



**AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE DEVELOPMENT OF CRITERIA FOR SOUTH
AFRICAN SMALL MEDIUM ENTERPRISES (SME) BRANDS TO EMPLOY WHEN
COLLABORATING WITH RELEVANT INFLUENCERS TO REINFORCE BRAND
ALIGNMENT**

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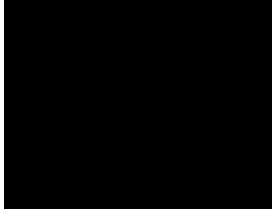
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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the Research Report submitted for the BA Honours in Strategic Brand Communication degree to The Independent Institute of Education is my own work and has not previously been submitted to another University or Higher Education Institution for degree purposes.



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Abstract:

In these times when technology is at our fingertips and content is shared at a much faster rate than ever before, we are seeing an increase in brand influencer collaboration campaigns. This study examines the extent to which collaboration between relevant influencers and brands can aid in the development of a criterion that can be used to reinforce brand alignment by SMEs in South Africa and even any size brand. Through eWOM, social media influencers are gaining control of the Internet through their exceptional work and presence. Their opinions have a sizable influence on people, impacting on brands and buying decisions. They can be classified as a contemporary phenomenon, as their collaboration with marketing agencies has increased significantly in recent years. More and more people are subscribing to these influencers' content in order to avoid missing out on content the influencers share. Brands seek mentions, reviews, and recommendations from such influencers. Even though influencer marketing is a relatively new strategy, it remains a viable option for marketers willing to think creatively and develop relationships with their target market. The study's objective is to establish a set of criteria that South African SME brands can use to collaborate with relevant influencers to strengthen their brand alignment. Participants in this study interacted with brand managers at corporates, brand influencer agencies, and influencers. The research findings concluded that while there is no industry-wide standard for creating relevant brand influencer collaborations, there were several highly similar elements that brands, and agencies used to engage in effective relevant brand influencer collaborations. These elements can be used in additional future studies to develop a criterion that SMEs can use in the absence of affordable influencer marketing through agencies and also participate in the influencer space to grow their brand.

Keywords:

Brand Identity, Brand Alignment, Influencers, South African SME brands, eWOM.

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ASAS	Academic student administration system
SMB	Small and medium-sized businesses
SME	Small Medium Enterprises
SMME	Small Medium Micro Enterprises
eWOM	Electronic Word-of-mouth

1 CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This research paper examined the criteria South African brands and agencies currently use for influencer collaborations and determined whether the criteria are consistent or would benefit from further development for standardisation. The study drew on historical and contemporary research on influencer collaborations with brands to reinforce brand alignment in order to educate readers about the history of influencers and how South African brands have historically chosen to collaborate with influencers to reinforce their brand alignment.

The purpose of this study was not to validate or draw conclusions, but to develop potential criteria that South African SME brands can use when collaborating with influencers to reinforce their brand alignment.

The study's expected outcome is to contribute to the body of knowledge on the possibility of a brand influencer collaboration criterion being developed for South African SME brands to collaborate with relevant influencers for reinforcing brand alignment, provided that brands are deliberate in their influencer collaborations.

1.1 Background and Contextualisation

According to Kadekova and Holiencinova (2018), brands used to be solely focused on well-known personalities, but have since shifted to include well-known bloggers and the ability of the average person to influence a targeted audience. Today, it is about everyday consumers making a significant difference. More and more brands are seeking someone to 'narrate' their story for them. Influencers are one of the fastest growing forms of online marketing. Proper influencer marketing is a cost-effective method of promoting brands, products, people, and ideas, bringing creative content to the company and allowing for natural reach to target groups. Influencer refers to a person with a sizeable following on social media who is compensated by companies to promote their brand, service or products to said followers, either through the provision of free products and trips or through a cash payment per promotional post (Kadekova & Holiencinova, 2018).

Kadekova and Holiencinova (2018) further elaborated that Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, and YouTube are all popular social media platforms for influencer

partnerships. Because of their authority, knowledge, position or relationship with their audience, an influencer has the ability to sway others' purchasing decisions. It is critical to remember that these individuals are not simply brand or marketing tools, but rather social relationship assets with whom brands can collaborate to accomplish their brand and marketing goals.

This topic is important because social word-of-mouth marketing has always had a major influence on public opinion and consumers' purchasing decisions, and thus plays a vital role in branding (Cool & Mico-Sanz, 2019). Advances on the internet, social media and the growth of mobile communication have contributed to a rise in the power of social word-of-mouth advertising which is now known as influencer marketing (Wielki, 2020).

This research discusses the opportunity to use market research data to develop criteria that South African SME brands can use to collaborate with relevant influencers to reinforce their brand alignment. According to the research, a brand message is more likely to be accepted if there is a self-brand relationship formed through participation with actual influencers on relevant issues (Wielki, 2020).

This research study applied the Kapferer Brand Identity Prism framework to examine what method and measurements brands use to collaborate with relevant influencers to reinforce brand alignment and if the elements used can be employed to develop standardised criteria for future South African SME brand collaborations with influencers. The Kapferer Brand Identity Prism (Kapferer, 2008) is a six-faceted brand identity prism which can be used to develop and manage a brand identity. According to Iannenko, Stepanov and Mironova (2020), Kapferer emphasised the differentiation and influence functions of brands, whereas brand identity defines the facets of brands' uniqueness and value.

Influencers are used by brand managers to promote a variety of products and services because they serve as a reference point for their followers. Despite growing interest in brand-influencer collaboration, academic research on the subject is limited (Belanche, Casaló-Ario, Flavián & Sánchez, 2021).

1.2 Rationale

In recent years, collaborations between brands and influencers to promote products to their social media target audiences have increased significantly (Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández 2019). According to Belanche et al. (2021), influencers are viewed as opinion leaders in the modern era and frequently promote brands on social media. Influencers and brands collaborate because the content generated by influencers on social media generates a more positive response from users. According to Kadekova and Holienčinova (2018), brands want to be mentioned, reviewed and recommended by these influencers. While influencers are a relatively new technique, it is a viable option for brands willing to think differently and strategically when it comes to developing relationships with their target market (Kadekova & Holienčinova, 2018).

Cant and Wiid (2020) reported that numerous SMMEs close their doors each year, and this is not solely due to unpredictable or unstable external conditions. Many of these closures can be attributed to management's inability to react to and make sound business decisions in response to changing business conditions. A strategic business plan, which includes marketing activities, can help mitigate this issue by providing a clear roadmap for SMMEs to follow in order to run their businesses successfully. Additionally, Mckeen (2019) stated that small and growing brands looking to expand their audience and optimise their brand content development efforts should leverage social media influencers. Wielki (2020) noted that a critical factor to consider when using influencers in an organisation's marketing activities is their cost-effectiveness. This enables brands with limited budgets to grow their brands despite their financial constraints.

As it is evident that South African SME brands do not have large marketing budgets to partner with renowned marketing agencies that can assist them in collaborating with relevant influencers to accomplish their brand objectives, there is a need to develop standardised criteria that South African SMEs can use to identify and collaborate with relevant influencers on a shoestring budget, as Wielki (2020) advised that influencers are a cost-effective branding activity. These criteria will assist brands in avoiding collaborations with irrelevant influencers that may result in brand damage, which may be difficult for SME brands to recover from due to their lack of budget for agency partnerships.

1.3 Problem Statement

Braam (2012) stated that competition in business has always been an unavoidable reality on a global scale. As a result, business competition has been made more difficult by technology, particularly in this digital age. From the consumer's perspective, a distinctive brand alignment lowers the risk perception and effort associated with making choices. McCoy (2012) suggested that an organisation, big or small, may lack a distinguished brand alignment based on influencer marketer and segmentation strategy, however, consumers can take advantage of the benefits offered by brand alignment. The growing phenomenon of influencers is at its peak and for a successful collaboration between brands and influencers, brands need to be intentional in collaborating with relevant influencers for their brand alignment as collaborating with the wrong influencer can be detrimental for a brand.

South African SMEs, as stated by Cant and Wiid (2020), must, therefore, be able to participate in new ways of engaging their target audiences on social media via influencers for brand alignment and collaborate with relevant influencers. There is a need for those brand-influencer collaborations to be guided by an industry standard set of criteria that SME brands in South Africa can use to collaborate with relevant influencers in the absence of agencies while also ensuring that those collaborations do not negatively impact the SME brand.

1.3.1 Why is the Problem Worth Investigating?

According to Grafström, Jakobsson and Wiede (2018), research indicates that influencers are more likely to be perceived as credible and trustworthy than paid advertisements, because of their alignment with content and having the ability to interaction via two-way communication on various social media platforms. The fact that consumers can select which influencers to follow, that they allow certain influencers to influence them, and that they trust their influencer and their opinion should all be considered relevant. One significant challenge for brands is identifying and selecting the right influencers. In comparison to direct marketing, influencers leverage the power of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) to indirectly promote their brand, products, or services. As a result, it is necessary to develop a set of criteria for SME brands in South Africa to use when collaborating with relevant influencers.

1.3.2 Research Question

To investigate the development of criteria for South African SMEs to employ when collaborating with relevant influencers to reinforce brand alignment, the following research question was formulated:

What elements of brand-influencer collaboration can be used to develop criteria for South African SMEs seeking to collaborate with influencers to strengthen their brand alignment?

1.3.3 Sub-Questions

The secondary research questions / sub questions for this study are:

- What criteria are influencer agencies and brands currently using to identify relevant influencers for their brands?
- How are the successes of these criteria elements determined?
- How do brands ensure that their brand messages are aligned when engaging with influencers?

1.3.4 Research Objectives

The research objectives of this study include:

- To develop criteria for brands to use when collaborating with relevant influencers.
- To determine the successful components of this criterion.
- To ensure that influencers' engagement with brands is consistent with brand messaging.

1.4 Purpose Statement

The Kapferer Brand Identity Prism framework was used to investigate the possibility of developing a set of criteria for South African SMEs to use when collaborating with relevant influencers to reinforce brand alignment. Advances on the internet, social media, and the proliferation of mobile communication have all contributed to an increase in the power of eWOM marketing, which is known to be fuelled by influencers (Cool & Mico-Sanz, 2019).

By examining the attributes that brands use to collaborate successfully with relevant influencers through the lens of Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism, the study hopes to gain detailed insight into the criteria that can be developed for South African SME brands to use when collaborating with relevant influencers to reinforce their brand alignment.

1.5 Conceptualisation

Concept	Definition	Context
Brand alignment	Braam (2012) stated that brand identity is the collection of distinct brand associations that the brand strategist aspires to create or maintain. These associations exemplify the brand's values and imply a commitment to customers on the part of the organisation's members (Aaker, 2002). The brand identity is the company's internal desired image that it wishes to communicate to its target audience. Brand identity defines the parameters within which a brand's uniqueness and value are contained. Marketers create those associations as part of the brand positioning process in order to convey a specific message. However, while a brand communicates its identity, what consumers perceive is its image. The sender is responsible for defining the brand's meaning, purpose, and self-image (Kapferer, 2008). This translates to brand alignment.	The purpose of this paper is to reinforce brand alignment through the application of developed criteria for brand-influencer collaborations. South African SMEs can leverage influencers to engage with their target audience via the power of eWOM by managing their own influencer collaborations. This falls under the category of reinforcing brand alignment, which is fuelled by brand strategy.
Influencers	Wielki (2020) defined influencers as persons who are popular and have a loyal following. Influencers, like experts in their fields, develop unique content to build their reputations (Wielki, 2020). They are powerful human brands that help brands perform better. Influencers	Influencers are a rapidly growing phenomenon that is primarily accomplished through social media. South African SMEs can collaborate with relevant influencers based on pre-defined criteria to strengthen their brand alignment via eWOM.

	use various social media platform to drive eWOM.	
Electronic Word-Of-Mouth (eWOM) under Brand Strategy	Joshi and Singh (2017) asserted that word-of-mouth has long been influential in shaping consumer perceptions of a product or service. This occurs when a consumer interacts with another online consumer who has previously used the service or product, which could occur in a shopping mall or store. In the late 1990s, WOM was transformed into eWOM through the widespread use of messengers and other instant messaging clients such as Yahoo and Email. By the late 2000s, various social media platforms had developed into an endless source of advertising, interaction, information gathering, opinion sharing, and discussion about brands, product features, and services.	In the context of this study, eWOM is the wheel upon which brand-influencer collaborations can be built in order to develop criteria for South African SME brands, as this is where influencers sell themselves to brands in order to gain collaboration. This would be a secondary objective within the context of the brand strategy aimed at reinforcing brand alignment.
SMEs in South Africa	SME brands, according to Zorraquino (2020), are brands that, despite being young or new, have a strategic position since they have the potential to become dominant brands in the future.	As stated by the Banking Association of South Africa (2019), SMEs are recognised as productive drivers of inclusive economic growth and development. Small and medium-sized businesses (SMBs) account for roughly 34% of total economic activity in South Africa (pre-COVID), according to SEDA (2016). It is critical to assist South African SMEs with limited budgets in reinforcing their brand alignment through influencer collaborations, as demonstrated in this study.

1.6 Overview of Research Methodology

This is an exploratory cross-sectional study that employed a qualitative data collection approach. Two brand-influencer agency directors, two corporate brand managers, and an influencer were interviewed via semi-structured online interviews. The data were

analysed qualitatively using an inductive approach. Chapter 3 contains a detailed discussion of methodology.

1.7 Structure of Paper

Chapter 1: Introduction

As well as providing the study's background, this chapter explains why this was an essential piece of research to conduct at this point in time. A thorough problem and purpose statement is supplied, which is followed by research questions and overall study objectives.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This section contains definitions of essential concepts to assist the reader in understanding how these terms relate to the study. This chapter contains a thorough overview and analysis of the relevant literature on the subject, as well as a theoretical basis that will aid in the resolution of the investigation's query.

Chapter 3: Methodology

By way of example, the research methodology provides a comprehensive overview of the research approach and methodologies that were used to answer the research question. Among the topics covered in this chapter are the worldview that guides the study, the type of data collection methods that are used, and demographic and sample approaches that are employed. The data collection procedure is detailed, as well as the data analysis tools that are used to make sense of the information gathered. Finally, the limitations and delimitations of the study, as well as the methods used to address them, are discussed.

Chapter 4: Data Findings

In accordance with the data that has been gathered and analysed, the findings are presented in narrative form. Using current literature as a framework, the findings are reviewed in detail, and important insights and interpretations are offered. In addition, the credibility of the findings are evaluated in this part.

Chapter 5: Data Analysis and Recommendations

The last chapter includes a thorough interpretation, discussion, and summary of the study's principal results, all of which are based on the research question and the study's aim. An evaluation of whether the research question was answered and whether the research goal was achieved is provided, as are the study's future implications and its ethical implications.

2 CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Benachrine (2019), literature review is critical in research and it is viewed as an integral part of the research foundations, going beyond data collection. It serves as a foundation for empirical findings that may confirm, refute or introduce a new perspective on a subject.

2.1 Theoretical Foundation

Numerous academics working in the field of brand marketing have developed conceptual frameworks for brand identity (Aaker, 1996; De Chernatony, 1999; Upshaw, 1995). Kapferer (2008) asserted that a brand's identity can be represented by a hexagonal prism dubbed the brand identity prism. Kapferer's (2008) model is fundamentally different from the others in that it incorporates managers' (physical, relationship, personality, culture, and consumer reflection) as well as consumers' inputs (self-image). Given that this thesis aims to identify a brand's identity and image, this model is ideal for this research. The researcher was able to extract themes from the research using the Kapferer Brand Identity Pyramid as a theoretical framework that informed the data analysis.

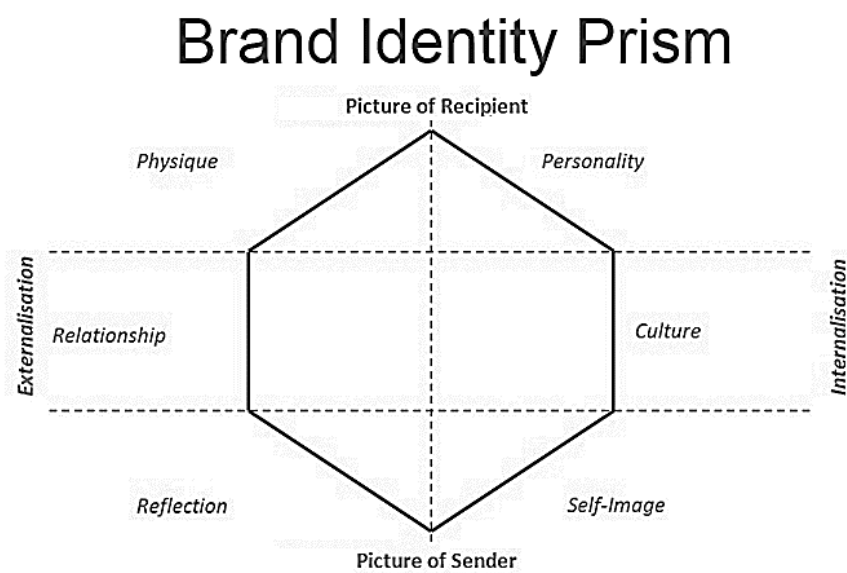


Figure 2.1: Brand Identity Prism

Source: (Kapferer, 2008:183)

The six-faceted brand identity prism includes physique, relationship, reflection, personality, culture, and self-image are all examples of these components. Physique is the term used to describe the value provided by a brand's physical characteristics. The relationship component outlines the brand's actions, behaviours and interactions with stakeholders. The term reflection refers to an external reflection of how customers perceive a brand. The personality component refers to celebrity spokespersons who may add specific human characteristics to the brand in order to differentiate it. The culture facet represents the brand's own set of values that it communicates to its target audience and leverages to distinguish itself from competitors. Finally, self-image is a component that can be characterised as a brand's own perception of itself. External expressions of a brand include its physicality, relationship, and reflection. In comparison to the outward characteristics, personality, culture, and self-image are internal characteristics that reflect how a brand expresses itself. Each of the six characteristics is inextricably linked to the others and so plays a role in the construction of a brand's identity (Kapferer, 2008).

To attract consumers, brands must ensure compatibility between the projected brand identity and how it is received. Thus, the more effectively a brand communicates its message, the stronger the brand (Kapferer, 2008). Clearly, it is critical for a brand to manage its brand marketing effectively. Numerous researchers, as stated by Braam (2012), have argued that internal marketing is a necessary condition for the organisation to maintain control over what it wants to be seen and what is actually seen by customers. This study examines the possibility of developing criteria for determining whether brand-influencer collaborations will reinforce SMEs' brand alignment through influencers.

2.2 Brand Alignment

McCoy (2012) explained that brand alignment is a theoretical framework that can be used to synthesise and integrate internal and external brand initiatives. Only when the objectives of the internal branding programme are in accordance with the broader business objectives and are appropriately translated to the target audience can a programme achieve its intended outcome (Mitchell 2002, cited in McCoy, 2012:100). Conflict arises when differing internal and external messages are used (McCoy, 2012). Brand alignment is a measure of how well a brand fulfils its brand promise.

Lischer (2021) stated that, simply described, brand alignment is a state in which both internal and external stakeholders understand the objective of a brand and act accordingly. When a brand is internally aligned, all its internal stakeholders understand why the brand exists in terms of the promise it offers to customers. An externally aligned brand ensures that its external stakeholders understand the claims the brand makes and believe that the brand delivers on those promises (Lischer, 2021).

Raman (2015) stated that brand alignment is the process by which a brand assures the alignment of its functional and operational groups in order to build and sustain a symbiotic relationship between internal and external stakeholders in order to consciously and consistently deliver on its brand promise. Historically, branding efforts have been directed towards external stakeholders. Therefore, branding efforts concentrate on external communication and assistance, which help in developing a brand image and establishing and fulfilling the brand promise to the customer (Tosti & Stotz, 2002 cited in Raman, 2015). However, brands quickly recognised that while external marketing and advertising can acquire clients, the entire organisation is required to maintain them in a constantly changing market. As a result, branding has expanded far beyond marketing. Its success is recognised as being contingent upon ensuring that all facets of an organisation's operations reflect and support the intended brand (Raman, 2015).

Brands are frequently referred to as a company's most important asset (Keller & Lehman, 2003, cited in Braam, 2012:16). According to Braam (2012), Aaker (1996) shared that the most significant purpose of an organisation's brand is to provide identity to its offerings to differentiate it from competitors. A brand assists clients in navigating a cluttered market, reducing risk while making a purchase and allowing them to express themselves.

According to Braam (2012), Aaker believed that a brand is crucial for producing value and building relationships, and the brand's identity is the distinct collection of brand associations that develop these ties with customers. The brand's identity is the distinct collection of brand associations that establish these ties with customers, and the brand's identity is the distinct collection of brand associations that establish these links with customers (Braam, 2012).

In the context of this study, brand alignment refers to the purpose that brands can attain by collaborating with appropriate influencers based on a specified criterion. This is especially critical for South African SME brands, as they often operate on low budgets and cannot afford to hire huge agencies to manage such marketing activities on their behalf, nor can they afford to partner with irrelevant influencers who may jeopardise the brand's identity. As a result, an industry-developed set of criteria for brand-influencer collaborations, which most agencies and corporations may reference, may help SMEs locate eligible influencers for collaborations.

2.3 Influencers

According to Wielki (2020), influencers have existed for the longest period of time; the concept originated in the 1700s and has evolved significantly. Influencers are social media users who have a huge following and the ability to influence consumers inside their network (Carter, 2016, cited in Wielki 2020). They are substantially more likely to share brand information, thoughts, and recommendations on social media. Keller and Fay (2016, cited in Wielki, 2020) referred to influencers as 'conversation catalysts'. Influencers spark brand-related interactions on social media by sharing their opinions about products and services, and as their influence rises, consumers seek out their advice, information and brand expertise.

Mason, Narcum and Mason (2021) stated that online engagement means interactions with influencers. Regardless of whether it is viewing a video, pinning recipes or reading Facebook stories, it is still part of communicating with an influencer. Mason et al. (2021) described influencers as pioneers when it comes to society's developments; they tend to be innovators who can consistently produce fresh ideas, concepts or information that interest social media users. Influencers have the skill to identify and revitalise trends before others and then spread them even further through social media. They know how the internet works, and social media users pay attention to them. Furthermore, Knowles, Ettenson and Dollens (2020) postulated that some 41% of marketing experts agree that influencer efforts outperform traditional advertising, which is perceived as a higher reach achieved through influencer marketing than traditional advertising media.

Kadekova and Holienčinova (2018) defined an influencer as a person with a large social media following who is compensated by brands to promote their products to

their followers through complementary products and trips and/or monetary payments per promotional post. The goal is to urge followers to buy such items. Knowles et al. (2020) added that Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat and YouTube are popular social media platforms for influencing. Because of their authority, knowledge, position or relationship with their audience, an influencer can influence the purchasing decisions of others (Kadekova & Holiencinova, 2018). It is critical to recognise that these people are not simply marketing tools, but rather social connection assets with whom brands can work to achieve their marketing goals (Mason, et al., 2021).

Braam (2012) elaborated that influencers are defined as individuals who are well-liked in their communities and have large followings of devoted fans. Braam (2012) further stressed that influencers frequently develop their own unique content to develop their reputation, and that they are regarded as experts in their respective groups. They are powerful human brands that have a beneficial impact on the performance of brands affiliated with them. On a similar note, Kadekova and Holiencinova (2018) further stated that an influencer is an opinion leader, popular among a large group of regular recipients, who, through their credible actions – currently displayed on social media – inspire trust, engage and convince their followers to make specific choices about what to purchase. Influencer marketers are defined in this study using the abovementioned definitions.

Moreover, Mason et al. (2021) shared that it is critical for brands seeking relevant influencer collaborations to identify how many people the influencer is reaching and how much active participation they generate. Marketers need to know if the brand's target audience not only likes, but also connects with the material they are producing. Furthermore, brands should review potential influencers' prior brand interactions, how informative they were and if they are considered trustworthy as an influencer. Developing a set of criteria for South African SME brands will aid in capitalising on relevant collaborations to execute effective brand alignment efforts.

2.3.1 Electronic Word-of-Mouth

Social media, which include, but are not limited to TikTok, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, have become the predominant vehicles for brands driving their online presence (Appel, Grewal, Haid & Stephen, 2019). Looking at social media's growth in relation to brand alignment, Glucksman (2017) stated that four effects on brand

alignment can influence brands. Firstly, social media has provided new avenues for brands to interact with their customers that did not exist before and this is through eWOM. Secondly, social media empowers consumers to engage in a greater sense of the company since they are a part of their communities and promote brand awareness and recognition. Thirdly, conversely, social media help to expand the brand's customer relationships. Lastly, when influencers follow the protocol above, it gives SMEs the opportunity to reinforce their brand's alignment, but this may depend on collaborating with a relevant influencer who can reinforce brand alignment according to the brand's desired objectives, including but not limited to, the number of followers, engagement or reach the influencer has (Glucksman, 2017).

According to Joshi and Singh (2017), eWOM, as a casual way of communication, has become critical in influencing consumer decision-making processes. The core component of eWOM is comparable to that of its predecessor, WOM, but it is faster and a more continuous source of information. With the advancement of Web 2.0 and improved user interfaces, the internet has played a critical role in connecting universal WOM (Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2003, Cheng & Zhou, 2010, and Chan & Ngai, 2011; all cited in Joshi and Singh, 2017).

Joshi and Singh (2017) goes on to say that eWOM can thus serve as a marketing tool as well as a self-sustaining channel. Consumers make decisions based on a variety of internal considerations, but they are also influenced by eWOM. Additionally, researchers have discovered that 70% of consumers' buying intent is influenced by the internet evaluations they read prior to making an actual purchase (Joshi and Singh, 2017).

Olmedilla, Arenas-Marquez, Martinez-Torres, and Toral (2016) believe that eWOM provides brands with a cost-effective marketing channel that does not require large advertising expenditures. As a result, marketers are extremely interested in identifying potential influencers, considering the relevance and impact that their ratings might have on other consumers' purchase intentions. Olmedilla et al. (2016) went on to explain that marketing material can be spread more quickly and effectively through influencers' recommendations to their followers and peers. Historically, attempts to identifying influencers have been mostly focused on the concept of trust and the degree of competence in a certain topic. However, contemporary computational tools

enable the collection of significantly more information about the social networking behaviours of members of these communities.

eWOM is the medium via which influencers deliver their messages; this is where certain agencies and corporations seek to find influencers to collaborate with based on their own set of criteria. A established set of criteria will assist South African SME brands in reaching out to social media, assessing the eWOM influence influencers have on their audience, and collaborating with relevant influencers intentionally to reinforce their brand alignment.

2.4 Small Medium Enterprises (SMEs)

For this study, SME brands includes companies from their early stage (<1million) to approximately R15 million revenue per annum and between one and ten years old. Zorraquino (2020) noted that SME brands are brands that, while being young or new, have a strategic position because they have the potential to become dominant brands in the future.

Hassen (2021) stated that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on South Africa's small business sector, as seen in the bleak economic figures. After scanning the small business scene, it is clear that many South African small brands will need to reconsider their business strategies in light of the pandemic's impact and other considerations. At this point in time, small business owners must prioritise skills and technology. Keeping up with technology should be a goal, as well. Online shopping, trade and marketing are rising at an exponential rate, and small brands, without a social media strategy and tools, risk losing any competitive advantage they now have (Hassen, 2021).

According to Bhorat, Asmal, Lilenstien, and Van Der Zee (2018), the bulk of investments required to establish and develop an SME are greater than the average South African entrepreneur's private savings. For example, the majority of South Africans require finance in order to purchase a vehicle, which is a crucial input for any business. Thus, loans will be required in the majority of circumstances for SME owners to make the essential investments to start, operate, and develop a business.

As per Dumitriu, Militaru, Deselnicu, Niculescu and Popescu (2019), SMEs are a key factor for economic growth, innovation, employment, and digital inclusion, and ultimately, for providing sustainability for society. Furthermore, Dumitriu et al. (2019) asserted that SMEs have determined that building a stronger brand is one of their primary goals.

Dumitriu et al. (2019) argued that having a traditional marketing perspective, as well as a social media marketing perspective for establishing a strong brand and producing better brand alignment, is becoming increasingly important to doing business and securing growth in virtually every modern SME. This is also true for sustainability. Sustainability marketing, for example, may (and should) provide actual value when evaluated through the consumer's eyes.

Some of these challenges have been addressed in specialised literature, but there is insufficient research on the linkages between brand, brand alignment, growth, and sustainability and the use of social media as a marketing tool tactic. Dumitriu et al. (2019) elaborated that a sustainable brand would improve a modern SME's reputation and ensure future profitability through stakeholder loyalty and support, thereby boosting brand alignment over time. As a result, brand, trust and reputation are swiftly becoming some of the most valuable assets of an SME (Dumitriu et al., 2019).

South African SMEs are experiencing economically challenging times. In order to expand their market and reinforce their brand alignment for growth purposes, they can turn to social media via relevant collaborations with influencers, which are more cost-effective because they can be achieved without the use of agencies. However, in order to collaborate with relevant influencers, they will need a set of developed brand-influencer criteria to guide them.

3 CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section discusses the research methods used to address the study's research topics. Bryman and Bell (2012) define methodology as an all-encompassing approach to the research process, beginning with theoretical foundations and concluding with data collection and interpretation. As a result, this section examines the research philosophy, design, approach, strategy, sample, data gathering techniques, data collection tools, data presentation and analysis procedures, ethical issues, and data trustworthiness challenges.

This is a qualitative exploratory study of the concept of developing a criteria for South African SME brands to use when collaborating with relevant influencers to reinforce brand alignment. Swerdborg (2018:37) defined exploratory research as "the process of gaining a better understanding of something".

3.1 Research Paradigm

The nature and growth of knowledge is referred to as the research paradigm (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2016). It highlights a researcher's knowledge assumptions and how certain research methodologies, research strategies and procedures could be applied by the researcher to the research being conducted (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). A paradigm is a research tradition that guides researchers in developing vital hypotheses, fundamental assumptions, high-quality research models and acceptable research procedures to use; in other words, it is the process of interpreting and investigating reality (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016).

Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) argued there is a wide variety of paradigms, but one of the experts in the field, Candy (1989, cited in Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017: 26) maintained that they can be grouped together into three major taxonomies: positive, interpretive and critical realism. Rehman and Alharthi (2016) stated that positivism maintains that reality exists independently from humans, that it is not mediated by perceptions and is guided by unchangeable laws. Natural occurrences exhibit a cause-and-effect link, and once established, they may be anticipated with certainty in the future. The interpretivist paradigm holds that reality is multi-layered and complicated, and that a single phenomenon can be interpreted in various ways, while critical realism is a

school of philosophy that establishes a distinction between the 'real' and 'observable' worlds. The 'real' is intangible and exists independently of human experiences, theories and constructs (Brant & Panjwani, 2015).

The purpose of this research is to get a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being studied, namely how strategic brand alignment for SMEs in South Africa can be shaped through influencer marketing as a social media marketing technique. This study thus lends itself to an interpretivist paradigm, which is discussed in greater detail in the following section.

3.1.1 Interpretivism

According to Thomas (2017), interpretive experts believe that reality is made up of people's subjective experiences of the outside world; as a result, they may hold an inter-subjective epistemology and the ontological conviction that reality is socially produced. Thomas (2017) explained that the interpretive paradigm is founded on observation and interpretation; hence, to observe is to collect knowledge about events, but to interpret is to make sense of that information by drawing conclusions or determining the match between the evidence and abstract reality within the context. It seeks to comprehend things by the meanings that individuals ascribe to them.

3.1.2 Ontology

Ontology studies the subject of being and primarily deals with what is real (Du Plooy-Cilliers, Davis & Bezuidenhout, 2014; Collis & Hussey, 2009). The ontological perspective of interpretivism holds that several realities exist for everyone, making reality subjective (Collis & Hussey, 2009). Reality is socially produced, and meanings are subjective, relying on previous experiences and relationships. As a result, people do not experience reality in the same way (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). This method allowed a narrative to be conveyed while offering rich and thorough findings.

3.1.3 Epistemology

Epistemology is the study of knowledge, including diverse ways of knowing (Horrigan, 2007). The epistemological approach to interpretivism holds that to comprehend human behaviour, one must comprehend the kind of information that everyone regards as common sense (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). Interpretations alter the facts of investigations done in this scenario. A researcher interacts with their research based on their beliefs and previous life experiences which will impact how they interpret their

findings (Collis & Hussey, 2009; Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). Using the interpretivist epistemological position, the researcher seeks to provide insight into the subjective reasons of participants for employing strategic influencer marketing to shape their brand alignment.

3.1.4 Axiology

Axiology is the study of values and value judgements and understanding what is valued within a specific paradigm. Interpretivists believe that researchers use distinct values that assist them in making decisions and giving interpretations of information (Collis & Hussey, 2009; Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014).

As a result, the major objective of this study was to develop brand-influencer criteria that South African SME brands may use to identify relevant influencers with whom to align their brands. Additionally, based on the researcher's personal values for each one-on-one, qualitative, semi-structured interview, the research analysis developed insights that the researcher values for the study, which will aid in future research for building the criteria for appropriate brand-influencer partnership.

3.1.5 Metatheory

According to Bates (2005:257) and Wagner and Berger (1985:700), metatheory involves the study or description of theory and refers to theoretical frameworks that drive the research process. Thus, interpretivism uses theoretical frameworks to collect precise information which might lead to a better understanding of the phenomenon being researched (Du Plooy-Cilliers, 2014: 30). The major theories on these ideas were developed by Kapferer (2008), Keller (2013) and De Chernatony (1999).

Thus, a qualitative technique based on semi-structured interviews was used to acquire a better understanding of how to build the criteria for relevant brand-influencer collaborations for SMEs in order to promote brand alignment. The Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism was used in this study to determine brand alignment from an interpretive standpoint.

3.2 Research Design and Approach

A qualitative study was conducted with influencer agency directors, corporate brand managers, and influencers based in South Africa. Although qualitative research does not produce the same level of assurance or predictive power as quantitative research

(Bryman, 2011), it is favoured in this study because it allows for the examination of complicated environments.

The purpose of this study was to determine which elements agencies and corporates look for when collaborating with influencers for brand driven campaigns, and whether there are any commonalities among the elements. The study's objective was to develop a criteria that can be used by South African SME brands, with limited budgets to hire agencies, to collaborate independently with influencers to reinforce their brand alignment.

Du Plooy-Cilliers (2014) asserted that interpretivists rely on qualitative research to acquire data. Qualitative research aims to elucidate a phenomenon through the use of semi-structured, textual, and open-ended research instruments to describe individual experiences (Bryman, 2011). These subjective experiences enable the researcher to get detailed explanations, interpretations, and meanings for the participants' actions. To gain a better understanding of the sentimental value that agencies and corporate entities place on collaboration with influencers and to develop a criterion for brand-influencer collaboration, extensive data needed to be collected. The data collection was based on perceptions, as there is currently no framework guiding relevant brand-influencer collaborations to reinforce brand alignment; thus, a qualitative research approach was the most appropriate for the study.

Qualitative research, according to Braun and Clarke (2013), aims to comprehend a problem from the perspective of a relevant population. Thus, the researcher needed to be able to obtain specific information about the viewpoints, behaviours and attributes of what process South African agencies and corporates follow to collaborate with relevant influencers for brands to reinforce distinct brand objectives.

Qualitative approaches can elicit detailed textual descriptions of how individuals perceive a particular study problem (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The participants' opinions, behaviours, attitudes, and perceptions were critical in determining the potential development of a set of criteria for relevant brand-influencer collaborations.

The research design encouraged participants to respond in their own words rather than being compelled to select a predetermined response. Qualitative studies are

unpredictable for the researcher and allow for greater flexibility on the researcher's part (Bezuidenhout & Strydom, 2014).

The study examined the method by which South African agencies and corporations identify appropriate influencers for their respective brands in order to accomplish a variety of brand objectives. This aided in detecting trends that could be used to build a set of standardised criteria that South African SME brands could use without having to incur the costs of approaching a marketing agency.

3.3 Population and Sample

According to Bezuidenhout (2014), the analytical unit in research refers to the primary entity that is being investigated and analysed. The unit of analysis is the most important entity examined by the researcher in their research study. Individuals, organisations, artefacts (books, photographs, newspapers), geographical units (town, census tract, state), and social interactions are all examples of units of analysis that could be included in a research study (Sedgwick, 2014). The current study's units of analysis were influencer agency directors, corporate brand managers and influencers in South Africa.

A population is the total number of individuals or groups with shared characteristics that are the subject of the research and from whom the data is acquired (Pascoe, 2014). One of the objectives of this research was to assess the value of influencers for brands in South Africa (from SMEs to large corporations) and to develop the criteria for collaborating with an influencer who is aligned with the brand's identity. Thus, the study population included agencies that work with influencers and brand / marketing managers who have worked with or are presently cooperating with influencers, as these are the people who interact with influencers and are assumed to have tools in place to find acceptable influencers for brands. The population's characteristics may be used interchangeably with the term "unit of analysis". According to Du Plooy (2014), the unit of analysis is the smallest study-able subset of the population.

The population included heads of agencies that specialise in influencer marketing portfolios, as well as brand or marketing managers who have dealt with or dealt directly with influencers to form relationships for their organisation's brands in South Africa as well as South African influencers who have collaborated with more than three brands

in the past three years. They needed access to video online communication channels and needed to have had experience developing guidelines or particular criteria for developing relevant brand influencers.

Sampling means finding members of the study's population who have comparable characteristics and approaching them with the purpose of eliciting significant insights for use as research data (Pascoe, 2014). There are two distinct sampling processes, each employing a distinct strategy. They are referred to as probability sampling and non-probability sampling. For this study, non-probability sampling was the most appropriate method.

Non-probability sampling is a qualitative technique in which participants are not given an equal opportunity to be included in the study sample (Pascoe, 2014). This technique is best for this study due to the difficulties of gaining access to all agencies dedicated only to influencer marketing, as well as to all brand or marketing managers directly engaging with influencers who meet the population characteristics. Given the qualitative nature of this research, it was critical to maintain an exploratory mindset that aimed to understand the criteria agencies and brands use to identify what they believe to be a brand-fit influencer, and how this can potentially result in a marketing technique that can be used across multiple brands in South Africa, given that influencer marketing is still a relatively new phenomenon (Wielki, 2020).

In probability sampling, each participant in the population has an equal likelihood of being chosen. A probability sample is one in which each population element has a known non-zero probability of selection. This sampling technique determines the likelihood that the sample is representative of the population. In other words, probability sampling uses random sampling procedures to select a sample. This sampling technique maximises the likelihood of obtaining a representative sample of the entire population (Pascoe, 2014).

However, such a sample would not have been appropriate for this study because the participants did not reflect any population and were chosen specifically for their years of exposure in the brand-influencer arena, their organisation and job title.

The participants in the research were chosen through purposive sampling and convenience sampling which were determined by two criteria. To begin with, the research objective was to ensure that participants came from agencies that

specialised in influencer and brand relationships, as well as brand or marketing managers who were actively involved in recruiting influencers to collaborate with their businesses. Secondly, it was critical for the semi-structured interviews to include individuals who actively and aggressively develop or use strategies for selecting the relevant influencers for specific brands.

Convenience sampling is a non-probability sampling technique that was chosen because it bypasses time, location, and financial constraints associated with research (Stratton, 2021) which is crucial given the uncertainties surrounding physical contact during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The research sample was defined by its nature (Pascoe, 2014), which included a total of four participants who lived and worked in South Africa. Two participants were influencer portfolio directors at highly recognised agencies in South Africa, and two were brand/marketing managers who had worked directly with influencers on their respective brands.

3.4 Data Collection

Because of the research's qualitative nature, the in-depth, semi-structured interview was chosen as the main data gathering method for this study, supplemented by open-ended questions where necessary. By allowing for two-way communication between the interviewer (researcher) and participant, semi-structured interviews promoted rich data collection (Bezuidenhout, 2014). The interviews were conducted to obtain information about individuals' perspectives, experiences, beliefs and motivations regarding specific themes (Creswell, Ebersohn, Eloff, Ferreira, Ivankova, Jansen, Neiuwenhuis, Pietersen and Plano Clark, 2016). Qualitative methods, such as interviews, are intended to aid in the development of more 'in-depth' understanding of social phenomena (Creswell et al., 2016). A semi-structured interview incorporates the greatest features of both structured and unstructured interviews (Creswell et al., 2016). The interviewer created a set of questions that all respondents (research participants) answered. Semi-structured interviews begin with a number of foundational questions that help define the areas to be examined (Creswell et al., 2016). However, additional questions were asked during the interviews to clarify and elaborate on some topics (Bezuidenhout, 2014). This interview format is most frequently used in business since it gives participants a framework for discussion, which many find advantageous

(Bezuidenhout, 2014). The interviewer took the participants through the process, allowing for additional clarification and questions (Creswell et al., 2016). The interview took the nature of an open-ended inquiry session. The data collection took place from 10–15 September 2021 and additionally on 19 November 2021. The participants were identified and contacted on LinkedIn. According to Ornico (2020), LinkedIn is the world's largest professional network. It is used to interact with and strengthen professional ties, and so proved to be a trustworthy platform for the researcher to contact and solicit involvement from the targeted participants.

Each interview lasted about 35–45 minutes and was conducted on the Microsoft Teams platform with influencers, influencer agency directors and brand/marketing managers. The interviews began with broad questions to ascertain the participants' backgrounds and then progressed to more organised probing questions about the phenomenon of influencer marketing. This relaxed the interviewee and established confidence and trust between the interviewer and the interviewee. A certain amount of trust between the interviewer and participant was required in order to obtain accurate descriptions, opinions and perspectives for this study (Shuttleworth, 2017).

Before the scheduled interviews, the interviewer distributed consent forms to the participants; once the consent forms were returned to the interviewer, the scheduled interviews began. Consent is a research process that involves the exchange of information between the researcher and the human participants in the research. The information offered to human research participants should be adequate, easily comprehended by the research participant with decision-making capacity, and the research participant should choose to engage voluntarily. Respect for persons necessitates that those participants in research be given the option of participating or not participating (Joshi & Manandhar, 2020).

Permission to record the interview was obtained from each interviewee, and the participants were assured of their anonymity and that the data gained would be used solely for research reasons. The recordings of the interviews were securely stored in a password-protected laptop file and transcribed using the Microsoft Teams transcription tool with professional editing.

3.5 Data Analysis

Qualitative content analysis was utilised to uncover themes and patterns that would give structure and significance to the findings (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). From this, a conceptual framework was derived to drive the study; hence, an inductive qualitative content analysis approach was adopted (Davis, 2014).

As indicated in the preceding section, data for this study was gathered through semi-structured interviews. However, because of the COVID-19 lockdown requirements that the researcher and participants needed to follow, the interviews with participants were conducted using an online platform, namely, Microsoft Teams. The researcher scheduled interviews with the participants at times that were convenient to them. Braun and Clarke's (2013) theme analysis model was used to analyse the data.

The data for this research was analysed using the thematic analysis method. It enabled the researcher to extract meaningful information from the data. Additionally, it provided a framework for organising and interpreting the data and to provide a narrative understanding that connected the similarities and contrasts in participants' descriptions of their subjective experiences (Crowe, Inder & Porter, 2015).

Crowe et al. (2015) further elaborated that thematic analysis is the process of interpretation of qualitative data in order to find patterns of meaning across the data. Thematic analysis methods are essentially independent of theory and epistemology and can be applied across a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches (Braun and Clarke, 2006, cited in Crowe et al., 2015).

Thematic analysis was selected as it was best suited for analysing interpretations, and it allowed the researcher to properly examine the links between concepts (Braun and Clarke, 2013). According to Braun and Clarke (2013), the steps for theme analysis include data reduction, data display, and data conclusions. The second major advantage of thematic analysis is its adaptability in analysing qualitative data and allowing for the applicability of the findings in different fields.

i) Preparation of data

The researcher transcribed the audio from all the semi-structured interviews into text and reviewed it numerous times in order to gain a thorough comprehension of the data acquired.

ii) Definition of coding unit to be analysed

Braun and Clarke (2013) recommended that researchers disclose whether they used a participant's words, phrases, sentences, or paragraphs as a coding unit. The researcher established concepts and themes in this study by using the participant's words, phrases, and sentences that she deemed pertinent to the topic.

iii) Development of themes

According to Bezuidenhout and Cronje (2014), a critical aspect of coding is meticulously defining each code, theme, and category in order to apply them consistently to the researcher's material. In this study, the researcher used different colours to highlight the words and expressions of participants in order to find coding themes. The researcher documented what each colour represented in terms of the theme; this made it simple to identify the various themes following the coding procedure and to organise the highlighted sentences in a table accordingly. Where the researcher observed recurrent patterns or interactions between variables and components for an element that could aid in the development of a criterion, the researcher recorded them using a specific colour coding.

iv) Interpretation of data

The researcher analysed and connected the discovered themes and categories to previous findings and theories in order to derive meaning from the text.

v) Report on methods and findings

The researcher detailed the steps used to code, analyse, and interpret the data as accurately as feasible.

vi) Review of themes

The researcher verified the coherence of the category definitions and determined and fixed any coding issues.

vii) Coding all text

The researcher identified and characterised pertinent themes, and all data was contextualised considering the study questions. These were based on the perspectives and numerous factors that agencies and corporates used and observed on influencers' social media platforms, as well as what influencers knew about being selected for collaborations to accomplish various brand objectives.

viii) Assessing coding consistency

The researcher and an independent consultant double-checked the consistency of all coding.

3.6 Limitation and Delimitations

The limitations of a study are the constraints and potential problems that the researcher can anticipate that could threaten the study's validity (Du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014). The first restriction of this study was the COVID-19 pandemic, which made it impossible for the researcher to physically interview the individuals face-to-face for data collection. To overcome this limitation, the interviews were held online via Microsoft Teams. Another constraint could be the issue of bias in data interpretation and analysis, which the researcher addressed by using a constructivist research philosophy in which the participants' phenomenological stance was taken literally as a reality. While viewpoints are quite subjective in terms of data interpretation, this study constructivist in nature, reducing the level of bias. Participants' online access was another limitation.

The researcher had identified several delimitations (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). The sample framework was delimited to participants based in South Africa, with a focus on brand managers who had used influencer marketing as a social media strategy, as well as agencies that worked with SMEs to pair them with influencers for brand-related aims.

3.7 Ethical Consideration

According to Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2016), ethics refers to the researchers' behaviour in relation to the rights of individuals who become the subject of the research or are impacted by it. The researcher addressed general ethical concerns by notifying

participants of the study's intent to conduct it, obtaining consent from all participants, maintaining participant confidentiality to ensure privacy, avoiding harm to participants, respecting participants' rights, obtaining permission to conduct the study, accurately reporting the findings, and debriefing the participants.

The researcher ensured that subjects gave informed consent to participate in the research by fully explaining the purpose and procedures of the study, as well as the implications of their participation. Consent forms included a comprehensive statement of the research's purpose, a description of the researcher, the duration of the research, the participants' right to participate or withdraw, the potential harm and benefit (if any) of participation, and how data would be stored and circulated.

Anonymity and confidentiality are ethical standards used in research to safeguard the privacy of study participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Participants were assured that any information they provided would be treated confidentially throughout the research process. Identifying characteristics of individuals were removed from verbatim quotations; where this was not possible, for example, when the information is still attributed to sources, permission will be obtained from participants prior to use, particularly for individual interviews. Participants were not required to provide sensitive personal identification information such as their names; instead, they were assigned pseudonyms to maintain their anonymity.

To conduct the research, the researcher received an Ethical Clearance letter from Vega School as well as from the organisations where the study was conducted.

4 CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter summarises the findings from the data collection. Thematic content analysis was used to analyse the data. Crowe et al. (2015) defined thematic analysis as a technique for analysing qualitative data. The researcher gathered data through five semi-structured interviews which were conducted via Microsoft Teams, an online meeting platform. Two directors of brand-influencer agencies, two brand marketing managers at well-known corporate brands, and an influencer were interviewed; all were based in South Africa and had been active in the brand-influencer space for more than three years. They had an in-depth understanding of brand-influencer collaborations and had actively assisted brands in engaging in relevant collaborations that resulted in the achievement of brand objectives.

To draw conclusions, the researcher examined recurring themes and patterns of meaning. Because the following study was guided by Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism Framework, a deductive content analysis approach was used to analyse the data and derive the conclusions discussed below.

4.1 Findings

The Kapferer Brand Identity Prism aligns six elements by considering their relationship to the brand (Sender) and its target audience (Recipient), and vice versa. The findings on Personality, Culture, and Self-image (the internal components) are discussed first. Following that, the three external components are discussed, namely, Physique, Relationship, and Reflection. (See Table 4.1).

The following themes emerged during the coding process from participants' semi-structured interviews about how they identified and chose to collaborate with brand influencers. The primary goal of the semi-structured interviews was to ascertain the process by which brands identified what they perceived to be a relevant influencer with whom to partner in order to achieve brand building. Additionally, the semi-structured interviews aimed to ascertain whether influencers were aware of what brands look for when auditing their eWOM content shared across multiple platforms.

Table 4.1: Emergent themes

Framework: Personality Total: 73		
Theme	Frequency	Verbatim Quotes
Content created by influencer – representative of themselves	52	"I do influencing and brand content creation" "my friends decided we're going to start blogging about these events, because you want to go to free events, so you have to create content" "one thing that I really liked doing and that was taking photographs and videos" "They just think it's just taking beautiful photographs looking good. And, you know, taking nice videos and posting, I have a lot of people that I follow who have got great content... And I look at them and be like, I don't understand how you still here with such great content. And fairly recently, I discovered it also has to do with some kind of social capital that you have. So I found that people, yes, follow you because you've got great content." "With micro influencers, they are more advanced than your nano influencers, which means they create great content"
Aspiration – influencers and brands that create intentional desire for their audience	7	"So I'm also trying to then attract travel and travel agency" "If it's something aspirational, not necessarily target market, but people look at them, they would want to buy whatever brand they affiliated with." "Are you trying to create a sense of aspiration or are you trying to reposition your brand." "Something aspirational, somebody who is not necessarily the target market, but when people look at them, they would want to buy whatever brand they affiliated with."
Brand identity – the personality of a brand vs influencer shows a fit in terms of character	14	"Actual proper brand alignment and brand fit, I can say that, brand influencers are quite impactful." "Getting that alignment right makes it that much more impactful" "What we're trying to achieve as a brand. That alignment is very important," "What do they stand for, what are their interests, are they really aligned to your brand."

Framework: Personality Total: 73		
Theme	Frequency	Verbatim Quotes
		"Finding the right brand ambassador to represent your brand based on what you are trying to achieve as a brand is very important" "I think just asking yourself that as a brand, character and values are very important, checking activities, what do these people post about? What are their interests? Are those things aligned to your brand because you're trying not to create a disconnect."
Framework: Culture Total: 30		
Values – what the brand vs what the influencer stand for. Is what defining them aligned	8	"Which is why character and personality comes into play, some people, not necessarily be the target audience, but because their values and what they believe in is aligned to your brand and it could be a good match, that makes it more believable" "Yeah, we're not actually affiliated with our brand, we have similar values, you had to be intentional for them to pick it up." "And what what is aligned to me as well. So I think our values must be the same, I think our values must be the same"
Awareness – a character that is aware and open to change and agile to its surroundings	12	"It is a new thing" "Evolution of marketing" "Those that are blogging, and that's how I got into into the scene. And yeah, then later on started seeing they moved away from blogs now into your Instagram, and your Twitter and your Facebook spaces" "I always look at American trends, and what they're doing that I do, you know, and how are people doing? Because I know in the next 3 for 5 years, it's what's going to be happening popping the side" "So I started off in that space and then As it went by I got tired of, you know, just doing fitness stuff. Because it's, it's more to me... So I started exploring other avenues and positioning myself like for different categories"
Credibility - believability of a brand, to continuously deliver on its promised	10	"There are brands that use influences as affiliates" "We take brand fans to talk about your product in a consistent way, also helping you from a diversity of people with real connections"

Framework: Personality Total: 73		
Theme	Frequency	Verbatim Quotes
		"Allow them to be more natural in that way you not paying them to be people they are not." "You need to be consistent in your on your page"
Framework: Self-image Total: 41		
Relevant – ensuring that a brand / influencer is relevant	19	"impactful done the right way" "brands should be optimising " "be heard and stay relevant" "So I started exploring other avenues and positioning myself" "They have good engagement and they have good reach, do they have your target market" "Someone that sounds and looks like me" "So I feel like I'm influential in that space. And a lot of people follow me to find out what's happening"
Identity – what are the traits that make the brand / influencer relatable / who they are	22	"I like me grooming as well. I like going to the spa, like I've got a skincare routine" "I do this I do that, you know, so I had to expand, I had to expand and I'm glad I did." "Those are people who would normally fit under natural influencers" "You need to be present as well" "Because with nano's you can't use listening tools to know exactly where you live, your family setup, your income level, who you insured with, and why, how long you have you had that car"

The brand identity prism has three internal facets: personality, culture, and self-image. The personality aspect may include a celebrity spokesperson who lends the brand specific human attributes in order to give it a distinct identity (Kapferer, 2008). The personality aspect of this conceptual model is represented by an influencer and his or her personal qualities that are associated with the brand. In other words, an influencer lends the brand a unique personality. In the context of the findings, content shared by influencers was significantly indicated by the participants. This contributed to the Personality element of the prism. Wielki (2020) argued that the type of content created is changing as a result of the growing popularity of celebrity culture. He explained that

influencers are powerful human brands that have a positive effect on the performance of brands with which they are associated and the type of content they share with the audience plays a significant role (Wielki, 2020).

The participants agree on the importance of content creation and the type of content shared by influencers in contributing to the influencer's personality perception. One participant shared that *"Which is why character and personality comes into play when it comes to content shared with followers, the content becomes believable when it is aligned to the influencers character."*

Wielki (2020) further stated that the content of influencers promotes specific ideas and lifestyles. In terms of artists, this term refers to individuals who are primarily concerned with creating material that has a strong aesthetic and visual appeal. This is observed in one of the participants finding where they comment *"They just think it's just taking beautiful photographs looking good. And, you know, taking nice videos and posting, I have a lot of people that I follow who have got great content."*

The other two themes, aspiration and brand identity, exemplify the concept of purposefully developing a personality to which the audience (i.e., followers) aspires and which accurately represents the influencer's character. Participants' findings indicate that influencers are also interested in instilling aspiration in their target audience; one participant stated that an influencer's primary goal is to instil aspiration. *"If it's something aspirational, not necessarily target market, but people look at them, they would want to buy whatever brand they affiliated with."*

This is consistent with Braam's (2012) assertion that influencers frequently create their own original content in order to build their reputation. Online identity is critical to influencers' popularity, as people gravitate toward those who endorse particular ideas, styles or attitudes Wielki (2020).

Culture is the second internal facet. Culture is a collection of values that a brand communicates to its target audience and uses to differentiate itself from competitors (Kapferer, 2008). According to the participants, influencers' values should align with the brand's values in order to foster a mutual relationship which would be portrayed externally through brand campaigns driven by influencers. This is seen in one of the participants responses *"Characteristic is very important, personality is very important, values are very important, a proper fit."* All participants acknowledged that an

influencer and a brand's values must be aligned for a collaboration to be successful, as this promotes simplicity in personality association and general outlook.

The final internal dimension is self-image, which is how the brand represents itself (Kapferer, 2008). According to the conceptual model, influencers' images should be consistent with the brand's self-image in order to communicate a consistent message to a desirable target audience. In their responses, the participants emphasized the importance of relevance as a deliberate activity that influencers should invest in as part of their self-image because it positions the influencer as current and relevant.

The coding for Culture revealed two major themes for this facet of the Brand Identity Prism: values articulated by influencers that brands would look for when collaborating with influencers on a global scale.

- The culture dimension embodies the brand's unique set of values, which it communicates to its target audience and uses to differentiate itself from competitors. Brands seek confirmation that the influencer's values and those of the brand are compatible (Wielki, 2020). Values enable an influencer to create an expectation through their work; when values are strong, consumers and brands can anticipate consistency in the type of content a creator produces. According to the Influencer Marketing Benchmarking Report, 2020 (cited in Wielki, 2020), brands that have a solid grasp on influencer marketing activities achieve high average earned media value.
- Additionally, the Culture dimension emphasised the importance of credibility for an agile brand. Credibility – a brand's ability to consistently deliver on its promise. Because customers frequently regard their friends and influencers as the most credible sources (AlFarraj, Alalwan, Obeidat, Baabdullah, Aldmour & Al-Haddad, 2021), the perceived credibility of influencers has become a critical issue. The participants shared that perceived influencer credibility has been a constant source of concern for marketers and brand managers when looking engaging in relevant collaborations, three of the five participants shared that this can impact noticeable campaign performance, sales and brand growth when influencers maintain a high level of credibility in their relationship with them. The influence of culture on behaviour has been extensively studied, according to Zhang and Sanderson (2017). The participants acknowledged that the way an influencer behaves outside

the scope of the collaboration contract but still during the duration of the collaboration has a direct effect – whether positive or negative. As a result, it is critical to define expected behaviours prior to the start of the collaboration

Identity and relevance were two themes that emerged during the interview coding process under Self-image. Identity is defined as a collection of meanings that define individuals in terms of the roles they fulfil, the social categories or groups to which they belong, and the unique characteristics that define them as distinct individuals. The findings indicate that participants believe that influencers' sense of identity influences how they portray themselves on social media, thereby creating a perception of who they are and how their followers perceive them. Participants added that such factors influenced how influencers behave and interact with brands and their followers

Framework: <i>Physique</i>		
Theme	Frequency	Verbatim Quotes
Physical look that audience associates with brand / influencer	32	"I am trying to help a friend out he is using his fitness" "He wants to get into this whole fitness where he you know, engages with your Adidas, and your Reeboks, and your Virgin Actives" "And then I also used to work for Discovery and Discovery vitality is all about wellness and fitness and all of that" "They just think it's just taking beautiful photographs looking good" "And he's really got these great looking, he's got a nice body and everything, and he looks after himself and everything, and he's struggling" "I just look at these people's profiles and they look nice; they are good looking people"
Framework: <i>Relationship</i>		
Authentic – builds trust between brands / influencers and target audience. They come across as relatable	50	"Look for influencers that authentic about your brand and simply love it... people who feel connected to your brand" "Connect more authentically to those people" "To connect with them" "Really build a simple human connection between human and the people behind the brand" "Filter prospective influencers and see how their fit to you brand in an authentic manner"

Framework: <i>Physique</i>		
Theme	Frequency	Verbatim Quotes
		"It's all about being authentic, believable and real." "Simple questions that people ask themselves when they consider something, and they are all linked to trust" "Someone that I know I'm affiliated with trust that recommendation" "It's so such a great thing because they now have built in that relationship and they trust me"
Engagement – how the influencer and brand engages with its followers / audience to create connection	27	"If you are looking for engagement" "If you want engagement, I will go for nano influencers" "they are very great for engagement" "problem with micro influencers is that, as they grow the engagement decreases because they no longer have authentic content" "If you want people to talk about your brand, you are going to focus more on engagement." "for instance engagements, some people who are more in touch with business and careers, and the more serious stuff" "it is engagement to a certain extent depending on how you structure the post, engagement and driving lifestyle" "engagement and if the engaging followers are actually our target"
Framework: <i>Reflection</i>		
Awareness – the influencer becomes an extension of the brand in a positive light to ultimately create brand visibility.	12	"If you are trying to reach a new target market, you are going to focus more on reach and awareness." "If you are trying to reach a new target market, you are going to focus more on reach and awareness" "and you can use the word awareness as well, to kind of measure that" "spreading messages around awareness for a specific" "Be part of a conversation and you want to drive awareness around something through a conversation with experts"
Measurement – post a campaign, the brand needs to quantify the	28	"I'm like, okay, the efforts that I've created what, how many customers walked in, or called or inquired and say that, I saw this post from Donald" "These are some of the metrics that you use to measure performance"

Framework: <i>Physique</i>		
Theme	Frequency	Verbatim Quotes
success of the collaboration		"As I mentioned with the scorecard" "You need to have an exit strategy" "what targets have we set for this person? What are we looking at?" "They cost effect yet they give you better ROI"
Reach – looking at how many people of its target audience the brand reached during the collaboration	24	"If your objective is reach, 300,000,000 reach and you achieve less, then you know that your target was not met...metrics used to measure performance or contenders reach is engagement." "Another important is audience, the size of their audience, is the audience that they are having your target market?" "ask yourself is my audience, my target market, going to benefit from the influencer that I'm using." "If you are trying to reach a new target market, you are going to focus more on reach and awareness."

The brand identity prism has three external qualities: physique, relationship, and reflection. The physique facet is an external view of the value that the brand generates through its physical attributes (Kapferer, 2008). The second external facet is relationship. The relationship facet specifies the brand's actions, behaviour and interaction with stakeholders (Kapferer, 2008). The last external facet is reflection. Reflection indicates an outward reflection that describes the way in which customers view the brand (Kapferer, 2008).

In the context of this study, only one participant made mentioned physical appearance, focusing more on living a lifestyle of fitness and healthy eating to attract a collaboration with targeted brands as well as being deliberate on clothing item when targeting collaborations with fashion brands. Smith and Murray (2014) asserted that the body is a central concept in self-identity, with some individuals increasingly defining themselves by their physical appearance. According to the participant, depending on the brands with which influencers wish to collaborate, they will work on their physical appearance if the targeted brand places a premium on physical appearance of influencers for potential collaborations. With this said, there was no emphasis on physique by the other four participants.

In the context of this study, the two main themes that were pertinent were building authentic relationship where there is trust. The participants shared that this is not only between the brand and the influencer but more importantly between an influencer and their followers, as the content would ultimately come across as relatable or be well received as the trust element is there. The second theme was engagement, which recurred the most frequently across all themes inside the prism. In this regard, participants shared that the influencer was deemed critical for generating eWOM brand recognition via engagement, and therefore for spreading a good message about a brand's desired objectives.

According to Heming (2020), para-social relationships are critical when it comes to influencing followers on social media. If a para-social relationship is established, it may also have an effect on purchase intention (Hwang & Zhang, 2018 and Lee & Watkins, 2016, both cited in Heming, 2020). A quasi-social relationship is defined as two-way communication in an artificial or fictitious social setting (Lin, 2002, cited in Heming, 2020:17). All participants shared that this is a result of repeated viewings, social media followers develop an intimacy with the influencers and thus develop a sense of loyalty toward their favourite influencer.

Three of the five participants further shared that authenticity is frequently used as a catch-all term to refer to a person who possesses all of the characteristics associated with trustworthiness.

The term reflection in this study refers to a group of stereotypical beliefs or qualities of a brand's target market that are regularly emphasised in campaigns and other types of communication. Three themes emerged from the reflection process were measurement, reach and awareness. This area mostly focuses on the outcome of a collaboration between a brand and an influencer based on follower interaction.

Wielki (2020) asserted that influencers' efforts result in the humanisation of brands and increased awareness of their existence. All the participants believe that among the most significant repercussions of influencers' activities is the dissemination of information about a particular brand, product, or service, as well as their impact on brand awareness. Belanche et al. (2021) stated that influencers who have a higher level of public recognition are more careful of the image they convey to others and acquire prominent brands in order to use them publicly and create an image of

themselves that corresponds to their ideal image. The participants shared that the brand's goal with the influencer engagement is to increase awareness, sales, conversation, brand growth and other aspects amongst among its target audience.

According to Dalstam, Holmagren and Nordlof (2018), brands today use influencers to reach their desirable target audience instead of directly transmitting their message to the consumer. One of the most interesting findings, which was strongly echoed by participants, was that influencers engage and interact with their followers on a personal and valuable level on social media, which can be used to drive a brand's marketing activities. As a result, the participants shared that influencer collaborations should not be an afterthought or a reactive activity, as they can connect the brand with its consumers and establish a positive brand image for a fraction of the cost of traditional advertising.

Findings show that the participants believe that brands can determine an influencer's 'average reach' by examining their engagement data, which includes the average number of likes or comments an influencer has received per post in recent history, as engagement is a critical indicator of reach and whether their audience is engaging with their content, but the measurement of this was no consistent across all the participants.

All the participants shared the same sentiments that measuring the efficacy of an influencer marketing campaign is crucial for efficiently increasing influencer activities and, ultimately, contributing to the brand objectives. The participants believed that the more influencer collaborations a brand has, the more knowledge they can bring to their next influencer collaboration as the participants all shared different ways of how they measure success of a collaboration. However, they all reiterated that it all depends on the objectives, whether they are sales, increasing traffic to a website, brand mentions, or follower growth. This theme was strongly reinforced by all participants, since the opinion was that one must assess and determine whether or not the brand influencer collaboration was beneficial.

4.2 Reliability and Validity / Trustworthiness

The term reliability (in quantitative terms) refers to the likelihood that the same results would be obtained if the research were repeated by a different researcher at a different

time using the same method or instrument (Koonin, 2014:257); however, reliability is concerned with the study's credibility (in qualitative terms) (Welman, Kruger & Mitchell, 2005:145).

Validity (in quantitative terms) is all about determining whether the research measured what it was supposed to measure (Koonin, 2014). Validity in qualitative research refers to "the integrity and application of the methods undertaken and the precision in which the findings accurately reflect the data" (Noble & Smith, 2015:34). This equates to dependability (in qualitative terms). This study was dependable as the researcher uses a tried and tested framework, namely, Kapferer Brand Identity Prism of brand identity and also made use of past literature by reviewing the findings in the past research that was studied. The validity is measured by means of internal validity (whether the research design will answer the research questions) as stated by Koonin (2014). The researcher was confident that the study would answer the research questions, as construct validity was present. "Construct validity is when we measure something with an instrument, we use to measure that which is supposed to measure" (Welman et al, 2005:142). The researcher believed that construct validity was present in the study as it was based on the Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism framework of brand identity and all questions and findings were based on the model.

4.2.1 Credibility

Credibility refers to the researcher's ability to accurately evaluate the data presented by the participants (Koonin, 2014). To establish credibility, the researcher spent sufficient time gathering and analysing data to appropriately interpret the findings. The semi-structured interviews were videotaped and transcribed to ensure that participants were not misquoted, and notes were taken during discussions to facilitate the researcher's analysis of the data.

4.2.2 Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent to which a study's findings and analyses can be transferred beyond a single research project and are applicable to various locations, situations, populations, and times (Koonin, 2014).

The study was cross-sectional and had a restricted time period, exposure and outcome occurred concurrently, in contrast to a longitudinal study in which the researcher can demonstrate a true cause-and-effect link (Koonin, 2014). As a result, the study's transferability may be limited. However, as Koonin (2014) recommended, the researcher established transferability by providing a precise and robust description of the phenomenon and a detailed and robust account of the data gathering experience. This gave a comprehensive and complete picture of the research setting and should enable other readers and researchers to make their own judgements about its transferability.

4.2.3 Dependability

Dependability refers to the consistency of the integration process between the data gathering method, data analysis and the theory derived from the data (Koonin, 2014). Despite the fact that this is a qualitative study, the data's dependability was increased using an inter-coder reliability check. According to Saunders et al. (2016), this is the degree to which two or more coders agree on the coding of the material or data under analysis, implying agreement on the coding system. Inter-coder reliability was established by the researcher's having her supervisor evaluate, audit, and critique her coding system and conclusions. Additionally, the researcher made use of intra-coding dependability, which, according to Koonin (2014), refers to the researcher's consistent coding style. These two procedures guaranteed the data was coded accurately, allowing the study's dependability to be verified.

4.2.4 Confirmability

According to Koonin (2014), this characteristic of trustworthiness relates to the extent to which the researcher's conclusions and interpretations are supported by the data obtained. The conclusions must flow naturally from the data. The researcher outlined the research procedure in detail and ensured that the conclusions were based on participant narratives and language and that the researcher's own bias was eliminated.

The researcher discussed the research procedure and explained why particular themes were grouped together at the analysis's coding step. Throughout the study process, the researcher kept a reflective notebook to reflect on everything that occurred in order to provide significant insight into how the themes arose.

5 Chapter 5: Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to determine the feasibility of developing a criteria for South African SME brands to use when collaborating with relevant influencers to reinforce brand alignment. Furthermore, this research paper set out to ascertain the current process by which brands collaborate with relevant influencers in order to achieve their desired brand outcome.

The Brand Identity Prism by Kapferer served as the theoretical framework for the semi-structured interview questions. The researcher determined that this framework was appropriate because it considers both internal and external factors that contribute to brand identity objectives. South African SME brands, in particular, were chosen as the area to contribute to because, in the context of South Africa, they operate on a shoestring budget, have been significantly impacted by COVID-19, and must find innovative ways to maintain a presence on social media platforms for potential growth, as stated by Hassen (2021). As a result, the development of relevant brand-influencer criteria aims to guide SME brands that are not able to access or afford the services of agencies in forming meaningful collaborations.

5.1 Answers to the Research Questions

With reference to the research questions, this section aims to unpack if the semi-structured interviews which are supported by Kapferer Brand Identity Prism.

5.1.1 What criteria are influencer agencies and brands currently using to identify relevant influencers for their brands?

The research findings indicated that corporate brands and brand-influencer agencies do not have a set criterion for collaborating with brand influencers. Having said that, it is worth noting that participants demonstrated common elements they actively observed on influencers' social media pages. Several critical elements were engagement, reach, content, brand value, affiliations, followers, and their perceived perception of the success of previous collaborations by influencers with other brands.

5.1.2 How are the successes of these criteria elements determined?

The findings indicate that corporate brands and brand-influencer agencies do not use a consistent metric to measure success. Participants agreed that the success of a

relevant brand-influencer partnership is contingent upon the partnership's initial objective. These can range from brands specifying the collaboration's objectives to include, but not limited to, increasing followers on their social media pages, increasing traffic to their website, contributing to the growth of sales, sparking conversation, and increasing awareness.

With that said, participants indicated that brand-influencer objectives should be established upfront and that the content created by the brand and influencer should have a direct impact on the pre-determined key performance indicators. Additionally, the collaboration should be defined, outlined and tracked throughout the collaboration to ensure that it is proceeding as planned, rather than measuring results only at the conclusion.

5.1.3 How do brands ensure that their brand messages are aligned when engaging with influencers?

Apart from collaborative content creation, there was little to contribute to this question, according to the findings. The answers to this question remain ambiguous and provide opportunities for additional research. Given that content was a significant factor in participants' responses, it is reasonable to assume that brand influencer collaborations are also cantered on content created by the participants in the semi-structured interviews. Additional research is necessary, possibly with a larger sample size of participants.

In conclusion, additional research should be conducted to develop a criterion that can be used by not only South African brands, but also brands of any size and brand influencer agencies, as there is currently no standard in this field. The development of a brand influencer criterion will make a significant contribution, as the influencer space is rapidly evolving and growing and is gradually supplanting traditional brand marketing activities, as evidenced by Geyser (2021) stating that over 5000 marketing agencies, brands, and other relevant professionals were surveyed in 2021 to ascertain their perspectives and gain insight into their industry perceptions. The findings indicated a significant decline in influencer marketing spend between March and July 2020 as the Covid19 pandemic unfolded, followed by a surge in influencer-led campaigns beginning in August 2020. The findings indicated one significant finding: despite the uncertainties surrounding COVID in 2020, influencer marketing remains a

highly popular and effective form of marketing. Indeed, can now be considered a component of the mainstream marketing mix; more investment had been made in this space than in traditional marketing; and the restrictions imposed by Covid accelerated the growth of this space beyond what was anticipated.

5.2 Contributions

Influencer marketing is still a relatively new field of academic research, and additional insights into the phenomenon are necessary, given the topic's increasing importance as a result of the growth of social media. This empirical study may be used to advance knowledge about influencer marketing as a form of communication that can also be used to strengthen a brand and to stimulate further research.

According to the researchers, influencer marketing can be used in conjunction with brand communication tools to maximize the impact of brand alignment and other brand objectives. Additionally, by incorporating the influencer into a brand's identity, the influencer can positively impact a consumer's perception of the brand. As a result, the researchers classified influencers' roles in laying the groundwork for a brand's identity and image to work cohesively and thus strengthen a brand. Additionally, three significant factors affecting these processes were identified in this study, which may be of interest to marketers in order to communicate effectively with their target audience. These are the eWOM, trust, and values factors.

5.3 Further Research

In conclusion, additional research should be conducted to develop criteria that can be used by not only South African brands, but also brands of any size and by brand-influencer agencies, as there is currently no standard in this field.

Additional research is necessary, possibly with a larger sample size of participants.

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7 Appendices:

A: Ethical Clearance Form

B: Consent Forms (five)

C: Interview Schedule: Questionnaire (five)

D: Transcripts

E: Research Report Summary Document Table