



Digitalisation and Sales: A study on the impact of online platforms on the retail sector.

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Abstract

In the modern day retail sector the increased incorporation of technology into daily operating processes of brands and businesses has made it easier for consumers and brands to interact with each other. However, this has also provided a market for counterfeiters to thrive in, especially in a post Coronavirus world where countless brands and industries have fully embraced a move to a more online based form of operations, the process of digitalisation was expedited as a result of the pandemic. As a result, it has become difficult for South African consumers to authenticate products they purchase online and ensure they are receiving the expected quality product for the amount of money they pay and put strain on the reliability and trustworthiness of online marketplaces.

This paper seeks to investigate the impact that these digital processes have had on consumer trust and loyalty, but also looking into how counterfeiters have an impact on the credibility of big name brands, such as Nike, in a South African context.

The study was conducted by incorporating a qualitative data collection method, making use of online focus group discussions as these allowed the researcher to hold an open forum on which participants could openly and anonymously share their views and experiences with online marketplaces and how these have impacted their purchasing behaviours going forward, the result of these discussions was a main recurring theme which indicated trust was seen as a higher order factor for online purchases.

DECLARATION

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

Signature: *Mnqobi Kwanda Majola* Date: 29/11/2021

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1.Introduction

1.1. Contextualization

It cannot be argued that global sneaker sales have been on a meteoric rise in the last couple of years, more especially with increased celebrity endorsement, coupled by greater availability of the products, it is no wonder sneaker culture may be at its highest popularity since Michael Jordan first introduced the world to Air Jordan (Thompson A. , 2020).

However, this rise in sneaker popularity has also provided an opportunity for scam artists to take advantage of individuals who may not be as familiar with sneaker culture and the difference between authentic products and the fake, this can be most evidently seen in the rising numbers of social media users that have often found themselves being scammed for major cash and not even receive any products at all (Mkwanazi, 2021).

This growing population of online scam artists has placed a spot of fear, doubt, and mistrust amongst consumers of online retail and sneaker fanatics alike. Therefore, this study is to explore the extent to which these online scam artists have impacted consumer trust and brand image as concepts that have their own complimentary impact on consumer brand loyalty.

1.2. Rationale

This problem is relevant because of the amount of counterfeit Nike products, mostly in the form of sneakers and other footwear, that can be seen flooding the market today which are predominantly advertised and distributed using Instagram, Facebook, and other online platforms. This is especially true in a South African context where these counterfeit goods have highlighted the issue of trust in online platforms and how this has impacted the credibility of a reseller brand.

Forgione (2017) stated that the increased availability of counterfeit goods has assisted brand owners in convincing their consumers to resume shopping with certified sellers or re-sellers of their products even if they are often sold at a much higher price than the marketplaces on which the counterfeit replicas are available, he further argued that this was due to the fact that consumers had begun to find it increasingly difficult to purchase from these online platforms with any grade of confidence that the product they were purchasing, mostly footwear, was actually authentic and would provide the actual quality expected from purchasing said product.

The decline of consumer trust in online marketplaces stemmed from the ease with which online retailers can manipulate product imagery in a way that an advertisement appears to be displaying the actual authentic product but because a consumer cannot do further research or have an in-person look at the product it comes down to them either trusting the brand and making the purchase, which often results in the receiving of a counterfeit product, or opting to pay a higher price to a certified reseller or the brands actual website.

1.3. Problem Statement

As brands continue to make a shift towards a more online based form of operating through social media pages and online stores, there is still a growing concern amongst consumers in the amount of trust they can place in brands and this could have an impact on Nike sales in South Africa due to the issue of reliability (Business Tech, 2014).

1.4. Purpose Statement

The purpose of this research was to identify the extent to which consumers feel they can trust brands or resellers of more exclusive products that operate online, mainly through social media pages such as Instagram and Facebook as well as identify the impact this factor has on the sales of these brands in South Africa.

1.5. Research Question

What impact does the integration of social media and other online platforms have on consumer trust and sales in the retail sector?

1.6. Objectives

- How do brands create a positive online presence?
- How can brands improve their online security to assure consumers of product authenticity?
- How do consumer trust and brand perception impact loyalty?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Conceptualization

Digitalization is the process a firm or organisation implements in order to optimize and automate certain processes, these are not restricted to solely being centred around technology itself as the primary focus of this process is to uplift employees through the provision of more effective organisational resources, in doing this, they will often be able to perform their tasks with a greater efficiency and in-turn provide greater value to the firm and its clients (Huspi, 2021). This relates to the convenience and security which can be provided to the consumers experience and brand journey when the digitalization process is correctly implemented.

Yang (2014) argued that brand trust as a concept could be seen as a second-order factor to promoting brand loyalty amongst consumers, although previously being seen as a first order factor the researcher argues it is a second-order factor because of the various complexities that could be related to trust, such as the intellectual ability and compassion of a specific brand and its target market. This intellectual ability and compassion could be interpreted as being about the extent to which a consumer is able to resonate (relate) with a certain brand. Yang (2014: 2) cited in Chaudhuri and Holbrook, (2001: 82) that brand trust is about and can be greatly determined by the customers preparedness to take the brand at its word and have faith that said brand will make good on the promise it makes to its target market when delivering its message.

This could be seen as an illustration of the importance of building and maintaining consumer trust over a long period of time as a core element of brand equity because the greater the amount of trust a consumer is able to place in a brand, the greater loyalty this consumer will have towards the brand in the long-run, and this will in turn have a positive impact on the brand image. Brand trust has been widely seen as an important determinant for building brand credibility amongst consumers and competitors of a brand in a certain market, a brand that is able to fulfil its promise will, often, enjoy greater industry success through greater market share which comes because of consumer loyalty (Alhaddad, 2015).

Brand Image as a concept refers to the way in which consumers see a brand; it can be described as the customer's view of the brand. This image evolves over time as consumers create an image of the brand based on their relationship and experiences with it, these experiences or interactions can take several forms and do not always entail the buying or use of goods and services but can also be in social media or advertisement interactions (Pahwa, 2021).

Alhaddad (2015: 138) cited from Aaker (1991) that brand image could be interpreted as a set of brand links, which referred to something related in memory to a particular brand, typically in some significant way to the experiences of the individual consumer, which can be described as the consumer's prospects and opinions towards a brand.

Essentially brand image consists of certain beliefs or outlooks that a consumer can develop or derive from a brand over a period, these outlooks are often influenced by even the slightest of interactions between the consumer and the brand which is why it is so important for brands to ensure there is always a clear and concise message that their

selected target market would be able to resonate with. Furthermore, said beliefs/outlooks often play a fundamental role in the consumers decision-making process in the instance where they assessed competitor brands as a replacement or substitute for another.

Alhaddad (2015) further argues that brand image can also be seen as the various physical and/or non-physical attributes of a brand that provide the consumer with the ability or visual representation to be able to easily identify their desired product. A positive brand image is important because it can, and often does, have a direct impact on a customer's brand trust, therefore the greater the positivity of the brands image the higher brand trust there will be from its consumers.

Brand image can also be seen to have a positive impact on consumer brand loyalty. As a concept, this refers to customers that demonstrate brand loyalty being committed to a product or service, as can be evidently seen by their repeat transactions, even in the presence of competitors that constantly attempt to persuade them away from their preferred brand. Corporations invest heavily on customer support and advertisement to build and sustain customer loyalty with a well-known product, in the case of the Nike brand such a product could be the Airforce 1 (Kopp, 2021).

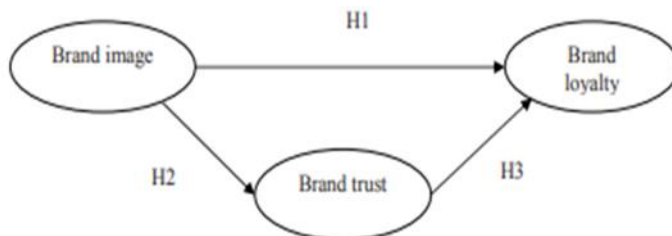
"Brand Loyalty is a deeply held commitment to re-buy or re-patronize a preferred product/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand or same-brand set purchasing despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behaviour" (Oliver, 1997, cited in Alhaddad, 2015:138).

Alhaddad (2015) argues that this concept comprises of two components that are integral to the formulation of brand loyalty, these being attitude and behaviour. The two components clearly explain the formation of the concept of brand loyalty; on one hand, consumer attitudes are an indication that loyalty is derived from a positive relationship between the customer and the brand, this attitude comes as a result of the consumer being able to resonate with the brand and its product/service offering and communication message which caters for the customers preferences; on the other hand, the behavioural aspect contributes to the formulation of brand loyalty through a consumers behaviour in making repeat purchases with the brand, this is often evident from a customer's previous purchases or interactions with a brand.

These concepts are inter-linked and often have an immense impact on the success of the other. A strong and positive brand image contributes exponentially to the long-term brand trust and brand loyalty, this can be seen because of a positive public image influenced by

consistency in product or service delivery. The greater consistency in fulfilling the brand promise, the greater consumer loyalty the brand would be able to obtain; wholistically, these concepts are contributing factors to the sales of a brand over a long period of time.

Figure 2.1: *An illustration of the relationship between brand image, brand trust and the impact these have on brand loyalty.*



Source: Alhaddad (2015: 139)

2.2. Theoretical Foundation

Many people confuse digitization and digitalization, which is why there is frequently a misinterpretation and inadequate adoption of innovative systems by brands and their leadership. It is due to this that it is critical to distinguish between these two somewhat close, but significantly different phrases.

Rachinger, Rauter, Muller, Vorraber and Schirgi (2018) asserted the theory of digitalization has an enormous significance in modern society and can have a tremendous influence on the evolution of a brand and its transformation to online media and an e-commerce-based form of delivering its products and/or services, which is why it was identified as a key theory for the formulation of this research paper. However, it is imperative that this term is not used interchangeably with digitization.

Majola (2020, cited in Gustafsson and Westbergh, 2010) that the internal integration of processes that lead to minimised business expenses is what is referred to as digitization, this is the transmission of knowledge from a traditional (document-based) system to a digital format and is not a particularly revolutionary phenomenon. In industry, this involves creating a more digitally inclined workspace and often brand leaders misinterpret this term to imply a total absence of print material. However, it goes further than that as in the case of some organisations this could entail certain functions, like accessing information, being done remotely, and working with employees or teams in innovative ways making use of the technological transition.

Whereas, according to Chapco-Wade (2018), digitalization differs in that it aims to change an organization's entire business model in a manner that contributes value to the company and its everyday activities, as well as the customer experience and the operating systems at their disposal to communicate and collaborate with their favourite brands. Principally, this looks at the processes that a brand can implement, through the interpretation of technology and information, to affect positive change for all stakeholders involved with the organisation.

This theory is relevant to the research paper because it looks to highlight the ways in which a business, based on a more digitalised operational model, could positively influence its own daily operations by providing ease and accessibility of resources for employees in completing their own tasks and doing this in a way that provides greater value to the consumer and their journey with a brand such as Nike. It also seeks to highlight the areas that tend to be the motivator for brands adopting this form of conducting business and contextualise why the need for security would be an important factor to ensure consumers trust a brand.

Over the last decade, there has been a prolific rise in online marketplaces and it can be argued that these markets would cease to exist without consumer trust, this as a result of the consumers prerequisite to be able to trust that producers/firms are providing accurate descriptions of the products or services they offer (Luca, 2016). Similarly, this can also be applied from the perspective of firms as they require that consumers possess the ability to meet the price that a specific product or service is offered for and fulfil the requirements of transactions as is necessary for exchanges to take place (Luca, 2016). Dwivedi (2020) argues that the implementation of the cyberspace and social media marketing have altered consumer behaviour and the business models of certain firms as social and online marketing provides noteworthy benefits, such as improved brand awareness for the firm and greater convenience for the consumer; however, it can introduce substantial challenges in the form of negative online reviews and what can be viewed by consumers as personally intrusive brand presence.

It can be reasoned that there is an attentiveness, in day-to-day life, placed on building trust and relationships; and the same regulation individuals have about disassociating with people they place little trust in, can be extended beyond personal interactions as can be seen from consumers' lack of engagement with brands that do not align with their ethics or values Christoff (2020).

This illustrates the way consumers may often display comparable behaviour, towards a brand, as that which they display towards individuals or groups in their lives and can be seen as evidence of the impact that consumer perception, coupled by brand image, can have on brand success and loyalty.

Brand trust assesses how much faith people have in the company and represents whether you are branding reliably delivers on its commitments and adheres to its core principles (Dienstman, 2020).

Reddy (2016) argues the aspect of trust in contemporary society retail sector is greatly impacted by the increasing availability of counterfeit goods in the market, in a South African context this is especially true towards Nike sneakers as there has been a large increase in online retailers, mainly through social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook, who claim to provide authentic products only for consumers to be let down when receiving their products and finding they are either not the colour or design they paid for, in other instances finding the product is not even the authentic “real-deal” product they had seen originally advertised and this could have an impact on the credibility of the Nike brand in South Africa.

Forgione (2017) states that in the last few years online marketplaces, such as shopping websites and social media platforms, have grown and continue to increase in popularity, serving as channels through which counterfeiters offer and sell fake products on the internet. He goes further to argue that the seismic number of these counterfeit products that are readily available and frequently offered on these platforms, assisted by the difficulty that brand leaders engage with in examining and authenticating these products, creates a lucrative environment for counterfeiters but an unsafe one for consumers of authentic, high-end products and that this can be seen in the lack of consumer protection from fraud.

This is in direct reference which the problem consumers face and that this paper seeks to address as to the extent to which consumers can trust online retailers, this is an especially worrisome concern if brand owners themselves are finding it difficult to authenticate products in a manner that ensures consumers, they are receiving the authentic product as advertised (Forgione, 2017). The Nike brand itself could be seen to be making it considerably simpler for counterfeiters to have the success they have enjoyed in recent years through the increased frequency of footwear releases, this coupled by the decrease in exclusive access for loyal consumers of these high-end releases could negatively affect

the brand because counterfeiters can capitalise on the well-known decrease in uniqueness of products (McKevitt, 2017).

According to Thompson (2020) the shortage in availability is where the opportunity is presented for counterfeiters, especially in South Africa where access is already limited, they are able to obtain counterfeit replicas through certain international connections or manufacturers and take advantage of the more desperate segment of the sneaker consuming clientele; by the time a consumer might notice they do not have the authentic pair of sneakers they desired, it is usually already too late as some retailers even delete social media pages after they have managed to make what they feel is a considerable or satisfactory amount of sales.

This problem has become so rife in South Africa that some banks have even gone as far as being able to identify, flag and reverse transactions done by their clients with online retailers that have been previously complained about by other clients; these counterfeiters often display a screenshot image of a product that displays the accurate graphic components and claim to have several pairs in various colours but, in some instances, consumers do not receive any product at all (Thompson, 2020).

Forgione (2017) further argues that these online marketplaces also turn profit from these counterfeit enterprises, mostly from transaction fees/costs, hence why there is little incentive for them to strictly regulate and monitor the legitimacy of these online retailers, the result is corrupt business models, in-turn the implication that there is essentially no reason to still consider these as dependable channels for consumers to purchase high-end/authentic products.

In a South African context this could be further highlighted by the questionable pricing that can often be seen displayed by these online retailers, where one pair of authentic Nike Air Jordan 1's should cost an average of R2500-R3000, an inexperienced consumer will be persuaded by the R1500 "special" for the "same pair" that many of these retailers offer their products for (Thompson, 2020).

Bridglall (2018) looked at consumer purchase intention in a South African context, more specifically in the luxury footwear market amongst women, and cited consumer trust, brand image and attitude as major determinants of consumer behaviour, but perceived quality and social status as intentions behind consumer purchases amongst her selected demographics. Kutu (2015) further argues the desired social status can be seen as an enabler for counterfeiters in South Africa to benefit, this as a considerable segment of the

population has an extensive desire to wear luxury brands to achieve a high social status, some may even do this to be held in high regard amongst the wealthy elite.

This literature is relevant to the study as it provides background into the extent to which consumers in South Africa place trust in and engage with online retailers, it these writings go further to highlight that there is a segment of the South African population that knowingly support counterfeiters to fulfil self-esteem needs.

In addition to this, Bridglall (2018) states that perceived quality, value and social status are determinants of consumer purchase intention in South Africa, this perceived or desired social status could be seen as a factor held in higher regard than that of being able to trust an online retailer by South African consumers and in an effort to impress socially these consumers may be more willing to, either knowingly or unknowingly, purchase goods from counterfeiters through social media platforms or websites in an effort to meet their potential need for a boost in confidence.

The need for being able to portray a higher social status can be seen to be a huge determinant in purchase decisions all over the world but would not be seen to be of greater importance than being able to trust the brand by a larger majority of consumers.

3. Research Design and Methodology

3.1. Paradigm

For this study, the interpretivist paradigm was adopted as it is based on the belief that reality has multiple layers of interpretation and a single phenomenon could be interpreted in different ways as influenced by the way in which individuals comprehend and network within their social environment (Nel, 2018).

According to Thompson (2015) interpretivism considers and values what people think, do and experience; as well as how they interpreted the phenomenon under investigation. The paradigm emphasizes the significance that people or groups place on their interactions, from this, trends and themes were then identified in the analytical process, here the researcher's task should be to comprehend real-world circumstances from the point-of-view of individuals within the selected sample population.

The paradigm is therefore relevant to the study because it will allow the interpretation of the sample populations responses as individuals and take into consideration, not only the environmental and cultural backgrounds of these individuals, but also include the way in which they are most likely to socially interact with the society or communities around them

as there is a high possibility that there will be several differences across the sample population, however, these could still reveal certain trends in how they interact with brands when responses are analysed collectively.

Qualitative research is a market analysis approach that focuses on collecting data through open-ended and conversational interaction, it entails gathering and analysing non-numerical information for the purposes of understanding patterns, emotions, or expectations, and can be used to obtain in-depth insight about the dilemma or to generate new research ideas (Bhandari, 2020). The selected paradigm of interpretivism is relevant because it ties into the qualitative approach/design by assisting in the interpretation of responses from the selected sample population in a manner that allows the identification of trends amongst the selected individuals.

Packard (2017) used the interpretivist paradigm to look at the individualistic nature of entrepreneurs and the way in which these individuals base their business ideas off what they perceive or identify to be a gap in a certain market or industry, he was able to identify that these ideas are also often based off what these entrepreneurs find to be something missing from their own lives and could recognise patterns in responses that lead to this conclusion through the aid of the interpretivist paradigm by analysing responses through the consideration of the various backgrounds of said individual entrepreneurs.

This further illustrates the validity of this paradigm in demonstrating how being able to interpret the responses or views of individuals within the sample population can reveal patterns in consumer decision-making and the identification of various determinants of the extent to which certain individuals may find they are able to place trust in an online retailer.

A significant advantage of the paradigm is that it provides impetus for great depth when doing the research. Pham (2018) further argues that the interactive interview process, such as focus groups, that is often adopted when utilising this paradigm can be used as leverage to provide the researcher with the advantage of being able to stimulate reactions from their population sample to reveal certain thoughts, feelings, or attitudes towards a brand, in this case being Nike and online re-sellers of the brands products.

3.2. Research Approach and Design

For the purpose of this study a qualitative research design was adopted to identify the extent to which the amount of trust a consumer has in a brand could have had an impact on the consumer loyalty towards a brand and the way in which different consumers amongst the selected population sample would or could have experienced trust or mistrust

when interacting with a brand. For this to be accurate, it was imperative that data collection was carried out precisely by documenting and reporting the methods of analysis in sufficient detail.

According to Hammarberg, Kirkman and de Lacey (2016) a qualitative approach is effective for studies where meaning or perspective were required, said perspective was about the individuals or groups who were participating in the study and were required to answer the questions that were going to be asked of them. Qualitative research methods have often been used to disclose certain feelings that individuals or groups may have had towards the implementation of certain initiatives (de Lacey et al., 2016).

Rahman (2016) asserted that there are advantages to the implementation of a qualitative approach such as:

- The author argues that this research design offers greater insights through more descriptive feelings, experiences, and attitudes of respondents; this can offer greater depth or better understanding into the respondent's behaviour towards the phenomenon being researched. This would be beneficial for the purpose of the study as it will provide insight into the respondents' purchase behaviour as well as their stance towards online shopping; it could also highlight a pattern in the sample's behaviour as a collective.
- Another advantage is that this approach will allow the researcher to interpret results with the consideration of human experience and the various or differing experiences that certain individuals may have; in reference to the study this could be beneficial through highlighting the need to consider that various respondents may have had different experiences with online brands which could influence them having opposing perspectives to other respondents within the sample.
- This goes further to highlight the need to consider the different cultural backgrounds individuals may have and the way these can impact their interaction with brands in an online capacity as some of these could influence them to remain with the more traditional methods of product purchasing.

Qualitative data intrinsically provides area for more extensive collaboration, and this meant there was an opportunity to provide various viewpoints which lead to a greater depth in information (Naresh, 2021).

However, there was a disadvantage of adopting a qualitative approach in that for some discussions the correct and most relevant questions were not necessarily asked for the

best accuracy possible for the study, a lot of information would not have been obtained at the conclusion of the study and this would have resulted in possibly leaving the same gaps in the body of knowledge as before the research was conducted (Vaughan, 2019).

The qualitative approach was however the most beneficial for this study as it allowed the interpretation of respondent answers in a holistic manner once familiar with the responses, this provided a platform for the identification of patterns in responses or behaviours when conducting the research and this aided in the accuracy of interpretation without bias.

3.3. Population and Sampling

For the purpose of this study individuals residing in Gauteng were selected from the existing South African population which consisted of individuals who were between the ages of 18-28 years of age. These individuals needed to be technologically savvy and relatively well-informed in fashion and streetwear culture; it was also a major preference for the researcher that the sample population consisted of individuals that spent a considerable amount of time on social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook to ensure the study was going to be interpreted in a context with which they were familiar. By doing this the hope was to achieve the most accurate and honest perspectives towards online shopping or engagement with online retailers thus revealing the way in which the issue of trust could have an impact on brand loyalty and customer retention.

Furthermore, non-probability purposive sampling was adopted for a deliberate inspection of interviewees based, not only on their ability to contextualize the subject or idea at hand, but also considering that these were individuals who were more likely to engage with brands' online platforms on a relatively regular basis.

This sampling method is also known as judgemental or selective sampling because it required the researcher to rely on the existing knowledge and the participants' own judgements surrounding the topic; additionally, this required the researcher to have previous knowledge about the purpose of the study in order to ensure only the most eligible candidates were selected for contextualisation of certain questions that were to be posed in data-collection methods (Alchemer, 2021).

This method was relevant to the study because of the necessity to collect and interpret results in a manner that allowed the researcher to identify patterns or themes in participant responses in a manner that took into consideration the various backgrounds and perspectives that arose from the different experiences of the selected participants; the sampling method provided the platform to do this by the researcher being able to select

individuals that could sometimes even offer a completely different perspective in the area of their own determinants of brand loyalty as a consumer.

The unit of analysis that was selected and implemented were focus groups because these allowed for the stimulation of ideas amongst peers who were mostly from different backgrounds, this also provided or brought to light new ideas through the group discussion as participants were then able to not only share their own ideas but go further in obtaining a different perspective to approach certain situations in their own capacity.

Phoenix (2016) reasoned that working in groups continues to increase in regards to being a fruitful method for analysing data as it had been reported to build strongly on existing research skills which then aided the process of data analyses visible to both the researcher and participants, it also provided reduction in the potential inequalities that could have been present amongst a sample population selected to take part in a focus group as it reduced the gap between the researcher and the participants.

This unit of analysis did in fact prove beneficial for the study as an open discussion allowed participants to feel more comfortable in expressing their views and sharing their opinions towards other respondents' ideas. The intended sample size here was 25 individuals who were separated into groups of 5 to ensure respondents were not only comfortable, but that there was greater ease in adhering to corona-virus compliance regulations; this as it proved difficult to physically host said focus group interviews and therefore meant they were hosted through the online platform Zoom.

3.4. Data Collection Method

***Please refer to Annexure D for focus group questions.**

Data is important because it forms the basis for the advancement of knowledge in almost every academic or exploratory field, whether it be relevant to a specific industry or is to merely add to an existing body of knowledge to provide broader information on specific phenomenon, it also helps researchers identify problems in certain areas and develop suitable solutions to address these phenomena.

Lobe, Morgan, and Hoffman (2020) argued that the Corona-virus pandemic had completely changed the landscape of qualitative data collection for research purposes and in their paper discussed the various ways in which technology, in the United States of America could be implemented as a tool to adapt to these changes, the authors went further to cover certain ethical and security concerns linked with conducting research through third party service providers.

The traditional data-collection method that would have been implemented for the purpose of this study is face-to-face, focus group interviews/discussions, these would have been effective as they would have offered in depth understanding and perspective into social issues; in relevance to the study they would have provided the platform for a more open discussion on something that continues to rapidly grow popular in the South African retail market, Nike sneakers and in particular the Air Jordan (Chin, 2018).

Nyumba, Wilson, Derrick and Nibedita (2018) looked at focus groups as a data collection method for conservationist studies and reasoned that these could often be seen as being identical to interviews, especially the one-on-one and group interviews, this similarity between the two techniques related to the opportunity to uncover individuals' perceptions and values, which would often be accompanied by the opportunity to read respondents' body language reactions to specific questions. However, the two collection methods differ in that an interview involves one-on-one interaction between the participant and the interviewer as an investigator, here the researcher asks the questions and controls the flow of conversation; opposingly, a focus group discussion places the researcher more as a moderator than an investigator and tends to include open, free flowing discussions between all participants (Nyumba et al., 2019).

Due to the corona-virus pandemic still being very present in South Africa, the data-collection method that was utilised for the purpose of this study in order to ensure safety of participants was: online, computer based focus group discussions which allowed the researcher to conduct their research whilst ensuring all participants were safe in adhering to social distancing regulations in their own right; this method was made relevant in that it still provided a more face-to-face interaction as opposed to text or voice only research methods (Lobe et al., 2020).

According to Paradis and O'Brien (2016) focus groups are an effective data collection method used to amass information from a group of individuals simultaneously, this is often done through prearranged interview questions asked by the moderator/researcher or a guideline that may often be used to stimulate an open conversation between participants. This method is often used when it is anticipated that the individual experiences of a collective will provide greater value and insight to understand societal phenomena than those of an individual without group influence; furthermore, in a pre-coronavirus world, focus groups would be conducted face-to-face and allow the researcher to capture participant facial and body reactions to comments from other participants or reactions to certain questions (Paradis and O'Brien, 2016).

The researcher identified the relevant participants from the selected population and sample size. All participants were initially contacted through the mobile application WhatsApp where they were asked about their initial willingness to be part of a focus group as well as their level of flexibility or availability over the course of a week that fell during the mid-year break as this would ensure the greatest convenience for all parties involved. The selected participants were all individuals whom are familiar with social media advertising as well as streetwear and sneaker culture, others were even individuals that make regular purchases through online platforms and had a positive attitude towards being able to share their views around the topic at hand.

Once the participants were all identified, the researcher then proceeded to allocate all the individuals a group and a time slot during which all the members of the group were available, all groups consisted of five individuals who were well informed around the basis and purpose of the discussion; a follow-up email was sent to all participants through which the relevant consent forms were sent and to be returned prior to the commencement of the different group discussions.

The focus group discussions were all held in the same week and took place in the evening as this assisted the researcher in ensuring that all participants were available without any immediate commitments of their own as all the discussions varied in length depending on how extensive the responses of each individual were; this variation also stemmed from some respondents having more to share about their own personal experiences with online shopping when interacting with various brands. The researcher went further to confirm final availability of each individual through WhatsApp, firstly the day before an individuals allocated group would be hosted and a second reminder on the day of the interview as is relevant to those certain individuals.

All discussions took place on Zoom where each individual of the selected sample population were sent links via email on the day of their allocated focus group, it was not a mandatory requirement for participants to have their cameras on, however, this was an option for those who preferred to do so. Due to the Zoom account not being premium the 40 minute time limit did apply but none of the discussions ran longer than 30 minutes each, this was also beneficial as it ensured there was not too much time taken out of the personal lives of the various participants.

Questions used to stimulate the conversations were separated into primary and secondary questions which were then coupled by slightly more specific, tabulated questions which

were integrated with brand names and imagery to stimulate responses by having offered a familiar image for the participants to base their responses on.

All the discussions were relatively free flowing and were conducted with minimal technical difficulty on the parts of both the researcher and the participants who later responded with messages of positivity indicating they enjoyed the discussions and some found them to even prove informative in their own personal capacity.

***Please refer to Annexure B for an audio recording of one of the focus group discussions hosted and Annexure C for a focus group transcript.**

A major benefit (strength) of having had to host these discussions on an online platform was that it provided great convenience for all individuals involved as it allowed flexibility for them pertaining to the location from which they decided to join the discussion; this would have also ensured all participants were in a comfortable environment and this contributed to the quality of their responses as they were accurate, honest and free from any pressures or moments of anxiety which could have been a factor had these discussions taken place in a physical, traditional setting. All discussions were recorded, although voices only and not video, so as to ensure there was evidence of these having taken place and proved to be a beneficial decision when it came to analysing responses and participant identities were kept anonymous as promised when first obtaining permission from each individual to participate in the study.

3.5. Data Analysis Method

Jena (2012) stated that data analysis was important to a research study as it provided credibility to the research and it backed up trustworthy references and gave theoretical foundation to the study. By providing insight and interpretation through data analysis the researcher also eliminates or lessens the probability of any bias to be present in the final results (Jena, 2012).

Warren and Rautenbach (2020) reason that there are various methods of conducting qualitative data analysis and some of these can be interpreted as follows:

3.5.1. Qualitative Content Analysis – it can be argued that this is probably the most shared and simple data analysis method, at its lowest level content analysis can be used to assess relationships within respondent content or several pieces of content that could be combined to add to a specific area of expertise. However, for this method to be successful it is important for the researcher to approach their analysis with a specific goal in mind already.

3.5.2. Thematic Analysis – this data analysis method is often used to interpret larger volumes of data by analysing interview or focus group records, these can then be grouped according to similarities or recurring themes amongst participant responses. Although effective, this method of data analysis can often prove to be time-consuming due to the extensive body of data that has to be analysed.

3.5.3. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) – this data analysis method is designed to assist the researcher comprehend the personal experiences of his/her participants where a specific phenomenon is concerned, this can range from the most common event like falling of a bicycle as a child to the rarest of cases like being a foreign refugee. A shortcoming of this method is that it may often be difficult for the researcher to omit their own personal bias when analysing data of a phenomenon where they themselves had a similar experience.

IPA was incorporated into the analysis of participant responses in order to interpret their personal experiences surrounding the idea or phenomena of receiving counterfeit products through an online platform or marketplace as it was anticipated some of the sample population would be able to provide personal insight around this issue. This method of qualitative data analysis provided opportunity for unbiased interpretation and explanation of personal experiences as explained by certain participants within their focus group discussions.

The researcher also posed certain questions to the various focus groups in a manner that was meant to prompt certain reactions and responses from the participants that were then categorised into pre-expected themes, this is why there was also an incorporation of a deductive approach to thematic analysis which allowed the researcher to categorise these responses in themes that he/she expected to emerge from conducting these focus group discussions.

Caulfield (2020) stated there were six steps to be followed when conducting thematic data analysis and these are as follows:

1. Familiarization – this entails the interpretation and transcribing of the audio recordings into passages of text or notes for each individual focus group in order to have a visual evidence of participant responses that the researcher will be able to become familiar with.
2. Coding – this involves highlighting specific sections of the transcribed text and identifying phrases that can be given shortened labels that will allow the description of

content. Due to time constraints the researcher hopes to obtain access to a coding software that could assist in transcribing the audio recordings into written materials as the coding can only be done by highlighting all the relevant phrases that can aid the ease of conducting the study.

3. Generating themes – these are generally broader than the codes and quite often it may be found that more than two codes can be combined to identify one theme, an example of a theme could be trust.

4. Reviewing themes – in this section the researcher will need to go over their identified themes and ensure that there are no shortcomings and limit any vague interpretation, should there be challenges encountered by the researcher it may help for him/her to either combine or separate certain themes for the best benefit of the study and interpretation of results.

5. Naming themes – once the final list of themes has been created and finalised it will benefit the researcher to name each them and give them a meaning so as to aid the reader of the paper and the results. This will involve the researcher clearly explaining what each them means in the context of their study.

6. Writing – this final stage looks at the interpretation of each theme as well as a broader explanation into how these were identified and what questions a specific theme answers in its own individual capacity in aiding the study and its initial purpose.

The deductive thematic analysis aided the researcher in interpreting the personal experiences of participants, where an experience was shared by more than one participant across the entire sample population, to create or bring to light an entirely different theme that was found to be relevant to the study.

4. Findings and Interpretation of Findings

The researcher incorporated Thematic Analysis to identify themes from the data collected to answer the research objectives, this was also effective in answering the research question: What impact does the integration of social media and other online platforms have on consumer trust and sales in the retail sector?

4.1. Key questions posed and relevant answers from groups (as a whole):

4.1.1. Do you prefer online shopping as opposed to in-store?

The general response to this question amongst all five focus groups was that the participants preferred shopping in-store, especially when concerning products, they were

unfamiliar with, as this would allow them to accurately assess the quality and style of the product. The general justification for this choice was that images seen online may often be misleading in colour of a certain product and even the fit or perceived quality that is obtained from an image is sometimes an inaccurate reflection of what will be received, in-store shopping ensures that what is seen is what was expected.

From these responses, although there is a willingness to purchase from specific online based brands, many consumers still prefer being able to physically see and feel the product they want before making the purchase.

4.1.2. Do you find it easy to trust an online based brand?

The responses between focus groups differed slightly in answering this question, where the first two discussions were concerned, the consensus amongst the participants was that if the brand had a proven credibility and popularity, they were more likely to place a certain level of trust in the brand. Opposingly, other participants stated they were less likely to trust an online based reseller that uses Instagram as a medium of service regardless of influencers or reviews as these can also be falsified and may often be hard to trust.

One participant went further to state that these online based brands, such as Instagram resellers, have a no refund policy which makes even harder to believe the business is legitimate as this can be seen as a reflection of lack of customer service. It was however found that participants often try do their own research around a brand because small, legitimate, and local boutiques often operate through social media pages.

This could be seen to link with the argument made by Forgione (2017) as he stated there was an increasing number of online marketplaces at an incredibly fast pace, and as these increase in popularity so does the opportunity for legitimate small businesses to compete for market share, however, this also provides an opportunity for counterfeiters to leave their mark as the saturation of the market often influences consumers to take the options that are selling products for lower prices than competitors, even though these may not be legitimate resellers.

4.1.3. What is your attitude towards online shopping?

The general attitude towards online shopping was revealed to be slightly negative amongst the focus groups, as individuals and wholistically. Although it was stated by some individuals that there are certain benefits of online shopping, such as convenience, the negative perception in a retail context was said to be influenced by a lack of physical

evidence around product quality, this response was also said to be influenced by the fact that clothing sizes vary depending on the brand and the design of a particular item.

Other participants argued that their slightly more positive attitude towards online shopping derived from knowing that there were certain products that had a low concern towards purchasing online, these were stated to be items such as electronics and sneakers where shoe sizes are known as these are variables that do not necessarily change with each purchase whereas increases or decreases in someone's body weight can influence the size of a pair of jeans for example.

4.1.4. Does it matter to you if a high-end product is legitimate or counterfeit?

All participants stated that they held legitimacy in high regard when purchasing even the simplest of products, there was a consensus amongst all focus groups that certain products that could be purchased from brands that are not necessarily high end or exclusive products would prove beneficial for counterfeiters as products such as basic t-shirts, skirts or dresses could be found cheaper for higher quality at pretty much any store.

Participants went further to state that they held legitimacy in high regard because of the social status that can be obtained when an individual is seen wearing a certain item or in the case of this study a pair of authentic Air Jordan ones; it was argued that with so many alternatives to high end products, consumers that cannot afford the actual authentic product for the price it should be purchased should rather not buy from the big name brands and settle for alternatives instead.

This question and its responses can be seen to coincide with the argument of Bridglall (2018) that states South African consumers place higher emphasis on perceived quality, value and social status that can be obtained by the purchase and styling of certain exclusive products and that trust was seen as a lower order factor for consumer purchase decisions. Trust being a lower order factor was interpreted by the researcher to correlate with the views of participants that stated they would still rather go to a physical store for certain products as they were able to get more accurate and honest views of product quality and style amongst other factors.

The responses to these questions illustrate the impact that online platforms have on consumer trust as participants stated they were aware of the popularity of products and current fashion trends from brands such as Nike Air Jordan, Gucci and Louis Vuitton and that they were reluctant to purchase products from uncertified online resellers because it is likely these products are not legitimate as opposed to purchasing from physical retailers, a

result of this would be a lower social status as an individual would rather not have an exclusive product if it was not the legitimate one.

4.2. Key Themes

From the interpretation of participant responses which were transcribed using Otter artificial intelligence software, it became evident that certain themes were being revealed because of certain attitudes and beliefs that the individual respondents had within their focus group discussions, from these themes, the most important ones were as follows:

Theme 1: Trust (Legitimacy)

Participants across all five focus groups stated that trust was in fact a higher order factor for them as a determinant for making purchases. This could be related back to the fact that most of the participants would still rather purchase certain products in-store as they do not have to rely solely on the perceived quality obtained from online research through pictures and websites. Some participants went further to state that they were aware of some legitimate local brands where the brand owner operates out of their residence and can only interact with consumers through social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook, however, they were less likely to trust these brands if they too adopted a no-returns policy as can be seen in the biological information provided on some pages. Participants also argued they were less likely to repeat a purchase with a brand that did not deliver adequately on the first purchase.

This was interpreted by the researcher as an answer to the objective of how consumer trust affects brand loyalty as participants stated they would not be likely to repeat a purchase or even make an initial purchase with a brand they could not trust. In relation to consumer perception this meant consumers saw brands that operated in this manner as slightly sketchy and difficult to trust because of the limited after purchase services available to them.

This could be reinforced by the concept of brand image as it can be built over time to strengthen the relationship between the consumer and the brand, but if the consumer has a low degree of trust towards a brand this means their perception of the online reseller is more negative than positive and has a negative impact on the consumers perception towards that specific brand, this impacts loyalty in the long-term as a consumer would be less likely to recommend a brand to their friends and/or family.

Theme 2: Convenience (Accessibility)

This theme was another that was revealed to be a higher order factor amongst the participant responses. Although most of the focus group participants said they still held a relatively negative attitude towards online shopping, some of these individuals stated they would often visit a physical store, when available, to assess product quality and design physically and then later make their purchase online, the reason for this was said to be convenience. Being able to visit a store and compare different products for purchase at a later and perhaps more convenient stage was found to be very valuable to the participants' experience with the brand.

This was stated as a higher order purchase factor for the participants as it meant they did not feel rushed into making a purchase decision, they were able to take their time to make comparisons and ensure the product they were about to purchase was something they were going to be happy owning. This theme arose from the fact that online shopping allows a consumer to make their purchase from quite literally anywhere; certain participants went further to say this was a benefit in instances where a brand has multiple stores, but the one they have access to did not have a certain product they could visit the online store and have the product conveniently delivered to their homes.

This theme could be seen as an illustration of the argument made by Alhaddad (2015) where the author stated brand image comprises of both physical and non-physical attributes and these are essentially any component of a brand that positively impacts the consumers journey with the brand, this theme could be seen as a non-physical attribute that positively impacts brand image which could result in greater consumer loyalty towards a brand that has a consumer centric approach to business.

Theme 3: Interaction (Customer Service)

The last of the key themes identified was argued by participants at length as there were differing views on the level of importance that various individuals placed on this factor but ultimately was agreed it played a major role in brand loyalty, especially in making repeat purchases.

In the instance where brands such as Nike or Adidas were concerned, participants argued that these were brands where they often experienced higher or more efficient customer service and even more so from online interaction with the brand as responses are timely and returns policies are extensive for the best benefit of the consumer. However, other participants stated they had poor experiences of interaction with brands such as Louis Vuitton and Gucci and went further to provide an insight in saying they felt this was

because the brand prides itself in being exclusive and that the brand and its employees would often be seen dismissing consumers who came into a store and did not look as though they were even meant to be there.

However, there was a consensus across all focus groups that a repeat purchase would be more likely if the interaction between consumer and the brand portrayed an image that the brand genuinely cares about its consumers.

This theme was interpreted by the researcher to address the objective of how brands can create a positive online presence, if consumers have clear communication channels between themselves and the brand this means there is greater interaction between the two parties and this can have an immensely positive impact on the consumers journey with the brand, which can result in greater consumer loyalty which increases the likelihood of a repeat purchase and this was something universally relatable for all focus group participants, although some stated they would then rather go to a different store; especially in the instance of more visible brands such as Nike and Adidas.

4.3. Validity, reliability and/or trustworthiness

Validity is essential since it defines which interview questions to adopt and allows the researcher the opportunity to verify that they are asking questions that actually assess the areas of significance, the degree to which a survey measures what it promises to measure is referred to as its validity; furthermore, a research study can be considered reliable if the results of the survey or questionnaires are the same after a re-test (Middleton, 2020).

For this study, the reliability in results was seen to be evident from the interpretation of the respondent answers from the audio recordings which were roughly transcribed using and coded using Otter and later formally written and translated manually, these ensured that sufficient investigation was conducted to ensure the most accurate results were obtained for the purpose of the study.

A study conducted to assess the usefulness of English videos as a valid method to teach English to foreign children revealed that although the platform of choice, YouTube, can be easily manipulated, it can still prove to be a valuable tool for educational purposes (Sakktivel Elangoven, 2020).

This could be seen as evidence that video or audio recordings as data storage methods, coupled by written interpretation of said results can be seen as reliable sources of information as there was also a low possibility of being able to tamper with the final

interpretation of results where there is visual or audio versions of the original participant responses.

The researcher was able to identify various higher and lower order determinants of purchase decisions and intentions across all five focus groups and derived that determinant of purchase decisions would vary between participants depending on sources of income, social status, and the reasons for which they were making purchases to begin with. It was also found that consumer loyalty and brand trust are in fact impacted by various brand practices and can have a long-lasting impact on brand image because of consumer perceptions.

5. Conclusion

The primary research question was directly answered to a satisfactory degree, where the researcher is concerned, this as some of the responses received from the focus group discussions fell within pre-expected themes which assisted in understanding various determinants of consumer loyalty. Furthermore, the questions posed were formulated in a manner that encouraged answers of deeper thought and quality which highlighted certain standards that different individuals have when considering which brands they interact with as well as the capacity to which they do this.

The secondary research question pertaining to consumer loyalty and how it is impacted by consumer trust and brand perception was also well-answered through conducting this study as an overwhelming majority of the sample population indicated that they preferred being loyal to brands who hold customer service in high regard and went further to also list this as a higher order factor behind purchase decisions as the availability of substitutes through competition is an indicator that no specific brand should feel entirely comfortable in a market where there is such a surplus of competitors.

From the selected sample population, it was also evident that many consumers still have a limited degree of trust where online platforms or marketplaces are concerned, this more especially in a South African context as consumers are actually very familiar with the issues around cyber security and legitimate resellers, specifically where higher end products are concerned. This can be justified by certain participants' reciting of their own experiences where they had either been completely scammed and not received their products or purchase at all; and in other cases where individuals received a very visibly counterfeit product that did not match the quality when compared to the amount of money they spent on the product.

The implications of these findings for future practice could serve as a guideline for brands looking to incorporate a fully digital form of providing products to their consumers by highlighting aspects of security and trustworthiness that people hold in high regard; as well as that being able to prove your authenticity as a brand can greatly benefit the long term success of the brand as consumers are more likely to remain loyal to producers who make the consumer journey as seamless as possible but also deliver on their product promises within a respectable or decent lead time as opposed to making consumers wait multiple weeks and sometimes months for a product.

As there were various ethical implications surrounding the conducting of this study, especially in ensuring that participation was entirely voluntary, it was imperative for the legitimacy of the study and responses that all participants signed and returned consent forms to the researcher prior to the commencement of the data collection process; anonymity was ensured by the researcher by no names being used when referring to participants and cameras remained switched off for the duration of all focus group discussions although it turned out that some were actually familiar with each other no one called each other by name and all participants remained respectful of each other's privacy throughout the entirety of the process.

Although the discussions were held on an online platform to ensure the health and safety of all individual participants, this proved to be a limitation as expected, this as body language and facial expression would have been beneficial to the flow of conversation and analysing responses to certain questions or responses where participants shared their own experiences with their respective groups. The time constraints of the Zoom platform were also a lower order limitation but did not impact the accuracy of the study in any way other than to potentially uncover some deeper human truths or themes from interpretation of responses.

The study was holistically a success and met the expectations of the researcher in most aspects as well as expanding their own knowledge and understanding around online retail and authenticity in a manner that could prove beneficial in the long run.

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