



The Impact of Embedded Influencer Advertising on YouTube and TikTok on Preteen Children: Investigating Parental Awareness

By

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ABSTRACT

Influencer advertising on social media platforms is often covert and embedded into regular content. Preteens between 9 and 12 are avid social media users, especially on YouTube and TikTok. Preteens in their concrete operational stage are believed to possess the cognitive abilities to process traditional advertising, but the embedded nature of influencer advertising can make it difficult for children with less mature advertising literacy to recognise its intent. Parasocial relationships (PSRs) with influencers increase their vulnerability and cause a warped sense of source credibility. This study aimed to investigate the impact of embedded influencer advertising on YouTube and TikTok on preteen children from a parental perspective to potentially inform education and legislation. Furthermore, the study aimed to understand how PSRs, and the dimensions of source credibility influenced this impact. The sample consisted of seven mothers, residing in the City of Cape Town, who partook in semi-structured in-depth interviews. Both parents and children appeared to lack an understanding of influencer advertising and suggested that education might be necessary for preteens to sufficiently understand disclosures. The study found that children are impacted by embedded influencer advertising through an increase in consumerism and parents expected preteens to be impacted emotionally when understanding the reality of sponsored content. PSRs formed with influencers seemed to heighten preteens' vulnerability to persuasion. This study highlighted the need for stricter legislation and accountability regarding disclosure, and the necessity of education for parents and preteens. Furthermore, the study aimed to initiate and encourage conversations between parents, children, and schools to allow preteens to enjoy their favourite content without exploitation.

Key words: influencer advertising, embedded advertising, TikTok, YouTube, preteens, parental awareness, parasocial relationships, source credibility theory, concrete operational stage, advertising literacy

Declaration

I hereby declare that the research report submitted for the BA Honours in Strategic Brand Communication to The Independent Institute of Education (The IIE) is my own work and has not previously been submitted to another University or Higher Education Institution for a postgraduate qualification.



28 November 2021

Signature

Date

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CHAPTER 1 – Introduction

The first chapter of this report aims to provide a comprehensive background for the study, as well as a justification for its necessity. After the introduction, the rationale is laid out, followed by the problem statement, purpose statement, research question and objectives.

1.1. Introduction and Background

Preteen children between the ages of 9 and 12 are avid users of social media, especially the audio-visual platforms YouTube and TikTok (Tolbert & Drogos, 2019; Perez, 2020; Zhong & Frenkel, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has caused an increase in children's screen time and thus their time spent on social media (Wallace, 2020). According to literature based on Piaget's cognitive developmental stages, children in their concrete operational stage have the cognitive ability to distinguish between advertising content and regular media content and can register its persuasive and selling intent (Šramová, 2014).

However, as preteen children are increasingly consuming more influencer-created content on YouTube and TikTok, as opposed to television content (Perez, 2020), non-disclosed embedded advertising and sponsorships make it difficult for children with less mature advertising literacy to make this distinction. The parasocial relationships (PSR) that children form with social media personalities and the celebrity status given to them often cause children to admire them which then causes a distorted sense of source credibility. This increases the vulnerability of preteen children, as their advertising literacy is less developed to deal with covert advertising messages (Boerman & Van Reijmersdal, 2019).

Thus, this study aimed to gain a more in-depth understanding of how preteen children are impacted by marketing on the social media platforms YouTube and TikTok. This impact was investigated through the perspectives of the children's parents to potentially guide informed decision making with regards to children's social media diets, to monitor and enhance their level of advertising literacy for embedded advertising more effectively (Naumovska, Jovevski & Brockova, 2020).

The following report will provide a detailed account of the rationale behind and the objectives and purpose of the study, as well as the theoretical and academic work that served as a framework throughout. Furthermore, the research methodology and approach will be discussed in detail followed by the findings, which will be deliberated within the body of existing research, the theoretical framework and larger context of the study. Lastly, the report will give an account of how research questions and objectives were answered, followed by the ethical considerations, limitations, and suggested heuristic value.

1.2. Rationale

Children's inability to fully grasp advertising intent has always been a subject of interest but has gained momentum with the boom of social media (Wilcox, Kunkel, Cantor, Dowrick, Linn & Palmer, 2004; Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017). Influencer marketing is often covert and non-disclosed, which blurs the lines for younger audiences with immature advertising literacy (Boerman & Van Reijmersdal, 2020).

Advertising targeted at children is a controversial topic as it allows brands take advantage of those who are most vulnerable (Radesky, Chassiakos, Ameenuddin & Navsaria, 2020). However, children's vulnerability is further exacerbated as social media advertising is not only subtle but come from admired and trusted sources – their favourite influencers. The parasocial relationships, along with the lack of legislation regarding disclosure of influencer sponsorships, allow brands to reach preteen audiences in a way that is persuasive, subtle, and effective (Evans, 2020).

Preteen children are increasingly active on YouTube and TikTok and form a large portion of the audience base (Tolbert & Drogos, 2019; Perez, 2020; Zhong & Frenkel, 2020). COVID-19 has seen a surge in children's screen time, thus their time on social media (Wallace, 2020) which highlights the need for more in-depth understanding of how children, specifically impressionable preteens, are influenced by marketing on these platforms. By understanding their level of advertising literacy for covert advertising messages, parents can make informed decisions regarding their children's social media usage and gain insight into monitoring and improving their understanding of advertising and persuasive intent through education (Naumovska *et al.*, 2020).

The significance of this study lies in its focus on preteen children and the decision to study the phenomenon from the parents' perspective. Preteens are increasingly active on social media (Tolbert & Drogos, 2019; Perez, 2020; Zhong & Frenkel, 2020) and due to their Piagetian stage of concrete operational thought, possess an inconsistent understanding of advertising that could not be compared to that of younger children or teenagers (Šramová, 2014). Since parents are believed to be integral in their children's education and often regulate their media consumption (Radesky *et al.*, 2020), studying the issue from a parental perspective has the potential to provide meaningful insight that could inform education and future research on the subject. To date, there is a lack of research on the subject focused on a South African sample, which is deemed necessary in the pursuit of country-specific understanding, education, and legislation.

1.3. Problem Statement

According to literature based on Piaget's operational stages, children in their concrete operational stage possess the cognitive abilities to distinguish between advertising content and regular media content and can register its persuasive and selling intent (Šramová, 2014).

However, as preteen children are exponentially consuming more influencer-created content on YouTube and TikTok, as opposed to television content (Perez, 2020), non-disclosed advertising and sponsorships make it difficult for children with less mature advertising literacy to make this distinction. Since children form parasocial relationships with social media personalities and often look up to them, they develop a warped sense of source credibility that increases their vulnerability for covert advertising messages (Boerman & Van Reijmersdal, 2019).

1.4. Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to gain a parental perspective on how preteens are impacted by embedded advertising on YouTube and TikTok, while looking at the nature of their parasocial relationships with influencers and the level of source credibility awarded to social media personalities and the influence thereof.

1.5. Research Question

How does embedded influencer advertising on YouTube and TikTok impact preteen children?

1.5.1. Sub-questions

- How aware are parents of their children's social media diets, specifically on YouTube and TikTok, and the impact thereof?
- How much time do preteens spend consuming YouTube and TikTok content?
- What is the nature of preteens' parasocial relationships with influencers and how does it affect how they respond to advertising?
- What degree of source credibility is given to influencers by preteens?

1.5.2. Objectives

- Gain insight on parents' awareness and perspectives on their children's interaction with social media and embedded influencer marketing.
- Understand how much time preteens spend on YouTube and TikTok.
- Find out whether parasocial relationships with influencers affect how preteens react to influencer advertising.
- Investigate how much source credibility is given to influencers by preteens.

CHAPTER 2 – Literature Review

The following chapter provides a detailed account of the concepts relevant to the study, the theories that served as a foundation, and the existing literature on the topic of embedded influencer advertising and preteens. The literature review explores several pertinent themes followed by a conclusion on the gaps in the particular field of study.

2.1. Conceptualisation

2.1.1. Preteens

Preteens, also referred to as tweens or pre-adolescents, are children between the ages of 9 and 12 (Tolbert & Drogos, 2019) who fall into Piaget's concrete operational stage (Piaget, 1964). This study focuses on preteens as they are active and independent users of video-streaming social media platforms such as YouTube and TikTok (Van Reijmersdal, Rozendaal, Hudders, Vanwesenbeeck, Cauberghe & Van Berlo, 2020).

2.1.2. Advertising to Children

As consumers, children are especially important to businesses (Krypton, 2018). In 2018, spending on digital marketing for children arrived at 900 million U.S. dollars globally and was predicted to increase (Guttmann, 2020). Children are significant targets for advertisers since they are believed to have substantial influence over their parents' purchase decisions. For brands, children are also potential future adult customers and businesses aim to 'catch them young' in the hopes of converting them to loyal customers (Calvert, 2008; Krypton, 2018). Advertising directed at children is largely believed to be unfair due to their inability to analyse these messages (Šramová, 2014) and is looked at from a social media advertising perspective in this study.

2.1.3. YouTube and TikTok

This study focuses on popular social media platforms, YouTube and TikTok, which are both based on sharing audio-visual content, albeit in different formats (Hudders, De Jans & De Veirman, 2020).

A report published in 2019 showed that children between the ages of 8 and 11 preferred watching YouTube content as opposed to television content (Ofcom, 2019). TikTok has become increasingly popular amongst young audiences and has been the most downloaded app since 2019 (Hudders *et al.*, 2020; Hutchinson, 2021; Koetsier, 2021). According to a study done by Qustodio, children between the ages of 4 and 14 spent more than 80 minutes per day watching both YouTube and TikTok (Hale, 2020).

2.1.4. Influencers

Social media users who have managed to gain a large following are known as influencers. Influencers are everyday people who create entertaining and appealing content on platforms such as Instagram or YouTube, to attract followers and achieve online fame (Evans, 2020). Micro-influencers can have anything from 1000-100,000 followers, while macro-influencers' following can range from 100,000 to 1 million followers, awarding them a celebrity-like status (De Veirman, Hudders & Nelson, 2019). These personalities brand themselves across social media by sharing high-quality self-generated content on specific topics or their lifestyle. Influencers are known for sharing their opinions and advice regarding brands and subsequently give product suggestions to their followers (De Jans, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2019; Hudders *et al.*, 2020).

Influencers who create video content for YouTube are called vloggers or YouTubers. YouTubers have become significant influences in the purchase decisions of younger children, who are increasingly active on the platform (De Veirman *et al.*, 2019). Children typically enjoy vlogs containing pranks, daily vlogs, videos showcasing musical abilities, vloggers playing video games, and product unboxing and reviews. Successful YouTubers have managed to build large communities around their channels, consisting of millions of subscribers and often sell their own **merchandise**, called YouTube Merch, matching their personal brand (De Veirman *et al.*, 2019;

Boerman & Van Reijmersdal, 2020). This study focuses on how preteens interact with influencers on YouTube and TikTok.

2.1.5. Influencer Marketing

Influencers have become popular spokespeople for brands through influencer marketing. Due to their large audience base and popularity of their content, influencers are seen as credible sources by their followers which has led multiple brands to add these personalities to their marketing strategies. Influencers are typically paid advertising revenue by brands for recommending products to their followers or subscribers (De Jans, Vanwesenbeeck, Cauberghe, Hudders, Rozendaal & van Reijmersdal, 2018; De Veirman *et al.*, 2019; Evans, 2020). The worth of the influencer marketing sector is estimated to reach \$15 billion by 2022 (Business Intelligence, 2021). De Veirman *et al.* (2019) explains that for brand endorsements on social media to be classified as influencer marketing, the influencer must receive either monetary compensation or free products in return. Additionally, influencer marketing content must be overseen and approved by the brand advertisers. Social media influencers thus act as independent middle parties between brands and consumers, allowing brands to reach consumers in a perceived authentic manner, since influencers deliver messages in ways that resonate best with their specific audience base. This study focuses on the nature and understanding of influencer marketing on YouTube and TikTok its influence on preteen children.

2.1.6. Advertising Literacy

Advertising literacy refers to people's knowledge and understanding of advertising (Hoek, Rozendaal, van Schie, van Reijmersdal & Buijzen, 2020). Advertising literacy consists of three levels, namely, advertisement recognition, understanding of selling intent, and the understanding of persuasion intent (Boerman & Van Reijmersdal, 2020). According to Boerman, Van Reijmersdal, Rozendaal and Dima (2018) advertisement recognition refers to a person's ability to distinguish between advertising content and regular media content. Secondly, understanding of selling intent involves the understanding that the content was created to sell something to the viewer. Lastly, understanding persuasive intent refers to the understanding that the

content was aimed at influencing and changing the attitudes and cognitions of the viewer.

Advertising literacy is crucial for individuals to form a healthy relationship with advertising, as it helps them identify and understand the meaning behind it (Boerman & Van Reijmersdal, 2020). Advertising literacy is relevant to this study since preteens are believed to have less mature advertising literacy for covert advertising messages, which could impact their interaction with influencer advertising (Rozendaal, Buijzen & Velkenburg, 2009).

2.1.7. Embedded Advertising

Brand endorsements that form part of influencer advertising are often fully integrated within the non-commercial content that influencers post (De Jans *et al.*, 2018; Evans, Hoy & Childers, 2019). Sponsored content in videos or posts are frequently masked as regular media content, making it appear as organic as possible (Boerman, Willemsen & van der Aa, 2017; Boerman & van Reijmersdal, 2019; De Jans *et al.*, 2019; Evans *et al.*, 2019).

This subtle integration of advertising is less invasive to followers, and thus more difficult to detect (Hudders & Cauberghe, 2018). Although multiple regulations have been implemented to enforce advertising disclosure on social media, many influencers continue to strategically conceal the true nature of their sponsored content from their audience (De Veirman *et al.*, 2019). Due to the subtlety, both children and their parents have been found to struggle to recognise YouTube videos as advertisements (Evans *et al.*, 2019; Folkvord, Bevelander, Rozendaal & Hermans, 2019). Embedded advertising is prevalent on all social media platforms and children are especially vulnerable to it which emphasises the relevance of this study (De Veirman *et al.*, 2019).

2.1.8. Advertising Disclosure

Advertising disclosures act as vehicles for informing social media users that the content they are viewing includes advertisement and thus has selling and persuasive intent (Boerman & van Reijmersdal, 2020). According to the Advertising Regulatory Board (2021) influencers are required to ensure their sponsored content is identified

accordingly, with identifiers such as #ad, #sponsored or with the help of platform specific features.

De Veirman *et al.* (2019) argues that disclosures are importance in activating people's existing schemas related to advertising. When confronted with embedded advertising, people are often dependent on disclosures to trigger their advertising literacy (Bladow, 2017). The prevalence and impact of disclosure and non-disclosure of sponsorships on YouTube and TikTok content consumed by preteens is investigated in this study.

2.2. Theoretical Foundation

2.2.1. *Piaget's Cognitive Developmental Stages (Piaget, 1964)*

Piaget's theory of cognitive development aims to describe the development of human intelligence by suggesting that children move through four cognitive developmental stages. Piaget argues that children are internally motivated to learn about their world and do this through various perceptual and motor activities, which helps them refine various knowledge structures in their brains. Children actively work to develop their existing mental structures by using them to make sense of new experiences. As children develop and learn more about the world around them, they add to and modify these structures to continually gain a more detailed perspective of reality. According to Piaget, all children move through four fixed stages, namely, sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational. Through these stages children's exploratory behaviour in early childhood develop into complex intelligence in late adolescence and adulthood (Piaget, 1964; Berk, 2013).

Piaget's theory is often referred to in studies focussing on children's advertising and consumer behaviour, as it describes how children process information and make sense of their experiences (Šramová, 2014; Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017). In this study, Piaget's theory is used as a foundation to understand how preteens, in their concrete operational stage, perceive and process embedded advertising and its mediating factors.

2.2.2. Parasocial Interaction (Horton & Wohl, 1956)

Horton and Wohl (1956) first described Parasocial Interaction (PSI) as the one-sided imaginary interaction between a person and a media personality, which has the potential to develop into an enduring, one-sided, personal bond, called a parasocial relationship (PSR). While Horton and Wohl (1956) often refer to PSI and PSR interchangeably, parasocial relationships take longer to develop and require ongoing interaction (Munnukka, Maity, Reinikainen & Luoma-aho, 2018). The one-sided nature of these relationships allows one party to spend substantial time and energy being immersed in it, while the other is entirely unaware of their existence (Yuan & Lou, 2020).

PSRs with influencers are common and can feel even more realistic, since followers are interacting with a real-life person, as opposed to a television character or celebrity, and have access to personal information about the influencer's day-to-day life. This creates increased feelings of intimacy and closeness in the follower (Lee & Watkins, 2016; Munnukka *et al.*, 2018). Social media has also allowed for more complex PSRs, that go beyond the one-way relationships seen with traditional media, since influencers have the ability to interact with their followers through comments or direct messages (Brown, 2015; Yuan & Lou, 2020).

Considering the likelihood of children to develop PSRs with social media influencers, Horton and Wohl's (1956) theory is used as a foundation to understand and conceptualise these relationships as they are explored in relation to children's interaction with embedded influencer advertising.

2.2.3. Source Credibility Theory (Hovland & Weiss, 1951)

Source credibility theory proposes that the positive characteristics linked to a communicator affects how the message might be perceived and accepted by the receiver (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). Hovland, Janis, and Kelley (1953) presented source credibility as a two-dimensional construct, consisting of expertise and trustworthiness of the source. Source attractiveness was later added as a third dimension, followed by perceived similarity, to create a four-dimensional construct of source credibility (Lou & Kim, 2019).

Source credibility has been described as an important factor in understanding the persuasiveness of celebrity and influencer endorsements and is often linked to PSRs (De Veirman *et al.*, 2019; Yuan & Lou, 2020). Thus, source credibility theory is used in correspondence with PSRs in this study, to better understand how relationships with and perceptions of influencers, as message sources, influence how messages are evaluated by preteens.

Using the abovementioned seminal theories as a backdrop, this study aims to understand how preteen children's cognitive abilities in their concrete operational stage, their parasocial relationships with and the source credibility granted to social media personalities impacts how they are influenced by embedded influencer marketing.

2.3. Literature Review

2.3.1. Social Media Popularity amongst Preteens

An abundance of research has been conducted that investigate how children interact with social media. Preteens have been reported to be a rapidly growing audience on YouTube, with the amount of preteen viewers doubling since 2015 (Rideout & Robb, 2019; Tolbert & Drogos, 2019). Ofcom (2019) reports showed that watching YouTube placed as preteens' favourite media activity, a finding supported by multiple studies (Boerman & Van Reijmersdal, 2020; Hoek *et al.*, 2020). Preteens are reported to watch videos specifically to see their favourite vloggers and almost a quarter of preteens claim to watch their favourite YouTubers every day (Folkvord *et al.*, 2019; Tolbert & Drogos, 2019).

Recent studies illustrate the increasing presence of YouTube in preteens' lives (Tolbert & Drogos, 2019). Rideout and Robb (2019) found that most preteens consumed YouTube content from their own phones, tablets, or computers. Contrastingly, Naumovska *et al.* (2020) found that most children consume social media through parents' devices, highlighting the need for country-specific research focusing on the viewing behaviour of South African preteens specifically. Tolbert and Drogos (2019) suggest that ease of access has led to the increase in viewership and

found that children typically watch YouTube alone with only 1% stating that they always watch with parents, underlining the need to interview well-informed parents.

YouTube has also become an influential source for children's informal learning, with many children pretending to 'play YouTube' with their toys from a young age (Pierson, 2016), linking to Bandura's (1977) social learning theory. It is not surprising that a survey by The LEGO Group (2019) found "YouTuber" to be the most popular aspiring career amongst preteens worldwide. Studies suggest that social media influencers have more influence on today's early and late adolescents than their friends or family and relate to them more than traditional celebrities (Al-Harbi & Al-Harbi, 2017; Lou & Kim, 2019). Many studies suggest that influencers can positively influence consumers' purchase intentions and brand attitudes (Lee & Watkins, 2016; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Domingues Aguiar & van Reijmersdal, 2018). However, none of these studies have focused on the manner in which, and if, in fact, influencers have the ability to influence the consumer behaviour of preteens.

Many researchers have focused on how children interact with YouTube as a social media platform (Krypton, 2018; Boerman & Van Reijmersdal, 2019; De Jans *et al.*, 2019; De Veirman *et al.*, 2019; Evans *et al.*, 2019; Folkvord *et al.*, 2019; Hoek *et al.*, 2020; Lou & Kim, 2019; Martínez & Olsson, 2019; Tolbert & Drogos, 2019; Van Dam & Van Reijmersdal, 2019; Van Reijmersdal *et al.*, 2020). In contrast, however, only one study specifically featured TikTok and thus concluded that more research is needed on this platform (Hudders *et al.*, 2020). Considering the popularity of TikTok (Hale, 2020; Hudders *et al.*, 2020; Hutchinson, 2021; Koetsier, 2021) this study recognises the need to fill this gap with regards to influencer advertising and preteens.

2.3.2. Advertising Literacy in Piaget's Concrete Operational Stage

2.2.3.1. Advertising Literacy for Embedded Advertising

Studies have shown that children are frequently exposed to social media advertising on various platforms, especially on YouTube (De Veirman *et al.*, 2019; Folkvord *et al.*, 2019; Martínez & Olsson, 2019). These studies also illustrate the effects these influencer endorsements have on children's attitudes and behaviour (De Veirman *et al.*, 2019; Folkvord *et al.*, 2019; Martínez & Olsson, 2019; De Jans *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, many sources have recognised the embedded nature of influencer

marketing on social media platforms (Bladow, 2017; Boerman *et al.*, 2017; Hudders *et al.*, 2017; Boerman *et al.*, 2018; De Pauw, De Wolf, Hudders & Cauberghe, 2018; De Pauw, Hudders & Cauberghe, 2018; Hudders & Cauberghe, 2018; Coates, Hardman, Halford, Christiansen & Boyland, 2019; De Jans *et al.*, 2019; Evans *et al.*, 2019; Folkvord *et al.*, 2019; Van Dam & Van Reijmersdal, 2019; Hoek *et al.*, 2020; Boerman & Van Reijmersdal, 2020; van Reijmersdal *et al.*, 2020).

Considering the time children spend consuming influencer marketing, it is important to understand how they recognise, process, and react to covert messages. While preteen children who fall into Piaget's concrete operational stage are generally accepted to be able to distinguish commercial content (Piaget, 1964; Šramová, 2014), they are what Roedder (1981) describes as cued processors in terms of their advertising literacy. This means that their existing knowledge regarding advertising needs a direct cue to be activated (John, 1999; Naumovska *et al.*, 2020).

Rozendaal *et al.* (2009) agrees that preteen children have less mature advertising literacy and argues that being able to recognise advertising and understand advertising intent, is a vital step for children to critically process and evaluate advertising. Vanwesenbeeck, Walrave, and Ponnet (2017) and Van Reijmersdal *et al.* (2020) argue that while knowledge of persuasive intent might be necessary, it does not prove to be enough for preteens to sufficiently process embedded messaging. Studies by Hudders, De Pauw and Cauberghe (2017), De Pauw *et al.* (2018) and De Pauw *et al.* (2018) found that children under 12 struggled to deal with embedded marketing. Similarly, a study by Martínez and Olsson (2019) observed that 9- to 12-year-olds had problems detecting hidden advertisement on YouTube. Feijoo, Bugueño, Sádaba, and García-González (2021) found that more than half of their sample of 10- to 14-year-olds, consisting of both the concrete and formal operational stages, couldn't identify advertising in social media content containing sponsorships. They concluded that children were least likely to detect advertising content on YouTube compared to other platforms, especially regarding product placements, and found age to be a decisive factor with regards to children's recognition index.

2.2.3.2. The Role of Advertising Disclosure

De Jans *et al.* (2018) and De Pauw *et al.* (2018) found that advertising disclosure is a helpful cue for children to recognise advertising content in YouTube videos. They concluded that this cued activation of advertising literacy resulted in better ad recognition in comparison to no disclosure. Similarly, Coates *et al.* (2019), also saw disclosures increase ad recognition in children. These findings are supported by Boerman and Van Reijmersdal's (2020) research that showed the increased levels of understanding of selling and persuasive intent in preteens following disclosure. Contrastingly, a study by Hoek *et al.* (2020) found no difference in the activation of advertising literacy between children who were exposed to sponsorship disclosures in a YouTube vlog and those who were not. However, the vlog used in the study that contained non-disclosed embedded advertising, was not sufficiently hidden, and appeared to be obvious to the average participant. Subsequently, Feijoo *et al.* (2021) suggested that clear and explicit disclosures are needed to aid children in distinguishing between commercial and regular content, which relates back to Roedder's (1981) description of preteens as cued processors.

Interestingly, Boerman and Van Reijmersdal (2020) found that disclosure on YouTube activated preteens' affective advertising literacy and subsequently lowered their perceived trustworthiness of influencers and their purchasing intent. They noticed that the recognition of selling intent negatively influenced product desire and activated resistance in children towards the persuasion. This relates to previous findings of De Jans *et al.* (2018) which suggests that children, like all human beings, like to believe that they have freedom in their purchase decisions. A limited amount of studies found that advertising disclosure resulted in negative brand attitudes (Vanwesenbeeck *et al.*, 2017; Hoek *et al.*, 2020; Van Reijmersdal *et al.*, 2020). Additionally, Feijoo *et al.* (2021) found that the more time children spent on a certain platform, the less likely they were to recognise advertising content on it, which they attributed to familiarity resulting in less cognitive effort exerted.

Through the reviewed literature it is apparent that embedded advertising makes it difficult for children's advertising literacy to be activated when disclosures are absent. The significant impact of cognitive development on the level of advertising literacy in preteen children highlights the need to understand how the concrete operational stage

in which preteens find themselves, contribute and define their interaction with and the impact of covert influencer advertising.

2.3.3. Parasocial Relationships with Influencers

Studies have shown that people have the ability to form deep and long lasting parasocial relationships with YouTubers (Lee & Watkins, 2016; Munnukka *et al.*, 2018). Research by Tolbert and Drogos (2019) shows that the strength of PSRs were positively related to the amount of time preteens spent on YouTube. On the other hand, Folkvord *et al.* (2019) found that strong bonds with vloggers lead to increased viewing time.

Lee and Watkins (2016) saw that influencers who fostered strong parasocial relationships with their subscribers were more likely to persuade them. Lou and Kim (2019), who noted the impact of PSRs on materialism, found PSRs to have a positive influence on preteens' purchase intentions. This was supported by De Jans *et al.* (2019) and Purnamaningsih and Rizkalla (2020) who discovered that PSIs influenced purchase intentions. Boerman and Van Reijmersdal (2020) concluded that attitudes towards disclosure are influenced by PSRs and found that the stronger a child's PSR with an influencer, the less likely they are to have negative attitudes concerning sponsored posts. Thus, children feel reluctant to use their existing advertising knowledge when exposed to their favourite influencer's content as they do not mind being persuaded, a finding that is supported by Evans (2020). Thus, even if they have the cognitive ability to discern the persuasive intent, they avoided activating it. Therefore, it is clear to see why Jones and Glynn (2019) call PSRs a key interest for marketers.

Seeing as preteens have the ability to form lasting bonds with influencers, which have the potential to influence their purchase behaviour, studying the mediating influence of PSRs on the impact of embedded influencer advertising makes Horton and Wohl's (1956) theory relevant to the study.

2.3.4. The Role of Source Credibility Dimensions

De Veirman *et al.* (2019) argue that influencers are believed to be credible and relatable sources. As a result, children perceive influencers as informative resources for product recommendations and advice (Martínez & Olsson, 2019). Lee and Watkins

(2016) suggest that perceived PSIs with influencers depend on their believed physical and social attractiveness. Purnamaningsih and Rizkalla (2020) on the other hand, found social attractiveness not to be relevant with regards to PSIs with beauty influencers but highlighted the importance of attitude homophily. While these findings are relevant, neither of the studies focused on the deeper connection of a PSR and included adult samples and can therefore not be applied to the context of the current study.

Through their research Lou and Kim (2019) also concluded that source credibility dimensions of attractiveness and perceived similarity played a significant role in the formation of PSRs with influencers, a finding supported by previous research (Tian & Hoffner, 2010; Bond, 2018). Furthermore, Yuan and Lou (2020) found that the link between attraction and product interest was mediated by PSRs and suggested the same relationship for perceived similarity. They concluded that the other dimensions of source credibility - trustworthiness and expertise - showed no relation with PSRs, even though these were the original dimensions theorised by Hovland *et al.* (1953). However, a study by De Jans *et al.* (2018), focussed on PSIs, found that disclosure in vlogs has a direct impact on the trustworthiness of the vlogger and result in decreased PSIs. Besides one study by Van de Sompel and Vermeir (2016) that focused on younger children, no recent studies could be found that address the role source credibility plays in the way preteens are impacted by influencer advertising (De Veirman *et al.*, 2019), hence the relevance of the study in exploring this dimension.

2.3.5. Parental Awareness

Since this study will focus on the parental awareness and perspective of children's interaction with influencer advertising, it is important to take note of existing literature on the matter. To date only a small number of studies have been done investigating the issue from this perspective (Šramová, 2014; Evans *et al.*, 2019; Lou & Kim, 2019; Naumovska *et al.*, 2020; Feijoo *et al.*, 2021).

Lou and Kim (2019) highlighted that not all parents are familiar with the current issue of influencer marketing, while Evans *et al.* (2019) found that advertising disclosure had a positive effect on parents' views of both advertised brands and the content format. Interestingly, Feijoo *et al.* (2021) found that parents underestimated their children's

advertising literacy for persuasive messages but emphasised the necessity for parents to aid their children in becoming consumers. Šramová (2014) also highlighted this importance by demonstrating how children in post-communist countries are struggling due to their parents never being exposed to advertising growing up. This was supported by Naumovska et al. (2020) who states that parents need sufficient online advertising literacy to adequately educate their children on the subject.

61% of American parents reported that their children under the age of 11 have been exposed to content that they felt were not age-appropriate on YouTube (Smith, Toor & van Kessel, 2018). As previously mentioned, Tolbert and Drogos (2019) revealed that co-viewing YouTube videos with parents were rare for preteens, making it difficult for parents to control or have awareness of the content their children are consuming. Considering that this study is conducted from a parental perspective, the findings suggesting that parents are uninformed and underestimate the impact of embedded advertising on children, should be noted and was considered when sampling participants who could valuably contribute to the study. Parental awareness of this issue is invaluable in informing better education on, and monitoring of, children's interaction with social media content.

2.3.6. Conclusion

Through the review of literature, the difficulty for preteens to distinguish between embedded advertising and regular content was clarified. Since these children are spending exponentially more time on social media, especially in the wake of COVID-19, they are regularly being exposed to non-disclosed sponsorships by influencers. The need for more research on the impact of embedded social media marketing on children has been identified by De Veirman *et al.* (2019) and is addressed by the study, along with the following gaps.

While many studies looked at children's experience with embedded advertising on YouTube, there is a lack of research focussing on children's experiences on TikTok. Since TikTok is increasingly popular amongst preteens (Perez, 2020) investigating their interaction with sponsored content on the app appears to be necessary. Given that COVID-19 has also seen a surge in children's screen time, this is seen as an

important aspect to incorporate into the study, as only a limited number of studies has recognised this factor.

Furthermore, the researcher identified a lack of research focusing on preteens in particular, since their unique cognitive abilities with regards to advertising literacy is not comparable with that of younger children or adolescents. While research has touched on the mediating influence of PSRs on preteens' experience with influencer advertising, there is insufficient focus on the dimensions of source credibility. This study aims to address PSRs together with source credibility when investigating how preteens are impacted by influencer advertising. Additionally, there is a lack of studies focussing on parental awareness and understanding regarding preteen's interaction with influencer advertising, which is addressed in the study.

Lastly, to the knowledge of the researcher, no studies on the impact of embedded influencer advertising on both YouTube and TikTok on preteens have been conducted in a South African setting. Due to various cultural differences and norms, the researcher recognises the importance of investigating the issue within a South African context.

Chapter 3 – Research Design and Methodology

The following chapter provides a detailed account of the research design and methods followed by the researcher. At the outset, the study is justified within the interpretivist paradigm, after which the research approach and design is discussed and justified in further detail. The population parameters, target and accessible population are then stipulated followed by all key aspects of the sample and implemented sampling methods. The interview process is illustrated under the data collection method, along with a summary of the discussion guide. Subsequently, each step of the data analysis method is explained in detail. Lastly, the trustworthiness of the study is highlighted with regards to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

3.1. Paradigm: Interpretivism

This qualitative study is conducted within the interpretivist paradigm. In line with interpretivism, the study acknowledges that people are constantly impacted by their unique environments. The study takes on a phenomenological approach, as it focuses on the phenomena of embedded influencer advertising and how preteens and their parents perceive and understand covert advertising in social media. Through this study the researcher aims to gain insight into the meanings participants assign to their social media interactions and attempt to understand and describe it subjectively. This study does not aim to explain any causal relationships to make predictions, instead it seeks to gain a deep understanding of the specific participants' experience and behaviour (DuPlooy-Cilliers, Davis & Bezuidenhout, 2014).

3.1.2. Epistemology

Aligning with interpretivism, this study refrains from the idea of an objective truth and therefore accepts knowledge as subjective to the participants, embedded within their own systems of meaning. Throughout the study respondents' experiences are regarded as subjective and true within their own personal, social, and familial contexts and thus are not generalised to the wider population (Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2014; Dean, 2018).

3.1.3. *Ontology*

Aligned with the interpretivist standing that reality is a social construct that different people experience in various ways internally, this study aims to comprehend how embedded advertising is understood within each respondent's subjective internal reality, without assuming that their experiences are the same as the next participant or the larger population (Du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014; Dean, 2018).

3.2. Research Approach and Design

Considering the purpose of the study to gain a parental perspective on how preteens are impacted by embedded advertising on YouTube and TikTok, implementing a qualitative approach best allowed the researcher to obtain an in-depth understanding of parents' unique perspectives and experiences. A qualitative approach is focused on constructing detailed in-depth descriptions of participants' social realities and understanding complex phenomena in various social settings and contexts. Through a phenomenological qualitative approach the study aimed to answer the research questions to provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact of embedded influencer advertising on children by intensively focusing on the perceptions of a small number of parents (Fouché & Delport, 2020).

The study was exploratory, as this aligned with the overall research purpose to gain deeper perspective on the subject. According to Davis (2014) research focused on social media often take an exploratory approach since it is a new and constantly evolving field. For this study, exploratory seemed fitting as research on TikTok is slim and the issue has not yet been explored within the context of South Africa. Therefore, exploratory research allowed the researcher to investigate new and unique insights to become familiar with the matter of embedded advertising and its impact on preteens.

A cross-sectional survey design was followed to gather rich in-depth data from parents at a specific point in time, through the utilisation of in-depth interviews. This aided the researcher in exploring the nature and status of the phenomena as it existed within a specific context (Maree & Pietersen, 2021).

3.3. Population

The population of a study describes all people or artefacts from whom information could be gathered (Pascoe, 2014). In this study, the population parameters were the following: Parents of children who spend more than four hours per week on YouTube and/or TikTok watching user-generated content who have sufficient awareness of their children's social media usage and interaction with influencers.

3.3.1. Target Population

The target population of a study includes all individuals or artefacts that are included in the population parameters (Pascoe, 2014). In this study, the target population consisted of all parents of children, between the ages of 9 and 12, who spend more than four hours per week on YouTube and/or TikTok consuming user-generated content and who had a sufficient level of awareness regarding their children's social media usage and interactions with influencers.

3.3.2. Accessible Population

Since the entire target population cannot always be accessed, the accessible population refers to the portion of the target audience that are included in the study (Pascoe, 2014). In the context of this study, the target population were too large and extensive for the researcher to determine all possible appropriate participants. Owing to the limited scope of the research the accessible population was confined to the participants residing in the City of Cape Town, due to geographical convenience as the researcher aimed conducted face-to-face interviews with most participants.

3.4. Sample

3.4.1. Sample

The study focused on retrieving information from parents; thus, the unit of analysis were people. Due to the qualitative nature of the study, as well as the limited availability of funding and time, the study focused on a smaller sample size (Pascoe, 2014). Sarantakos (2000) states that qualitative research frequently contains limited sampling, often based on saturation, while Patton (2002) stresses the lack of definitive

rules in qualitative sample size, as it depends on what the researcher aims to discover and what will be useful to the study. While the researcher was open to variation in sample size based on data saturation, the sample included 8 participants who were interviewed.

Lavrakas (2008) explains the importance of screening recruited individuals to ensure eligibility for participation in the sample, prior to data collection. Recruited participants were screened, through a short questionnaire, to ensure that their children spent more than four hours per week on YouTube and/or TikTok consuming user-generated content and that the parents had sufficient awareness of their children's social media usage and interactions with influencers. In the context of the study, sufficient awareness was determined by whether parents knew what content and which influencers their children were watching, their children's feelings towards this, and the conditions in which they watch YouTube and TikTok.

All recruited participants were successfully screened, and the sample consisted of mothers, between the ages of 34 and 49 with preteen children. Four were parents of girls, while the other three raised boys. Participants resided in various parts of the City of Cape Town Metropolitan Municipality.

3.4.2. Sampling Method

Due to the difficulty to access the entire population, the qualitative nature, as well time constraints, non-probability sampling methods were used to access a sample that falls within the population parameters. The sample was chosen based on availability, convenience, and the researcher's judgement, rather than systemic or random selection, due to the goal of qualitative study being focused on data saturation as opposed to representativeness. Through this the exploratory research aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of the issue, rather than producing generalisable data (Pascoe, 2014).

Purposive sampling was used to decisively choose participants who formed part of the target population and had potential to contribute to the study. The researcher used their judgement to select participants who possessed the characteristics outlined by

the population parameters and were believed to suit the study's purpose and contribute to the study in a meaningful way (Strydom & Delport, 2020).

After five participants were selected through purposive sampling, snowball sampling was implemented to reach a larger sample since the researcher depleted all available resources. Existing participants were asked to refer the researcher to acquaintances who fit into the population parameters and would be willing to participate (Pascoe, 2014). This process continued until data saturation was achieved and a total of 7 participants were interviewed (Strydom & Delport, 2020).

3.5. Data Collection Method

After participants were recruited and agreed to partake in the study, individual in-depth interviews were scheduled.

According to (Strydom & Bezuidenhout, 2014) in-depth interviews are a qualitative method of data collections which consist of the researcher asking various questions to participants in a conversational manner. The goal of in-depth interviews is to gain insight into participants' opinions of and experiences with the phenomenon being studied, through open-ended questions.

Strydom and Bezuidenhout (2014) emphasise the value of interviews for gathering meaningful information and suggest that, when conducted effectively, interviews allow researchers to fully comprehend participants' responses by asking detailed questions. Furthermore, interviews allow the researcher to ask for clarification on questions that seem unclear, to foster a deeper understanding of the participant's views. In-depth interviews provide the opportunity to ask appropriate in-depth questions as the conversation flows in various directions. Despite the semi-structured nature of some in-depth interviews, it allows the researcher and participant a high level of freedom and flexibility making it suitable for gaining meaningful information and insights for qualitative data collection.

Thus, one-to-one semi-structured interviews were chosen, as they are a suitable data collection method to gain a deeper understanding of how parents perceived the impact of embedded social media advertising on their preteen children.

After participants were recruited, they received an email containing additional information including a consent form for participating in the research and the recording of interviews. The participants were required to read the relevant information and consent forms before scheduling an interview time, either in-person or online, based on their preference. Due to the researcher being fully bilingual, the participants could choose to do the interviews in Afrikaans or English, to provide the most authentic account of their experiences. The interviews followed a conversational discussion rather than a one-sided interview, as the researcher engaged with the parents in an attempt to better understand their point of view.

3.5.1. Interview Guide

Due to the semi-structured nature of the interviews, an interview guide was constructed to focus the discussion. Greeff (2020) describes this as a written questionnaire that is used to guide an interview. The interview guide provided the interviewer with a set of appropriate predetermined questions to allow for engagement with participants and guide the narrative path of the interview. Setting up a guide beforehand allowed the researcher to think about the scope of what was aimed to cover when interviewing participants. Furthermore, this forced the researcher to consider parts of the discussion that may be sensitive and allowed them to enter the conversation with increased compassion and caution.

Greeff (2020) urges researchers to consider both the logical order and the placing of sensitive topics when setting up a discussion guide. Thus, the interview guide for this study started with broader questions, followed by more specific and in-depth topics, with more sensitive areas being discussed towards the end, to allow participants to ease into the interview process and become comfortable with opening up to the interviewer (Strydom & Bezuidenhout, 2014). In line with Smith, Harré, and Van Langenhoven's (1995) recommendations the discussion guide had appropriate questions related to each section of the study, as can be seen in Annexure B, by consulting the literature review, as well as the research questions, objectives, and purpose of the study. Hereby the researcher ensured that the guide could gather the necessary information to answer the research questions and carry out the objectives.

By editing the discussion guide, the researcher ensured that the questions were appropriate for the study and that there were no unreasonably leading questions, and that questions did not seem judgemental, biased, or ambiguous. Questions containing jargon were altered to minimise participants' confusion (Smith *et al.*, 1995).

Greeff (2020) suggests that researchers become familiar with the interview guide prior to the session to facilitate the discussion in an organic fashion which will allow them to focus and be led by the conversation. Thus, the researcher studied the guide, to promote both accuracy and flexibility.

3.5.2. Interview Process

The interviews started with the researcher explaining the context of the study to ensure participants understood their contribution to the study and how their information would be used. They were ensured that there were no incorrect responses and that their information would remain confidential. Prior to the session the researcher took care that terms such as “parasocial relationships”, “sponsored content”, and “embedded advertising” were familiar to the parents, to avoid confusion or misunderstanding (Greeff, 2020).

After the introduction the researcher followed with general questioning regarding the child's social media usage on YouTube and/or TikTok, the influencers they watch regularly and the type of content they prefer watching.

The second section of the interview focused on children's parasocial relationships with abovementioned influencers. Parents were asked about the way that their children discussed the influencers with them and their understanding of their children's relationship with the influencers and their perceived appeal. The impact of influencers on the children was investigated by discussing whether children's behaviour have been altered to mimic that of influencers and whether they have expressed desiring products associated with specific influencers in the past. Source credibility and whether parents thought their child would believe everything their favourite influencers told them were an important part of this section. If the discussion flowed in that direction the researcher discussed the difference between children's interaction with

television characters and social media influencers and their perceived reasons for preferring one above the other.

Later the child's understanding of user-generated content was discussed, starting with whether the child can distinguish between social media content and television programming. Parents were asked if they think their children preferred one above the other as well as their reasons for believing that. Both the parents' and children's perceived views about social media were explored as well as parents' beliefs about discussing the topic with their children. The researcher explored how parents believed their children would react when they realised that their favourite influencers are paid to promote certain products.

Subsequently the researcher and parents discussed the perceived impact embedded advertising has had on their children, including their understanding of sponsorships on social media. Advertising disclosures in children's content were discussed along with parents' opinions regarding the necessity of disclosures in social media content.

Lastly, the researcher ended the discussion by asking parents why they believed this to be an issue that needed to be addressed as well as advice they have for other parents raising children in a social media world. Finally, parents were granted the opportunity to express any further comments they on the topic and were thanked for their contribution.

While most interviews followed the above-mentioned order, every interview was unique since the researcher followed the flow of the discussion instead of ensuring each question in the interview guide was fulfilled. Different participants elaborated on different topics as they were allowed to contribute to and augment the discussion as the conversation moved in different directions. By using clarification and elaboration probing, both the researcher and participants had the freedom to further explore interesting themes that emerged during the session to gain further understanding. Throughout the interviews the researcher took note of non-verbal cues, as they had the opportunity to carry valuable information (Greeff, 2020), which is considered a valuable advantage of conducting in-depth interviews.

Furthermore, the researcher recognised their role in facilitating and participating in the conversation as they offered their attention to the participants. All interviews were recorded with the consent of participants and recordings were only stopped once the interview ended, to avoid any “off the record” information (Greeff, 2020). After the interviews, all notes and recordings were transcribed and kept safe until the data analysis process commenced.

3.6. Data Analysis Method

Patton (2002) emphasises the importance of treating the raw interview data as valuable material and ensuring they are kept safe and secure throughout the research process by saving backup copies of transcripts, printing and storing hard copies, and keeping an original master copy. After each interview was completed, the recorded material was transcribed manually by the researcher. Both the original and transcribed material were saved onto the researcher’s personal computer and backed up on the cloud, after which it was printed out and filed, for the next phase of the data analysis, qualitative content analysis.

Schurink, Fouché, and De Vos (2020) underlines the value of qualitative data analysis for discovering underlying meanings and possible patterns of relationships within the collected information. According to them, qualitative data analysis has the ability to convert qualitative data into understandable and trustworthy insights to gain an in-depth understanding of the material. Thus, qualitative content analysis was selected as a suitable method of analysis to derive meaning and insights from the in-depth interview material that describe the participants’ and their children’s perspectives and experiences.

Qualitative content analysis was used as a deductive method to code and identify subjective themes and patterns. Through this method the researcher aimed uncover a rich description of the perceptions and lived experiences mirrored in the material (Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2014). The researcher was led by existing theories in literature, namely, Piaget’s developmental stages, parasocial interaction and source credibility theory, and operated within a restructured theoretical framework (Bezuidenhout & Cronje, 2014). Furthermore, the deductive process was informed by the existing

literature on the subject which provided the researcher with potential themes and a background of the greater context of the issue.

Strydom and Delport (2020) state that steps in qualitative data analysis should be used as guidelines rather than strict rules to be followed. Thus, the data analysis process for this study was adapted from Zhang and Wildemuth's (2009) proposed method, to accommodate the specific study, the collected data, and the researcher, as follows:

1. The raw recorded interview data were prepared by manually transcribing it. Since the purpose of the research was to gain a deeper understanding of parents' perspectives on the impact embedded influencer advertising have on their children, it was important that all data was considered, and thus transcribed, to ensure that significant data were not left out in the process.
2. The researcher defined the intended basic coding unit that were to be analysed by breaking the data down into manageable parts. Phrases and sentences were chosen, to encourage an in-depth analysis and to ensure that nothing was missed (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015) which aligns with the aim of the research to get in-depth information and a thorough understanding.
3. Coding units were grouped together to form themes. The coding scheme was developed deductively, by drawing relevant themes from the literature review and theoretical foundation. However, the researcher valued a flexible coding process and remained open to new codes arising from the data. Thus, the themes that formed part of the initial coding scheme were as followed, with a colour being attributed to each theme:
 - a. Watching behaviour
 - b. Parasocial relationships
 - c. Source credibility
 - d. Advertising to children
 - e. Parental control and awareness
 - f. Impact of embedded advertising

g. Understanding of sponsored content advertising

4. The initial themes were tested on sample texts from some of the interviews to ensure its clarity and consistency, before it was applied to the entire data set.
5. Thereafter, all the data were coded by means of thematic coding to thematically analyse the text. The established coding scheme was applied to the entire text to identify, separate, and contextualise groups of data that appeared to be relevant to the research purpose and question. Throughout the coding process the researcher made notes on reoccurring themes and interesting findings on a separate piece of paper.
6. To ensure consistency the researcher re-evaluated the coding process and its application to the text. After the re-evaluation of the coded material and the additional notes, the researcher altered the themes as it would be presented and interpreted in the report according to predominant, reoccurring themes and the bigger picture of the research problem. The adapted themes were as follows:
 - a. Watching behaviour.
 - b. Parental concern, as opposed to control and awareness.
 - c. Parasocial relationships, which now included source credibility as a sub-theme as the researcher observed a strong link between the two themes.
 - d. Understanding of sponsored content, which included both parental and preteen understanding, since it was apparent that parents' understanding was also slim and a topic of interest.
 - e. Impact, which was divided into behavioural and emotional, as the impact appeared to be more nuanced than expected.
7. Following the coding, these identified themes were interpreted with reference to existing theories and research stipulated in the literature review, as well as the researcher's own interpretation of the text. A document was created with each of the new themes as headings, where the researcher pasted the relevant

interview quotes and text from the literature review under each heading, with further subheadings attributed to specific aspects of each theme. This document was printed and used to compile the presentation and interpretation of findings as seen in Chapter 4. The meanings attributed from the text were considered with regards to the larger context in which the phenomena exist, as well as the subjective personal experiences of the individual participants.

8. The researcher made sure they reported on the data analysis process comprehensively and truthfully in terms of the coding, analysis and interpretation of the data as stated above, to avoid confusion and enhance transparency. This was achieved and supported by keeping notes throughout the data collection and analysis process.

3.7. Trustworthiness

Since qualitative data are not measured objectively and focus on gaining an in-depth understanding of people's experiences instead of measuring quantitative causal relationships, determining validity and reliability are not possible. Instead, qualitative research should focus on ensuring trustworthiness of data, which is divided into credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability (Koonin, 2014).

To ensure credibility within the study, the researcher focused on becoming familiar with participants early on and a substantial amount of time was spent with participants to guarantee a rich understanding of their experiences (Koonin, 2014). The researcher had regular meetings with their supervisor to debrief and discuss decisions. Furthermore, credibility was ensured through the application of substantiated and well-established research methods, as well as a research design that aligned with the research question and purpose. The theoretical framework that served as a basis for the study aligned well with both the research question and methods (Nieuwenhuis, 2021).

The study attempted to ensure transferability, by thick description, where the researcher provided any readers with a detailed description of the context, participants, and the design. Thus, readers could gain a deeper understanding of the study's context to see whether it can be applied to other scenarios and contexts. While non-probability

sampling was used, the researcher aimed to select a sample that best represented the population, with regards to the issue and context that was studied (Nieuwenhuis, 2021).

Dependability was ensured through the administration of a journal file by the researcher to keep record of decision-making processes of data collection and data analysis. The researcher documented the category labels that were created through the qualitative content analysis process and noted all revisions and changes made. Similarly, the researcher took note of any observations that became apparent when analysing the text. Through the documentation of the data analysis process, the researcher allows others to gain insight into their process, decision-making and how they interpreted the findings (Nieuwenhuis, 2021).

To achieve confirmability the researcher ensured that they were aware of their own predispositions going into the study and made sure that findings were based on the participants and not their personal biases. The researcher refrained from becoming too involved with the participants to avoid additional bias. To further ensure confirmability an “audit trail” was created to allow observers to follow the research process and corresponding decisions. The use of quotes was justified within the context of the study. Quotes were used wisely and not taken out of context or edited to push the researcher’s interpretation.

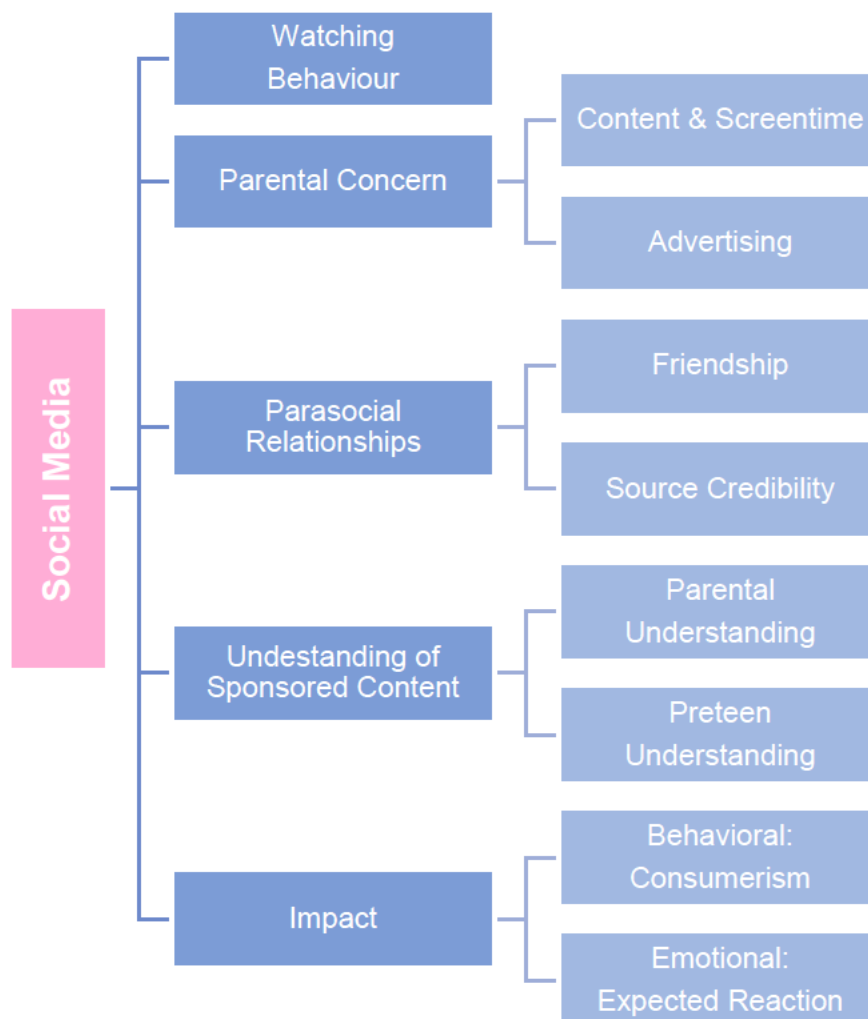
Chapter 4 – Findings and Interpretation of Findings

The subsequent chapter provides an integrated presentation and interpretation of the research findings. The chapter is divided into the different themes and sub-themes that emerged during the qualitative content analysis, and all findings are discussed within the existing body of literature, theoretical foundation, and subjective context of the study.

4.1. Research Findings

4.1.1. Themes

Figure 1: Themes



4.1.2. Theme 1: Watching Behaviour

YouTube was significantly more popular than TikTok amongst the preteens involved in the study (n=7), with only one mother reporting that her 10-year-old daughter watches TikTok videos daily. Besides the mother in question who stated that TikTok “*isn’t a big thing for [her]*”, none of the parents allowed their children to download TikTok, since they believed it was “*inappropriate*” in terms of the content and lack of restriction on the app. This is unexpected and differs from findings by Hudders *et al.* (2020) who found TikTok to be an increasingly popular platform amongst preteens. However, three parents mentioned that their children were exposed to TikTok content through friends with older siblings, at school, or through secondary platforms like YouTube, probably through YouTube Shorts. This indicates that although they had not personally allowed their children to download the platform, they were aware that their children had access to it and that its influence was reaching their preteens.

According to the parents all of the preteens spent a substantial amount of time on YouTube or TikTok daily, with six parents reporting that their children spent more than 90 minutes per day on one of these platforms, consistent with Hale’s (2020) findings. Five out of seven preteens in the study could utilise their personal tablets or phones to consume content, which aligns with Rideout and Robb (2019) who found that most preteens consumed YouTube content through their own devices but differs from Naumovska *et al.* (2020) who found that most children consume social media through their parents’ devices. Similar to this finding, only one parent explained that she co-viewed YouTube with her 10-year-old son from time to time, while the rest of the parents only reported watching the content to make sure it was appropriate, aligning with Tolbert and Drogos (2019). Two parents expressed their frustration with the “*mindless*” nature of YouTube while others mentioned that YouTube and TikTok were significant sources of inspiration for their children. A participant with an art-loving 10-year-old asked, “*If it wasn’t for [YouTube] how else would they get that inspiration?*”.

All but one preteen preferred social media, above television programmes, which is consistent with various studies (Ofcom, 2019; Boerman & Van Reijmersdal, 2020; Hoek *et al.*, 2020). Some children found television programs boring and preferred YouTube for its “*close contact*” with influencers and how much more “*relatable*” since they are watching the “*real [lives]*” of these people. These emotional elements

contributing to children's preference could be linked to the parasocial relationships established with influencers (Horton & Wohl, 1956) since Tolbert and Drogos (2019) argue that preteens are given more opportunities to engage and form relationships with influencers on social media, due them being considered more socially real, in comparison to actors on television. This, too, was the case in the present study.

4.1.3. Theme 2: Parental Concern

Six out of seven parents came to the interview discussion eager to tell the researcher about their efforts in either managing their children's screentime or their continued awareness of what their preteens are watching on social media. Notably, the interviewer never asked how parents manage screentime or regulate content and all parents prompted the discussion themselves. Ostensibly, managing these factors created a substantial amount of stress in their lives. A parent of a 10-year-old boy, expressed how differences regarding screentime have caused conflict in her family, stating her fascination with how *"the virtual world even complicates your real world"*. Even though the interviews started with an introduction on social media advertising, the embedded nature thereof, and advertising literacy in preteens; parents' main concerns remained with content and screentime, with the exception of one parent who eventually acknowledged the need for better education regarding sponsored content.

4.1.3.1. Sub-theme 1: Content & Screentime

Parents were adamant in convincing the researcher that they are aware of the content their children consume, that they have numerous settings or tactics to control this, and they know that the content is *"kosher"* because they are continuously *"keeping an eye"* on what their children are watching. This is inconsistent with the findings of Tolbert and Drogos (2019) who reported low parental awareness of children's viewing behaviour, due to the lack of co-viewing. Parents' main concern regarding content on YouTube included the use of foul language, with one popular vlogger, *Unspeakable*, being known for creating gaming content free of harsh language and violence for younger audiences (Kid Matters Counseling, 2021).

Monitoring screentime seemed to be a complicated and sensitive issue for about half of the parents who believed it is necessary to restrict the time their children spent

online. One mother used the word “*difficult*” four times when asked how much time her child spent online, without being prompted to explain how she manages this. Amongst those who strongly believed that screentime should be limited, two working mothers mentioned how they struggled due to their children being left alone while they are working and have a “*free reigns kind of life*”, which was heightened with the pandemic. Additionally, two mothers also noted how the addition of technology for online schooling has heightened the issue of screentime. The other half had a more laissez faire attitude and believed that children should “*regulate themselves*” and that their children are less likely to become obsessed when they are not restricted.

4.1.3.2. Sub-theme 2: Advertising

When parents were asked to give advice to other parents at the end of the interview, most referred to content and screentime, despite influencer advertising being discussed comprehensively during the interview. None of the parents seemed concerned with this issue initially, however three parents expressed that their eyes were opened by the end of the discussion and that they were planning to talk to their children about the nature of social media advertising. This is illustrated by a parent who said, “*You have actually opened my eyes now... I didn’t think about it like that at all. We never discuss this, and I’ve never explained it to him like that. I will tonight.*”, which links to findings by Lou and Kim (2019) who suggest that not all parents are familiar with the issue of influencer marketing.

4.1.4. Theme 3: Parasocial Relationships

4.1.4.1. Sub-theme 1: Friendship

Consistent with findings by Lee and Watkins (2016) and Munnukka *et al.* (2018) most parents in the current study reported that their children formed parasocial relationships with influencers, especially on YouTube. Parents agreed that their children would frequently talk about their favourite influencers as if they were close friends and that they were very interested in these people’s personal lives. While discussing their relationship with influencers, many parents used the words “obsessed” to describe how their children felt towards these social media personalities. Unlike findings by Tolbert and Drogos (2019) children’s viewing time did not impact the strength of their

parasocial relationships since children seemed to foster PSRs with influencers regardless of viewing time.

4.1.4.2. Sub-theme 2: Source Credibility

Most parents agreed that their children would believe most things their favourite influencers told them, mostly due to the strong PSRs they have formed with them. Two parents expressed that their 11- and 10-year-olds would have believed everything influencers said to them, since they would struggle to believe that influencers would lie to them. Since most preteens watched influencers for the type of content they shared, they considered them to be experts in their field, which increased their overall credibility in preteens' eyes, a finding that relates to that of De Veirman *et al.* (2019) and Martínez and Olsson (2019). This suggests a potential link between perceived expertise and trustworthiness and PSRs amongst the preteens in the study. However, this is in contrast with the findings of Yuan and Lou (2020) since a potential link between perceived expertise and trustworthiness and PSRs was suggested within the preteens in the study. Since these are both dimensions of Hovland and Weiss's (1951) source credibility theory, it is proposed that the preteens awarded source credibility to the influencers, due to their perceived expertise, while their PSRs fostered a sense of trustworthiness which had a positive impact on the credibility of the source.

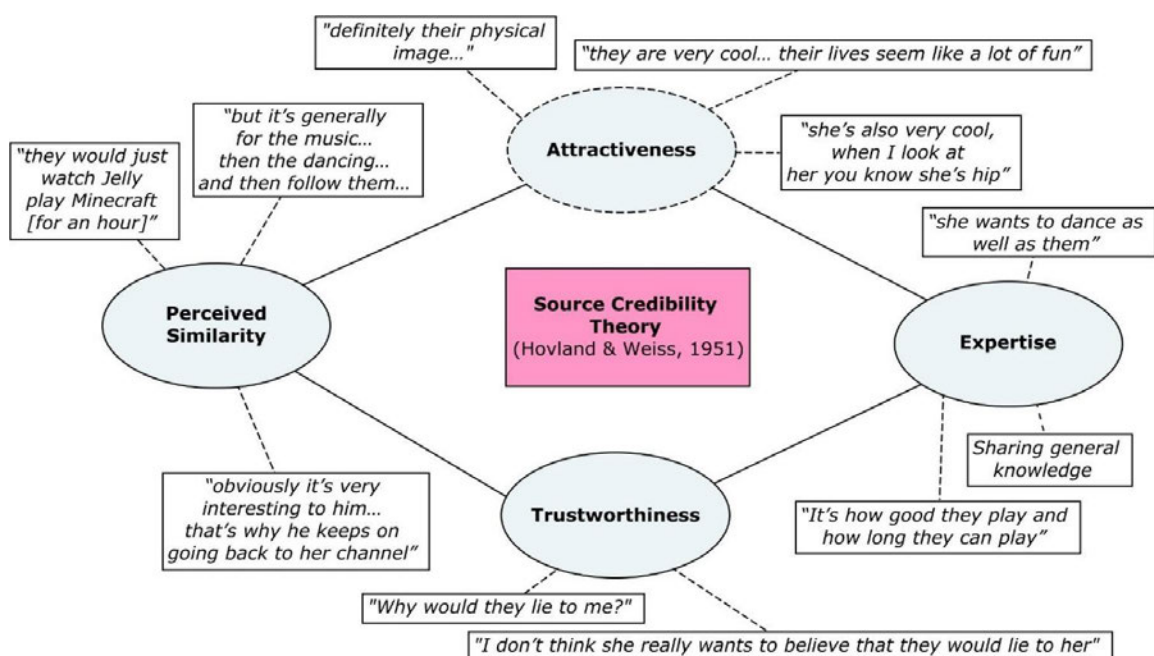
Besides preteens considering influencers as relatable sources, the source credibility dimensions of attractiveness and perceived similarity also played a role, relating to findings by Bond (2018) and Lou and Kim (2019). With regards to perceived similarity, attitude homophily did not appear to be of concern for children, however similar interests might have been a crucial deciding factor in the child's decision to follow certain influencers who share interest-specific content. Thus, these children considered them as credible sources in their specific fields due to their expertise and shared a similar interest with them which strengthened the PSRs felt towards these influencers.

Besides perceived similarity, the preteens also appeared to admire how different the influencers' lives were from theirs, with most parents expressing that influencers had a very aspirational lifestyle in the eyes of their children. Four of the children have mentioned that they want to become YouTubers, a finding consistent with that of The

LEGO Group (2019). One of the 10-year-old preteens even started her own channel, citing her favourite YouTubers, Jenstine, as her inspiration, while another parent found it interesting that her now 9-year-old has been asking her how he can become a YouTuber since the age of 6.

Children were ostensibly impressed and persuaded by how much money influencers made, the cars they drive, the fun they have daily, and how they “*can do exactly what they want*”. This admiration of the influencer lifestyle contributed to their perceived attractiveness attributed by preteens, along with their physical appearance. Several parents described influencers as “cool” when explaining why their children like them, which is supported by Lee and Watkins’s (2016) findings in an adult sample. As can be seen in Figure 2, preteens rewarded a great level of source credibility to influencers with regards to the different dimensions described by Hovland and Weiss (1951). Source credibility was impacted by and impacted the strong PSRs these preteens formed with influencers, which had the potential to determine how they were impacted by sponsored content by these creators through their receptivity to persuasion.

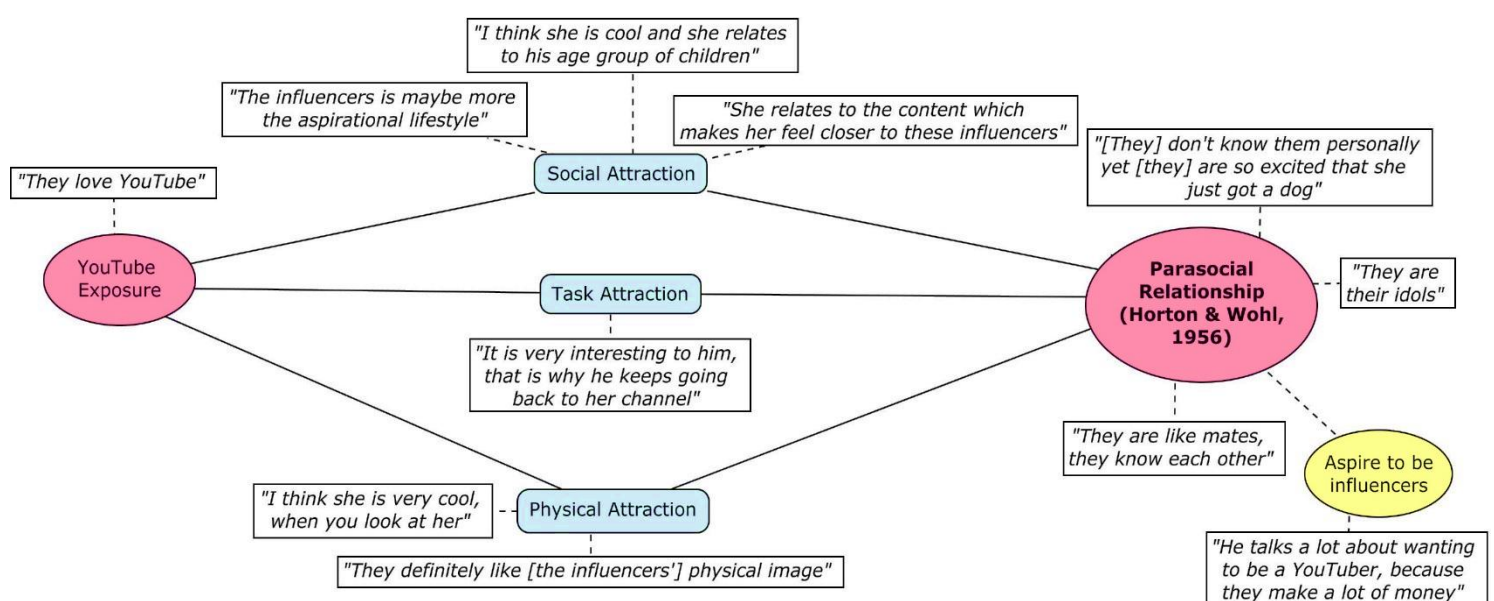
Figure 2: Source Credibility Theory



One parent revealed that her children's obsession with merchandise was *"how [she] noticed that they watch more than just how to play a game..."* The appeal of YouTube-branded merchandise, for four of the preteens, could be attributed to the obsession and PSRs children have with YouTubers, since merchandise displays their personal brand, which links to findings by Lee and Watkins (2016). According to parents, there was an indication that PSRs had an impact on the purchase behaviour of some children as they asked their parents for both merchandise and other products seen in videos, aligning with other studies (De Jans *et al.*, 2019; Purnamaningsih & Rizkalla, 2020). Two parents intimated that their children would be reluctant to consider their favoured influencers as lying to them to promote products, possibly on account of the PSRs and source credibility awarded to them, which loosely relates to findings by Evans (2020). This suggests that these preteens could be more easily persuaded, as a result of their PSRs, since they could be less likely to believe that they are being advertised to, and thus avoid activating their existing advertising literacy, according to Evans' (2020) findings.

Based on Horton & Wohl's (1956) model, preteen's anticipated formation of PSRs with influencers can be seen in Figure 3 based the factors: social attraction, task attraction and physical attraction. As an addition to the original model, the researcher added children's aspiration to be influencers to be linked to PSR.

Figure 3: Parasocial Relationships



4.1.5. Theme 4: Understanding of Sponsored Content

Four parents mentioned that their preteens still have difficulty understanding advertising in general, despite falling within Piaget's (1964) concrete operational, aligning with findings by Rozendaal *et al.* (2009) who agree that children in this stage have less mature advertising literacy. Half of the parents reported that they still need to explain the nature and mechanics behind marketing and consumerism, with two expressing their frustration that their children did not want to believe them when they explain that companies want to profit off of them.

4.1.5.1. Sub-theme 1: Parental Understanding

While some parents expressed the need for dialogue regarding consumerism, parents seemed to have little to no conversations with their children regarding influencer advertising. As previously mentioned, three parents noted that the interview opened their eyes and prompted them to have more discussions with their children on the topic. Most parents thought that their sponsored content was absent or less prevalent on content that their children consumed. This could be attributed to the embedded nature of the advertising which prevented both preteens and adults from recognising the sponsorships, as multiple sources have noted the prevalence of covert advertising on these platforms (De Veirman, *et al.*, 2019; Folkvord *et al.*, 2019; Martínez & Olsson, 2019) with YouTube being the most difficult to notice (Feijoo *et al.*, 2021). However, two parents who initially had this belief, had a realisation where they said, "*oh wait... there was this [product]*", suggesting that parents might not recognise sponsored content unless their attention is drawn to it.

Some parents also seemed to lack a full understanding of sponsored content themselves, with one openly admitting her lack of knowledge. This could be attributed to the fact that these parents did not grow up with social media advertising and thus social media did not form part of their advertising literacy, which links to findings by Šramová (2014) who found that parents in post-communist countries struggled due to the lack of exposure to advertising they experienced growing up. Two parents illustrated their understanding by comparing it to product placements in movies but said that the danger with social media advertising is that it is now more accessible in the comfort of their own homes. Only one parent gave a definite example of how she

understood influencer advertising, by explaining how a brand like Nike can pay a YouTuber to wear their clothes on camera without ever mentioning that they were paid for it.

4.1.5.2. Sub-theme 2: Preteens' Understanding

All of the parents reported that their children knew that influencers made a substantial amount of money, with it being a defining feature in these influencers' attractiveness and their aspirational lifestyles. However, none of the parents could confirm that their preteens knew *how* they made so much money. While some parents used their children's knowledge of this to justify their understanding of the nature of sponsored content, the researcher developed the impression that none of the children really understood this. Five parents confirmed that they do not think their preteens fully understand how sponsored content works and would not be able to recognise it without disclosure, a finding supported by various sources (Hudders *et al.*, 2017; Feijoo, *et al.*, 2021). Thus, this is also consistent with Roedder (1981) who describe children in their concrete operational stage as cued processors.

Parents mostly believed that disclosures were necessary since their children would not be able to recognise advertising without it, a finding supported by Coates *et al.* (2019) and Feijoo *et al.* (2021). However, most said that they have not heard disclosures in their children's content, which could explain why parents have the perception that their children are not consuming sponsored content. Interestingly, one parent acknowledged that even if sponsorship disclosure was to be included, she did not think her 11-year-old son would necessarily understand what it meant, suggesting that the cues offered to children in disclosed videos might not be enough to activate children's existing advertising literacy – highlighting the need for education on the subject. Thus, this contrasts Coates *et al.* (2019) and Feijoo *et al.* (2021) since explicit disclosure alone might not be sufficient in activating preteens' advertising literacy.

The mother recognised that as an adult she understands that sponsorships are necessary for her to enjoy her favourite videos, as influencers need to get paid through brand sponsorships to keep creating content. Seeing as children were inspired by and enjoy watching YouTube and TikTok, enforcing stricter disclosure legislation together

with comprehensive age-appropriate education, could help preteens in their concrete operational stage to continue enjoying their favourite content without exploitation.

4.1.6. Theme 5: Impact of Embedded Influencer Advertising

4.1.6.1. Sub-theme 1: Behavioural – consumerism

When asked whether their children are impacted by embedded influencer advertising or if they have ever asked for something they had seen on YouTube and TikTok, parents gave mixed responses. Five expressed that they did not believe the content included sponsorships but continued to explain how their children wanted YouTuber-branded merchandise, art supplies, nerf guns, hover boards, Air Pods, or large toy cars after seeing these products on videos. One parent said that she was certain her 11-year-old son has never asked for anything he has seen on social media because *“he never really asks for things”*, hinting that personality might also contribute to how children’s consumerism is impacted by sponsored content. Five of the parents in the study said that their preteens have asked for products they have seen on YouTube, especially YouTuber-branded merchandise. Since merchandise is not an external brand sponsorship it is challenging to identify whether it can be viewed in the same light as embedded sponsorships from external brands. However, this still illustrates the influence of YouTubers on the purchase behaviour and attitudes of preteens, a finding that is supported by Lee and Watkins (2016), Djafarova and Rushworth (2017), and Domingues Aguiar and van Reijmersdal (2018). Four parents expressed their relief that products were rarely available in South Africa, which made it easier to combat.

Despite children’s purchase behaviours likely being impacted by social media advertising, two parents mentioned that their 9 and 10-year-olds were still more influenced by peer pressure at school, but that they expected this to change in the future, deviating from Djafarova & Rushworth (2017) and Lou and Kim (2019) who found influencers to be the most influential sources in preteen’s decisions. However, one of these parents mentioned that her children are already *“so consumer focused”* and that social media exacerbates this, highlighting the added impact influencer advertising could have on preteens’ consumerism.

4.1.6.2. Sub-theme 2: Emotional – expected reaction

When asked how their preteens would react if they realised that their favourite influencers were trying to advertise and sell products to them, one parent brushed it off by saying that her 10-year-old knows that influencers are paid. Interestingly, four of the parents expected that this realisation would have made their preteens feel uncomfortable or uneasy, linking to findings by Boerman and Van Reijmersdal (2020) who showed that realisation, through disclosure, resulted in decreased trustworthiness and resistance in some preteens.

Hence, if disclosures were added to videos, and children understood it, the realisation of the intent may have caused them to lose trust in influencers, which could negatively influence source credibility due to the perception of ulterior motives. This could have decreased persuasion and led to preteens not being so easily influenced, an assumption partially supported by De Jans *et al.* (2018).

Thus, these findings could suggest that embedded advertising had a positive impact on the purchase behaviour of preteens, when not disclosed and not understood within their advertising literacy, since their admiration of these influencers and the PSRs formed with them made them credible sources as they believed what influencers told them. However, if children could recognise and understand the advertising and persuasion intent it would have led to negative attitudes towards influencers as children felt betrayed and exploited. This could possibly result in decreased source credibility and perceived integrity, in the eyes of young fans who believed their idols had their best interests at heart.

However, it is possible that PSRs and loyalty to influencers may minimise the rate at which this occurs, as was found with the two previously mentioned preteens who were reluctant to activate their advertising literacy due to their loyalty to the influencers. Thus, the emotional impact of influencer advertising on social media presented in two different ways in the study, both linked to PSRs. Since children formed strong PSRs with these influencers they are emotionally invested in the relationship and place a great amount of trust in them. Thus, when confronted with the fact that influencers are deceiving or exploiting them, the reality has the potential to leave them either feeling

betrayed and uncomfortable with the realisation, or in a state of denial where they refuse to see that this could be the reality.

4.1.7. Conclusion

Through this analysis it was clear that YouTube and, to a lesser degree, TikTok have become significant parts of the preteens' media diets and their daily lives. While all parents were aware of what their children were watching on the platforms and what influencers they enjoyed watching, they did not seem to be concerned with the impact influencer advertising could have on them. Parents also appeared to lack a comprehensive understanding of sponsored content, likely due to it not forming part of their own advertising literacy growing up, which could impact how they educate their children. Similarly, the preteens in the study seemed to have poor advertising literacy for covert sponsorships and it was suggested that even if disclosure were to be present, the children would not necessarily understand the mechanics behind it. This highlighted the need for stronger disclosure legislature, along with education, for both parents and children, in order for children to enjoy their favourite content without being exploited.

The preteens displayed clear PSRs with influencers, which impacted the source credibility awarded to these personalities. In turn, children were more likely to believe influencers with whom they formed PSRs which impacted their vulnerability to persuasion. It was found that the impact of embedded influencer advertising on YouTube and TikTok impacted the children's purchasing behaviour, especially through YouTuber-branded merchandise, yet some parents still believed that their children's content included little to no sponsored content. Lastly, the emotional impact of embedded advertising was also considered, as preteens could have been expected to feel discomfort with the idea of their idols deceiving them for a brand deal, while others were reluctant to activate their advertising literacy when faced with sponsored content by their favourite influencers. Both of these emotional reactions could possibly be attributed to children's loyalty, trust in, and PSRs with influencers.

Chapter 5 – Conclusion

The following chapter serves as a conclusion for the report and aims to answer the research questions and objectives of the study based on the research findings. Furthermore, this section considers the ethical steps taken as well as the believed limitations. Lastly, a suggestion of the study's heuristic value is given along with opportunities for further research.

5.1. Answering the Research Question and Objectives

5.1.1. Research Question

How does embedded influencer marketing on YouTube and TikTok impact preteen children?

With regards to the main research question, the current study found that children are impacted by embedded influencer advertising on YouTube and TikTok, through an increase in consumerism as children in the study tended to ask for products seen in videos. More interesting, however, was the believed impact influencer advertising would have on preteens once they understood the mechanics and motivation behind it, which no preteens in the study showed complete capacity for at this stage. Parents reported that their children would feel uncomfortable and betrayed by their favourite influencers if they were to fully comprehend those influencers aimed to sell products through their content.

5.1.2. Objective 1

Understand how much time preteens spend on YouTube and TikTok.

Interestingly, the children in the study were not as active on TikTok as was expected. Besides one child that spent between 1-4 hours per day on TikTok, the preteens were primarily active on YouTube. The preteens spent a substantial amount of time on the platform, with six out of the seven parents reporting that their children watch YouTube for at least 90 minutes per day. Additionally, some parents cited managing their

children's screentime as a topic of concern, while others adopted a more relaxed approach.

5.1.3. Objective 2

Gain insight on parents' awareness and perspectives on their children's interaction with social media and embedded influencer marketing.

The parents in the study were mostly aware of the content their children consumed on social media, with most being able to recite specific influencers their children watched regularly. Parents were especially aware of the amount of time their children spent on these platforms and were mainly focused on the effects of screentime and inappropriate content. However, the parents were less aware of the degree of sponsored content their children consumed and were not particularly concerned about the impact thereof until attention was brought to the issue, after which most parents still viewed screentime and content as larger concerns.

5.1.4. Objective 3

Find out whether parasocial relationships with influencers affect how preteens react to influencer advertising.

Based on their parents' recall of their children's experiences, the preteens in the study appeared to have clear parasocial relationships with influencers. Parents mentioned that their children spoke about these personalities as if they were close friends and were obsessed with them and their personal lives. These bonds formed with influencers were suggested to impact how children respond to advertising as it heightened their vulnerability to persuasion, likely due to their loyalty towards the influencer and their desire to be like them. In some cases, PSRs could have caused them to be more reluctant to use their existing advertising literacy as the preteens want to believe that their favourite influencers have their best interests at heart, without exploiting them. Additionally, it was found that the realisation of sponsored content could negatively impact their PSRs due to their discomfort with the idea of being "lied" to.

5.1.5. Objective 4

Investigate how much source credibility is given to influencers by preteens.

The preteens in the study awarded a substantial level of source credibility to influencers, and parents reported that they would mostly believe them. Children sought out content related to their own interests, increasing the level of perceived similarity with influencers, and they also believed that these influencers were experts in their specific fields of interest, making them credible sources in the preteens' eyes. Lastly, the attractive lifestyle and physical attractiveness of influencers attributed to higher levels of source credibility in the eyes of preteens who aspired to be just like them.

5.2. Ethical Considerations

To adhere to the regulations, set out by the Independent Institute of Education (2021) the study did not include preteen participants, but instead focussed on parents' perspective of the issue to avoid conducting high-risk research with vulnerable participants. The researcher received ethical clearance before sampling participants and proceeding with the data collection process (see Annexure C).

Since the research included human participants, care was taken to ensure they were not harmed during the research process, which included giving participants a choice between having the interviews occur in person or online, depending on their preference during the COVID-19 pandemic. Recruited participants received a thorough description of the study and the process before agreeing to participate. Thus, all participants gave their informed consent, by signing a consent form, which can be found in Annexure A and included a detailed description of the purpose of the study, the interview process, and how their data will be used to contribute to the study. Additionally, participants were required to sign a consent form giving the researcher permission to record their interviews. These forms and the researcher assured participants that participation was fully voluntary and that they were allowed to withdraw at any given point.

All information regarding participants and their data were kept anonymous throughout the study, as no names or personal information were used when consulting with the

supervisor or when writing the final report. Only the researcher had access to participants' personal information and the raw data to ensure confidentiality (Strydom, 2020). In conducting research and writing the report, the researcher remained aware of their unconscious bias and did not knowingly take any personal prejudices into the study. This included avoiding asking leading questions, as well not manipulating the data to fit a certain agenda.

5.3. Limitations

Firstly, while the researcher aimed to remain impartial and fair, their inevitable biases and perceptions regarding the topic and the research process could be regarded as a limitation in the study.

One key limitation of the study was the inability to interview children due to ethical reasons (Independent Institute of Education, 2021). Instead, children's experiences were investigated from their parent's perspective, which could have differed from children's direct account of their experiences with social media advertising. Furthermore, the apparent lack of parental understanding on sponsored content, could have accounted for inaccurate assumptions regarding their children's understanding and the impact it had on their children. A mixed method design incorporating paired interviews with parents and their children may have been beneficial to yield the most holistic and in-depth understanding

Furthermore, results could not be generalised to the larger population of preteens who consume content on YouTube and/or TikTok, for a number of reasons. The lack of access to the entire population pertaining to the study has resulted in the use of non-probability sampling methods which does not allow for the generalisation of results. The small sample size, due to time and financial constraints, contributes to this limitation, and together with the sampling method also restricted the diversity within the sample, which was not sufficiently representative (Enslin, 2014). However, the researcher acknowledges that generalisation and representativeness are not the fundamental goal of qualitative data.

The unexpected lack of participants whose children were active on TikTok inhibited the study from garnering a meaningful understanding regarding children's interaction

with sponsored content on the app. Although the study aimed to fill this gap in literature, only one participant could provide insight on the matter, which led the study to focus predominantly on YouTube.

5.4. Heuristic Value

This study highlighted the need for education on the subject of influencer advertising amongst preteens, as well as their parents. While unexpected, the study showed that the parents also lacked a thorough understanding of the nature and mechanics behind sponsored content, which could be attributed to their lack of exposure whilst growing up. Thus, a holistic approach to education on the matter should be implemented. The study hoped to open parents' eyes to the issue and initiate conversation not only regarding screentime and content, but also online advertising and the impact this may have on their children.

Therefore, the researcher suggests programmes focused on social media advertising literacy to be implemented in primary schools or in pre-schools. Most importantly parents could be educated on the matter during information evenings and encouraged to continue the conversation with their children at home. Moreover, in-class education should be encouraged for children, to compliment the discussions at home. Only after both children and parents are informed on the matter will disclosure be fully effective.

However, this study suggests that with appropriate education that promotes advertising literacy and clear disclosure in influencer content, preteens and their parents could enjoy their favourite content without exploitation. Thus, the study also emphasises the need for stricter accountability for brands and influencers regarding disclosure, especially with content targeted at children.

5.4.1. Opportunities for Future Research

While this study aimed to fill the gap regarding research on TikTok, the data did not allow for a comprehensive understanding of preteens' interaction with sponsored content on the platform. Since TikTok is a growing platform and reported to be popular amongst children, further research on the subject is encouraged.

While the researcher expected to find a link between embedded influencer advertising and consumerism, the emotional impact was surprising and a curious avenue for future research when studied with source credibility and PSRs. Parents in the study suggested expected feelings of discomfort and betrayal from the preteens if they were to understand influencer advertising, which could cause decreased source credibility and perceived integrity. This expected reaction could be further investigated with preteen participants, to substantiate this assumption.

Furthermore, parents' lack of understanding suggests the opportunity for a study focused on consulting both parents and children to investigate both parties' understanding and establish to what extent parents can give an accurate account of their children's experiences. Additionally, further research on parents could be valuable in providing insights to guide parental and preteen education on the subject.

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Annexure A: Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

Explanatory information sheet and consent form for participants

To whom it may concern,

My name is Carla Spies, and I am a student at IIE Vega. I am currently conducting research under the supervision of Carol Affleck about the impact of embedded influencer advertising on preteen children. I hope that this research will enhance our understanding of parent's perception on how children interact with social media and covert advertising on these platforms.

I would like to invite you to participate in my study. In order to explain to you what your participation in my study will involve, I have formulated questions that I will try to fully answer so that you can make an informed decision about whether or not to participate. If you have any additional questions that you feel are not addressed or explained in this information sheet, please do not hesitate to ask me for more information. Once you have read and understood all the information contained in this sheet and are willing to participate, please complete and sign the consent form below.

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

I would like to invite you to participate in this research because you fall into the target population as you have children between the ages of 9 and 12. If you decide to participate in this research, I would like to have an in-depth interview with you to gain a better understanding of your perspective.

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

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

Whether or not you decide to participate in this research, there will be no negative impact on you. There are no direct risks or benefits to you if you participate in this study. You might,

however, indirectly find that it is helpful to talk about your child's interaction with social media. If you find at any stage that you are not comfortable with the line of questioning, you may withdraw or refrain from participating.

Do I have to participate in the study?

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

Will my identity be protected?

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

What will happen to the information that participants provide?

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

What happens if I have more questions about the study?

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

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

My contact details are as follows:

Carla Spies

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

The contact details of my supervisor are as follows:

Carol Affleck

[REDACTED]

Participant or respondent consent

I, _____, agree to participate in the research conducted by Carla Spies about the impact of embedded influencer advertising on YouTube and TikTok on preteen children.

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

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

Signature	Date

CONSENT FORM FOR AUDIO OR VIDEO RECORDING

Consent form for participants	
I, _____, agree to allow Carla Spies to audio record my interviews as part of the research about the impact of embedded influencer advertising on YouTube and TikTok on preteen children. This research has been explained to me and I understand what participation in this research will involve. I understand that: • My confidentiality will be ensured. My name and personal details will be kept private; • The recordings will be stored in a password-protected file on the researcher's computer; and • Only the researcher, the researcher's supervisor and possibly a transcriber (who will sign a confidentiality agreement) will have access to these recordings.	

Signature	Date
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Annexure B: Discussion Guide

The impact of embedded influencer advertising on YouTube and TikTok on children:
investigating parental awareness.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

1. Introduction and warm-up

Interviewer gets to know the participants: biographic information about them and their children.

Interviewer explains the following:

Today's interview will be a discussion for me to better understand how your child is influenced by embedded influencer advertising on YouTube and/or TikTok. You have been approached since I believe you have the ability to contribute to my study that will hopefully offer some insights into how preteens interact with sponsored content on social media. It is important to know that nothing you say is wrong and that I am here to understand and listen to your perspective of this issue and your experiences. I want us to have an open discussion where you feel free to bring up any relevant information, however you will not be pressured to talk about anything that you do not feel comfortable disclosing. I appreciate your willingness to take part in this study and the value you will bring to the understanding of this topic.

A. General questioning

- How much time does your child spend watching YouTube and/or TikTok?
- On what devices do they watch e.g., your phone, their iPad etc.?
- What time of the day do they spend time on social media?
- What do they enjoy watching on YouTube and TikTok?
 - Any specific influencers they like?
 - Is there a specific genre that they are drawn to e.g., dance videos or pranks?

B. Influencers

- You mentioned that your child likes (names influencer name), what are your reasons for saying that?
- Do they prefer watching just them instead of other influencers?
- Does your child ever discuss them with you?
 - How often?
 - What do they tell you about them?
- Do they speak about them as if they are their friends?
- How would you describe their relationship with said influencer?
- Have you noticed that they start behaving like these personalities or changing their behaviour to “be like them”?
 - Have you noticed them wanting or purchasing products because of this influencer?
- What do you think your child finds attractive and desirable about this person?
- Do you think they aspire to be like them?
- Do you think your child will believe anything that this influencer tells them?
 - What about other influencers?
 - Why do you think so?
- What do you think about children interacting with social media influencers as opposed to more traditional television characters?
- Have you noticed a difference in your child’s interaction with influencers vs traditional TV characters?

C. Child’s understanding of user-generated content

- Speaking of, do you think your child realises the difference between user-generated social media content and TV content?
 - Why do you think your child prefers one above the other?
 - How have they changed since they started consuming social media content?
- What is your child’s perception of social media?
- How do you feel about sponsored content on social media?
 - Do you ever share this viewpoint with your child?

- Why do you feel it is important to have these conversations with children?
- How did/will their perception change when they realise that influencers are paid to say certain things?

D. Impact of embedded advertising

- Why do you think they have/ have not realised that social media content is often sponsored?
- Have you ever heard influencers they watch openly disclose that a video included paid promotion?
 - What do you think your child's perception is towards paid promotions in videos?
 - What do you think of their ability to recognise sponsored content even when it is not disclosed?
- How has advertising on social media impacted your child?
 - How has this impacted your family life or relationship with your child?
 - How has this impacted their social or daily life?
- How has non-disclosed advertising specifically impacted your child?
- Why do you think it is important (or not important) for advertising on social media to be disclosed?

E. Closing

- Why do you think this is an issue that needs to be addressed?
- Do you have any advice for parents raising children in a social media world?
- Do you have any other comments on what we discussed today?
- How do you feel about this discussion?

F. Thank participant for their time and say goodbye.

Annexure C: Ethical Clearance Letter



Date 24 June 2021

Student name: Carla Spies

Student number: [REDACTED]

Campus: Cape Town

Re: Approval of RESE8419 Proposal and Ethics Clearance

HONOURS ETHICAL CLEARANCE LETTER

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

Your research proposal posed no significant ethical concerns, and your supporting documents and instruments are in order to proceed. We hereby provide you with permission to proceed with your research.

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

We wish you all the best with your research!

GENERAL CONDITIONS TO BE FULFILLED IN RELATION TO RESEARCH

Permission is granted to proceed with the above study subject to the conditions listed below being met and may be withdrawn should any of these conditions be flouted.

Please note: The panel has not considered the merits, accuracy or ethical soundness of the research. The only merits examined are the use of The IIE as a sample.

Permission is granted subject to the following conditions:

1. The researcher(s) will need to obtain informed consent in writing from all of the participants in his/ her sample if the study is not anonymous.
2. The researcher(s) may only use the data collected for research purposes and in no other way.
3. Photographs of human subjects may only be taken if relevant to the research, informed consent was obtained, and even with informed consent, the photographs may not be published on any online platforms.
4. The researcher is responsible for supplying and utilising his/her own research resources, such as stationery, photocopies, transport, faxes, and telephones and should not depend on the goodwill of the institutions and/or the offices visited for supplying such resources.
5. No names or identifying information of participants may be used within the research and the research must be voluntary.
6. Please make it clear that the information will not be used punitively in any way and participants may in no way be counselled/advised based on this.

Supervisor/ Campus Postgraduate Coordinator (CPC) name:

Carol Affleck

Signature:

A solid black rectangular box used to redact the signature of the supervisor.

Annexure D: Final Research Report Summary Document Table

TITLE: The Impact of Embedded Influencer Advertising on YouTube and TikTok on Children: Investigating Parental Awareness.

Research Purpose/Objective	Primary Research Question	Research Rationale	Seminal Authors	Lit Review	Paradigm	Approach	Data Collection Method(s)	Ethics	Key Findings	Recommendations
To gain a parental perspective on how pre-teens are impacted by embedded advertising on YouTube and TikTok.	How does embedded influencer marketing on YouTube and TikTok impact pre-teen children?	COVID-19 has seen a surge in children's screen time, thus their time on social media. Understanding the way children are influenced can help parents to make informed decisions and guide their children. There is a lack in research focussing on preteens and their parents in South Africa.	Piaget, J. 1964. Part I: Cognitive development in children Horton, D. & Wohl, R. R. 1956. Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction.	Conceptual Framework	Paradigm Interpretivism Epistemology <i>The knowledge gathered will be used to get a more in-depth understanding of children and parents' meaningful experiences with the topic.</i>	Qualitative Accessible Population Parents of children between 9-12 who spend more than 4 hours per week consuming user-generated content on YouTube and TikTok, residing in the City of Cape Town municipal area and have sufficient awareness.	Semi-structured, in-depth interviews Data Analysis Method(s) Qualitative Content Analysis - thematic coding	Parents will be interviewed instead of children. Ethical clearance will be obtained before starting. Informed consent will be adhered to. Participation will be voluntary all information will be kept anonymous.	Preteens and parents lack understanding regarding embedded social media marketing. Children were impacted behaviourally (consumerism) and expected to be impacted emotionally. PSR increased vulnerability. Key Contribution Need for stricter legislation and accountability for disclosure. Start the conversation between children, parents, and schools on influencer advertising to advise education for all parties to decrease exploitation.	More studies focused on preteens' interaction with TikTok. More studies investigating the emotional reaction of preteens when sponsored content in relation to PSR. Studies interviewing both parents and children.
	Secondary Questions - How much time do pre-teens spend consuming YouTube and TikTok content? - How aware are parents of their children's social media diets, specifically on YouTube and the impact thereof? - What is the nature of pre-teens' parasocial relationships with influencers and does this affect the way that they respond to advertising? - How much source credibility is given to influencers by pre-teens?	Key Concepts Preteens, Advertising to Children, YouTube & TikTok, Influencers, Influencer Marketing, Advertising Literacy, Embedded Advertising, Advertising Disclosure	Key Theories Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development (Piaget, 1964) Parasocial Interaction (Horton & Wohl, 1956) Source Credibility Theory (Hovland & Weiss, 1951)	Theme 1: Social Media Popularity Amongst Preteens Theme 2: Advertising Literacy in Piaget's Concrete Operational Stage Theme 3: Parasocial Relationships with Influencers Theme 4: The Role of Source Credibility Dimensions Theme 5: Parental Awareness	Ontology <i>Reality is subjective to the participants and shaped by their individual experiences.</i>	Sampling non-probability Sampling method Purposive Sampling & Snowball Sampling Size 7 mothers	Limitations Children cannot be interviewed. Lack of preteens who are active on TikTok. Findings cannot be generalised. Bias of the researcher.			