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ASSIGNMENT 7: SUMMATIVE RESEARCH REPORT

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**The role Instagram influencers have on identity construction: the perceptions of
millennial's in Sandton.**

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ABSTRACT

The internet is a global network of computers that has provided the advancement of communication and connection. It has created a social media environment that introduced social networking sites such as Instagram. Instagram began having increased numbers of individuals who call themselves “influencers” who are individuals that construct their identities online and use them for impression management in relationships thus prompting people to see them in a certain or different light. Research about social media influencers is abundant however, less is known about the impact Instagram influencers play in their audience’s identity construction. The purpose of this research was to explore millennials perceptions of the role Instagram influencers play in identity construction. Semi structured interviews were conducted with six participants who are Instagram users between the ages 24-39 years old. Responses were analysed using a thematic analysis and more than two themes emerged. It was found that Instagram influencers do play a role in identity construction to a certain extent by normalising and instilling ideas in people’s minds by frequently creating and posting content about their journeys, luxuries and achievements. The results conclude that Instagram influencers have both positive and negative effects on how young adults construct their identities depending on one’s strength of character.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Contextualisation

There are several definitions of communication and for the purpose of this study, communication is described and understood as an essential part of human life because it is a daily activity that affords people the luxury to verbally or non-verbally send, receive and transmit information from one person to another depending on a person's intention (Littlejohn, Foss and Oetzel, 2017). South Africa and the entire world have gone through crucial transformation in communication and media technology which abandoned traditional media and established new media such as the internet, social media or online newspapers which has altered life dramatically (Lule, 2012). This is an era that developed and enabled millennials to grow up in advanced technological environments that allows the internet to have a significant influence on media and its content. The internet brings about autonomous elements to communication that prompt sociability and collective belonging (Diamandaki, 2003).

Access to the internet has become increasingly popular in South Africa in the recent years hence why multiple researchers have focused their attention on the internet as an ecosystem that allows the development of identity construction (Lamb and Poster, 2003). That is why Littlejohn, Foss and Oetzel (2017) believe that technology creates an environment that permits certain conversations to take place which will assist in the building and framing of human viewpoints and relationships in the society. For instance, environments such as the social media as one of the main means of communication has made life easier because it enables global communication and instant news dispersal that can be customized to fit the needs of an individual (Lule, 2012).

Social media introduces social networking sites such as *WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter*. As stated by Cohn (2011) social media “uses web based and mobile technologies that transmit information through an interactive dialogue thus forming the connection between people. Social networking sites are social structures that intensify the connection between people who are linked by common cause”. Social networking sites began having increased numbers of individuals who call themselves “influencers” and according to Lipschultz (2018) influencers could be described as individuals that construct their identities online and use them for impression management in relationships thus prompting people to see them in a certain or different light.

According to Jiang and Ngien (2020) *Instagram* is one of the fastest growing social media platforms that permits users to beautify their photos by applying enhancement filters that have changed how people present themselves online. The peer portrayal of idealized beauty that normally affects the audience's internal identity and responses (Jiang and Ngien, 2020). *Instagram* is the focal concept of the study and is supported by Lao's (2018) study that mentions that changes in human relationship and interaction also alters social and cultural institutions and these transformations arise from *Instagram* and *Snapchat* which are sites that remain understudied compared to *Facebook* or *Twitter*. However, the findings suggest that the "users understanding of self modifies throughout the usage of the site regardless of a positive or negative effect (Lao, 2018). The following will speak more about the research in terms of: the reasons for the study, the problem determined for the study to answer, the research questions and objectives, a literature review that lays a foundation of understanding and the study's approaches, design and methodology that aids to collect data and draw conclusions from the findings and interpretations of the results so as to put the research into perspective.

1.2. Rationale

Over the years changes in media and communication have rapidly developed and the internet has changed the circumstances of identity construction transitioning from less traditional to more westernised ways using social media (Zhao, Grasmuck and Martin, 2008). Social media is one of the biggest ecosystems in technology and communication that offers an environment that is more mobile, personal and participatory thus introducing an increase in individuals being a social media influencer on social networking sites for various reasons (Lule, 2012). Having said that, according to Kavakci and Kraeplin (2017) social media also enables the building and rebuilding of an individual's cyber persona.

The topic was selected because with the frequent millennial engagement with social media, it is noticeable that the millennial generation is heavily influenced by what they consume on social media thus sparking an interest in attempting to investigate and understand whether social media influencers have a role in how millennials build their identities. There are various studies conducted such as: the analysis of the role of digital influencers and their impact on the functioning of the contemporary online promotional systems and its sustainable development by Wielki (2020) or the impact of social media influencers on purchase intention and the mediation effect of customer attitude by Jean, Rozaini, Radzol, Hwa and Wong (2019) that focus on social media and influencers as advertising sources,

their influence on consumer purchase decisions, gym membership or healthy eating. The reason why this study was selected and needs to be known is because it aims to explore the role and impact Instagram influencers play in creating an identity for one but also understanding through the lens of millennials to help brands and social media influencers get a better perspective of how millennial's view their influence and how it affects them.

This study is relevant to communication scholars and studies because it is set out to investigate the changes in media and communication in terms of the use of influencers and how influencers have the power to control their target audiences. However, this study is more specific to narrow down the broad ideas and focuses on how Instagram influencers have a role in their millennial audience's identity building. Identity is a form of communication about oneself to another as a way of understanding the world around them. This study is relevant to society in general because identity construction involves the society and how they influence or identify with one another, it contributes to the society's circle of knowledge and it may generate results that can be used for practical application.

1.3. Problem Statement

There are a large number of international studies (Khamis, Ang and Welling, 2017) that explore social media influencers and how they negotiate their personal brand identity on social media to attract and respond to their target audiences. There are also studies that have been conducted that are centred on online identity construction on anonymous environments such as Bulletin board where individuals have the freedom of identity to be whoever or whatever they desire to be (Zhao, Grasmuck and Martin, 2008). An investigation was launched in United States that analysed identity formation on known environments, for instance; *Facebook* and findings proposed that *Facebook* users claimed their identities indirectly as a "show" rather than directly as a "tell" (Zhao, Grasmuck and Martin, 2008).

However, what is known from most studies is how social media influencers influence individuals brand perceptions, purchase or behaviour intentions and how they are used as a branding strategy (Jin, Muqaddam and Ryu, 2019) and exploring how identity construction is used as feature of professional communication (PAD Research Group, 2016). The gap is that there is less research that investigates how millennials perceive and assess the role or impact Instagram influencers have on their identity formation within a South African context. Therefore, this study provides more theoretical insight and emphasis on effectively understanding the role Instagram influencers have on how millennials identify themselves and how other people perceive and identify them so as to provide insight for South African

academics but most importantly provide insight for South African companies and influencers to be more mindful of the information they put out and how they portray that information for the betterment of their marketing strategies.

1.4. Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to explore millennial's perceptions of the role Instagram influencers play in identity construction. This study is aimed at understanding millennials perceptions in terms of and explaining whether Instagram influencers have a hand in who and what a person is and how a person sees themselves individually and socially since technology and media have rapidly changed ways of communication and constantly introducing new tools to use to connect and bring people closer.

1.5. Research Question

The main question is: Do Instagram influencers play a role in identity construction? The sub questions are: How do Instagram influencers play a role in identity construction? What is the role of Instagram influencers in millennials identity construction?

1.6. Objectives/Hypotheses/Sub-questions

The objectives are: To explore whether Instagram influencers play a role in identity construction? To explore how Instagram influencers, play a role in identity construction? And to determine whether or not this influence has a positive or negative effect on how millennials see themselves.

The sub questions are: How do Instagram influencers play a role in identity construction? What is the role of Instagram influencers in millennials identity construction?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Theoretical foundation and how it links to the research problem

The theoretical foundation is literature that backups the research problem and are interlinked because they offer thesis's that will guide thinking and attempt to offer knowledge that will help one understand the research and the problem appropriately and find solutions to counteract the issue and fill in the missing gaps. The problem being investigated is on the

impact that Instagram influencers have on identity construction, trying to understand how millennials perceive the influence and what they think about it. This information will broaden the communications body of knowledge and allow one to see through different and multiple perspectives.

2.1.1 Communication Theory of Identity- Hecht and Choi (2012) breaks down the theory and points out that a person's identity influences the formation of their beliefs, feelings, and attitudes which assumes that people socially construct themselves because they define who they are according to mutually constructed understandings of the world around them, their experiences and what they are taught. This thus indicates that self-concepts, social relationships, communities, and communication are a combination of how an individual's identity is created. According to Gudykunst (2005:264) identity can be constructed, understood, and studied using the following layers:

Personal layer: This means that this layer constitutes ideas about self-confidence, self-image, and self-concepts that create a personal identity for one enabling them to define who they are. For example, Instagram influencers may use this layer to influence how millennials view themselves in terms of worth, ability, and appearance.

Enacted layer: This layer is how individuals communicate and express themselves to others through certain actions as a way of validating a specific identity. For example, Instagram influencers use this layer when they use persuasive communication to persuade their audiences to do or purchase something which in return assists the audiences to acquire an identity, they have been longing for to socially belong and be validated by a group.

Relational layer: "Identities are shaped by social roles, emerge in relation with other people and influenced by others' views" (Gudykunst, 2005:264). For example, the relationship between millennials and their Instagram influencers is an online social relationship that allows influencers to take up that social role in online communities where they share opinions, give advice, persuade you to purchase something or inspire you resulting to millennials seeing themselves through the perspectives of the social world.

Communal layer: "Identities emerge out of groups and networks where people share history or characteristics" (Gudykunst, 2005:264). For example, the reason an influencer connects with their audiences is through shared understanding and qualities like both ends

want to seek social validation, they want to clarify their identities and they tend to share collective worldviews on certain current issues in the world.

Certain inconsistencies were picked up in the layers called “identity gaps” that result to communication outcomes, such as personal and relational layers where a gap in an individual’s self-image and how others perceive him/her results from misunderstanding, ineffective communication or dissatisfaction. Personal and enacted identity indicates a gap in the way one views themselves emphasizing that it differs from the way they expressed themselves and that is due to being intimidated, shy, or dishonest. This raises a red flag between the layers because it results to a negative communication outcome since now the layers are opposing one another when they should be aligning. Identity gaps emerge because of people’s inconsistencies in communicating their identities (Jung and Hecht, 2004). These inconsistencies result to cognitive dissonance because of how individuals perceive engaging in a behaviour that contradicts their treasured identity by knowing that someone is watching somewhere increases the importance of engaging and the need validate why you are engaging (Matig, 2018).

While some may argue that this theory is outdated, it is still relevant and can be used in the current world because it moves away from the idea that identity is a personal construct thus with the global changes that are occurring now and how communication and media are evolving. These developments permit moving towards the idea that identity is socially constructed since individuals have become social beings, are adapting to western ideas, and are given various social platforms to communicate through and from. The statement validates that this theory is relevant to the study because it will assist in showing the role Instagram influencers play in identity construction by further understanding factors that contribute to identity formation, emphasizing that identity is considered, displayed and exchanged as communication stipulating that the two concepts are intertwined (Littlejohn and Foss, 2009). In summary, communication is a part of identity rather than a process that produces identity.

2.1.2 Social Learning Theory- As stated by David (2019) the social learning theory has three general principles which are: observation, imitation, and modeling. These principles co-exist with a modeling process such as attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation. Attention is observation, it is the amount of attention paid to the attractiveness, characteristic, currency, or complexity of the content produced by Instagram influencers.

Retention is memory thus recalling what one has paid attention to on the social platform. Reproduction is modeling and is all about reproducing the behaviour or image observed on the platform by the audience. Motivation is having a sound reason to mimic what has been observed. However, this theory has limitations as mentioned by social learning theorists “that people can learn through observation alone, but their learning may not necessarily be shown in their performance thus learning may or may not result in a behavior change” (Razieh, 2012). The social learning theory was criticized for the positive and negative reinforcement of reward and punishment that it did not offer a full explanation for all behaviours neglecting cognitive motives and behaviours (Learning theories, 2014).

This theory is relevant to the study because it helped to explain how Instagram influencers influence millennials' viewpoints through observational learning which bridges the gap between cognitive, behavioural, and environmental influences. Millennials thus observe, imitate, and model the messages or behaviours their influencers communicate on Instagram (de Wet, 2017). With the daily usage of Instagram, millennials frequently observe what their influencers are doing. For instance, an upcoming Kenyan Instagram influencer, Elsa Mpho Majimbo recently posted a video about body-shaming comments she has been receiving during the global COVID 19 lockdown and she replied and said: "she is aware and she is not eating KFC to gain abs but she is simply just making herself happy" (Majimbo, 2020).

A vast number of her audiences, mainly millennials perceived her behaviour as a positive response of self-confidence thus they began imitating that behaviour which was seen through multiple TikTok videos (TikTok is a recently established social media platform known for singing, dancing, lip-syncing short music or funny videos, Webwise, 2019) that included individuals with various body types, stuffing their faces with food and lip-syncing her phrases. This example proves that her audiences were influenced through a “basic model of observational learning called a live model, which involves an actual individual demonstrating or acting out behaviour” (Razieh, 2012) thus indicating a change in the millennial's identity which is self-image.

2.1.3 Review of literature

It is imperative to understand previous literature to guide one's comprehension of the study to follow. The purpose of the review is to provide foundation of knowledge on the topic, to

identify gaps in research, to identify need for additional research and why further research is needed (Upstate library, 2020).

2.1.4 Identity

Identities are the traits and characteristics, social relations, roles and social group membership that define who one is (Leary and Tangney, 2012). However, a simpler definition of identity is “the characteristics that make a person or thing who or what they are and make them different from others” (Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, 2020).

This study focuses on and defines three identities amongst others that exist and explain how each is constructed in the cyberspace:

Personal identity is assigned with philosophical questions that emerge about oneself. For instance, who am I? thus referring to possessions one feels an attachment too which makes them who they are. The way one defines him/herself as a person differs vastly from others and from one time to another (Olson and Zelta, 2019). Social identity is a person's sense of whom they are to other people depending on what they have in common providing them with different social roles to play thus resulting in learning how to socialize and gaining self-esteem that prompts behaviour and influences how other people treat you (Vinney, 2019). Professional identity is how one recognizes themselves concerning and as a member of that specific reputable profession that is held with independence and that recognition is built on a person's experiences, values, qualities, beliefs, and motives (Tsakissiris, 2015).

2.1.5 Identity construction on social media platforms

Campbell (2018) highlights the fact that discourse communication is the mastermind behind identity construction and is used to account for the communicative procedures in construction. Therefore, according to Valencia (2017), personal identity on social media is a modern presentation of who you are online that gradually evolves with features that one chooses to change although other features cannot be changed. An individual's online persona is and can be vastly different from real offline persona thus affecting one's identity and due to the contrast, it raises a question of who is the real you. She, therefore, highlighted a consciousness continuity theory that suggests that personal identity continues to exist over time because of the reputation and memories of oneself created online that are all connected. However, De Gouveia (2011) proposes a different view that personal identity construction is when a person maintains, protects, and enhances their identity through

purchasing brand products promoted for self- expression, showcase social or professional belonging and communicate self-image through selfies taken and posted on social platforms.

Elin and Thumin (2012:91 cited in Ganda 2014:11) agree with Valencia (2017) that there are choices in what features to represent and how to represent them as a way of enhancing presentation and self-performance. Hence why an individual's increased online interaction time leads to the formation of social identity through the popularity received from shared content thus creating a reputation for one which is included into his/hers offline identity to assist in building a new interpretation of self, based on the recognition received from others on how one has represented themselves online (Ganda, 2014) thus answering the question raised about who is the real you? The 'real you' is determined when building a new interpretation of self.

Kasperuniene (2019) mentions and agrees with Valencia (2017) and Enil & Thumin, (2012) that individuals choose what and how to present themselves to their audiences by providing information on their profiles such as their achievements, skills, and abilities creating an impression that increases trustworthiness, professional power and credibility that is seen by present or future employers and colleagues on professional sites such as LinkedIn that prompts employers to form perceptions about you as a job applicant. Another appropriate example is how individuals present themselves through their dress codes says a lot about who and what they are especially visible during this COVID 19 pandemic and the usage of the Zoom site for meetings. People wake up, dress, and look professional to just sit in their living rooms and converse through their computers. *Instagram* also permits an individual to enact a professional identity on their profile by including your occupation on your profile. For instance, an influencer writes that he/she is an influencer but also a medical representative or brand image, and that alone sparks an impression on the viewer or audience's mindset influencing how one interacts with you.

The relevance in defining these identities forms a foundation for human understanding indicating that constructing an identity is a form of communication with oneself and the world around you and whichever identity enacted it communicates with each other supported by Gudykunst's (2005) view that identities are constructed using the four layers from the communication theory of identity. Identities and Identity formation also evolves from symbolic interactionism (individual and social interactions, social structures, symbols, language, and messages) and is interdependent, fluid, varied, and interpretive also influenced by the interchange of communication especially on social media platforms.

2.1.6 Social media platforms

Social media is a platform where individuals can create an identity and reputation by publishing self-attributes, experiences, values, or motives for impression and recognition which is publicly monitored (Kasperuniene, 2019). However, Guida and Wilson (2019) argue that social media is a channel used by brands for customers to connect with them for various reasons and intentions.

Instagram is a photo and video sharing application where people can upload their content and share it with a group of close friends or a wider number of followers who can view, like and comment on what is uploaded and shared, Instagram accounts can be made public or private for those who have privacy concerns (Instagram, 2020). *Instagram* is a platform used for personal, leisure, and business purposes. For instance, to engage with other people, inspire, develop photo galleries, find a significant partner, share life experiences and opinions, highlight and converse about issues faced, promote brands through influencers, and lastly, start-up online pages to provide products and services.

Despite the advantages and just like any other social platform, *Instagram* has its downfalls. For example, cyberbullying, succumb to social pressure, social hacking. According to Marisa (2019) Instagram has the biggest media influence with users between ages 18-34 years old that make up sixty four percent of intense engagement with content of a person you may not know personally. The interaction online allows people to assess their stories and those stories are a way of attempting to understand oneself.

2.1.7 The use of Instagram influencers

According to Glucksman (2017), Instagram influencers are fervid individuals who share their experiences and views by shaping their audience's attitudes or behaviours, driving engagement, and sparking action towards certain goals. They succeed in doing this because they relate to their audiences on a personal level, building trust and loyalty with them. Instagram influencers have become the ultimate trusted source of information for audiences to turn to for recommendations, affirmation, entertainment, or calming down any uncertainties through meaningful and memorable messages provided, and that is why they are regarded as the most influential in decision making (Mediakix, 2019).

Millennials and Instagram influencers foster reciprocal relationships because they relate to each other, in hope that they share the same values, personalities, or goals and are understood more by them rather than real offline friends or family. Instagram influencers have a persuasive power and that is how they are so popular in changing how an individual

sees or builds themselves supported by a recent study by Campbell (2018) that mentions that language and identity interlink with one another hence why people can negotiate and construct their identities whenever they engage and communicate in a new language indicating that language expresses power relationships thus controlling other's decisions or behaviours. For instance, people tend to be predictable thus susceptible to any influence which leads to a negative impact on an individual's identity because one starts living a life that is not theirs meaning they are living life on other people's terms.

Social media unavoidably affects people's mindsets although it depends on the amount of content consumption and exposure making it easier for Instagram influencers to exercise power through language and message meaning. As stated by Yang (2016) Influencers are active users amongst the other two categories (interactive and passive) of social networking sites activities relating to vigorously creating content online that caters for everyone instead of specific individuals. For this reason, with reference to Marisa (2019) influencers are susceptible to regularly show in a user's newsfeed because of how vigorously and regularly they produce content and post.

The current literature links to the research problem because it will help put the research into perspective and allows the ability to conclude whether the problem was resolved or not. Therefore, gaining knowledge from previous literature is essential to provide one with a foundation of knowledge to draw from to make sound deductions about the research.

2.2. Conceptualisation

These concepts will be defined in detail through explanations and discussions in order to provide sound understandings and overviews of the concepts:

	CONNOTATION	DENOTATION
Identity construction	For the purpose of this study, it is how individuals' build who they are in response to how other people perceive them that makes them unique and different from others.	"It involves life experiences, relationships, and connections and having a reasonable mental or emotional stamp on a human" (Dowling, 2011:1).

	CONNOTATION	DENOTATION
Instagram/social media influencer	For the purpose of this study, the influencers tend to encourage and persuade people to be something/someone or purchase certain products/services or even change their appearances for various reasons.	Influence their followers on their social media platform due to their reputation, expertise on certain topics, credibility, and authenticity through engagement. Usually used by brands as a marketing strategy to help promote products/services through content posted (Influencer marketing, 2020).

	CONNOTATION	DENOTATION
Millennials	For the purpose of this study, millennials are a generation that grew up in an advanced technological environment that uses electronics, the internet and apps and cannot imagine the world without them as means of changing communication and improving identity.	“Millennial is an adjective derived from the millennium and means a period of a thousand years especially when calculated from the traditional state of the birth of Christ. Millennial also means people that have reached young adulthood in the early 21 st century that are born between 1980 and 2000.” (Oxford dictionary, 2010).

	CONNOTATION	DENOTATION
Instagram	For the purpose of this study, <i>Instagram</i> connects people and allows freedom of speech and expression but can also promote peer pressure. Seen as a platform for elite people where they can boast about their possessions.	It is a social networking site and photo-sharing app that allows people to share content to showcase what they like, love, find interesting, or vent about issues faced (Ganda, 2014). Holak and McLaughlin (2017) add on to say that users can add captions, hashtags, and location geotags to link their posts and enable them to be searchable by other users.

3. **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHDOLOGY**

3.1. Outline of worldview/paradigm/tradition

This research is a qualitative study and makes use of an interpretive paradigm because it values how people construct their social realities through understanding their viewpoints, feelings, and experiences thus clarifying and providing insight on how people make sense of their social world through interpretation of meanings or situations they encounter (Maree, 2020). Interpretivism is the overall framework of the study, it guides the theoretical approach taken and the data collection methods used such as interviews.

According to iNtgrty (2016) interpretivism is underpinned by an assumption that it leans towards qualitative research meaning because of various certain experiences that support this study, findings gathered cannot be generalized which could be one of the limitations of this study. However, the findings suggest that human sense and meaning making are complex and situational. Interpretivism merges people's interests and differences in the study.

The ontology approach of this paradigm is that reality is socially constructed through the interaction of people in their social environments by way of observing information obtained from that interaction and interpreting how people make sense of the world around them to make inferences. The epistemological approach is about knowledge and meaning by understanding the experiences and realities of individuals emphasizing the exclusion of objective knowledge existing in this paradigm and study. The axiology approach is that this study needs to generate knowledge and information that is subjectively and ethically valid, honest, reliable, and fair.

Interpretivism will help gain clarity and insight on how millennials perceive the role influencers have on their identity formation for an effective understanding of how they make sense of that influence. It will aid in interpreting the meanings millennials assign to messages sent out by influencers and assist in understanding how millennials negotiate their identities to see whether what people consume on Instagram influences their behaviours. It will assist in the development of new knowledge.

3.2. Research approach and design

This qualitative research design was chosen and is fit for the study because it investigates human behaviours and their frame of references. It is interested in finding characteristics of a phenomenon that can be explained using themes by producing rich and insightful information that indicates motives and patterns within a phenomenon (Shuttleworth and Wilson, 2008). This is a qualitative research study because it used a subjective perspective and semi structured interviews which was a qualitative data collection method. A qualitative research design is best suited for this study because it gathered data about millennials perceptions, experiences or interpretations in order to understand and explain how they interpret/d Instagram influencers and their social world (Astalin, 2013). A qualitative research approach is appropriate for this study because it yielded insightful information that may indicate that an individual's creation of their social reality is constantly evolving so how a millennial constructs themselves is an ever-changing cycle dependent on the influence received from the media platform and influencers. Data collected from this qualitative study is organized in themes to identify patterns in those themes to provide usable insight on the topic (UKEssays, 2018).

A cross sectional study design was used in this study because the research was conducted at a single point in time over a period of four days whereby data was collected through a 10-20 minutes semi structured interviews with the six participants which was time and cost efficient to describe the participants of interest (Allen, 2017). A cross sectional study was used to determine if Instagram influencers correlate with identity construction through description and observation to make inferences or gather prior data (Cherry, 2019). This design is inexpensive to conduct and is used to describe the characteristics of the topic and check for similarity and variation between variables that might link with the role Instagram influencers play on identity formation (Cherry, 2019).

This study is exploratory because it is intended to examine the topic at hand and seek to comprehend more about it to discover the truth, idea or problem behind it (GradesFixer, 2019). This type of research explores the research topic: The role Instagram Influencer's play in identity construction: the perceptions of millennials in Sandton with different levels of depth to indicate that the study is flexible and adaptable to change when new information arises (Dudovskiy, 2019). The aim for exploratory research was to help gain better understanding on the phenomenon by answering research questions such as the who, how and why. For instance, how do Instagram influencers play a role in identity construction? What is the role of Instagram influencers in millennials identity construction? Using an exploratory research helped obtain innovative ways to examine reality through a great deal of information gathered in a transparent way and these innovative ways may not accurately apply to the entire target population due to a small sample size (Reiter, 2017).

Deductive reasoning was used in this study because it helped build a thesis that tests whether existing theories support or reject conclusions about the role Instagram influencers play in identity construction by shifting focus from a general observation to a more specific generalisation (Maree, 2020). Deductive reasoning permits this study to access if there is a connection between Instagram influencers and identity construction. The researcher read prior research on social media and identity construction and tested the thesis by analysing data on the use of social media influencers in order to come to conclusions that will support the phenomena.

3.3. Population

3.3.1. Population

3.3.1.1 Unit of analysis

According to Dolma (2010) units of analysis are entities that are being questioned in the research study, the who or what. The researcher investigates the perceptions, attitudes or opinions of millennials (Kumar, 2018:72). There are four units of analysis: individuals, organisations, groups and social artefacts (Kumar,2018:72).

This study's unit of analysis are individuals because it is of paramount importance to understand their experiences, opinions or perceptions that reveal significant information related to what or who they think influencers are, how they perceive their role in identity construction or how their own identities are constructed. The individuals are of the millennial generation and are both male and female participants.

3.3.1.2 Target and accessible population

A target population is an overall category of individuals with certain aspects that the researcher desires to examine and where the data was collected from to either generalise or make conclusions thus aiding in establishing a sample size from the scope provided (Lavrakas, 2008). An accessible population is a sub population that a researcher has access to and can apply conclusions to, fundamentally known to represent the sampling frame (Asiamah, Mensah and Oteng-Abayie, 2017).

The target population for this study were Instagram users. The accessible population were 24-39-year olds who live or work in Sandton, Gauteng and have access to Instagram.

3.3.1.3 Population parameters (characteristics)

Population parameters are certain characteristics that describe the entire population and are necessary for an individual to be eligible to participate in the study (Salkind, 2010).

The population parameters for this study were:

- males or females.
- 24-39 years of age.
- Live or work in Sandton, Gauteng.
- Are daily users of Instagram.

3.4 Sampling

3.4.1 Probability or non-probability sampling

Non-probability sampling depicts sampling techniques that assist in choosing units from a population that is studied, choosing those individuals is not done at random but rather influenced by subjective judgement (Maree, 2020). Non-probability sampling is used for qualitative and exploratory studies whereby the researcher must find out whether a problem even exists or requires an in-depth analysis (Fleetwood, 2020). Non-probability allowed the flexibility of fast responses as an indication of high levels of rationale to participate in the study which is cost efficient and is also concerned with the details of the sample examined (Laerd dissertation, 2012). The disadvantages of non-probability sampling are that it restricts generalization, financial resources are limited, does not offer equal chance for participation and the given time frame constraints the study (Maree, 2020). However, the non-probability sampling may possibly produce a biased sample because of the researcher's subjective involvement in selecting the participants or interpretation of data (Fleetwood, 2020).

3.4.2 Sampling method

The best suited sampling for this study was purposive sampling. It provided focus by clearly stipulating certain characteristics of the population to be sampled with a motive in mind (Maree, 2020). However, according to Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan and Hoagwood (2015) purposive sampling is used to identify and select cases that have a great deal of information regarding the study with intent to attain in depth understanding of the study. This sampling method was used because it allowed researchers to choose those they see, or think is fit to participate in the study which are Instagram users between the ages of 24-39 year old, therefore rejecting those that do not qualify who are either under or over the stipulated age and are not regular Instagram users (Fleetwood, 2020). Researchers ability to select their own participants suggested the usage of homogenous purposive sampling technique which refers to choosing participants that shared similar traits like age or gender (Foley, 2018).

3.4.3 Sample size

Sample size refers to a group of units that are selected from the target population and are a representative of the entire population of the study (Omniconvert, 2020). Vasileiou, Barnett,

Thorpe and Young (2018) posit that samples in qualitative and exploratory research are likely to be small in nature in order to support the notion of an in-depth analysis of information collected from the study. However, according to Maree (2020:221) a small sample size is influenced by participants that have similar characteristics which is significant for the study because they may adequately represent the population.

The sample size for this study was collected from 6 male and female millennial participants because time constraints and financial limitations prompted the researcher to limit the study (Maree, 2020). The types of questions asked during the interview played an important role in distinguishing the sample size therefore, If the sample constitutes of needed and usable information from each participant than there is no reason for a larger sample size due to the richness of data already generated (Omniconvert, 2020).

3.5 Data collection

3.5.1 Data collection method

Semi structured interviews are flexible because they permit probing and adjusting of questions thus allowing discussion and prompting two-way communication (Maree, 2020). According to Dejonckheere and Vaughn (2019) semi structured interviews allow the researcher to validate findings through member checking. Advantages of semi structured interviews are that information obtained is not just answers but rather reasons for answers, offers the opportunity of learning instead of just verifying what is already known. The disadvantages of using semi structured interviews was that if the researcher does not have interviewing skills, it may hinder one from obtaining sound information. Skills to analyse the data may be a problem which leads to further interpretation than initially intended (Keller and Conradin, 2019).

Data was collected using a semi structured interview method because it constitutes of open ended questions that allowed the interviewees freedom of expression that lead to diversion from the topic but also enabled the researcher to capture the very essence of the participants experiences, beliefs or opinions so as to gather in-depth information related to the phenomena of interest (Cohen and Crabtree, 2006). This data collection method is useful for the study because it produced reliable and comparable results that aided in effectively understanding the phenomena and answering the research questions and objectives (Cohen and Crabtree, 2006). However, there were external factors that influenced data collection, for an example: the COVID 19 pandemic. Therefore, due to the lockdown

restrictions and social distancing measures face to face interviews were neglected and the researcher had to opt for online semi structured interviews and according to Maree (2020:96) data collection in the digital media offers ease and speed of data collection and analysis but produces over simplified data and depersonalised research. Digital data was able to answer the research questions and objectives and the advantage was the easy access to collecting data, but it needed access to internet connection or to have enough data bundles. The limitations of digital data were the inability to observe behaviour as one would in face to face interviews and participants partook in the interview from different environments which could potentially lend the interview an informal tone to it.

3.5.2 Data collection application

This research made use of online semi structured interviews on a social media app called Facebook Messenger Room. This online platform was used because it is data efficient and easily accessible since most individuals have and use Facebook for connection and communication. The reason why the Facebook Messenger Room was chosen and used is because it is one of the few inexpensive platforms that allowed video chat on the laptop which afforded the researcher the ability to video record the interview using their smartphone. Another reason is that the link used to join into the Messenger Room can be used and shared to participants that do not have a Messenger or Facebook account thus made it an easily accessible platform to use. Well known concerns about online interviews are that they cannot guarantee full confidentiality because of privacy and security reasons that may be experienced. However, Messenger Room ensures this is how they protect your privacy: Room provides links that are unique and can be regenerated at any time, allows the prevention of unwanted participants by being able to remove and block them at any time and also are able to lock the room if no new participants are needed (Egan, 2020).

Data collection process:

- Ethical clearance that gives permission to collect data was provided by IIE Varsity College ethics committee.
- The researcher contacted the participants through social media such as WhatsApp as it was quite challenging to go into the field and approach participants due to Covid 19 restrictions.

- The researcher asked for permission to conduct the interviews with 6 participants and then consent letters were sent to each of them as a pdf file via WhatsApp that when signed it confirmed their participation in the study.
- A specific date and time to conduct the interviews was confirmed by the participants and researcher.
- Interviews were conducted from Thursday the 20th August 2020 to Sunday 23rd August 2020.
- Data collection took place over a period of 4 days.
- The interviews were conducted through Messenger Room whereby a link was created and sent to the participants that allowed them to join the room and wait to be interviewed.
- The interview guide consisted of 11 questions that participants answered freely and truthfully.
- The researcher firstly introduced herself to the participants then gave them a brief overview of the topic discussed, reminded them of their rights as participants and then continued with the interview by asking open ended and probing questions.
- The interviews were video recorded using a smartphone for later transcription.
- To protect the participants anonymity and confidentiality, the participants had a choice to either turn their video's on or off and leave the audio on for dialogue.
- Once the interviews were complete, the participants were appreciated and thanked for their participation.
- The interviews ranged in length- the shortest was 10 minutes 30 seconds and the longest was 17 minutes 40 seconds.
- All information collected was backed up on icloud drive and onedrive.
- The files are password protected.
- The data was transcribed and interpreted accurately to help come to suitable conclusions about the topic.

3.6 Data analysis

3.6.1 Data analysis method

Thematic data analysis (TA) was used because it analysed data to identify common patterns or ideas of meaning by analysing peoples experiences or knowledge which resulted to rich detailed interpretations of data indicating how flexible the analysis was thus highlighting the appropriateness of understanding the data and making the results of that data understandable to the public (Caulfield, 2019). Thematic analysis is usually used in qualitative and exploratory studies and applies a deductive approach to analysing data collected from semi structured interviews conducted according to the studies objectives and questions. Deductive reasoning was used in this study because it helped build a thesis that tested whether existing theories support or reject conclusions about the role Instagram influencers play in identity construction by shifting focus from a general observation to a more specific generalisation (Maree, 2020). Deductive reasoning permitted this study to assess if there is a connection between Instagram influencers and identity construction. The researcher read prior research on social media and identity construction and tested the thesis by analysing data on the use of social media influencers in order to come to conclusions that supported the phenomena.

Thematic analysis was used in this study because it captured the very essence of the difficulties of meaning within rich textual data collected from the millennial's perceptions, beliefs or experiences thus required an additional researcher involvement and subject interpretation. However, the researcher must be careful of bias and be neutral throughout. The researcher critically interpreted and made sense of the depth of influence by Instagram influencers (Guest, MacQueen and Namey, 2012). The thematic analysis is relevant because it allowed the researcher to analyse, focus and extract themes from words, statements or phrases that disclosed the participants most frequent thoughts, feelings and opinions. An advantage of thematic analysis is that it is flexible because it is transparent and usable with any theory because it is not restricted to a certain theoretical or epistemological view (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). A well-constructed thematic analysis should provide information that is easy to act on (Medelyan, 2019).

Medelyan (2019) explains coding as “the process of labelling and organising qualitative data to identify different themes, concepts and the relationships between them”. The data collected was coded using priori coding which means assigning predetermined codes to

new data thus connecting them together to draw out meaning (Maree, 2020). One limitation of priori coding is that it restricts the data analysis to prefigured codes rather than open codes to reflect the views of participants from a traditional qualitative way. Priori coding encourages researchers to be open to emerging additional codes that are seen from data analysis (Elliott, 2018). Coding thematic data made it effortless to interpret millennial's perceptions on the role Instagram influencers play in identity construction thus assigning codes to themes, words and phrases from each interview captured the meanings behind the millennial's perceptions as means for better analysis and interpretation to come to sound conclusions from the findings (Medelyan, 2019).

3.6.2 Data analysis application

The process used to analyse the study was the thematic data analysis 6 steps (Braun and Clarke, 2006):

- Familiarization: The researcher familiarized themselves with the data by reading the interview data collected from the participants. The researcher thoroughly went through the data and personally transcribed the video recordings and took notes of information related to the topic in order to create sound codes before conducting a genuine analysis
- Coding: The researcher defined codes necessary to organise the large sum of information into small meaning units and highlighted textual data on pen and paper in various colours to indicate varied codes that described the information. 6 participants were interviewed but due to word count, the researcher saw fit to show only 2 responses in the example below:

Interviewer: "In general, why do you think people follow Instagram influencer?"

Interviewee 1: "People want to be part of a community and feel like they belong. And in a community, there are leaders and followers. People want to identify with somebody they feel connected to or who do things they are interested in. People want to live and see themselves through a certain influencer they follow. People follow influencers to connect with friends and gain themselves followers in return".

Interviewee 2: "Some people look up to influencers, to seek inspiration/s. Others seek motivation on how to make social media influencing a career. Lastly, others learn and find out information online through influencers".

Priori codes found when analysing words, phrases and sentences: Leaders and followers, sense of belonging, connection, similar character traits, inspiration, create a career, information, motivation and education.

- Generate themes: The researcher grouped the codes together to form themes and codes irrelevant to the study were removed. Themes assisted in making data manageable while providing immense insight relevant to the study. In order to find and generate themes, the researcher used an observational technique such as 'repetitions-they are easy to recognize in text' (Ryan and Bernard, 2003). For instance, according to the interview with participant 3. There were repetitions in responses during the interview that kept on surfacing which indicated how the participant perceived an Instagram influencer. The interviewer asked a series of questions that received similar responses and a repetition of a word.

Interviewer: "How would you define an influencer?"

Interviewee: "A person who influences people to buy into a certain lifestyle they should aspire for".

Interviewer: "Why do/don't you follow influencers?"

Interviewee: "I don't follow influencers because I'm not easily influenced by other people's lifestyles because people live a lie, they live a life totally different from what you see on Instagram".

Interviewer: "How do you think Instagram influencers play a role in identity construction"?

Interviewee: Explained by providing an example- "Rappers/singers sell lyrics but when analysing their music videos, they are basically selling people their lifestyles by showing off fancy big houses, expensive cars and a luxurious life

Lifestyle is a theme generated from the participants interview. Another theme generated is 'leaders and followers' which is also a code.

- Review themes: The researcher rechecked the themes for accuracy, validity and reliability by rereading through all transcribed interview data and saw if the themes produced insightful data on how millennial's perceive the role Instagram influencers play in identity construction and according to the above mentioned theme, this particular millennial perceived Instagram influencers as trying to sell them a certain lifestyle to live. Persuading them to live a life that may not even be meant for you.
- Define themes: The researcher thoroughly explained what the themes exactly mean and how they aided in understanding the data set successfully. For instance, theme 1- lifestyle means a person's way of life/living. Therefore, a lifestyle in the context of

the study is an interesting theme because it indicates that Instagram influencers play a role in how one should behave, believe in, the moral or social standards to adhere to. Theme 2- leaders and followers. This theme is interesting because it showcases that influencers are leaders that are willing to try new things out for the first time without hype and audiences are mere followers because they come on board and join the bandwagon and this is when one notices a trend and see the impact of an influencer thus some audiences are easily influenced.

- Write up: The researcher reported back on the collection and analysis of data and the results of that allowed the researcher to make sound conclusions on how the analysis assisted in answering the study of interest. For instance, a sound conclusion from the analysis is that, Instagram influencers have a 50/50 chance on playing a role in identity construction. However, it all goes down and depends on a person's strength of character.

4. FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

According to Maree (2020) "data analysis consisted of breaking the data into smaller units like themes that were coded, however the challenge now is to put the findings into a logical and well-structured manner that will disclose the very essence of phenomenon being studied". These are the study's research findings that resulted from the data collected from the six semi structured interviews which are discussed in relation to the previous literature and/or theoretical approaches while answering the research questions and addressing the research objectives. The findings and interpretations of findings are represented using percentages (%) which means that the six participants equal to 100% thus 100% divided by six indicates that the participants are represented by 17% each (which ranges between 15-17%).

Question 1: How much time per day, on average, do you spend on Instagram?

50% of the respondents said that they spend three to four hours per day on Instagram. The remaining 50% had varied amounts of hours per day ranging from five to six hours, twelve hours and lastly one respondent was not sure of the precise time spent on Instagram. Ganda (2014) states that an individual's increased online interaction time leads to the formation of social identity through the popularity received from shared content thus creating a reputation for one which is included into his/hers offline identity to assist in building a new interpretation

of self, based on the recognition received from others on how one has represented themselves online.

Participants	Hours per day, on average
Participant 1	3-4 hours
Participant 2	12 hours
Participant 3	3-4 hours
Participant 4	Different segments of the day
Participant 5	3-4 hours
Participant 6	5-6 hours

Participant 6 response to question 7 may be linked to this interpretation of the amount of time spent on Instagram, she stated that *“social media plays a vital role in people’s lives since technology continuously develops thus the more one consumes what influencers do on social media, is the more one desires to do the same things or behave the same way because it is perceived as how society is socialized”*. Theory to back up this interpretation is that people socially learn how to behave or to behave in an acceptable way to their society through observation, imitation and modelling which are the three general principles of the social learning theory (Oxford concise dictionary, 2010; David, 2019). The deductions made that millennials observe, imitate and model the messages and behaviours of their influencers depending on the amount of time spent consuming their content is supported by the previous literatures theme 4: the use of Instagram influencers statement that social media unavoidably affects people’s mindsets as it depends on the amount of content consumption and exposure making it easier for Instagram influencers to exercise power through language and message meaning.

Question 2: Are you familiar with the term “social media influencer”?

100% of the participants confidently expressed that they knew and were familiar with the term.

Question 3: How would you define an “influencer”?

All of the respondents definitions of the term were explained quite differently from one another yet when studied together one interpretation deducted from it is that an influencer is a person who promotes brands, products, trends and lifestyles for sales or awareness by influencing purchase decisions or convincing people to do certain things or be different people. Themes that arose from these responses are brands and promote/r. However,

Glucksman (2017) and Marisa (2019) state that an influencer is a fervid individual who vigorously and regularly create content online and share their experiences and views, drive engagement and spark action toward certain goals.

Question 4: Do you follow any Instagram influencers? If so, who?

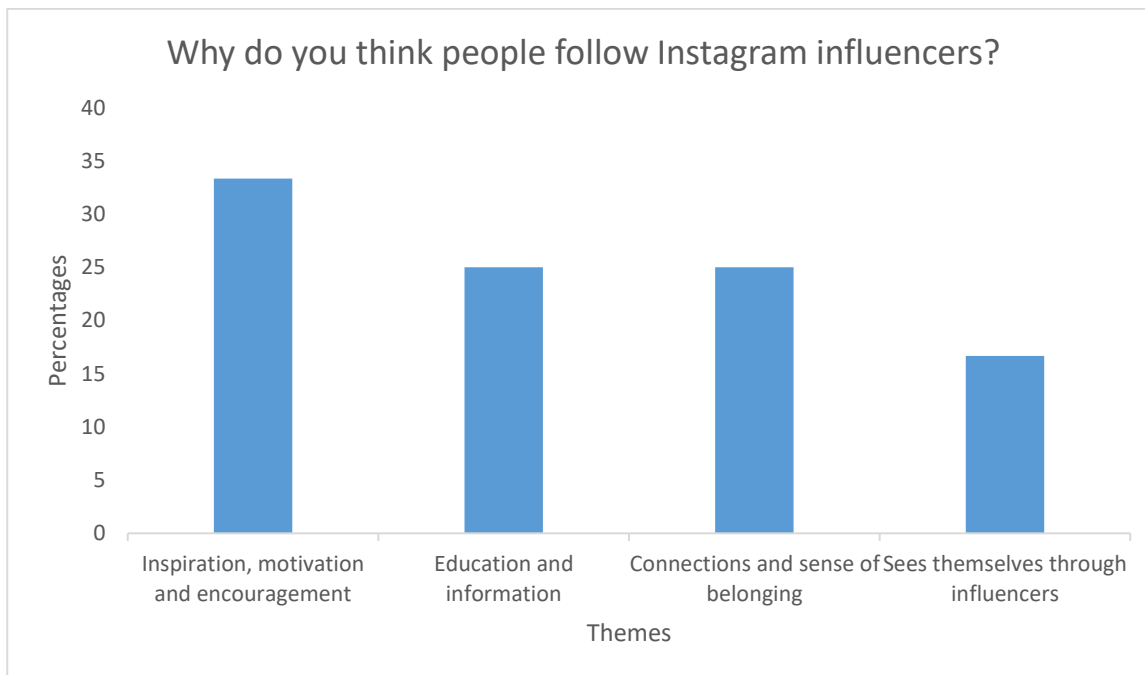
68% of the participants said they do follow Instagram influencers, namely: Mihlali Ndamase, Sarah Langa, Mpumi Ledwaba, Kay “Yarms” Ngonyama and Mashudu “Mashstartup” Modau. 32% of the respondents mentioned that they do not follow any influencers. These A list influencers that are mentioned are active users who regularly create and post content that helps build trust and loyalty with followers through memorable behaviour and messages (Mediakix, 2019).

Question 5: Why do/don't you follow these influencers?

Question 6: In general, why do you think people follow Instagram influencers?

Question 5 and 6 share similar themes hence why their analysis of findings is linked together. Two out of six respondents indicated that they do not follow influencers because they are not easily influenced by others' lifestyles, they have learned that people live totally different lives compared to the content they post and lastly, they are tired of being force fed marketing or a lifestyle. The other two participants' response was that they like the influencer/s personalities and often feel encouraged and motivated to do better. The last two mentioned that they find the content interesting and learn a lot from them and learn more about the functionality of the digital space.

The participants' responses reflected the following themes: that 33,34% of them believe that people follow influencers for inspiration, motivation and encouragement, 25% think it is to gain education and information, 25% is about connections and sense of belonging and the remaining 16,67% stated that people usually see themselves or the lives they desire to live through the influencers they follow. These findings confirm the communication theory of identity's relational layer by Gudykunst, 2005; Hecht and Choi, 2012 that “identities are shaped by social roles that emerge in relation with other people and influenced by others' views”. For example, the relationship between millennials and their Instagram influencers is an online social relationship that allows influencers to take up that social role in online communities where they share opinions, give advice, persuade you to purchase something or inspire you resulting to millennials seeing themselves through the perspectives of the social world. What millennials do, say or experience is influenced by others' views.



Question 7: Identity construction is defined as “the process of shaping the way a person sees themselves individually and in relation to other people through influencing their values, behaviours, knowledge, practices, beliefs and discourses. So, in your opinion, do Instagram influencers play a role in identity construction?

Four of the six interviewees do think that Instagram influencers play a role in identity construction which reinforces the idea from the previous literature that millennials and Instagram influencers foster reciprocal relationships because they relate to each other, in hope that they share the same values, personalities, or goals. The fifth interviewee believes that they do not play a role in identity construction and the final interviewee was unsure thus stating that *“based on the given definition he does believe that Instagram influencers do play a role yet in reality he does not think that people consume influencer content holistically”*. For instance, people do not go out looking for a sense of identity from influencers but rather they find a piece of themselves in the influencer or the influencer is doing something one is interested in. Instagram influencers do play a role in identity construction through the amount of time spent on the social platform meaning that the more you consume the content is the more that content wears off on you and plays a minor or significant role in who you are or how one sees the world around them.

Question 8: How do you think these Instagram influencers play a role in identity construction?

68% of the participants who are the four that said yes to the previous question agreed that Instagram influencers play a role in identity construction by aspiring one to achieve something. Basically, selling followers a dream or a lifestyle by normalising and instilling an idea in people's minds through regularly creating and posting content, boasting and flashing their luxuries, achievements and journeys. The remaining 16% which is the one participant that was unsure stated that *"he personally thinks that people already have a sense of identity and influencers do not go out dictating what to do or who to be that was against who someone initially is or was already doing"*. To support this idea, Hecht and Choi (2012) breaks down the communication theory of identity and mentions that identity influences the formation of their beliefs, feelings and attitudes assuming that people socially construct themselves because they define who they are according to mutually constructed understandings of the world, their experiences and what they are taught. The 'how' of the role Instagram influencers play identity construction is supported by the notion from previous literature that Instagram influencers have a persuasive power and that is how they are so popular in changing how an individual see or builds themselves through language as it communicates power relations that controls other people's decisions and behaviours.

Question 9: Do you think following Instagram influencers has a positive or negative effect on how millennials (young adults) see themselves? Please motivate your answer.

All participants think Instagram influencers have both positive and negative effects on how young adults see themselves. The participants motivations for positive effects range from: motivation and encouragement to do better or do what you desire to do, educational and informative, gain confidence from seeing others successes and make people comfortable with the uncomfortable (i.e. body, skin, fashion or personality). The positive effects reinforce the already mentioned themes of motivation and encouragement, educational and informative. The motivations for negative effects range from: persuades one to succumb to social pressures, provide an unrealistic benchmark for what life is today, they infiltrate your self-esteem and worth, influencers usually are not who they say they are, people base their lives on the recognition and likes received which is usually discouraging, lastly people aspire to others lifestyles without honour and work ethic. The emerging themes from the negative effects are social pressures, unrealistic benchmark and credibility of influencers.

For influencers to influence their followers is because of the "attention paid to the attractiveness, characteristic, currency and complexity of the content produced" (David, 2019). The response of recognition and likes supports Ganda (2014) idea that "an

individual's increased online interaction time leads to the formation of social identity through the popularity received from shared content thus creating a reputation for one which is included into his/hers offline identity to assist in building a new interpretation of self, based on the recognition received from others on how one has represented themselves online".

Question 10: How difficult do you think is it to change a person's opinion, belief or perspective?

Five of the six respondents felt that it is difficult to change a person's opinion or perspective unless you are telling them what they want to hear, give them that "aha" moment or come with sound facts and theories, forgetting the fact that influencers have a persuasive power. One participant believes that it is not about difficulty but about what one is destined to do or be. Social media unavoidable affects people's mindsets although it depends on the amount of content consumption and exposure making it easier for influencers to exercise power through language and message meaning (Campbell, 2018).

Question 11: Do you think a person's characteristic shapes how Instagram influencers influence them?

Four of the participants agree with the question with three differing justifications: the entitlement character people have makes them feel entitled to the lives of their influencers, an influencer with an ambitious trait may influence a follower to be ambitious and motivated to want the finer things in life and lastly, there are leaders who are trend setters with an adventurous mentality or personality and followers who rely on other to tell them what to do or try. One participant completely disagreed with the question and the last participant stated that it depends on your strength of character (i.e. if you are a people's pleaser than you will be easily influenced, if you are not easily influenced than one will not care about what others do or say). Themes that emerged from the findings is the strength of character and leaders and followers.

5. VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY / TRUSTWORTHINESS OF FINDINGS

5.1 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative research is a crucial element that ensures the validity, integrity and transparency of the study in terms of finding confidence in the data analysis and methods, findings and interpretations by following a criteria of four procedures that will help prove the quality of the study (Maree, 2020).

Credibility: This study is a qualitative research design that utilized a semi structured interview data collection method that helped to gather data about millennials perceptions on the role Instagram influencers play in identity construction and assisted in answering the research question of “how do they play that role?” which proves the study to be credible. The data is credible because it is supported by enough comprehension and discussions on the topic provided by multiple authors. The findings are credible and trustworthy because they are sourced from human understanding and experiences. The findings can be used as a point of reference to back up and support theory or research associated with the topic or qualification discipline. The depth of data interpretation made the study credible because the researcher assured the truth and accuracy of findings by making certain that there is no falsifying of information by thoroughly going through the data transcripts and findings. The study sampled participants with a purpose in mind which probes a deeper human understanding and experience for better analysis and explanation. The constant feedback given by supervisors and the meetings that were scheduled in advance with the participants makes the study more credible because of the relationship built beforehand.

Transferability: The results of this qualitative study may be transferred to other suburban areas in different locations. The emphasis on “other suburban areas” or developed and developing countries is because there is a vast difference in the exposure to social media and the usage of social platforms and smart phones in rural areas or townships of different provinces. For instance, results from millennials in Sandton may not apply to millennials in Diepsloot because their hierarchy of needs is quite different from one another. Due to non-probability sampling the results may not be transferable to other millennials because a large amount of the population was not sampled thus the results produced do not represent the entire population precisely. With that being said, if the results produced were to represent the entire population then the results would be transferable to other millennials across the country, province or the world because humans get caught in a trap of being a “sheep” which means they follow whatever they see or told on social networks thus leading them to living lives that are not true or even theirs.

Dependability: The report and study are dependable because it can be used and replicated by students and other researchers through a data analysis and collection method and processes that guarantee’s consistent or similar findings. This study is dependable because it consists of information that showcases how the researcher went about compiling this report and how the results were concluded, and sound interpretations achieved. However, dependability is also acquired when an outside opinion analyses’ the study’s research

process to confirm if it is reliable enough to be considered or used. Outside opinion such as from the researcher's supervisor.

Confirmability: This research has been conducted and it can be confirmed that it is formed by the participants feedback that generated accurate and appropriate findings. The researcher-maintained objectivity throughout the study and report to avoid researcher involvement and bias that usually interferes with the elucidation of information. The researcher adhered to a term called 'audit trial' which provided a systematic data analysis that indicated the motivation behind decisions made and processes used (Maree, 2020).

6. CONCLUSION

6.1. Summary of findings as they relate to the research question, problem and objectives

This research report answered the research problem and filled in the gap by showcasing how millennials perceived the role or impact Instagram influences have on their identity construction through explanations and experiences mentioned during data collection and analysis. These differing perceptions may relate or apply to one or more millennials within the South African context indicating the importance of hearing millennials voice and attempt to understand from the perspectives. The research goal was reached by exploring millennials perceptions in order to understand whether Instagram influencers have a hand in who and what a person is or how one sees themselves and how do they do that. To reinforce the research goal, one participant's perception suggests that people can filter out the influencers content because one's mind is constructive enough to not allow Instagram influencers to have a hand in who and what a person is. Another participant's perception suggests that she follows Instagram influencers because she simply likes the person that influencer is which proposes an idea that once one likes something or someone than one tends to desire to be like that someone or want to obtain that something thus indicating how Instagram influencers infiltrate and have a hand in how one views themselves.

Research objective one: To explore whether Instagram influencers play a role in identity construction through analysing millennial's perceptions. Question 7 findings explain whether Instagram influencers play role in identity construction, 80% of the participants do believe they do through reciprocal relationships in hope that they share similar character traits, goals or values. One does not think they play a role in identity construction. The last participant

was unsure because he does not think people consume content holistically. So, whether Instagram influencers play a role in identity construction is inconclusive because participants share different views. With 80% of the participants beliefs it can be concluded that Instagram influencers do play a role in identity construction thus also answering the main research question.

Research objective two: To explore how Instagram influencers, play a role in identity construction. The social learning theory and communication theory of identities are theoretical approaches used in this study. Question 8 findings suggest that 90% of respondents think Instagram influencers play a role in Identity construction by normalising and instilling ideas in people's minds by frequently creating and posting content, boasting and flashing their journeys, achievements and luxuries. These findings reinforces the communication theory of identities approach that millennials define who they are according to mutually constructed understandings of their realities and world around them that were normalised and instilled (Hecht and Choi, 2012). Ways Instagram influencers play a role in identity construction is through social learning: followers spend hours on their smartphones observing and paying attention to their content. One recalls what was observed by reproducing and modelling that message or behaviour in the content and then offer motivations as to why that message or behaviour was mimicked (David, 2019).

Research objective three: To determine whether or not this influence has a positive or negative effect on how millennial's see themselves. Question 9 findings speak directly to this objective and suggests that the influence is on a 50/50 scale: 100% of the participants agree that this influence has both positive and negative effects on how young adults see themselves. Positive effects: 1. Motivation and encouragement. 2. Educational and informative. 3. Enhance/gain self-confidence. 4. Makes you comfortable with the uncomfortable. Negative effects: 1. Credibility of influencers. 2. Succumb to social pressures. 3. Live up to unrealistic benchmarks of life. 4. Infiltrate self-worth and self-esteem. 5. Base one's life in terms of the recognition and likes received which can be discouraging. The positive effects of the influence may answer the last research question that the role of Instagram influencers in millennials identity construction is to guide followers train of thoughts or how they perceive the world around them through informative posts and educational content, influencers are the quickest source of information be it good or bad. Their role is to make people comfortable with the uncomfortable by making one realise certain things or instances about one's own personality or value and belief system. In some occasions Instagram influencers tend to be role models that offer encouragement, words of

wisdom and motivations that shape who a person is or how they think. One of question 11's responses suggests that the role of Instagram influencers is to be a leader that is authentic and trusted.

6.2. Anticipated contribution of the study (Implications of findings)

The anticipated contribution of this study is not aimed at making predictions but rather on explaining the sort of contribution this study achieved in creating new knowledge. This study predicts to contribute credible information to South African literature that puts the study into perspective by providing a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. The contribution will assist in educating brands, consumers, influencers and academia about the role Instagram influencers play in identity construction and the impact that influence has on millennials realities thus advancing human knowledge and offering a new and different way of viewing this phenomenon due to the changes of media and advancements of communication. It is known that social media causes various communication challenges that directly affects how people see themselves. Therefore, understanding millennials perceptions and opinions is of paramount importance and is beneficial because individuals do not view the same influence similarly to each other and have different ways of interpreting the world around them. This study may not only benefit millennials in suburban areas such as Sandton but may also apply to millennials in different areas. Findings from this study may be beneficial to brands and influencers because it allows them to effectively understand their consumers/audiences and better structure their strategies when dealing with individuals.

6.3. Ethical considerations

Ethics are defined as "norms for conduct that distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour" (David and Resnik, 2015). Therefore, there are several ethical considerations the researcher implemented in their study to ensure that the study is reasonable, unbiased and equal to avoid fabrication, inaccuracy, misrepresentation and not compromise the lives of participants (Maree, 2020). This research will adhere to The National Health Act and IIE Varsity College Research Ethics Committee and be guided by existing laws, protection of human rights and ethical judgement from discussions with supervisors.

Respect: When compiling data, the researcher made sure to be respectful towards the participants by possessing a humble attitude and behaviour and acknowledge their differences (Maree, 2020).

Wellbeing: The researcher promoted the wellbeing of the participants by assuring them an environment where they can be comfortable and free to talk by avoiding any possible harm which ensures safety (Maree, 2020).

Participants rights: According to The National Health Act 61 of 2003 (Department of Health, 2014) “researchers should respect their respondents’ rights to privacy, dignity and equality”. For example, respondents’ have the right to withdraw from the interview if they feel their dignity is threatened. They have the right to a non-deceptive equal interview session.

Informed consent: Participants were provided with an informed consent form that permitted them to be a part of the study and be informed about the study’s nature, purpose, any possible risks that may be faced and what is expected of them prior or during the interview through a detailed explanation written on the consent forms that have to signed. Participants partook in the study willingly and may withdraw from it anytime (Bryman & Bell, 2007 cited in Research methodology, 2019).

Researcher: The researcher refrained from subjective involvement and maintained objectivity to make certain there is no falsifying or misrepresentation of any information collected and is accurately used for appropriate reasons (Bryman & Bell, 2007 cited in Research methodology, 2019).

Confidentiality and anonymity: When working with individuals, the researcher should foster, for instance: a ‘doctor-patient confidentiality’ policy and implement that idea into the study to guarantee strict privacy in all data acquired and also assure the respondents that their identities will be undisclosed and their video or audio recordings will be dismantled for their protection (Smith, 2003).

6.4. Limitations of the study

Limitations are unexpected challenges faced during the study that influence how the research will be interpreted in its entirety as a result of generalizability, time availability, data collection method and access to participants thus reflecting the integrity and transparency of the researcher (Price and Murnan, 2004). The limitations are:

The researcher will be unable to generalize the data collected due to non-probability sampling and the interpretivism paradigm because of issues of prejudice and validity when generalising to a larger population as a result of a small sample size. The short time frame given to gather data may hinder the researcher from obtaining in depth analysis of findings and information. The COVID-19 pandemic interfered with how the data was accumulated thus neglecting face to face interviewing due to social distancing and the researcher mitigated this issue by opting for online interviewing which may not guarantee full confidentiality because of privacy and security reasons thus compromising the consent of participants. Access to participants may be quite difficult because they have the right to deny participating in the study due to other commitments they have. Data collected in the digital media produces oversimplified data and depersonalised research. Digital data collection limits the observation of behaviour as one would in face to face interviews and the six participants partook in the interview from dissimilar environments.

Compiling and conducting this research report was successful and the success of it is evident when the researcher found out that Instagram influencers do play a role in millennials identity construction, however that role is played at varying levels and to a certain extent depending on what one desires to gain, time spent on the social platform and one's strength of character. Future researchers should conduct further research in different contexts, for a larger sample size or a younger demographic as it will assist in distinguishing and comprehending the difference between how millennials' and adolescents construct their identities. This study should encourage further thinking and more light needs to be shed on the impact Instagram influencers have on their audiences and the role Instagram influencers play in their audience's identity construction.

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8. ANNEXURES

8.1. Annexure A – Consent Form

To whom it may concern,

My name is **Siphumelele Sithole** and I am a student at **IIE Varsity College, Sandton**. I am currently conducting research under the supervision of **Jenna- Lee Ramnarain** about whether Instagram influencers play a role in how millennials construct their own identities in South Africa. Therefore, investigating the perceptions of millennials to understand through their lens if they are victims of this kind of influence and what and how do they feel about it. I hope that this research will enhance our understanding of the role Instagram influencers play in identity construction and the impact that influence has on millennials realities thus advancing human knowledge and offering a new and different way of viewing this phenomenon since there are changes in the media and advancements in communication, as It is known that social media causes various communication challenges that directly affect how people see themselves. I would like to invite you to participate in my study. In order to explain to you what your participation in my study will involve, I have formulated questions that I will try to fully answer so that you can make an informed decision about whether or not to participate. If you have any additional questions that you feel are not addressed or explained in this information sheet, please do not hesitate to ask me for more information. Once you have read and understood all the information contained in this sheet and are willing to participate, please complete and sign the consent form below.

What will I be doing if I participate in your study?

I would like to invite you to participate in this research because you fit the characteristics of a sample i would like to include in this study as it is imperative to get your point of view on this topic as a millennial in South Africa in order to make this study valid and credible. It is important to capture true feelings and experiences rather than making assumptions. If you decide to participate in this research, I would like to invite you for an online interview on your preferred social media platform (WhatsApp Video Call/Instagram Video Chat/FaceTime) if permitted, there will only be an interviewer and interviewee whereby you will be asked a set of open ended questions related to the research topic and feel free to openly express yourself, there is no wrong or right answer.

The interview will approximately take 20 minutes to complete and it will be recorded with your permission. All information collected will be confidential and your identity kept a secret. Recordings and information provided will only be used for analysis and will only be accessed by me and my supervisor for academic reasons.

No incentives will be given for participation as it is voluntarily.

You can decide whether or not to participate in this research. If you decide to participate, you can choose to withdraw at any time or to decide not to answer particular interview questions.

Are there any risks/ or discomforts involved in participating in this study?

Whether or not you decide to participate in this research, there will be no negative impact on you. There are no direct risks or benefits to you if you participate in this study. You might, however, indirectly find that it is helpful to talk about your **feelings, experiences or opinions**. If you find at any stage that you are not comfortable with the line of questioning, you may withdraw or refrain from participating.

Do I have to participate in the study?

- Your inclusion in this study is completely voluntary;
- If you do not wish to participate in this study, you have every right not to do so;
- Even if you agree to participate in this study, you may withdraw at any time without having to provide an explanation for your decision.

Will my identity be protected?

I promise to protect your identity. I will not use your name in any research summaries to come out of this research and I will also make sure that any other details are disguised so that nobody will be able to identify you. I would like to ask your permission to record the interviews, but only my supervisor, I and possibly a professional transcriber (who will sign a confidentiality agreement) will have access to these recordings. Nobody else, including anybody at **IIE Varsity College, Sandton**, will have access to your interview information. I would like to use quotes when I discuss the findings of the research, but I will not use any recognisable information in these quotes that can be linked to you.

What will happen to the information that participants provide?

Once I have finished all interviews, I will write summaries to be included in my research report, which is a requirement to complete my **honours degree in Communication**. You may ask me to send you a summary of the research if you are interested in the final outcome of the study.

What happens if I have more questions about the study?

Please feel free to contact me or my supervisor should you have any questions or concerns about this research, or if there is anything you need to know before you decide whether or not to participate.

You should not agree to participate unless you are completely comfortable with the procedures followed.

My contact details are as follows:

The contact details of my supervisor are as follows:

Jenna-Lee Ramnarain

Consent form for participants

I, _____, agree to participate in the research conducted by **Siphumelele Sithole** about **whether Instagram influencers play a role in identity construction, attempting to understand that view from millennials perceptions.**

This research has been explained to me and I understand what participation in this research will involve. I understand that:

1. I agree to be interviewed for this research.
2. My confidentiality will be ensured. My name and personal details will be kept private.
3. My participation in this research is voluntary and I have the right to withdraw from the research at any time. There will be no repercussions should I choose to withdraw from the research.
4. I may choose not to answer any of the questions that are asked during the research interview.
5. I may be quoted directly when the research is published, but my identity will be protected.

Signature

_____23 AUG 2020_____

Date

Consent form for audio-recording/ video recording

I, _____, agree to allow **Siphumelele Sithole** to audio record my interviews as part of the research about **whether Instagram influencers play a role in identity construction, attempting to understand that view from millennials perceptions.**

.

This research has been explained to me and I understand what participation in this research will involve. I understand that:

1. My confidentiality will be ensured. My name and personal details will be kept private.
2. The recordings will be stored in a password protected file on the researcher's computer.
3. Only the researcher, the researcher's supervisor and possibly a transcriber (who will sign a confidentiality agreement) will have access to these recordings.

Signature

_____23 AUG 2020_____
Date

8.2. Annexure B – Interview Schedule/Questionnaire

1. How much time per day, on average, do you spend on Instagram?
2. Are you familiar with the term “social media influencer”?
3. How would you define an “influencer”?
4. Do you follow any Instagram influencers? If so, who? If not, who influences your opinions and decisions?
5. Why do/don't you follow these influencers?
6. In general, why do you think people follow Instagram influencers?
7. Identity construction is defined as “the process of shaping the way a person sees themselves individually and in relation to other people through influencing their values, behaviours, knowledge, practices, beliefs and communication (discourses). So, in your opinion, do Instagram influencers play a role in identity construction?
8. How do you think these Instagram influencers play a role in identity construction?
9. Do you think that following Instagram influencers has a positive or negative effect on how millennials see themselves? Please motivate your answer.
10. How difficult do you think is it to change a person's attitude?
11. Do you think a person's characteristic shapes how Instagram/Instagram influencers affects them?

8.3. Annexure C – Ethical Clearance Letter



24 JULY 2020

Student name: Siphumelele Sithole

Student number: 16007400

Campus: IIE's Varsity College

Re: Approval of Bachelor of Arts in Communication Proposal and Ethics Clearance

HONOURS ETHICAL CLEARANCE LETTER

Your research proposal and the ethical implications of your proposed research topic were reviewed by your supervisor and the campus research panel, a subcommittee of The Independent Institute of Education's Research and Postgraduate Studies Committee.

There are some aspects that you still need to address in your proposal. You will need to address these aspects in consultation with your supervisor before you may proceed (see below):

Please discuss with your supervisor/navigator/lecturer how you will address these issues listed below:

Please note: Your fieldwork may only proceed once you address the following issues:

- Title suggestions: *The role Instagram influencers have on the identity construction on millennial's living in Sandton.*
- Please make all the changes suggested/recommended by your supervisor.
- Please make sure your objectives align to your research title and problem statement.

In the event of you deciding to change your research methodology in any way, kindly consult your supervisor to ensure all ethical considerations are adhered to and pose no risk to any participant or party involved. A revised ethical clearance letter will be issued.

We wish you all the best with your research!

8.4. Annexure D – Examples of Data Collected

[illegible]

8.5. Annexure E – Concept Document Table

PROVISIONAL TITLE: The role of Instagram influencers in identity construction: the perceptions of millennials in Sandton.

Research Purpose/ Objective	Primary Research Question	Research Rationale	Seminal Authors/ Sources	Literature Review – Conceptual Framework	Paradigm	Approach	Data Collection Method(s)	Ethics	Anticipated Findings	References
The purpose of this study is to explore millennial's perceptions of the role Instagram influencers play in identity construction.	Do Instagram influencers play a role in identity construction? Primary Objective: To explore whether Instagram Influencers play a role in identity construction.	This study needs to be known because it is interested in understanding the role and impact Instagram influencers play in creating an identity for one but also understanding through the lens of millennials to help brands and influencers get a better perspective of how millennials view their influence and how it affects them thus filling in the gap of brands understanding how their influencers infiltrate their audiences identities.	Campbell. R. P. B. 2018. 'The relationship between memorable messages and identity construction'. David. L. 2019. 'Social learning theory (Bandura)'. De Gouveia. C. 2011. 'The role of brands in the formation and manifestation of adolescent identity'.	Theme 1: Identity. Theme 2: Identity construction on social media platforms. Theme 3: Social media platforms. Theme 4: The use of Instagram influencers.	Paradigm Interpretivism. Epistemology The researcher aims to educate people, introduce them to new ideas and help them see things in various ways. Make this information available for present and future companies and influencers as a guide on how to better their skills and strategies by fully understanding their consumers perceptions not just about their products but how consumers view their influencers. Ontology Reality is a combination of being governed by laws as well as being a social construction. Axiology What's valued is validity, reliability, accountability,	Qualitative.	Semi structured interviews. Online interviews due to the covid 19 pandemic and social distancing.	Respectful, promote wellbeing, assure confidentiality and anonymity, participants must provide informed consent.	Expected to find credible information that will put the study into perspective, information that proves that Instagram influencers do or do not contribute to identity construction.	Campbell. R. P. B. 2018. The relationship between memorable messages and identity construction'. Graduate student thesis, dissertations and professional papers.[online] Available at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd . [Accessed 24 March 2020].
						Population				
						Population Parameters				
Research Problem	Secondary Questions/ Hypotheses/ Objectives	Key Concepts	Key Theories			Males or females, 24-39 years old, Live in Sandton, Daily users of Instagram.	Sampling	Data Analysis Method(s)	Limitations	Anticipated Contribution

What is known from most studies is how social media influencers influence individuals brand perceptions, purchase or behaviour intentions and how they are used as a branding strategy and exploring how identity construction is used as feature of professional communication (PAD Research Group, 2016). The gap is that there is less research that investigates how millennials perceive and assess the role or impact Instagram influencers have on their identity formation within a South African context.	<i>How do Instagram influencers play a role in identity construction?</i> <i>To explore how Instagram influencers, play a role in identity construction</i>	<i>Instagram influencers, Millennials, Instagram, Identity construction.</i>	<i>Social learning theory. Communication on theory of identity.</i>		<i>openness, honesty and fairness although theory/research can't fully be value free. Research should generate knowledge, achieve positive changes in the society, allow understanding of numerous issues and can be used for public awareness.</i>	<i>Non-probability sampling.</i> Sampling method <i>Purposive sampling.</i> Size <i>6 participants.</i>	Unit of Analysis <i>Individuals.</i> Data Analysis Method(s) <i>Thematic data analysis. Deductive approach. Prior coding.</i>	<i>Short time frame thus unable to get in depth information. Unable to generalize due to non-probability sampling. With online interviews unable to guarantee full confidentiality.</i>	<i>Anticipated contribution to South African literature to fully understand and educate brands, consumers and influencers on their role and impact in identity construction.</i>	David. L. 2019. 'Social learning theory (Bandura)'. In leaning theories. [online]. Available at: www.learning-theories.com/social-learning-theory-bandura.html. [Accessed 22 May 2020].
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