conclusion**

Following the introductory chapter, this research paper is organised as follows:

- A literature review of current literature to identify the issues and gaps that have driven this study.
- An overview of the exploratory qualitative research for the definition and conceptual development of the social media impact on buyer choices that was undertaken.
- Theoretical implications, as per the data analysis, findings, recommendations, future research directions and conclusions of the study are presented.

## **2 LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Introduction**

Few things have been as inescapable and global as social media, cementing the sentiment of Schwab (2016) who claims that in as much as the previous industrial revolutions have brought mind-boggling change and advancements, technology and digitisation have raised the bar far higher because of the mere speed of innovation in terms of its development and assimilation. Yoo, Gu and Rabinovich (2019) argue that this speed has been facilitated by the super low costs at which users produce and share information in large volumes through social media platforms.

Social media is a term that denotes internet-based services which facilitate an individual's construction of a public and semi-public profile, linking friends, family and co-workers, facilitating collaboration and allowing for widespread sharing of information (Friedland 2013). Emergent in the late 1990s, with new platforms and a variety of their uses evolving rapidly (Friedland 2013), Myspace was one of the first launched in 2003. It was viewed as a cheap marketing tool, shifting the control and power from the traditional top-down model of publishing, publicity and trend generation (Sims 2014).

Included in the definition of social media are blogs (including Twitter), internet communities (Facebook, Myspace, and LinkedIn), wikis and online discussions (Franklin et al. 2009). Social networking sites are classified by Stokes and The Minds of Quirk (2008) into categories: social networks (social channels developed around social profiles), content creation (sharing and creation of content), bookmarking and aggregating (social curation and sharing of content) and location (location-based subsets of social networks).

Social networking sites ride on the back of www technology, which was introduced to the public in the 1990s (Gale 2013), explained as 'a hypertext system developed in the 1990s for publishing information on the internet' (Capstone 2003) and hosted by the internet.

The internet is a worldwide grid of computer networks conceived by the genius of visionaries such as Vannevar Bush and J.C.R. Licklider (Hardy 2003). The internet is an innovation that has taken the world by storm, with billions of users across the globe. The www is highly versatile, with sufficient browsing utilities to allow users the freedom and ability to share media-rich information (images, videos and sound) with their peers (Berghel & Cooper 2005). Some of the most famous examples are internet browsers such as Firefox, Apple Safari, Microsoft Edge and Google Chrome.

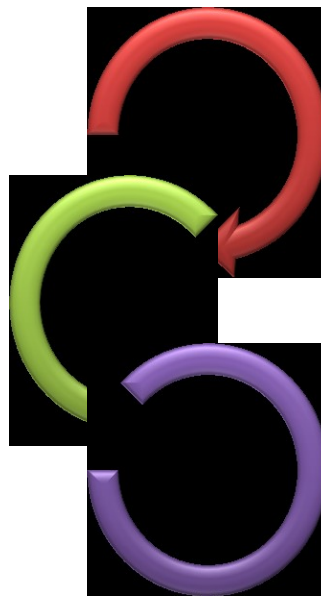


Figure 1: Social media foundations

Source: Adapted from Chu and Kim (2015)

Web 2.0, the second generation of internet services, lies at the heart of the now prevalent internet-based applications, allowing for the creation and exchange of UGC (Chu & Kim 2015). Its emergence has eased interconnectivity and participation, transforming the internet to a social environment through social media where individuals interact and generate online content (Hajli 2014).

Globalisation, affordability, ease of access, search ability and ever-increasing high-speed connections have rendered the web a major facilitator of commerce, news, information, education and socialisation (Henderson 2017), forever altering the course of life and the interactions of people. Millions of self-made content creators, publishers, online purchases and instant global breaking news, amongst others, have been spawned.

This study is rooted in examining the role social media plays in the shopping choices of buyers. An understanding of this can aid in identifying the lure and the attractions of social media.

## **2.2 Literature review and theoretical background**

### **2.2.1 The internet and social media**

Substantial background has been covered and published in the exploration of social media: how social media affects the purchasing behaviour of consumers; how social media is influencing purchase decisions; how social media is affecting our mental health; and many more topics.

The dawn of the internet and advancements in technology has introduced social media. Across different platforms, new products and services are launched on a daily basis. It is undeniable that a social media marketing component has become a big component of the strategic marketing plan of businesses that want to thrive in the 21st century. 'Where there is an audience, there is advertising' (Stokes & the Minds of Quirk 2008:411). This sentiment is elaborated further by SI (2016) who claims that social media is founded on the wisdom of crowds, with communication/publications produced and sustained by people's interpersonal connections.

That crowd – that audience – is where smart businesses want to place themselves. Stokes and The Minds of Quirk (2008) go on to highlight that it is not only about the time spent on social networks, but about the diversity and richness of demographic (age, gender, race) and psychographic (values, interests, opinions, attitudes)

opportunities. Everyone with a smartphone, young and old, is part of one social network or another, liking pictures and making comments.

The growth of Web 2.0 and social media as noted by Jamali and Alimohammadi (2015) has facilitated the emergence of Altmetrics, social bookmarks, data usage, number of downloads, microblogging numbers and numbers of links received as alternative sets of metrics. Social reviews and recommendations, in the form of 'likes' for example, have become the technological word of mouth and continue to be one of the most effective marketing tools with most consumers looking to the review section, sometimes from multiple vendors, before making a decision.

Consumers have a tendency to act like a herd of sheep by following each other senselessly, according to Denhardt, Fuller and Hautz (2013), often triggering consumer 'annoyance with the fan page due to information overloads and misinformation'. This applies to the negative mob influence (group think) a bad review may have and varies from the admiration a brand may have where a review, or reviews, are highly favoured. The speed of the internet and ease of use of the site enhance the attraction of social media and the fresher, attractive and more relevant the content, the better the chance of a business getting on the first page of a search and the better the exposure.

### **2.2.2 The nature of behaviour**

What is it that makes social media so tempting, so attractive? Why are consumers so gullible to social media? Understanding consumer behaviour might shed some light, because consumer behaviour – interests, patterns and triggers – is important to the social media marketer. What has become evident is the fact that the use of the internet, social media, mobile apps and other digital communication technologies has become a daily norm, a part of billions of people's lives (Stephen 2015). The marketer, therefore, has to understand the nature of behaviour in order to develop programmes that will bring about behavioural change. Human behaviour is made up of a myriad of fields as illustrated in Figure 2.



Figure 2: Human behaviour study fields

Source: Compiled by researcher

The fields can be defined as follows:

- Social anthropology is the study of human societies, cultures and their development, e.g. family, social roles, status.
- Sociology is the study of social problems, analysing communities and the world in its entirety and examining the overall development, structure and functioning of human society.
- Psychology is the science of behaviour and the mind (perception, influences, beliefs and motivation).
- Economic and cultural factors are at the centre of the study fields and take into consideration buyers' cultural background influences and affordability issues.

Figure 2 illustrates clearly how nurturing and social environments have a bearing on people's entire well-being, and thus great influence on choices for consumption. Some of the possible factors influencing consumer behaviour are, group influence

(the social anthropology aspect), personal preferences (the psychological aspect), economic conditions, consumer purchasing power and marketing campaigns used by marketers.

In their article, 'The rosy side and the blue side of emotional brand attachment', Hung and Lu (2018) elaborate on the above factors by suggesting that the rosy side and the blue side respectively denote the positive and negative emotions underlying purchasing decisions. The rosy side, on the one hand, is driven by autonomous motivations; the intrinsic motivation of pursuing pleasure and fulfilling self-determination needs and self-congruence, driven by passion, love, affection and a sense of connection for the object being purchased.

The blue side, on the other hand, symbolises the darker side of consumption prompted by feelings of loneliness. Snyder and Newman (2019) argue that lonely consumers have a higher need to belong and usually express their intentions to belong by joining a socially-oriented community brand. Hung and Lu (2018) reiterate the blue side as emotions (brand attachment) associated with separation distress feelings, sadness and anxiety.

Individual social media related trends are not just a part of a random collection of trends, but trends rooted in a single underlying shift in the American psychology – the persistent narcissism in culture – asserted by Twenge and Campbell (2009).

### **2.2.3 The present state of social media tools**

The acceleration of digitisation and the rise in the use of mobile phones continue to be on an incremental trajectory and with them social media is considerably transforming the way organisations do business and alter communication approaches (Ravaonorohanta & Sayumwe 2020). Individuals, young and old, and organisations, private and public, have to maintain at least one social media account or otherwise they miss out on information and stay irrelevant. Ravaonorohanta and Sayumwe state that with the sharing, receiving, sending and soliciting of comments,

there are solid and genuine social interactions going on through 'real-time dialogues' with users from across the globe.

This rapid and constant engagement is driven by positive emotions such as satisfaction and trust. Satisfaction with the platform used is the strongest predictor of customer engagement (De Oliveira Santini, Ladeira, Pinto, Herter, Sampaio & Babin 2020). Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Pinterest and LinkedIn are cited by the authors as the platforms used by most organisations for engaging with their clients.

#### 2.2.3.1 Selfies and vanity

The rise of social media advertising is attributable to the critical role played by the emergence of the selfie. With the uploading on social media of instant pictures of products or lifestyle images, feedback in the form of likes and comments on the products/service is immediate and they receive exposure that they otherwise would not get, without incurring much cost, if any. Women, and men to a lesser extent, silently but powerfully declare their self-love (Pham 2015).

As of 2013, because of the explosion of the use of the word 'selfie' and its integration into our daily lives, the word was added to the Oxford English Dictionary to mean 'a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically with the use of a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website'.

#### 2.2.3.2 Content blogging

Well-written, well-curated and pithy material does not get old nor can its importance be emphasised enough and Lukyanenko, Parsons, Wiersma and Maddah (2019) maintain this by reflecting that organisations are increasingly seeking UGC – information produced by general members of the public, by extracting data through forums, social media, blogs, comments and product reviews. Humans are the ultimate consumers of content in its various forms. A frequently updated blog with rich content, which is of high quality, and with great quality aesthetics which capture people's real-world experiences, as alluded to by Lukyanenko et al., is always a guaranteed winner.

With all their juggling, people may be busy and distracted, but they will turn to a high-quality blog when they want to dig deeper, to learn more and gain greater appreciation on a subject of their choice. Jiang, Tian and Zhou (2019) assert the point that when two content creators are not vastly different; the demand from each of them will be very small and will result in limited coverage of new content. Creators with beautiful blogs that complement and seek to explain their products/services will attract more attention, more followers and trend more thereby making their brands richer. In recent times, user-generated networks, according to Lanz, Goldberg, Shapira and Stahl (2019), 'have become more ubiquitous, capturing a substantial part of the social media sphere'.

#### 2.2.3.3 Influencers

'The delivery of marketing or advertising messages is often carried out by the so-called YouTube influencers' (Xiao, Wang & Chan-Olmsted 2018). The 1980s saw the rise of 'brand ambassadors', for example Robin Townsend, an American television actress who was engaged to market Lux bath products and became the brand ambassador, the face of the product range, due to her success in the industry. She took her fame and Television presence to the product endorsement sphere and many women converted to purchasing and using Lux bath products because of her. This was in that time referred to as human branding – any persona who becomes the subject of marketing communication efforts (Close, Moulard and Monroe 2009).

The professional, one dimensional way of this type of advert curation, trustworthiness, argument quality, social influence and information involvement became questionable. In today's social media era, there is a new age rise of human brands, called influencers – people who produce and upload videos onto the platform and who have a group of followers who regularly follow the uploaded content (Xiao et al. 2018). In order to be an influencer, one does not necessarily have to be celebrated anywhere; most are just famous for being famous, they have to have 'instagrammable' pictures and well-curated content, beautiful pictures and beautiful settings depicting the relevant message intended for the market. In short,

'the content is generated by individuals and firms interested in self-promotion' (Lanz et al. 2019).

There is a rising shift to people with credibility in their niche who become influencers. Retailers prefer their individuals with a story to tell as influencers, a brand that resonates with them and that can propel their own product further. This too has proven to be very effective as it generates instant and super-fast mass word of mouth at very little cost.

#### 2.2.3.4 Hashtags

The remedy to having a subject to resonate with people and to catch on like wildfire, is to create a hashtag (#). A hashtag is a word or an assortment of words that can be easily found in the context in which one is searching, for example #menaretrash and #metoo, and is otherwise defined as 'a metadata tag used on social networking sites to facilitate a search for a specified topic of interest' (Antoine 2016).

Most people will not even begin to tell you what the campaigns behind these hashtags were or meant, but they will somehow recall them because they proved to be very famous and most likely resonated with them at some level. Antoine (2016) adds that hashtags were originally used to categorise Twitter posts, to facilitate and ease the conversation flow about the same topic.

(Bao and Tomorn 2020) cite the importance of understanding the needs of different races and genders in developing hashtags for businesses looking to widen their targeted customer reach domestically and internationally. With the rise of online purchases through the use of technology and emergent trends, marketing is not random for those who seek success. There clearly is a correlation and a process in social media marketing. The presence of a hashtag is an example of machine interactivity giving such a tweet a greater probability of being found, even by individuals who do not follow the initial sender, but who are interested enough in the hashtag's topic (Soboleva, Burton, Malik & Khan.2017); if it resonates with them, they will find it.

## **2.3 Consumers' purchasing behaviour**

This section will peruse the role of vanity in the purchasing behaviour of buyers and will explore vanity and influencers as theoretical foundations of the research.

### **2.3.1 Vanity**

That people are social beings, susceptible to other's perceptions, influences, motivation and beliefs is a fact proven in the science of psychology, with self-presentation an inherent and defining characteristic of social interaction (Sezer, Gino & Norton 2017). Whether people like it or not, other's perceptions influence how they approach, treat and reward one another. What differs is the extent to which people absorb and react to the influences.

The dawn of social media has seen vanity taken to new heights with some critics calling it the scourge of the digital age. Vanity is 'blamed for unleashing a cyber-psychological surge of pent up exhibitionist desires' (Pham 2015). Social networks at the foundation level were created for people to communicate easily and to facilitate the renewal of existing relationships and the building of new ones. These platforms became an extension of people's real lives, with people creating profiles, posting messages, photos and sharing interesting news or even old pieces of information.

The interaction compelled some people to claim identities more socially desirable and better than their offline/real identities in their quest for popularity and apparent well-roundedness (Huang, Kumar & Hu 2018). Sezer et al. (2017) attest to these self-presentation claims. Closely linked to self-presentation is a phenomenon called humblebragging, with people highlighting their positive qualities and competencies under the guise of a complaint or humility – a double-edged sword (Sezer et al. 2017).

To the untrained eye and ill-informed mind, both phenomena can quickly be examined and perceived as negative, narcissistic or a cry for help: 'Look at me now'. However, Pham (2015) presents a different viewpoint and introduces the concept of

networked vanity. This is a political tactic based on a 'fake it till you make it' mentality rooted in the belief that personal transformation is entrenched in social transformation. Individuals who previously felt marginalised – whether based on gender, race, sex or any other stereotype – could assert and empower themselves through selfies and share themselves and their stories, which otherwise would remain buried and unknown, as expressions of self-worth.

Vanity has been frowned upon, viewed as a form of narcissism, but with evolution, and inclusiveness largely driven by individualism and freedom of speech, there is a shift towards viewing those that assert and love themselves unashamedly as heroes. Drexler (2014) says,

Here's the truth: Celebrities are vain. And so are millions of the rest of us. This isn't even a particularly difficult truth, because there is nothing inherently wrong with vanity. Vanity is healthy. It's natural. It doesn't necessarily signify a culture overrun by superficiality. In fact, it is a fundamental part of developing positive self-esteem, which, as we know, is important.

### **2.3.2 Human brand/influencers**

Drawing on the above discussions, especially about self-presentation, there is a need for individuals to associate with and emulate their stars/celebrities; hence, the rise of the human brand where celebrities become the subject of advertisers' marketing efforts. With customers' needs for affiliation fuelled by their need for relevance, celebrities as human brands are able to engage with fans/clients and build emotions with customers, evoking that need of oneness and sameness that is so sought after (Saboo, Kumar & Ramani 2016). Kakitek (2018) sees it as the transfer of the chosen celebrities' positive attributes onto endorsed brands, helping consumers to form relationships with specific brands.

Through years of deceptive marketing, followed by more years of intrusive advertising in the form of incessant and unsolicited ads (spam mail), the growth of social media has brought with it the rise of another phenomenon: influencers. These

are described as people who, through their niche of choice, distinguish themselves through their abilities and likes, appearing trustworthy and reliable and in the process attracting a large audience (Audrezet & De Kerviler 2019). Trust is the cornerstone of any meaningful and long-lasting relationship with benevolence, integrity, competence and ability (Hajli 2014) as some of its dimensions. Trust plays a pivotal role in the exchange of information and the integration of knowledge (Chu & Kim 2015).

The effortlessness and ease of influencer marketing has seen many smart marketers jump on the bandwagon with subtle product placement to insert their products and services in influencers' dialogues with their followers. These dialogues – from their daily personal self-care routines, what they wear, where they eat, travel, what diapers their children use, what milk formula their children drink, to which banking institutions they invest with – are as vast and varied as the number of followers themselves.

The influencer trend started with individuals marketing their friends and their favourite brands for free. They themselves tried to get free publicity to push whatever agenda they had. With the growth of the trend, they have grown in professionalism and online stature. Their recommendations have become steadily more important to the purchase decisions of their followers and they seek to be treated as brand ambassadors rather than just advertising conduits (Audrezet & Charry 2019).

Influencers curate their content so professionally and conscientiously that big brands have no choice but to affiliate with them and to conclude long-term contractual relationships. Table 1 presents a juxtaposition of two marketing approaches: the transactional, old fashioned, conduit approach and the new age, intimate and 'authentic' relational approach.

Table 1: Two ways to manage social media influencers

	<b>Transactional approach</b>	<b>Relational approach</b>
<b>Strategic positioning</b>	Influencer is a tool to execute the brand strategy	Influencer is an expert who shapes the brand strategy
<b>Role</b>	Product endorser	Brand ambassador
<b>Selection criteria</b>	Followership size	Fit with brand image
<b>Contract</b>	Per-campaign contract	Long-term contract
<b>Metrics</b>	Return on Investment ROI in sales per campaign	Annual ROI in brand image and community engagement
<b>Costs of switching</b>	Low	High
<b>Communication</b>	Standardised	Customised
<b>Management</b>	Delegated to agency	Direct relationship

Source: Audrezet and De Kerviler (2019)

As the name denotes the transactional approach is a give and take approach to marketing, purely influenced on what the marketer can get out of the product endorser's campaign. The influencer is purely a puppet, executing the company's brand strategy, driving sales through product placement on social networks (Audrezet and De Kerviler 2019). At the end of the given campaign the influencer-marketer relationship is terminated especially if the campaign is not measuring well by producing requisite results. No relationship is formed and thereby little influence of the endorser on the targeted consumer.

The relational approach on the other hand has proven to be a huge success with those who have implemented it and who see the rewards through increased influencer leadership and the reported substantial increases in the revenues of organisations; the power of influence is undeniable.

Pophal (2015) alluded to the fact that many influencers appreciate that the best way to find appropriate readers is to go into their territory by reaching out to publishers with an established audience. He says they do this with the understanding that, in the bigger scheme of consumption and marketing, customer decision process is driven by brand equity. Brunetti, Confente and Kaufmann (2019) explain it as 'a key marketing performance indicator central to business successes. The strength and value of a brand resonates with consumers choosing brands whose personality is consistent with their own self-concept and their ideal or specific dimension of their self (Kakitek 2018).

## **2.4 Proven success factors to develop an effective social media strategy**

Content creation has changed over time, more so with the introduction of social media. Gone are the days when content creation was the reserve of the few and following are just some of the more prevalent avenues of creating content, used in the social media era.

### **2.4.1 Electronic word of mouth and user-generated content**

Value addition to a community has been identified by Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) as an imperative for individuals and would explain why word of mouth has always been so prevalent. Word of mouth, based on social connections, is possibly the oldest means of transmitting information. It has evolved to more sophisticated electronic means: eWOM. Hennig-Thurau et al. identify concern for other consumers, helping the company, social benefits and exerting power as the consumers' motives for adding value/contributing to their community.

Following from the concept of social identity, with one experiencing positive interaction with others or merely identifying with certain characteristics one has, Joyce and Harwood (2020) claim that information technology is empowering consumers with a vast array of available eWOM. He and Bond (2015) insist that eWOM informs purchase decisions. It is evident that whatever experiences and

viewpoints are shared by the people with whom they identify; a process as simplistic as word of mouth influences customers (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004).

In this era of technology, with information changing hands and crossing continents instantaneously and all in one's pocket, word of mouth inevitably takes a more sophisticated turn in the form of electronic means aptly called eWOM, which Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) refer to as any product, service or brand-related statement electronically delivered by a potential, actual or former customer. eWOM is so closely related and similar to UGC that the terms have been used interchangeably by some. With UGC more brand related, it is said to mean online media content created, initiated, circulated and consumed by the general public for consumption by users (Kim & Johnson 2015).

This content generation is seen every day with individuals uploading videos and photos on YouTube, Instagram and Facebook amongst others. A certain narrative meant to stir awareness and evoke emotions from followers is the point. Others view these individuals as attention seekers crying for help. They disregard their meaning, value and sense of self-worth. They – the do-it-yourself brigade – would otherwise not see the light of day in mainstream media (Pham 2015) and their voices will never be heard.

The biggest factor social media has been praised for is its generative features, which inform the dynamism in the relationship between input as user participation and output as user innovation (Van der Graaf 2015). This perpetuates the prevalence of 'brand communities' that often take ownership of the brand as a way to strengthen ties amongst community members and to set them apart from outsiders (Ford 2015).

#### **2.4.2 Access to backroom information technology systems**

'Social media is a marketing and promotion opportunity which transcends the usual middleman and connects directly with clients' (SI 2016) because it relates to communication systems produced and sustained by people's interpersonal connections.

For the longest time, mainstream advertising was the preserve of the few; only those who could afford to hire the best advertising agencies could do that and maximise on their brand's exposure. Today, customer involvement through social media fulfils a critical role in marketing (Hajli 2014), offering brand enhancement, facilitating word of mouth, increasing sales, sharing information and generating social support for consumers.

The availability of resources in one's pocket, the technology, the tools and the content enable individuals and businesses to produce their own marketing. Pophal (2015) advises the following steps for influencer marketing:

- Build on strategy – have a client-centric approach and build a plan from it.
- Consider long-term search from the audience perspective – design relevant content that resonates with clients.
- Guest blogging – expand reach by inviting established bloggers with larger subscriber bases.
- Prioritise – narrow the field of potential outlets.
- Leverage technology – with the distribution market being overcrowded, aptly predict what content will resonate with consumers.
- Invest in paid advertising – grow your following organically then inject some cash behind it to expand reach.
- Work it – promote the work.

The technological space belongs to the young generation, with their own language, customs and laissez-faire attitudes, and provides countless ways of exploring the influencer marketing space, giving one's content a huge boost (Slivka 2018). Slivka advises on the following:

- Ask why: Understanding why you need influencers is great for pulling the right levers to achieve results, key performance indicators, target markets and the platforms to use.

- Find appropriate influencers using hashtags: Explore people, the microblogger included, in multi-disciplinary spaces. King Glosby (2015) adds to this by advising on devising a short and recognisable hashtag to be included in all marketing endeavours and preparing social media graphics to share across platforms.
- Define your terms: Align with people whose content you respect.
- Know your own value: Offer the influencer what is of value to them.

Affirming these points is the success of Netflix – the second most viewed subscription streaming platform. According to Gómez and Quevedo (2018), Netflix is well aware of its why, its target market and its measuring metrics and of the fact that Twitter is the best social networking platform for it. This is due to its content churn and the fact that its users are exposed to higher volumes of content at any given time.

Adding to this list of advice is Breshears (2016) who states that a mobile-friendly website, a Facebook page and an email list should be the bare minimum that a serious practitioner should have because consumer behaviour aspects such as information acquisition, awareness, attitudes, opinions and purchase behaviour amongst others are a major part of social media (Toscani, Tosin & Zanella 2018).

## **2.5 Conclusion**

Whirlwind speeds in technological advances, the internet which has evolved from basic HTML to Web 2.0 (soon to move onto Web 3.0) and the development and constant evolution of social media have facilitated consumers' interconnectivity. Social news, social networking sites, media sharing, blogs and microblogging generate online support never before seen, consequently driving up the visibility and sales of brands.

The rise of the free world and millennials with their self-assertive attitudes has given rise to vanity and influencers. It has become common to walk past a group of youth

or an individual walking around, raising their phones to their face, smiling and snapping away at themselves without a care in the world. A picture which in one single click will land on multiple social media platforms is taken. If the individual is someone with influence, that picture could just as well have been worth a million Rands for the service/brand being marketed.

With WOM from retweets, hashtags, mentions and likes, the middleman has been cast aside. Content has been created and gone viral and the individual or business has attributed it to the success of their marketing strategy, hassle-free and sometimes at close to nothing. Social media has become the archetypal reference point for individuals that seek inspiration and guidance on the latest and best. It is has thus become an imperative for any product brand that seeks relevance and sustainability, to position itself strategically on social media. It has to understand its clientele, the kind of content that will keep the clientele engaged and work on churning out more of what the client wants most.

### **3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Research methodology/paradigm**

The study was conducted by administering a survey on young upwardly-mobile professionals, in order to validate the proposed model. The study followed the qualitative approach and the use of an interview schedule was implemented. The opinions of respondents and how they interpreted the subject through the ethnomethodology tradition was analysed. The intention was to appreciate the creation of social order through interactions and conversations.

The respondents were based in Maseru, Lesotho. Maseru is the capital and most cosmopolitan town of Lesotho, with more young, affluent individuals who are exposed and inclined towards social media purchasing. The study gathered knowledge and understanding from avid social media buyers and followed the epistemological orientation of interpretivism described by Bryman and Bell (2011) as 'viewing events and the social world through the eyes of participants, by probing beneath surface appearances'.

#### **3.2 Research design**

The design chosen was phenomenological because of the emergent characteristics and nature of social media as a result of the rapid changes in technology and the uses and users thereof. The subject of the research was unequivocally interpreted from the experiences of those who directly lived the experience of buying due to social media influence. The research sought to harness the insight of participants, to limit the influence of any preconceived ideas by the researcher and to allow the participants free will and dominance over their views. The design was able to give a glimpse of how individuals interpreted their constantly changing reality in a perpetually changing world.

### **3.3 Population and sample**

#### **3.3.1 Population**

The population was made up of young, upwardly-mobile professionals, defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as ‘a fashionable young middle-class person with a well-paid job’. Their upward mobility was evident in their recent promotions in their substantive organisations and in their new appointments to higher positions in new organisations as per media bulletins. The respondents were made up of a Forensic Specialist, Technical manager, Policy and Procedures Specialist, Performance Management Manager, Finance Director, Senior Manager Client Services, Attorney, Managing Director, Head of Marketing and Strategy, Brand and Marketing Manager, Training and development Director and a Marketing Director. These were individuals based in Maseru who met the definition due to their upward mobility in the corporate world and their vibrancy in the social space.

#### **3.3.2 Sample and sampling method**

Convenience sampling was used as per the ease of accessibility of the respondents. As Bryman and Bell (2011) state, ‘the opportunity that presented itself to gather data from a convenient sample was too good to miss.’

The sample was based on middle-class professional individuals, young men and women aged between 25 and 45 years of age who reside in Maseru. Because of the qualitative nature of the research, the sample size was limited to 12 individuals. The respondents were identified by the positions they held at their respective places of work and their evident upward mobility through promotions at work and higher positions at new organisations. As Maseru is a small town, it had a small pool of professionals destined for the apex of their organisations. It was therefore common knowledge when young professionals moved at those levels. Recruitment to the interview was done telephonically by calling participants at their respective organisations with telephone numbers obtained from the telephone directory.

The population was made up of young, ambitious professionals whose smartphones and the technology of the day played a major role in their lives. They had the greatest potential buying power, the opportunity to impact the market share of businesses and to engage with social media marketers. It was the likes of these professionals who were able to give the information that was needed for the study.

Narrative thematic analysis was used to analyse the gathered data (Bryman & Bell 2011). During the analysis, transcripts were perused thoroughly to identify themes from the responses. Participants' views were consolidated in line with the emergent themes.

### **3.4 The research instrument**

To explore the topic, an interview schedule was used to conduct semi-structured telephonic interviews to solicit answers pertaining to social media and the issues that were addressed. A semi-structured interview is expected to cover a myriad of contexts through a series of questions on an interview schedule (Bryman & Bell 2011).

Six semi-structured questions with probes were prepared to help guide the interviews and to collect the necessary data. The interview schedule is attached as Appendix A.

### **3.5 Procedure for data collection**

Semi-structured questions in telephonic interviews were used to collect the data. As Creswell and Creswell (2018) state, interviews are very handy because they allow respondents to describe their own experiences. They go on to state that this approach is cheaper and quicker to administer. To these advantages, Bryman and Bell (2011) add that interviews offer an in-depth exploration of participants' meanings.

Creswell and Creswell (2018) identify the disadvantages of such interviews as follows: information is provided in a designated setting rather than in a natural field

setting and is filtered through the views of the interviewees; the possibility of a shortfall in articulacy and the perceptions of some interviewees may influence the outcome. To these, Bryman and Bell (2011) added lower response rates and the struggle to engage respondents for longer than 30 minutes on the phone.

The interview schedule approach was most appropriate for this study because, with open-ended questions, respondents could respond however they wished and in their own terms. The liberty of the schedule catered for unusual responses to questions the researcher could have omitted to include in the interview schedule or for responses of which the researcher had not been aware. Therefore, the freedom allowed this study to explore new areas to which the researcher could have been oblivious to. The study was predominantly based on buyer behaviour and included questions about attitudes. These questions steered the direction of the study, overlapping a little with normative standards and values.

In collecting the data, prospective participants who were identified based on the positions they held in their respective workplaces beforehand, were emailed the 'Participation and consent letters, attached as Appendix B and C respectively.

### **3.6 Data analysis and interpretation**

The interest of the researcher was to explore and understand the phenomenon that is social media and some parts of its history, rendering the research iterative inductive. Based on the hypotheses, findings were analysed on the basis of the data gathered from the interview schedule to develop a theory based on identified prominent themes, patterns and ideas. The intent was to make sense of the data using content analysis, a coding schedule and a coding manual.

The information obtained from participants was analysed using narrative thematic analysis (Bryman & Bell 2011). Participants' responses, based on their thoughts and views, were consolidated according to emerging themes. Identification of their inherent thought patterns was crucial and helped to deduce key messages emanating from the interviews.

Participants' original viewpoints were captured by quoting their statements verbatim to minimise diluting received content. The analysis further emphasised the study's design whose objective it was to view the research subject from the participants' viewpoints.

Triangulation was used to cross-check the findings of the study and categorisation of sampled respondents emerged from the drawn sample of middle-class professionals. These helped to provide their views and opinions on the research.

### **3.7 Ethical considerations**

Ethical questions are apparent in our daily lives in issues such as personal disclosure, authenticity and credibility of the research report (Creswell & Creswell 2018). In the context of carrying out research, ethics are encapsulated in the areas presented below.

#### **3.7.1 Permission obtained**

This part entails obtaining approval from individuals earmarked for the study through a letter detailing the length of time of the interview, potential impact and research outcome (Creswell & Creswell 2018). Permission was appropriately sought from the participants by calling them, explaining the purpose of the research and requesting their participation therein. Upon their consent, a formal letter was sent together with a copy of the questionnaire.

#### **3.7.2 Informed consent**

According to Bryman and Bell (2011), this principle requires participants to be fully informed of the research process in a language they understand. The aim of the research should be clarified, the implications thereof outlined and full disclosure on any other issues which may influence their decision/willingness to participate in the interview provided.

In light of this, a 'Participation letter' (Appendix B) was sent to all participants detailing the name of the study, the purpose and primary objective and the undertaking on anonymity and confidentiality of the information and findings thereof. Attached to it was the template permission letter.

### **3.7.3 Voluntary participation**

The sixth paragraph of the participation letter reads: 'Participation in this research is on a voluntary basis'. This was upheld in that people who were approached but who turned down the proposal to be engaged in the survey were neither forced nor convinced to do so. Instead the researcher courteously moved along in the interests of the integrity of the survey as suggested by Creswell and Creswell (2018).

### **3.7.4 Anonymity and confidentiality**

Care should be taken to maintain the anonymity of participants' accounts and the confidentiality of their records to avoid victimisation (Bryman and Bell 2011). Where possible, pseudonyms should be used instead of people's names or any identifiers. In light of the point made by Creswell and Creswell (2018) that trust should be developed with participants, their names were not revealed anywhere and their responses were kept anonymous. In a case where the need may arise to use their names or identities in the future, permission will first be sought.

### **3.7.5 No harm**

The welfare of all participants must be protected; research that poses harm to participants is unacceptable. Bryman and Bell (2011) cite physical harm, harm to development or self-esteem, future employment or career prospects, stress and inducing subjects to perform reprehensible acts as types of harm. Vogt, Gardner and Haeffele (2012) warn of the remote chance of a research question necessitating the probing of sensitive subjects, but probing did not happen in this study because of the online nature of the interview.

The type of research being carried out was social, individualistic and not based on any organisation. It was based purely on people's perceptions and ideas and there

was nothing that warranted any harm. However, much care and diligence was ensured with regard to participants' anonymity and confidentiality by using pseudonyms where necessary.

In conducting the interviews, from the initial conduct, through the type of questions posed and the analysis of the outcome to reporting and storing the data, trust was developed with the research participants. The integrity of the research was promoted through guarding against any misconduct and impropriety (Creswell & Creswell 2018).

### **3.8 Limitations of the study**

The limitations of the study include the following:

- Coding presents a problem of possibly plucking text too big and losing the context of what was intended.
- Coding also increases the possibility of losing a respondent's narrative flow due to data being too fragmented.
- Sample non-responses of some of the identified respondents were noted.
- Non-random sampling poses the threat of bias on the part of the researcher, which may possibly lead to a subjective conclusion, rather than an objective one.
- The reiterative nature of content analysis poses a threat of going beyond and above the given time frame.

### **3.9 Validity and reliability**

#### **3.9.1 External validity**

External validity is 'the degree to which findings can be generalised across social settings' (Bryman & Bell 2011) and this might affect this study due to the small sample chosen for the qualitative research.

### **3.9.2 Internal validity**

This is 'concerned with the question of whether a conclusion that incorporates a causal relationship between two or more variables holds water' (Bryman & Bell 2011). In researching the impact of social media on buyer choices, given the rise of the use and influence of social media on individuals, there is confidence that social media is responsible for the rise of consumption and boom of certain products.

### **3.9.3 Reliability**

Reliability measures consistency; it seeks to establish whether the results of a study are repeatable or not (Bryman & Bell 2011). Repeatability may be an issue in this case as the stability of the measure may change over time due to the varying social media influences and the fads people follow.

### **3.10 Conclusion**

The research was purely qualitative in nature, with the primary emphasis on gathering data and generating a theory from the discoveries rendering the study inductive. In the pursuit of knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon of social media and its influences, an epistemological orientation was followed.

Young, middle-class professionals in Maseru, Lesotho, across levels from specialists, middle management and directors, were surveyed. The tool of choice for the survey was an open-ended interview schedule, administered via telephone at the respondents' time and convenience.

In seeking to understand the prominent themes, patterns and ideas, the collected data was analysed and interpreted following the narrative thematic analysis method. Words and phrases that seemed to come up frequently in the research and which linked closely to the social media search and interest were manually coded and aligned to resonating subjects and themes.

In developing a highly credible study full of integrity, close attention was paid to ethical considerations. The study was relevant and added value to the body of

knowledge in marketing. There was no biasness in the study and the methods used in collecting data were sound and full of integrity. No harm was presented to the respondents, prior, during and after completion of the field study. Due to COVID19 restrictions, interviews were held remotely, via telephone, for respondents' and researcher's safety. Permission was sought and consent to proceed with the interview was obtained. The interview schedule and survey were not forced on participants. The other eight potential interviewees, who were contacted but either declined the invitation to be interviewed or just kept silent upon receipt of the consent to participate form for their signatures as had been agreed, were just left out of the study. Confidentiality of the participants was maintained, by using synonyms and only making reference to their job titles, not their identifiers; names or identity numbers.

## **4 DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION**

### **4.1 Introduction**

The interviews were conducted using a self-developed semi-structured interview schedule with six questions and a set of accompanying probes per question. The participants in this field study were middle-class professionals based in Maseru, Lesotho; they ranged across the job spectrum from specialist, through manager to director. Participants were called on their work phones to request their participation. Upon agreeing to the interview, letters of participation and consent were sent to them by email. Over the course of five days and at agreed times per participant, interviews were held telephonically.

The questions sought to assess the influence of social media platforms on the buying choices of shoppers, to consider the critical factors regarding social media that influence buyer choices and buying patterns of the young, middle-class professionals and to establish if the increased social media participation of businesses yielded better results or not. Participants' opinions were gathered and an analysis was made on how they interpreted the subject. The intention was to appreciate the creation of social order through conversations and interactions with participants.

The intention of the epistemological orientation of the interpretivism approach used was to probe beneath perceptions and surface appearances. By probing and gaining appreciation, a view of the social world through participants' points of view could be established. The research sought to gain participants' insights on social media and purchase decisions, to throw away the researcher's preconceived ideas and to allow participants to freely air their views and share their experiences. The subject matter was directly interpreted from the participants' buying experiences and the design was able to yield varying glimpses of how people view and use social media.

## 4.2 Analysis and interpretation of biographical data

Table 2: Biographical analysis table

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age range</b>	<b>Professional level</b>
Professional 1	Female	25-30	Forensic Specialist
Professional 2	Female	35-45	Technical Manager
Professional 3	Male	25-30	Policy and Procedures Specialist
Professional 4	Female	30-35	Performance Management Manager
Professional 5	Female	35-40	Finance Director
Professional 6	Male	40-45	Senior Manager Client Services
Professional 7	Female	40-45	Attorney
Professional 8	Female	35-40	Managing Director
Professional 9	Male	40-45	Head of Marketing and Strategy
Professional 10	Male	35-40	Brand and Marketing Manager
Professional 11	Male	40-45	Training and Development Director
Professional 12	Female	35-40	Marketing Director

Source: Compiled by researcher

### 4.3 Analysis and interpretation of interview schedule

#### 4.3.1 Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data. It was chosen because of its flexibility and having no tie to a specific philosophical orientation. Thematic analysis identifies analyses, describes and culminates in interpretation of the themes that emanate from the collected data (Bryman & Bell 2011). In order to be able to make an informed decision as to what counted as a theme in line with the research objectives and the literature review, this approach required the deep immersion of the researcher in the provided data.

First, line-by-line coding was performed to examine the responses by participants. The data collected provided grounds for the codes. Cross-participant comparisons were then made to ensure coding consistency across the data spectrum. After merging codes that had very similar meanings, the 122 codes which emanated from the data were distilled to 12 themes to produce distinct categories. Thought patterns and viewpoints on social media purchasing were captured to deduce key messages from the responses. Table 3 is indicative of how some codes were generated and themes developed.

Table 3: Organising themes on social media influence

<b>Codes</b>	<b>Basic Themes</b>	<b>Organising Themes</b>
Conversations Exposure Information Socialise Connecting Communication Interacting	People relish being part of a collective and partaking in conversation	Interconnectivity and participation

<b>Codes</b>	<b>Basic Themes</b>	<b>Organising Themes</b>
Social media as a source of inspiration Motivation Creative ideas	People love drawing inspiration from others they view similar to them	Influencers
Use of own discretion Desire to be unique Making independent purchase choices I am myself I just love buying I know what I want I am confident; I know my wants and needs	People have a sense of identity	Intrinsic motivation
Negative energy Inferiority complex Feeling not good enough Discontentment	Social media makes people unhappy and anxious	Anxiety
Getting ideas I just browse and buy elsewhere I have confidence	People appreciate social media for inspiration, but prefer to buy at known brick and mortar stores	Electronic Ewom scepticism
Fear Not real Fake Filter perfect Lack of trust	Lack of trust in the platforms hinders purchasing	Questionable trust
Negative feedback No professionalism Carelessness	Social media perceived as highly intrusive and without boundaries	Satisfaction Levels

<b>Codes</b>	<b>Basic Themes</b>	<b>Organising Themes</b>
Intrusive No boundaries Disrespectful Insensitive		
Colour Images Quality Attractiveness Effort put into platform Good photography Fresh appeal	Content that resonates, on a well put together platform is highly valued	High quality and rich content
Uncomplicated Not many confusing things Convenience Easy to understand accessible	Convenience and ease of use	Ease of use
People I know and trust Personal relations Family Networks Friends Peers	Trust is highly placed on people's close knit relations	Traditional WOM
Large audience Young and old Big pool of clients Diversity of clientele	Social media as a marketing platform of the future, catering for everyone	The diversity and richness of demographics

<b>Codes</b>	<b>Basic Themes</b>	<b>Organising Themes</b>
Social media as a growth strategy for businesses Companies not on social media will not survive Lose client touch Wide exposure Increased networks We will not know about them Limited coverage	Businesses not on social media lose out on wide and deep exposure	Low market reach

Source: Compiled by researcher

#### **4.4 Views of participants**

The questions were aimed at ascertaining the influences that social media had on buyer choices.

##### **4.4.1 Interconnectivity and participation**

Question 1 sought to address the point in the literature review which alluded to the fact that social media is founded on crowd wisdom and publications are developed and perpetuated/sustained by the interpersonal relations found on the web. This was affirmed in the responses found from the interviews with respondents who stated that their purchases, though not necessarily online, were predominantly influenced by the conversations, socialisation, communication and interactivity of social media.

The majority of participants agreed that social media influences their buying behaviour. Whether or not they bought online, or they were prompted to search elsewhere, particularly at the trusted brick and mortar store, open and interactive conversations on social media platforms do seem to be the highlight and founding blocks of social media influence on buyer choices.

'I love the candid, albeit sometimes rude comments on social media, because you get lots of different reviews and conversations about a product/service,' stated the Senior Manager Client Services.

This point was reiterated by the Attorney,

The openness of dialogue and sharing of ideas from a wide array of people with different backgrounds makes the communication on social media very influential and renders me open to influences I otherwise wouldn't have been.

These views confirmed the point in the introduction to the literature review that people are social beings and that they are always seeking opportunities to share information with friends and family.

#### **4.4.2 Influencers**

Question 2 produced two distinctive camps regarding the perceived level of social media influence on purchases. Some gave resounding endorsement to being influenced by social media. The type of influences ranged from social ads and retail store promotions to specials.

The perceived credibility of the seller/marketer was the primary reason given for the influence. The Performance Management Director exclaimed, 'I get influenced by people I can relate to. I can't relate to a catalogue; that is so old fashioned.' They went on to state that with an influencer, they could get back to them on their post and probe further on the qualities and benefits of the item being marketed to ensure that they had a good basis for making their purchase decisions.

The Training and Development Director stated, 'I follow people with content that builds me as an individual. Content that resonates. I don't follow people just because they are celebrities.' The participant went on to explain why she followed a famous American family TV series. She said,

Contrary to the fashion and the lifestyle the sisters are known and followed for, I follow them solely for the solidarity and tenacity they portray in their show. My sister and I do not have the same relationship. There is a 10 year age gap between us and watching how the TV sisters relate makes me have a longing and faith that maybe someday my sister and I can have a relationship as solid and protective as theirs.

These sentiments were very refreshing and somewhat surprising because they were a direct contrast to the literature review assertions that people follow and allow themselves to be influenced by celebrities' views just for the sake of it. The respondents depicted a picture of people who did not follow influencers like headless chickens, but of people who sought relevance, substance and pith in the social media posts in which they engaged.

#### **4.4.3 Intrinsic motivation**

Question 2 also produced a great number of participants who vehemently distanced themselves from the notion that they were influenced to make purchases by influencers. Upon being probed on the extent to which they followed influencers, The Forensic Specialist blankly enquired, 'What is that?' This question was closely followed by 'Ooh, is that what they are called? I have no interest honestly; I do not see their relevance in my life'.

The Head of Marketing and Strategy clearly stated that she did half-heartedly look into the lives of celebrities/influencers but was not particularly swayed into making a purchase because she did not want to be dictated to by crowds. The Technical Manager stated, 'My buying is personal. I am a shopaholic. I do not have to be influenced by anyone, but my own needs, wants and budget.'

'I don't trust influencers, but I can follow a normal social media participant who is like myself, as long as they have great style and content that resonates with me,' said the Managing Director. One response that stood out was of the Senior Manager

Client Services who sounded defeated as she said, ‘*Ae kannete* [No, really], I have no time. It sounds like a whole other life; exhausting following and trying to keep up with people.’

These statements tie with the literature and are closely linked to the sentiment in the preceding paragraph. Despite everyday flooding of information and busyness, when people seek deeper meaning and desire to gain greater appreciation of their subject of interest, they will resort to a medium they deem to be of high quality. Their knowledge of self and personal preference and not an external force is their big influencer.

#### **4.4.4 Anxiety**

In response to Question 3, which was about purchases induced by social media publicity, the Marketing Director stated,

Social media brings too much negative energy I do not need, as it makes me feel inferior, like I am not living too good a life, like I am not enough. I know I’m supposed to accept my standard of life and not feel pressured, but it does get to me.

The Performance Management Manager said, ‘I know my reasons are subjective, but I feel that influencers are fake and they just bring us mere mortals undue pressure.’ She elaborated that strategically she followed people who imparted wisdom and whose content helped her grow as a person and not people who sell an idea, a lifestyle or product/service to her.

The Attorney uttered, ‘the anxiety, the discontentment leaves me emotionally drained, like I am not doing enough with my life, yet I know I have a lot to be grateful for’. The anxiety and discontentment brought by checking into people living their ‘best’ lives, is a well-documented phenomenon, with De Vries and Kühne (2015) affirming that ‘perceiving the self as doing worse than others leads to less favourable self-perceptions’.

These negative feelings are akin to the blue side of emotions linked to feelings of distress and anxiety as per the literature in Chapter 2. The idea that our social environments do have a direct and impactful bearing on our well-being is affirmed.

#### **4.4.5 Electronic word of mouth scepticism**

Question 3, on purchases made because of social media publicity, yielded yet another group/theme of responses. 'I do not consider myself an avid social media participant, but I do log in from time to time to browse for ideas and inspiration,' said the Finance Director.

'I love the creativity and variety found on most social media platforms,' said the Technical Manager.

'Social media is for browsing then I buy elsewhere where I have confidence.' The Policy and Procedures Specialist elaborated that if she saw something online, she would actively find the item at a credible brick and mortar store or another established online store, unless it was from a small business or individual known to her.

This point was reiterated by Finance Director: 'I love social media for the latest trends and then I find alternative suppliers. I don't necessarily buy from the advertised site.'

'I just want to see how the other half live,' stated the Forensic Specialist.

These points depart from the assertions made in the literature review that eWOM has somewhat taken over and perpetuated from traditional word of mouth. It was revealed that people were sceptical of online reviews and would prefer to first vet the information, unlike in traditional word of mouth where they would take the opinion of their physical inner circle absolutely.

#### **4.4.6 Questionable trust**

Trust in the platform one is buying from is as important as the product or service one is buying. In trying to establish what features greatly influenced their purchase choices, as per Question 4, the Brand and Marketing Manager said, 'The element of surprise in some instances becomes evident when one finds out that the item purchased/displayed on the platform is rather different in reality (look and feel of the item).' The Attorney said,

Ah, social media is too perfect, everybody is super educated with an executive job on LinkedIn and everything about Instagram is too polished with all the filters. That doesn't look like real life to me.

Yet the Performance Management Manager said,

I bought a dress for my milestone birthday because the lady looked beautiful in it and it had all the right sparkles, but instead I received something that looked more like my grandmother's 1960's tablecloth.

From the above comments, it is evident that most people viewed social media posts with suspicion. They did not have full trust in the lifestyles being portrayed and even more so the products. According to Bortree, Huang, Li, Wang, Wu, and Xiao and Yang (2016), with sponsored marketing content, users either selectively avoid or sometimes filter advertising content on various platforms. These sentiments are in line with the literature that claims that continuous and rigorous engagement on social media sites is largely driven by satisfaction and trust in the integrity of the content of the platform.

#### **4.4.7 Satisfaction Levels**

With the probes in Question 4 about whether there are platforms they believed to have more influence than others, The Finance Director said,

Other social media sites seem to be the preserve of the few, but Facebook is accessible to everyone; it's easy to use and very communal. For these reasons I do not like it, as there's lots of negative feedback that makes rounds. There is no "professionalism" or sense of censorship on Facebook; people are just careless.

The Marketing Director stated, 'I love connecting with old friends on Facebook, but I find it intrusive. There are no boundaries and most times people are disrespectful and insensitive.'

'If it is the sale of a service or an essential, for example education and necessities, Facebook works well and it is the most subscribed to platform in my view,' stated the Training Development Director.

Differences in the backgrounds, interests and perceptions of people came through as would be expected. Some believed LinkedIn had more influence; others rated Instagram, Twitter and so on as more influential. There was, however, unanimity on the wide use, accessibility and influence of Facebook, even for those who professed to neither liking it nor using it.

This ties with the literature in Chapter 2 which, according to De Vries and Kühne (2015), states that how people process social information may be associated with their level of satisfaction in life which is a global cognitive-judgemental component of happiness.

#### **4.4.8 High quality and rich content**

Question 4 was on the features of a social media platform thought to be influential in making purchases. Balcarova, Pilar and Rojik (2016) state the necessity of creating both an emotional and a rational connection between brands and consumers. They go on to list brand salience, resonance, judgements, performance, imagery and feelings as the six brand building blocks. This sentiment was echoed by participants,

with the Head of Marketing and Strategy saying ‘I love Instagram imagery; the pictures are very wow’.

‘Fresh appeal’, ‘presentation’, ‘attractiveness’, ‘colour’ and ‘light’ were some of the words that were used to describe the lure and attraction of platforms. The Managing Director said:

The way the company had posted the item spoke to me. It was paired with what I enjoy, making me very susceptible to buying items, some of which I would not have thought of buying.

‘I love good photography, like someone really made an effort for me to see, you know?’ exclaimed the Senior manager Client Services.

The literature speaks of the intrinsic motivation to make purchases on the basis of affection for and connection to the service or product on display. It goes without saying that beautifully presented material, as claimed by the respondents, will be more appealing and induce some level of affection. The literature also asserts that rich content with equally rich aesthetics captures people’s reality and will always be a great drawcard to a platform.

#### **4.4.9 Ease of use**

Continuing with Question 4 on the features of a platform that render it more influential on their purchases, ‘ease of use’ and its many derivatives was one of the responses that stood out. The following responses capture this aspect:

- ‘I love the ease of connection and search features, nothing confusing.’
- ‘A simple site with no confusing features.’
- ‘Easy access into and through a social media site is appealing.’
- ‘Convenience 101. I am too busy and I hate searching through a lot of stuff.’

No one wants to struggle unnecessarily over anything. Of the features which made respective sites appealing and that stood out the most about the use of social media sites was convenience and ease of use. An uncomplicated application or platform which was easy to understand and use, without compromising on safety features, was rated highly by participants.

'Uncomplicated', 'ease of use', 'not confusing' are some of the words that were used to describe this phenomenon. It is clear, therefore, that the importance of vigilance for scams cannot be overemphasised and that background checks as one 'surfs' the net are imperative. If a site is too confusing, the fear level of scams is that much higher, ultimately affecting reliability and the chance of making purchases. These opinions were in line with the literature review which highlighted ease of access and search ability as some of the biggest drawcards to the use of a platform.

#### **4.4.10 Traditional word of mouth**

When responding to Question 6, which was about any other influences that motivated their purchasing, the Forensic Specialist suggested that 'knowing a lot of people helps' because in knowing a lot of people, connecting and increasing one's circle of influence was greatest and the spread of information was easily perpetuated.

The Training and Development Director stated, 'Most times when my friends and I go to an event, the question is, girls, what do we wear? And because I trust them, I am inclined to buy whatever is suggested by the group.'

As the Finance Director put it: 'I listen to people I know, people I trust, where conversation is flowing and I am me.'

'I still believe in the power of word of mouth, my physical networks more than social media likes and recommendations.'

The Performance Management Manager stated,

Even If I am not on social media, someone close is and when I ask, where I can buy a carpet, they will refer me to a social media advert they saw and I can go to the shop directly.

The prevalence of word of mouth, particularly eWOM, was discussed in the literature. Besides the influence of attractive sites and promotions, word of mouth seemed to have more influence on participants' buying choices than any other form of advertising or marketing.

Family and friends to a large extent – and colleagues to a lesser extent – fuel word of mouth. Against the backdrop of the sentiments in previous paragraphs about online safety concerns and lack of credibility by some purveyors of information, old fashioned trust in people in same circles proved to be very important.

These views slightly deviate from the eWOM assertions made in the literature review in that word of mouth in the traditional form is still preferred over eWOM. People are wary and suspicious of eWOM and the likes of online recommendations and reviews, but opinions and affirmations by their inner circle continue to be a trusted and reliable source of information and ideas.

#### **4.4.11 The diversity and richness of demographics**

In the earlier days of the internet and social media, the prevalence of the use of social media among the youth was high; the older generation was on the periphery. The landscape has since changed as more and older people are seen to be active on social media.

'You get all age groups on social media. I was shocked that my kids now want to be dressed according to how they saw their celebrity idols on Instagram,' uttered the Head of Marketing and Strategy.

This point was reiterated by the Policy and Procedures Specialist who said, 'There are a lot of people on social media of different ages, market segments and tastes.'

With the undeniable pervasiveness of technology in people's lives, it is no surprise that the internet and social media are no longer the preserve of the youth. Whatever the reasons for the previous apprehension of the use of social media by adults, it is evident that life has pushed everyone into a corner. Technology is in everyone's pocket. Services and products have gone online, making exposure to social media for all age groups essential.

The point in the literature about the diversity and richness of demographics and psychographics was strongly affirmed – a testimony to the fact that technology has become a part of our lives and everyone is bound to have a smartphone and to engage on social media.

#### **4.4.12 Low market reach**

When asked what their views were about businesses not making use of social media as part of their marketing strategy, the responses ranged from 'very low reach and coverage' to 'they will not survive' and 'they are doomed'. The Senior Manager Client Services echoed,

With COVID19, there has been little physical movement; people that you normally expected to drive down past your billboard are stuck at home on their phones with social media.

The Forensic Specialist said, 'I don't read street newspapers, I don't window shop and I'm not going to know about other shops if they are not on social media, which is where I play.'

The Marketing Director 2 stated, 'It doesn't kill to try other marketing avenues.' The Finance Director pointed out,

Let's talk about Nokia. It sat on its laurels because it had the cell phone monopoly and no competition. In came new advancements in phones and suddenly they weren't relatable because they were using Microsoft. No one was buying; they were not using social media, therefore, lacked influence.

This point of view by a participant highlights the importance for companies to keep abreast with the times and to rebrand themselves. It is evident from these discussions remaining complacent does kill. The urgency for reinvention and agility was written on the 4IR wall, but COVID19 has catapulted us many years into 4IR and those who do not embrace change are certainly doomed to failure.

The question yielded undeniable consensus from participants. Even those who are not particularly keen on everyday scrolling of pages felt that businesses marketing their wares and services on social media have a better chance of reaching out to potential clients than those that only use flyers, magazines and other traditional means of marketing.

These views tie very closely with those expressed in the literature review on access to backroom information technology systems; mainstream advertising used to be the preserve of the few but is fast becoming obsolete. Today, with the affordability and convenience of social media marketing, having a social media presence is an imperative for organisations to better engage their clients and market their wares.

Some of the views that came up during the interviews were the following:

- The affordability of social media usage. Using data from social media over traditional marketing was viewed as very cheap and affordable.
- The use of promotions, social ads and sales as means by which businesses draw clients to their sites appealed to some people and lured them to buy.
- The inclination of some clients was towards apps, the likes of the WhatsApp business link, as additions to their preferred social media platforms.

#### **4.5 Conclusion**

The researcher became immersed in the research findings. The process was highly iterative as there was a lot of back and forth, reading and rereading of the research answers to ensure that the sentiments of respondents were captured comprehensively.

Unlike the suggestions made in the literature, vanity did not play as big a role as was anticipated. The respondents displayed a great level of maturity and sensibility, even those who were to some great level influenced by social media.

Much reference is made to the influencer – a phenomenon that has taken hold and become the mainstay for brands' marketing campaigns – in the literature review. Limited influencer influence was another revelation that came as a surprise. Because of the prevalence of influencers and their high visibility in modern times, the researcher had taken it for granted that people were readily influenced by them. However, respondents displayed a great deal of maturity and discernment.

Interview responses were indicative of the autonomy, free will and own discretion still exercised by people when making purchasing decisions. Some participants claimed that people who were swayed by influencers/public opinion were people who had neither confidence nor knowledge of themselves. This affirms the view of De Vries and Kühne (2015) that social comparison specifically impacts self-perceptions, implying that if people know less of themselves and compare themselves with others, they are bound to lose themselves in the crowd and become easily swayed and influenced by others' perceptions.

The participants' high level of judgement on the issue of eWOM became apparent. Although people may have their eyes peeled to what is available in the market and may from time to time listen or read review sections, they still prefer to dig deeper, to do their own research and to rely rather on their physical inner circles than online circles.

The depth and resonance of content had more impact on participants than just the aesthetics and flamboyant displays of 'good' life. Most people stated that they followed online people and/or influencers to whom they related, with whom they shared relevant content and who could make meaningful contributions to their lives.

The one surprising and eye-opening observation gathered from respondent's shared views, presented by the scepticism of eWOM was that, there is no direct correlation between the number of likes and number of transactions. The perception held, that a huge following and many 'likes' of a product brand on social media translates to the marketer's improving bottom-line is a huge misconception. The marketer could certainly be getting much more following and exposure to the masses, but this does not mean people are making purchases. As per their responses, respondents prefer to browse, get inspiration but make purchases with alternative retailers. This could speak to other factors such as pricing, quality of service delivery and ease of conducting business.

## **5 CONCLUSION**

### **5.1 Introduction**

The aim of this study was to discover the influence of social media marketing on buyer choices. This chapter discusses and provides interpretations of the findings emanating from the preceding chapter and will confirm and contrast data gleaned from previous research studies outlined in the literature review. The limitations of the study will be highlighted and recommendations and a conclusion will be presented.

### **5.2 Outline**

The motive for the study was triggered by personal interest and curiosity. The researcher possessed a deep need and desire to find out the drivers behind the choices of purchases people made. Over the years, there has been an exponential rise in the use of social media. An increase in big and small brands and the influencer phenomenon as explained in the literature review has occurred. The amount of information available to consumers via a variety of platforms has increased at an alarming rate. It is against this background that the researcher sought to find out if indeed there was a direct correlation between social media marketing and buyer choices.

### **5.3 Study sample description**

The study sample consisted of 12 young, fashionable, middle-class professionals in well-paid jobs in Maseru, Lesotho. They had either been recently promoted or had received new appointments to higher positions in new organisations. Their ages ranged from 25 to 45 years and they were armed with smartphones. The latest technology was a big part of their lives. The participants were recruited telephonically to introduce the researcher. Those who agreed to be interviewed were emailed the consent letter. The COVID-19 pandemic's social distancing protocols saw people working from home thus the interviews were held telephonically and took an average of 25 minutes each.

## 5.4 Findings

Research on social media has been extensively covered and the research questions and topics have been as wide and varied as the social media platforms themselves.

The objectives of the study were addressed satisfactorily. The influence of social media from the perspectives of young, middle class professionals was assessed. The study found that a significant number of individuals did indeed use social media and the majority were frequent users of, on average, three platforms. The overwhelming majority expressed their indifference to social media because of the negative feelings conjured by the environment. Their feelings of inferiority and inadequacy in measuring up to others affirm the point made by Snyder and Newman (2018) that adults can be impacted by feelings of loneliness which could affect their mental and physical well-being. These feelings led the respondents to approach social media maturely and to participate strategically therein, by selecting which platforms to use and by being pedantic about what content they explored.

Resonance with their preferred content became the leading factor as to why people engaged with certain social media accounts or followed certain people. For example, people followed only individuals whose content was about exercise routines, spiritual content or cooking experts/chefs, as opposed to following random public figures just because they had beautiful profiles.

The secondary objectives, on what the critical factors to a successful social media platform that influence buyer choices were answered. Ease of use, great imagery and aesthetics of a platform, came out strongly as some of the critical factors in influencing buyer choices. A point affirmed by Glosby (2015) that, “your social media photos speak volumes”. Another point that emerged strongly from the research was the fact that people used social media for inspiration. With that said, only a few participants were put under pressure, by social media to make prompt purchases. Most took to social media to get ideas and to be inspired to either find or buy similar items elsewhere. This point was alluded to by Hudson and Thal (2013) who noted an

extended evaluation stage during which consumers juggled with the brands under consideration a great deal.

The last objective was successfully addressed also, with the resounding agreement by all respondents that businesses with high social media participation have better returns than businesses that do not. The COVID19 pandemic with high restrictions and limited movement of people starkly highlighted the differences in successes and exposure of businesses on social media than those that were not. 70% of marketers see increased sales for using social media for more than 12 months and about 91% report increased business exposure and business partnerships (Stelzner.2019).

## **5.5 Recommendations**

It is an undeniable fact that, due to globalisation and the speed at which world changes happen, social media is a big part of people's lives. As a player on the world stage, Lesotho is also impacted. The following are the recommendations for further research and for any organisation/individual to use to effectively market and increase sales through their social media platforms:

- Draw up and invest in implementing a robust digital marketing strategy, as a big part and cornerstone of a business marketing and brand strategy
- Invest substantially in knowing and engaging the client and harnessing their insights and preferences for effective tailoring of marketing content.
- Ensure that prices are commensurate to the quality of the products/service being offered.
- Invest in a platform that is easy to use, that is attractive with good lighting and imagery and that offers convenience to buyers.
- Ensure the credibility and relevance of the chosen social media platform to the chosen demographic. A social media platform is seen as the cornerstone of good relationships and increased purchasing by clients (Hajli 2014).
- Invest in meaningful social interactions. Clients love being sincerely engaged instead of being promoted to.

- Make great customer service a cornerstone of the business to ensure repeat business and referrals. People's distrust of online businesses can be overcome by peer opinions and validation.
- User Generated content carries more weight on social media than generic, business generated content. Ensure therefore that clients have a good experience with your business, so that they can share stories, images and reviews of your product/service.
- Create a buzz using tailor-made marketing activations, around the product/service offered to increase engagement (Saravanakumar & SuganthaLakshmi 2012).
- Form authentic collaborative partnerships with other social media marketers, to have wide client reach, interact, connect and engage with them to form a strong reliable inner circle
- Invest in paid marketing such as affiliate marketing and social media ads, which ensure ability to drill down on appropriate demographic information, for targeted campaigns.

On account of the plethora of information and marketing information thrown at consumers on a daily basis, it is an imperative to have a great marketing strategy as the foundation to one's marketing endeavours. It is the best possible building block to powerful, social media marketing. Being cognisant of the above points will add that much more mileage to success in social media marketing.

## **5.6 Limitations and future research**

The study was conducted using a small sample of individuals in urban Maseru and this may not be representative of the real happenings on the ground.

Coding, which was used in analysing the data, may also have caused the researcher to confound respondents' accounts of the issues due to the back and forth nature of the analysis.

There were issues which caught the attention of the researcher but which fell outside the scope of the study but which warrant further research. One is an in-depth insight into the buying behaviour of middle-class professionals in terms of influencer marketing; more dimensions need to be taken into account.

In addition, future research could conduct interviews using focus groups to observe group think and group dynamics and to identify any symbiotic behaviour that may emanate from the discussions.

In the present study research is qualitative in nature; future quantitative research, with a bigger pool of participants and quantitative measures, could prove useful.

## **5.7 Conclusion**

The main objective of this field study was to assess the influence of social media on the choice to buy from the perspective of young, middle-class professionals in Maseru, Lesotho. In addition, an exploration of the critical factors regarding social media that influence buyer choices and the determination of the buying patterns of young, middle-class professionals who use social media as a sourcing platform was investigated. Lastly, the study sought to establish if increased social media participation by a business yielded better returns than those received by businesses that did not actively participate in social media.

The findings were that buyers were influenced to make purchases by social media attractiveness, substantial versus superfluous content and site credibility. Their relationship with social media was merely investigative; they engaged with social media to browse and to get inspiration and ideas for buying elsewhere. The consensus was that organisations that used social media for marketing were further ahead of the curve than those that did not. All in all, the objectives of this field study were addressed comprehensively.

The researcher has, therefore, come to the conclusion that social media does indeed have a great influence on buyer's choices. Whether they use it to seek inspiration or peer reviews on certain products, ultimately they rely on social media to validate their researches. It does also have a great impact on business's performance. Businesses that did not use social media to advertise their merchandise proved to be less successful than their counterparts who used social media, as such it would be highly recommended that business, big or small have a social media marketing component as part of their bigger strategic marketing plan.

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# **APPENDIX A**

**INTERVIEW SCHEDULE ON THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON BUYER CHOICES IN MASERU, LESOTHO**

This survey is part of a research project undertaken with the University of the Free State (UFS), as part of the requirements of obtaining the Masters of Business Administration (MBA) degree.

1. Do you use social media?

Probes

-If yes to the above, which of the following social media platforms do you use?

<input type="radio"/> Facebook
<input type="radio"/> Instagram
<input type="radio"/> Twitter
<input type="radio"/> Pinterest
<input type="radio"/> LinkedIn
<input type="radio"/> Other

-Which top three (3) platforms do you most frequently use?

-For what purpose do you use them?

2. Please share your experiences on the use of social media platforms with regard to purchasing options/decisions?

Probes

-Do you believe social media has any level of influence on your purchase?

-Please elaborate on your choice above

-To what degree/extent do you follow social media influential/prominent people?

-Do you think prominent people on social media, influence your buying choices?

3. Tell me more about the purchases you make based on social media publicity.

Probes

- Are you easily swayed by popular opinion?
- When was the last time you bought anything due to the influence of social media?
- What influenced you?
- Were you happy with what you bought?
- If “no”, what discouraged you from buying?

4. What features about your preferred social media tools greatly influence your buying choices?

Probes

- Are there platforms that you think have more influence than others?
- If “yes” to the above, why do you think this is so?
- If “no” to the above, why do you think this is so?
- What is it about a social media platform that you believe has more influence over buyer choices than others?

5. What are your views on businesses that do not make use of social media platforms to market their businesses?

Probes

- What do you think of their market reach abilities?
- If you think they do not have enough exposure, what are your concerns about the limitations?
- Is there anything you may add regarding the use of social media platforms to influence purchasing that was not mentioned?

6. Are there any other influences not mentioned above?

Peer group
------------

Colleagues
------------

Family	
Mainstream media, e.g. Television	
Other	

# **APPENDIX B**

## **RESEARCH STUDY INFORMATION LEAFLET AND CONSENT FORM**

### **DATE**

*19 August 2020*

### **TITLE OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT**

*The Influence of Social Media on Buyer Choices in Maseru, Lesotho.*

### **PRINCIPLE INVESTIGATOR / RESEARCHER(S) NAME(S) AND CONTACT NUMBER(S):**

*'Mahlalele Mosa Putsoane                      1998215469                      +266 589 111 44*

### **FACULTY AND DEPARTMENT:**

*Economic and Management Sciences, UFS Business School*

### **STUDYLEADER(S) NAME AND CONTACT NUMBER:**

*Mr. Mark J. PetersMr. Mark J. Peters*

*+27 82 311 9118*

### **WHAT IS THE AIM / PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?**

To explore the power of marketing through social media. It aims to find out what influence social media marketing has on buyer choices.

### **WHO IS DOING THE RESEARCH?**

*'Mahlalele Mosa Putsoane; as part of the requirements, for completing the Masters of Business Administration (MBA) degree.*

### **HAS THE STUDY RECEIVED ETHICAL APPROVAL?**

This study has received approval from the Research Ethics Committee of UFS. A copy of the approval letter can be obtained from the researcher.

**Approval number:** *Approval letter attached*

#### **WHY ARE YOU INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT?**

*There are 18 participants for this study, conveniently chosen because they fell within the specified demography of the study; young middle class professionals who recently got a promotion or got a new higher level employment in a new organisation. All of them caught the interviewer's attention, through company broadcasts in newspapers' or company websites.*

#### **WHAT IS THE NATURE OF PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY?**

*The participant's role is to participate in a telephonic interview. The participant is encouraged to give their honest and objective opinion and views of social media .The responses can be as lengthy and detailed as the response necessitates. The study involves the use of a semi-structured interview schedule. The interview schedule is made up of questions linked to social media use, for example, which social media platforms do you use? How much influence do you believe your preferred platforms have on your purchase decisions? The expected duration of participation is approximately thirty (30) minutes.*

#### **CAN THE PARTICIPANT WITHDRAW FROM THE STUDY?**

*Participation in this study is voluntary and you are under no obligation to consent to participation and there is no penalty or loss of benefit for non-participation. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a written consent form. Due to the use of an interview schedule, which is non-identifiable, it will not be possible however to withdraw from the research project once the interview is underway.*

#### **WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**

*Possible benefits for participation in this study are not directed to the individual/participant per se, but a general contribution towards understanding patterns of buying amongst, the young middle class professionals in Maseru, Lesotho.*

#### **WHAT IS THE ANTICIPATED INCONVENIENCE OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**

*There will be no harm whatsoever in taking part in this study. The only inconvenience may be the loss of your time; the earmarked 30 minutes, for participating and filling in the questionnaire.*

#### **WILL WHAT I SAY BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?**

*Due to the use of an interview schedule which is non-identifiable, it will not be possible to link the responses to any particular respondent, however confidentiality cannot be guaranteed due to possibility of occurrence of breach of data.*

#### **HOW WILL THE INFORMATION BE STORED AND ULTIMATELY DESTROYED?**

*Hard copies of your responses will be stored by the researcher for a period of five (5) years in a securely locked and fire-proof filing cabinet at a place of work, for future research or academic purposes. Only the researcher has access to this cabinet, which is locked at all times. Electronic data will be stored on a password protected computer, with back up on a password protected external hard drive. Future use of the stored data will be subject to further Research Ethics Review and approval if applicable. There is no foreseeable inconvenience, risks, or harmful side effects to you as a participant in this research, because of the casual nature and simplicity of the research, based solely on participant's views and motivations and not infringing on anyone's privacy.*

#### **WILL I RECEIVE PAYMENT OR ANY INCENTIVES FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY?**

*There will neither be a reward nor incentive whatsoever, nor will the participant incur any cost for participating in this study. The only inconvenience caused to the participant will be their time (approximately 30 minutes) in thinking and answering the interview questions.*

#### **HOW WILL THE PARTICIPANT BE INFORMED OF THE FINDINGS / RESULTS OF THE STUDY?**

*If you would like to be informed of the final research findings, please contact, 'Mahlalele Putsoane on +266 589 111 44, or mosachoks@gmail.com. The findings are accessible for five years. Should you require any further information or want to contact the researcher about any aspect of this study, please contact 'Mahlalele Putsoane on +266 589 111 44 or on email, mosachoks@gmail.com. Should you have concerns about the way in which the research has been conducted, you may contact Mr. Mark J. Peters on mark@markjpeters.co.z or, +27 82 311 9118 and describe any potential level of inconvenience and/or discomfort you experienced as a participant.*

**Thank you for taking time to read this information sheet and for participating in this study.**

# **APPENDIX C**

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (participant name), confirm that the person asking my consent to take part in this research has told me about the nature, procedure, potential benefits and anticipated inconvenience of participation.

I have read (or had explained to me) and understood the study as explained in the information sheet. I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and am prepared to participate in the study. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without penalty (if applicable). I am aware that the findings of this study will be anonymously processed into a research report, journal publications and/or conference proceedings.

I agree to the recording of the *insert specific data collection method*.

I have received a signed copy of the informed consent agreement.

Full Name of Participant: Thabo Melapo

Signature of Participant: T. Melapo Date: 30/08/2020

Full Name(s) of Researcher(s): Mahlalele Mosa Putsoane

Signature of Researcher: M. Putsoane Date: August 2020


I, RETHABILE NTERERE (participant name), confirm that the person asking my consent to take part in this research has told me about the nature, procedure, potential benefits and anticipated inconvenience of participation.

I have read (or had explained to me) and understood the study as explained in the information sheet. I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and am prepared to participate in the study. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without penalty (if applicable). I am aware that the findings of this study will be anonymously processed into a research report, journal publications and/or conference proceedings.

I agree to the recording of the *insert specific data collection method*.

I have received a signed copy of the informed consent agreement.

Full Name of Participant: RETHABILE NTERERE

Signature of Participant:  Date: 20.08.2020

Full Name(s) of Researcher(s): Mahlalele Mosa Putsoane

Signature of Researcher: P.M. Putsoane Date: August 2020

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (participant name), confirm that the person asking my consent to take part in this research has told me about the nature, procedure, potential benefits and anticipated inconvenience of participation.

I have read (or had explained to me) and understood the study as explained in the information sheet. I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and am prepared to participate in the study. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without penalty (if applicable). I am aware that the findings of this study will be anonymously processed into a research report, journal publications and/or conference proceedings.

I agree to the recording of the *insert specific data collection method*.

I have received a signed copy of the informed consent agreement.

Full Name of Participant: Thuso Thabane

Signature of Participant: TTW Date: 28/08/2020

Full Name(s) of Researcher(s): 'Mahlalele Mosa Putsoane

Signature of Researcher: S.M. Putsoane Date: August 2020

I, MAMONKI LEBOHANG RAMOHLO (participant name), confirm that the person asking my consent to take part in this research has told me about the nature, procedure, potential benefits and anticipated inconvenience of participation.

I have read (or had explained to me) and understood the study as explained in the information sheet. I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and am prepared to participate in the study. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without penalty (if applicable). I am aware that the findings of this study will be anonymously processed into a research report, journal publications and/or conference proceedings.

I agree to the recording of the *insert specific data collection method*.

I have received a signed copy of the informed consent agreement.

Full Name of Participant: MAMONKI LEBOHANG RAMOHLO

Signature of Participant: [Signature] Date: 21/08/2020

Full Name(s) of Researcher(s): Mahlalele Mosa Putsoane

Signature of Researcher: [Signature] Date: August 2020



Mkhoshoeshoe Michaleniane (participant name), confirm that the person asking my consent to take part in this research has told me about the nature, procedure, potential benefits and anticipated inconvenience of participation.

I have read (or had explained to me) and understood the study as explained in the information sheet. I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and am prepared to participate in the study. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without penalty (if applicable). I am aware that the findings of this study will be anonymously processed into a research report, journal publications and/or conference proceedings.

I agree to the recording of the *insert specific data collection method*.

I have received a signed copy of the informed consent agreement.

Full Name of Participant: Mkhoshoeshoe Elizabeth Michaleniane

Signature of Participant: [Handwritten Signature] Date: 20/08/2020

Full Name(s) of Researcher(s): Mahlalele Mosa Putsoane

Signature of Researcher: [Handwritten Signature] Date: August 2020



I, \_\_\_\_\_ (participant name), confirm that the person asking my consent to take part in this research has told me about the nature, procedure, potential benefits and anticipated inconvenience of participation.

I have read (or had explained to me) and understood the study as explained in the information sheet. I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and am prepared to participate in the study. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without penalty (if applicable). I am aware that the findings of this study will be anonymously processed into a research report, journal publications and/or conference proceedings.

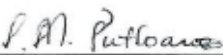
I agree to the recording of the *insert specific data collection method*.

I have received a signed copy of the informed consent agreement.

Full Name of Participant: Palesa Chetane

Signature of Participant:  Date: 19/08/2020

Full Name(s) of Researcher(s): Mahlalele Mosa Putsoane

Signature of Researcher:  Date: August 2020

I, Rethabile Thahane (participant name), confirm that the person asking my consent to take part in this research has told me about the nature, procedure, potential benefits and anticipated inconvenience of participation.

I have read (or had explained to me) and understood the study as explained in the information sheet. I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and am prepared to participate in the study. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without penalty (if applicable). I am aware that the findings of this study will be anonymously processed into a research report, journal publications and/or conference proceedings.

I agree to the recording of the *insert specific data collection method*.

I have received a signed copy of the informed consent agreement.

Full Name of Participant: Rethabile Thahane

Signature of Participant: [Signature] Date: 28-08-2020

Full Name(s) of Researcher(s): Mahlalele Mosa Putsoane

Signature of Researcher: [Signature] Date: August 2020

I, Reekhibe Charles Motu (participant name), confirm that the person asking my consent to take part in this research has told me about the nature, procedure, potential benefits and anticipated inconvenience of participation.

I have read (or had explained to me) and understood the study as explained in the information sheet. I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and am prepared to participate in the study. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without penalty (if applicable). I am aware that the findings of this study will be anonymously processed into a research report, journal publications and/or conference proceedings.

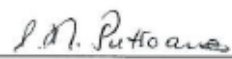
I agree to the recording of the *insert specific data collection method*.

I have received a signed copy of the informed consent agreement.

Full Name of Participant: Reekhibe Charles Motu

Signature of Participant:  Date: 21st August 2020

Full Name(s) of Researcher(s): Mahialele Mosa Putsoane

Signature of Researcher:  Date: August 2020



CONFIDENTIAL

I, [Name], hereby certify that I am a student of the University of the Philippines and I have read and understand the contents of the attached informed consent form and I have voluntarily agreed to participate in the research project titled [Title].

I understand that my participation in this research project is voluntary and I have the right to refuse to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or consequence. I understand that the results of this study will be used for research purposes only and will not be used for any other purpose. I understand that my participation in this research project is confidential and that my identity will be protected.

I understand that my participation in this research project is confidential and that my identity will be protected.

I understand that my participation in this research project is confidential and that my identity will be protected.

Full Name of Participant: [Name]

Signature of the participant: [Signature]

Signature of the researcher: [Signature]

Signature of the researcher: P.M. Pustians Date: [Date]



I, Regina Thakholi (participant name), confirm that the person asking my consent to take part in this research has told me about the nature, procedure, potential benefits and anticipated inconvenience of participation.

I have read (or had explained to me) and understood the study as explained in the information sheet. I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and am prepared to participate in the study. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without penalty (if applicable). I am aware that the findings of this study will be anonymously processed into a research report, journal publications and/or conference proceedings.

I agree to the recording of the *insert specific data collection method*.

I have received a signed copy of the informed consent agreement.

Full Name of Participant: Regina Masekhola Thakholi



Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: 08/23/2020

Full Name(s) of Researcher(s): Mahlalele Mosa Putsoane

Signature of Researcher:  Date: <sup>23/</sup>August 2020

I, MAPASEKA NTLEI (participant name), confirm that the person asking my consent to take part in this research has told me about the nature, procedure, potential benefits and anticipated inconvenience of participation.

I have read (or had explained to me) and understood the study as explained in the information sheet. I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and am prepared to participate in the study. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without penalty (if applicable). I am aware that the findings of this study will be anonymously processed into a research report, journal publications and/or conference proceedings.

I agree to the recording of the *insert specific data collection method*.

I have received a signed copy of the informed consent agreement.

Full Name of Participant: MAPASEKA NTLEI

Signature of Participant: [Signature] Date: 19/08/2020

Full Name(s) of Researcher(s): Mahlalele Mosa Putsoane

Signature of Researcher: [Signature] Date: August 2020

I, Malittle Lekhanya (participant name), confirm that the person asking my consent to take part in this research has told me about the nature, procedure, potential benefits and anticipated inconvenience of participation.

I have read (or had explained to me) and understood the study as explained in the information sheet. I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and am prepared to participate in the study. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without penalty (if applicable). I am aware that the findings of this study will be anonymously processed into a research report, journal publications and/or conference proceedings.

I agree to the recording of the *insert specific data collection method*.

I have received a signed copy of the informed consent agreement.

Full Name of Participant: Malittle Lekhanya

Signature of Participant:  Date: 29th August 2020

Full Name(s) of Researcher(s): 'Mahlalele Mosa Putsoane

Signature of Researcher: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: August 2020

# **APPENDIX D**

GENERAL/HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (GHREC)

17-Aug-2020

Dear Mrs Mahlalele Putsoane

Application Approved

Research Project Title:

**The Influence of Social Media On Buyer Choices in Maseru, Lesotho**

Ethical Clearance number:

**UFS-HSD2020/0974/2007**

We are pleased to inform you that your application for ethical clearance has been approved. Your ethical clearance is valid for twelve (12) months from the date of issue. We request that any changes that may take place during the course of your study/research project be submitted to the ethics office to ensure ethical transparency. Furthermore, you are requested to submit the final report of your study/research project to the ethics office. Should you require more time to complete this research, please apply for an extension. Thank you for submitting your proposal for ethical clearance; we wish you the best of luck and success with your research.

Yours sincerely

**Dr Adri Du Plessis**

**Chairperson: General/Human Research Ethics Committee**

**Adri du  
Plessis**

**2020.08.1**

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*Adri du Plessis*

# **APPENDIX E**



## EDITING CERTIFICATE

21 October 2020

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

### DECLARATION: Editing of Field Study

This is to certify that the MBA field study entitled “**THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON BUYER CHOICES IN MASERU, LESOTHO**” submitted by ‘**Mahlalele Mosa Putsoane**’ was edited for English language, grammar, punctuation, and spelling by the undersigned. Editing also included addressing the layout and formatting of the document.

The editor will not be held accountable for any later additions or changes to the document that were not edited by the editor, nor if the client rejects/ignores any of the changes, suggestions or queries, which he/she is free to do. The editor can also not be held responsible for errors in the content of the document or whether or not the client passes or fails. It is the client’s responsibility to review the edited document before submitting it for evaluation.

**Name of Editor:** Shirley Wilson

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# **APPENDIX F**

**Turn It In certificate**