



The rise of social media marketing during Covid: An exploratory study of consumer buying behaviour based on the online experience curated by brands

By

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative research report was to gain a better understanding of South African consumers buying behaviour based on the online experience curated by brands via social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and TikTok, post the Covid-19 outbreak. Despite conducting an extensive literature review on consumer behaviour models as well as placing these within a digital context there were no academic research articles which sought to understand the experience of consumers as well as brands during Covid. Hence, the reason for the research conducted was to gain a better understanding and make a meaningful contribution as to how brands can successfully communicate with consumers on the above-mentioned digital platforms during such unprecedented times. Focus groups were conducted with 14 conveniently sampled participants (both consumers and industry-professionals/brand owners), at which data saturation was reached. A thematic analysis was used to code the transcribed data. The process followed was inductive and once data saturation was reached, codes and themes were collated/developed. Findings indicated that consumer behaviour has shifted during Covid, in terms of what they prioritise their spending on, which platforms they spend most of their time on as well as which platforms they prefer brands to interact and engage with them on, and what type of brand communications are most appealing to them.

Declaration

I, Stephanie Christina Jooste hereby declare that the research report submitted for the Bachelor of Commerce Honours in Strategic Brand Management to The Independent Institute of Education (The IIE) on the 29th of November 2021 is my own work and has not previously been submitted to another university or Higher Education Institution for a postgraduate qualification.

Table of Contents

<i>Introduction and Contextualisation</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Rationale.....</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>Problem Statement.....</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Purpose Statement and Research Questions</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>Objectives</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>Theoretical Foundation.....</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>Literature Review.....</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>Conceptualisation</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>Social Media Marketing (SMM).....</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>Consumer Behaviour</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>Brand Communication Strategies Post the Covid-19 Outbreak.....</i>	<i>15</i>
From Attention Economy to Trust Economy	16
From Product to Brand.....	16
From Conversion to Conversation.....	16
<i>Research Paradigm.....</i>	<i>17</i>
<i>Design/Conceptual Approach.....</i>	<i>18</i>
<i>Population</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>Sampling.....</i>	<i>20</i>
<i>Data Collection Method(s).....</i>	<i>21</i>
<i>Application of Data-Collection Method(s)</i>	<i>22</i>
<i>Data Analysis Method(s).....</i>	<i>23</i>
1. Familiarisation	24
2. Coding.....	24
3. Generating Themes.....	24
4. Reviewing Themes	24

5. Defining and Naming Themes	25
6. Write Up	25
Application of Data Analysis Method(s)	25
Coding Key Codes and Themes Identified.....	26
<i>Trustworthiness.....</i>	27
1. Credibility	27
2. Transferability	27
3. Dependability	28
4. Confirmability	28
<i>Presentation of Findings</i>	29
Focus Group Guide	29
Key Questions Discussed and the Relevant Responses from the Groups ...	30
Which Social Media Platform Do You Prefer and Why?	30
How Did Your Social Media Behaviour Change During the Covid-19 Lockdown?	
.....	31
In What Ways did Your Online Buying Behaviour Change During Covid-19	
Lockdown?	32
What Brands Do You Follow/Interact with on social media?	34
<i>Interpretation of Findings.....</i>	35
Interpretation of Key Themes and Findings Reviewing, Naming and	
Defining Themes	35
Theme 1: Social Media Content and Marketing	35
Theme 2: Shifts in Consumer Behaviour.....	36
Theme 3: Brand Resonance.....	37
<i>Conclusion</i>	37
Research Questions/Objectives addressed.....	37
Primary Research Question.....	38
Secondary Questions.....	38
Objectives.....	38

Ethical Considerations, Limitations and Heuristic Value	39
<i>Annexure A Explanatory Information Sheet and Consent Form</i>	<i>41</i>
<i>Annexure B Consent Form for Audio and Video Recording</i>	<i>43</i>
<i>Annexure C Ethical Clearance Letter.....</i>	<i>44</i>
<i>Annexure D Final Research Report Summary Document Table.....</i>	<i>46</i>
<i>References</i>	<i>46</i>

Introduction and Contextualisation

Social media has changed the world (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019). The computer-based technology that facilitates the sharing of ideas and information through the building of vital networks and communities can connect and share information with anyone around the world, or many people simultaneously (Dollarhide, 2021). Social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram have evolved in recent years and have become much more impactful/influential especially for brands and their marketing efforts (Barker, 2017). Online platforms such as Facebook and Instagram were initially used by individuals to share personal information, photos and updates with their friends and family (Barker, 2017).

However, the evolution of social media has resulted in these platforms being leveraged by businesses as a marketing tactic to influence consumers buying behaviour and interactions with brands, based on the content that is being created and shared (Barker, 2017). For businesses, social media is considered an indispensable tool. Brands and organisations alike use various platforms to seek and engage with customers, drive sales through advertising and promotion, gauge consumer trends, as well as, offering customer service and/or support (Dollarhide, 2021). Thus, the research topic is centred around social media marketing (SMM) and the influence SMM possesses in terms of consumer buying behaviour. The title of the study is as follows:

The rise of social media marketing during Covid: An exploratory study of consumer buying behaviour based on the online experience curated by brands.

Technology and the use of social media has revolutionised the marketing industry (Asma & Misbah, 2018), with billions of people worldwide utilising social media, it has quickly become one of the defining technologies of our modern era (Asma & Misbah, 2018). Facebook boasted nearly 2.5 billion monthly active users at the beginning of 2021 and this number is estimated to increase to 3.9 billion users in 2022 (Chen, 2021). Given the massive audience potential and the amount of time consumers spend on said social media platforms daily, it is no surprise that marketers have leveraged social media as a marketing channel and therefore strengthened its communication

initiatives (Appel *et al*, 2019). Social media has been embraced in an academic context as well. An extensive collection of research on social media marketing and related topics such as online word-of-mouth (WOM) and online networks have been developed (Appel *et al*, 2019).

Despite what scholars have studied and learned over the course of the past two decades, due to the rapid evolution of SMM – and how SMM is utilised by brands and consumers alike, as well as, the current environmental conditions in which it exists – the future of SMM and how it influences consumers' buying behaviour based on the experience curated by brands might not merely be a continuation and/or repetition of what we have already seen/what has already been observed and studied (Appel *et al*, 2019). The reason is that society now lives in a post Covid-19 world and limited research exists as to how brands have had to adapt and change their communication tactics to consumers following the pandemic, as well as how consumers' online presence and buying behaviours have changed.

Social media's role in users' lives has evolved and diversified during the pandemic (Trifonova, 2020). A couple of years ago, social media users were cutting down on the time they were spending on social media platforms to be more mindful about their social media behaviours and to limit the amount of personal information they were sharing on the public domain (Trifonova, 2020). However, throughout the course of the pandemic and ensuing lockdown's this has changed quite drastically. According to coronavirus research conducted by GWI, as of April 2020, consumers started spending longer periods of time on social media. This is starting to stabilise, with 43% of consumers admitting to logging on for longer because of the outbreak and 19% claiming that they will continue to spend prolonged time on social media (Trifonova, 2020).

Apart from the amount of time spent on social media platforms during the pandemic, these sites have been described as a "social lifeline" as well to get new information about the coronavirus disease (Molla, 2021). Twitter, for instance, became a pivotal platform for users as a real-time news source (Molla, 2021). The pandemic made certain social media platforms, whose usefulness had started to weaken and whose user growth was in decline, suddenly relevant again (Molla, 2021). Today, GWI's

coronavirus research data indicates that using social media to stay up to date with news and current events is the top reason for logging in globally at 36% (Trifonova, 2020).

Thus, the role and impact of social media as a marketing tool stands to increase in importance due to the continuing Covid-19 pandemic and required social distancing. Social media offers alternatives for consumers to interact with others as well as brands without any physical contact (Mason *et al*, 2021). Therefore, brands and businesses alike can seek new opportunities to gain a competitive advantage using effective SMM strategies (Mason *et al*, 2021). This is explored in more detail in the following research report.

Rationale

It is important to consider the role and future of social media in relation to consumer buying behaviour and marketing because it has become an essential marketing communication channel for brands and businesses alike (Appel *et al*, 2019). Furthermore, social media is culturally significant since it has become, for many individuals, the primary domain on which they consume extensive amounts of information, share content and aspects of their lives with their peers, as well as receive information about the world around them and current global and political affairs (Appel *et al*, 2019). Thus, SMM can be harnessed as a powerful medium by brands that are seeking to reach out to their perspective clients. Given the wide reach of SMM, brands are increasingly relying on it to achieve their marketing and branding objectives (Asma & Misbah, 2018).

Moreover, social media is always changing. Social media as we have come to know it today is very different than before the dawn of Covid-19 and will likely change again in the pending future (Wold, 2020). This can be credited to both technological and social changes that have emerged since the pandemic outbreak such as new social media platforms (TikTok) as well as these platforms adding new features and services such as swipe-ups, shopping links, etc. (Wold, 2020). In terms of social changes, as previously discussed, users of social media have increased the amount of time they spend on these platforms since the virus outbreak and there has been a noticeable

change in what consumers are posting during this time (Wold, 2020). There has been a noticeable shift in users timelines due to current social and racial injustice issues/events such as the Black Lives Matter (BLM) and Gender Based Violence (GBV) movements, which have become a central focus in today's social and political climate amidst the pandemic (Wold, 2020).

Thus, one of the most crucial components of SMM is the narrative that takes place between brands and consumers (Asma & Misbah, 2018). Social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram can be leveraged to host the flow of information and play an important role in sending, receiving, and exchanging information (Asma & Misbah, 2018). But brands need to be aware of the conversations being had, the narrative taking place and the content being shared by the consumers they aim to target on these platforms because brands are at risk of receiving backlash if the content, they are sharing does not consider and meet the tone of the above-mentioned social and political movements that are currently taking place.

Furthermore, misinterpretation, miscommunication and misunderstandings from consumers are the potential pitfalls in the flow of online communication set out by brands. This can then potentially result in a negative brand experience with the consumer (Asma & Misbah, 2018). This is deemed relevant to the research due to the accelerated use of social media and SMM during and post Covid-19 as well as the impact/influence it holds – in terms of establishing a positive or negative brand experience – as it can determine a brand's success or demise based on the online relationship the brand establishes with its customers.

Problem Statement

The research is relevant and important because the recent pandemic indicates significant and structural impacts on consumers' buying behaviour which has the potential to result in significant changes in marketing practices within South Africa.

Despite recent changes in terms of social media since the pandemic outbreak – research on the above-mentioned topic is limited – as pre-covid research does not address the aim. Furthermore, despite the industry reports indicating the quantitative size of the various changes in social media behaviour – there is no qualitative research

which seeks to understand the experience of consumers as well as brands during Covid. Thus, the proposed topic and study intends to gain a better understanding and make a meaningful contribution as to how brands can successfully communicate with consumers online post the Covid-19 phenomenon.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative research is to explore and gain a better understanding of South African consumers buying behaviour based on the online experience curated by brands via social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and TikTok post the Covid-19 outbreak. The primary research question is therefore positioned as follows:

How has social media marketing impacted consumer buying behaviour as well as the brands trying to target them online during Covid?

To achieve the research goal and help provide an answer to the primary research question, the following secondary questions have been constructed:

- How has Covid-19 affected social media marketing for brands?
- How has Covid-19 affected consumer behaviours?
- What are the consumer preferences of brand interaction on social media post-covid?

Objectives

The following research objectives aim to assist in the investigation of the research problem, help answer the research question(s) as well as reaching the study's goal as outlined above:

1. *Understand how Covid-19 affected brand's (social media) communication strategies.*
2. *Gain a deeper understanding of the changes in consumers buying and social media behaviour during Covid-19.*

3. *Explore the SMM content that is deemed important/relevant to consumers post-covid.*

Theoretical Foundation

The theory and literature identified that are considered integral to the study and highly relevant is the traditional, widely accepted five-step consumer behaviour and decision-making model that was introduced in 1968 by Engel, Kollat and Blackwell (EKB model) (Engel *et al*, 1968). According to Unni (2020), in terms of digital and social media marketing the essential elements for observing consumer behaviour are still the same and the EKB model is still the accepted model for observing consumer behaviour (Unni, 2020).

The seminal EKB consumer decision-making model (1968) is one of the core theories of consumer behaviour and is based on prior work in academic literature by John Dewey (1910) (Engel *et al*, 1968). The EKB model describes consumers' decision process as well as how decisions are made when choosing among a list of alternatives available (Engel *et al*, 1968). The model puts forward a successive process of decision making which consists of the following steps:

1. Problem recognition
2. Information search
3. Evaluation of alternatives
4. Purchase
5. Post-purchase evaluation

The first step begins with problem recognition whereby consumers will recognise a problem which needs to be solved, this is followed by information search which refers to the process of gathering all information available regarding possible solutions (Engel *et al*, 1968). Typically, the larger the purchase decision, the longer the process will take as consumers are usually very thorough in their search and seek out information regarding features, pricing, ease of use, etc. The third step comprises of the "evaluation of alternatives that is subjected to the consumers' personal criterion in

deducing the preference” (Engel *et al*, 1968). i.e., most consumers have a list of criteria that the alternatives must meet.

Once the decision is made, the consumer then moves into the fourth stage where the purchasing of the chosen product/solution takes place and finally, the fifth step involves the post-purchase evaluation (Engel *et al*, 1968). Which is where the potential to create a long-term relationship with the consumer takes place and provides an opportunity for value creation for both customers and the company/brand they bought the product from (Engel *et al*, 1968).

However, the well acclaimed EKB model has come under criticism and scrutiny as it is said that the model lacks a clear definition of variables as well as demonstrates vagueness and complexity (Ashman *et al*, 2015). Although the model does try to define variables and specify functional relationships between various components. The EKB model fails to adequately explain how it influences consumer decision making (Ashman *et al*, 2015). Granted the influence of the environmental variables are identified but their role in affecting behaviour is not well developed.

The EKB model has been further criticised for being “too restrictive” (Ashman *et al*, 2015) to sufficiently harbour the variety of consumer decisions that currently exist and has also been deemed “too marketer dominated” (Ashman *et al*, 2015) as it lacks a boarder acceptance of sociocultural factors that have an impact on consumer behaviour. Despite the above-mentioned concerns and scrutiny, the model is still firmly embedded as fundament of consumer decision making and will likely not be abandoned by academic literature anytime soon (Unni, 2020) Thus, for the purpose of the topic and proposed research, the EKB model is selected/included as integral to the study.

Literature Review

The EKB consumer behaviour and decision-making model has been widely used and a renowned topic in terms of marketing. This is credited to the insight gained into the consumer’s mind and what ultimately leads them to make or refrain from making a purchasing decision (Erasmus *et al*, 2001). However, we now find ourselves living in

a digital age where social media is being leveraged as a powerful tool by brands and businesses alike (Asma & Misbah, 2018). But there has also been a cultural shift in recent years between brands and consumers (Ashman *et al*, 2015), whereby information and power has been placed firmly in the hands of the consumer as opposed to the brands/businesses trying to target them (Ashman *et al*, 2015).

This shift in consumer behaviour is because of the Covid-19 pandemic (Ashman *et al*, 2015). With an increase in online engagement, consumers are more discernible with who they choose to interact with (Bonchek, 2014). Consumers are not passive observers waiting to be marketed to anymore, but rather now have a desire to participate in what they want marketed to them as well as suggest what they are interested in and what they expect from the products/services brands are trying to sell to them (Bonchek, 2014).

Modern consumers are more informed and are digitally and efficiently inclined to seek personalised experiences, they no longer entertain the idea of “being sold to” (Bonchek, 2014). Therefore, there have been several studies that suggest gaps in the traditional consumer behaviour and decision making (EKB) model as new trends in consumer behaviour and brand communication tactics has emerged in the age of digitalisation (Erasmus *et al*, 2001) and potentially since the outbreak of Covid-19 in 2020.

Thus, the Covid-19 pandemic provides an opportunity to gain valuable consumer behaviour insights as well as revive a historical consumer behaviour model and place it within a digital context as suggested by scholars; Andrew N. Mason, John Narcum and Kevin Mason (2021) who conducted quantitative research on the importance social media marketing gained after Covid-19. They considered the role of social media and applied it to the consumer decision-making model as outlined by Engel, Kollat and Blackwell (1968). For instance, they examined the role of social media in identifying product needs which is the first step in the consumer decision-making process and describes the realisation of a product need. They suggest that consumers notice/are more perceptible to external stimuli from social media platforms such as other consumers, promotional material from brands as well as product packaging which can be perceived as an unmet need by the consumer to which they become

motivated to search additional information to resolve the perceived need (Mason *et al*, 2021). As a result, the consumer may then develop a felt need (problem recognition) that is felt strongly which then prompts them to seek a product solution.

The scholars considered social media to be a “salient source for influencing consumers’ shopping and buying behaviours” (Mason *et al*, 2021). It is considered a powerful tool for message and brand exposure, hence why businesses use online platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter as virtual avenues to enhance consumers’ product and/or brand awareness (Mason *et al*, 2021). These platforms are also leveraged by consumers to share their product/brand experiences with other consumers and brands alike. This is an example of the role of social media in post-purchase behaviours i.e., the final stage of the consumer decision-making (EKB) model.

Consumers forming purchase-satisfaction emotions is considered key in the development of consumer relationships and repeat purchase behaviours (customer loyalty) (Mason *et al*, 2021). Consumers now engage in post-purchase processes in a digital/online context, this is actioned when they express/post shopping purchase satisfactions and/or dissatisfactions on the relevant social media platforms. Thus, social media offers brands/businesses an instant, efficient, and affordable way of getting feedback from consumers which in turn, provides them with an opportunity to resolve any concerns a lot quicker (Mason *et al*, 2021). Furthermore, Covid-19 and the role of social media seems to have propelled consumer behaviour activities to occur online and in a more digitally driven environment.

To conclude the influential EKB model of consumer decision-making (1968) was formulated more than five decades ago. Its authors could not have anticipated today’s digital world as well as the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. While in some ways consumers basic human needs may remain the same, the platforms and their utility consumers use to satisfy their needs have certainly changed (Mason *et al*, 2021). Furthermore, consumer buying habits are continually evolving and the way brands think about them have changed too. Initially it was accepted that consumers were rational and behaved in consistent ways as the EKB model demonstrated (Ashman *et al*, 2015). But as time and technology has progressed and more sophisticated theories,

concepts and research were explored, it has become evident that consumers often behave irrationally with numerous factors determining decisions and buying habits such as SMM and various brand and communication strategies (Mason *et al*, 2021). Although the above literature is relative to the research and aim, as previously mentioned limited qualitative research exists which seeks to understand the experience of consumers as well as brands relative to SMM during covid. Hence, primary research has been conducted to fill the gaps and achieve the aim/purpose of the research report.

Conceptualisation

Social Media Marketing (SMM)

The term social media can take various definitional forms, in the physical sense, it can be considered as a collection of software-based digital technologies that typically take the form of apps and websites and provide users with a digital environment in which they can send and receive digital content and/or information via online social networks (Appel *et al*, 2019). In this sense and for the purpose of this research social media can be thought of as the major platforms and their features such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and TikTok. In terms of marketing, social media can be described as a digital marketing channel that marketers can use to communicate with consumers through advertising (Appel *et al*, 2019).

However, social media and SMM can also be thought of in a broader sense as well in terms of the research. It can also refer to a digital place whereby individuals conduct significant parts of their lives (Appel *et al*, 2019). This perspective is more fixated on what individuals do and how they behave in these social environments as opposed to the specific technologies these platforms boast. SMM is largely concerned with information sharing and in terms of marketing, is often referred to as a form of online word of mouth (WOM) (Appel *et al*, 2019).

Furthermore, SMM is technology-centric-but also a social-ecosystem in which an assorted and compound set of behaviours, interactions and exchanges including various kinds of interconnected variables (people, brands, organisations, and firms) can occur (Appel *et al*, 2019). Social media and SMM is prevalent, widely adopted and

culturally relevant. The provided conceptualisation of this phenomena is deliberately expressed in multiple and broad ways because for the purpose of this research, social media (and SMM) has essentially been described as/takes the form of – content, information, behaviours, people, brands, organisations – that can exist in an interconnected, networked digital environment where interactivity is plausible (Appel *et al*, 2019).

It has evolved from being an elementary online manifesto of WOM behaviours and content/information creation and sharing. Today, it is an advanced phenomenon and is prevalent across societies and culturally prominent on a local on global scale (Appel *et al*, 2019). Throughout the course of the research, the multiple forms of social media and SMM as described above are explored and address the aim of understanding its implications on consumer behaviour and branding/marketing post-covid.

Consumer Behaviour

Attempting to gain understanding as to what exactly consumers are thinking and what makes them buy certain products/services is a goal of every business (Gray, 2019). A way to achieve this is by closely observing their behaviour. The process by which a consumer chooses to purchase or use a product/service is referred to as the consumer behaviour process which has been defined by Engel, Blackwell and Miniard (2001) as “the activities directly involved in obtaining, consuming and disposing of products and services including the decision process that precedes and follows these actions” (Swarbrooke & Horner, 2007). The EBM definition places emphasis on the importance of the psychological process which the consumer goes through during the pre-and-post-purchase process (Swarbrooke & Horner, 2007).

Moreover, Solomon (1996) included the concept of consumer needs and wants in his definition which describes consumer behaviour as “the process involved when individuals or groups select, purchase, use or dispose of products, services, ideas or experiences to satisfy needs and wants” (Swarbrooke & Horner, 2007). This explanation suggests that consumers may make decisions in groups and not just by themselves (Swarbrooke & Horner, 2007). The processes which are outlined in these definitions are complex which is why the consumer behaviour process is illustrated in

models as discussed in the above theoretical foundation (Swarbrooke & Horner, 2007). Furthermore, it is important in terms of the research to consider the role of consumer behaviour within the marketing process. In this context, marketing refers to the relationship between the consumer/buyer and seller. Marketing leans on the idea that organisations should have the consumer as the central focus of all their activities (Swarbrooke & Horner, 2007). Brands and businesses alike need to consider their consumers' wants and needs to persuade them to buy their products/services.

However, to ensure well-designed products/services are developed, it requires an understanding of consumer behaviour as well as the ability to predict how consumer behaviour will change in the future (Swarbrooke & Horner, 2007). Thus, organisations will have to understand how and why a consumer makes a choice. This will aid their persuasive efforts to consumers when a choice is being made between the organisations products/services and the ones offered by its competitors (Swarbrooke & Horner, 2007). It will also assist the organisation in developing offerings that are correctly positioned to their target market. Consumer behaviour is relevant to the research because it allows brands and businesses alike to gain a deeper understanding about their target audience which allows them to craft products, services and company culture that has the potential to persuade/influence their buying habits (Gray, 2019).

[Brand Communication Strategies Post the Covid-19 Outbreak](#)

Brand communication is considered a crucial element and tool of brand management and refers to the way in which businesses/companies inform, persuade, enlighten, teach, remind as well as enrich the knowledge of their stakeholders about the brand, its strengths, values, fundamentals and its offerings of products and services (Bhasin, 2021). It is a gruelling time for brands across the world as they seek to communicate with their stakeholders effectively and sensitively during the ongoing pandemic. The world of marketing has witnessed significant shifts in digital strategies that have proven to drive brand communication and consumerism in such times (Dang, 2020). Naturally, brands' communication strategies have had to be adjusted to effectively resonate with consumers post the Covid-19 outbreak. These strategies include:

From Attention Economy to Trust Economy

As a result of concerns surrounding data management and fake news, trust began to play a larger role in customer attraction than mere product capabilities and “frilly” advertisements (Dang, 2020). We live in an environment where information is being shared constantly and the cognizance around data ownership and data brokerage by large organisations came to the forefront of many consumer decisions (Dang, 2020). However, the abrupt outbreak of the coronavirus and the successive rise in digitalisation has exasperated the inclusion of trust-based communication strategies (Dang, 2020). Trust has boosted the perceived value gained by consumers, thus driving a greater retention rate within a brand. Brands are said to be successful in building trust through attentiveness, transparency, and simplistic communication (Dang, 2020). Transparency surrounding safety measures, aligning with customers concerns, and getting straight to the point have been a key enabler of trust during the pandemic.

From Product to Brand

Previously, marketing/advertising strategies has remained focused on driving product sales and increasing product placements, be it in popular culture shows or through the rising influencer culture (Dang, 2020). But since the pandemic outbreak, strategies have shifted to “pure brand image building” (Dang, 2020). Whereby brands and businesses alike have adopted two key approaches (1) protection and (2) enhancement (Dang, 2020). Brands following the former approach have made the decision to lay low and stop advertisements that were previously on display and distancing themselves from the outcomes surrounding Covid-19 (Dang, 2020). Brands taking the latter, however, have kept the bigger picture in mind and remain focused on emerging themselves in solution-generation during the pandemic. Successful brand communication strategies present today involve speaking up, humanising content, and taking a responsibility-first approach (Dang, 2020).

From Conversion to Conversation

The final brand communication strategy adopted post Covid-19 is seen on a day-to-day level which has been the shift from sales focused conversion to conversation (Dang, 2020). Social listening, sentiment analysis of audience and truly

comprehending the lives of customers has become of the essence. The pandemic has disrupted previous data trends concerning customer journeys and brought about a renewed need for brands to listen (Dang, 2020). Brands have begun to harness the power of social media platforms such as Twitter and adopted a communicative approach whereby they start conversations and enquire about their consumer's needs by asking them questions on social media platforms (Dang, 2020). These mechanisms have proven to be useful and assist during lockdown restrictions and further increased user acquisition during the pandemic (Dang, 2020).

Furthermore, the use of user generated content (UGC) has allowed many consumers/audiences to feel as though they are a part of the process – there has been an increase in UGC based on advertisements, music videos and online challenges (Dang, 2020). Thus, consumer centricity continues to gain importance during this time and compassion is considered crucial towards building relationships between brands and consumers. The above-mentioned brand communication strategies are relevant to the research because it is important for brands to know and be aware of the better ways to communicate with its targeted audiences on advertising platforms such as social media during the pandemic to remain relevant and profitable during these times. It also provides a better understanding as to how brands have had to adapt, change, and strengthen their communication strategies during and post the coronavirus outbreak.

Research Paradigm

“One thing that brings people together is shared experiences” (Molla, 2021). The harsh reality of the ongoing pandemic and lockdown restrictions is that societies around the world must be in isolation and apart from one another to someday be together again (Molla, 2021). After years of social fragmentation, during which people became less likely to share common daily activities and interests or even share the same reality, people suddenly have something they can all talk about and a shared experience because of the global pandemic (Molla, 2021). Thus, the paradigm selected is interpretivism. Reason being is that the interpretivist paradigm aims to gain a deeper understanding of the subjective world of human experience and the central phenomenon being studied (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Furthermore, an interpretivist

approach tries to better understand the subjects being studied by interpreting what they are thinking and the meaning they derive from the context (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Therefore, emphasis is placed on understanding the individual being interviewed and their interpretation of the world around them as they have lived the phenomenon and would have their own experiences.

Based on the purpose of the study, a qualitative research approach was undertaken which focused on obtaining data through open-ended and conversational communication/questions by means of focus groups. The reason for such an approach is that qualitative research is built on the disciplines of social sciences such as psychology, sociology, and anthropology (Nieuwenhuis, 2019). Thus, qualitative research, and its methodologies, allows for in-depth and further examining of questioning of respondents based on their feedback (Nieuwenhuis, 2019). This allows for the researcher to better understand the respondents' experiences, motivations, feelings, and decision-making processes which further helps derive conclusions from the research conducted. The subject of the study is people, thus interpretivism and qualitative frameworks are better suited to social inquiry as opposed to positivist approaches.

Design/Conceptual Approach

As mentioned above, qualitative research is representative in the field of social sciences and humanities. Furthermore, a significant focus in the research is Covid-19, this phenomenon is the ongoing global pandemic of the coronavirus disease 2019 (World Health Organization , 2021). Thus, a phenomenological research design is considered as the appropriate choice for the research as it seeks to “describe the essence of a phenomenon by exploring it from the perspective of those who have experienced it” (Nieuwenhuis, 2019). Phenomenological studies home in on the meaning of a particular lived experience held by its participants to determine what the experience means to them as they are the ones who have had the experience and are therefore able to provide comprehensive descriptions of it (Nieuwenhuis, 2019). From these descriptions, general interpretations/meanings can be obtained.

When undertaking a phenomenological research design, researchers are required to rid their perspective of theoretical, prejudicial, and suppositional reflections and rather take an interpretivist approach by which the researcher makes interpretations/mediates between different meanings of the lived experiences by the group of participants (Nieuwenhuis, 2019). A phenomenological study typically describes and interprets meaning from several participants and their lived experiences of a phenomenon and tends to focus on describing what they all have in common based on the shared experience.

Moreover, the Covid-19 phenomenon has only just recently occurred and it still ongoing and as previously mentioned, limited literature exists on the topic which is why an inductive approach has been actioned for the research (Nieuwenhuis, 2019). The inductive approach consists of three stages; (1) observation, (2) observe a pattern, and (3) develop a theory (Nieuwenhuis, 2019). Once the relevant data was collected for the study, observation then took place, which was then followed by a search for patterns in the data which then lead to developing a theory that could help explain the patterns that were previously identified (Nieuwenhuis, 2019). This process helps the researcher draw a general conclusion from individual instances and/or observations. The benefit of an inductive approach is that it allows for flexibility, attends closely to context as well as supports the creation of new theory (Nieuwenhuis, 2019).

Population

As previously mentioned, the aim of the research is to explore and gain a better understanding of South African consumers and their buying behaviours based on the online experience curated by brands during Covid. Thus, the key characteristics/parameters of the population in terms of the research and who could qualify to participate in the questionnaire were any/all South Africans over the age of 18, who were in lockdown and experienced the phenomenon (Covid-19), has access to and uses social media platforms daily as well as interacts with brands on these said platforms. Moreover, individuals who also qualified to participate were industry-related professionals that would be able to answer the questions from a brand's perspective i.e., entrepreneurs, brand owners and/or those who work in digital/social media

marketing positions. However, South Africa's current population is estimated at more than 60 million people (World Population Review , 2021). Therefore, it was unlikely that all South Africans who fit the criteria would have had the opportunity to participate in the study which is why data saturation is deemed an important aspect in qualitative research and was considered at the design stage of the research project (Nieuwenhuis, 2019).

Sampling

The unit of analysis for the research comprised of individuals/consumers above the age of 18 and living in South Africa who have experienced the central phenomenon (Covid-19), are active social media users and/or industry professionals who would be able to answer the questions from a brand's perspective as well. Furthermore, non-probability sampling was undertaken as the sampling method. This refers to a sampling technique in which the researcher selected the sample/participants based on their subjective judgement as opposed to random selection (Nieuwenhuis, 2019). This technique is used widely in qualitative research and was carried out by means of observation. Unlike probability sampling – where every member of the population can be selected – nonprobability sampling occurs when not all members have an equal chance of participating in the study (Nieuwenhuis, 2019).

Furthermore, non-probability sampling is suited to the study because it is considered most useful in exploratory studies (Nieuwenhuis, 2019). There are various types of non-probability sampling methods, but for the purpose of the research, a convenience sampling strategy was undertaken whereby samples were selected from the population based on the convenience of availability and access (Nieuwenhuis, 2019). This is typically not considered an ideal sampling strategy but given the current circumstances in terms of the pandemic, the researcher needed to select participants that were conveniently available and easier to recruit. Usually, in research, it is recommended to use a sample that is inclusive and represents the population, but in this case, the entire population is too large to observe. Thus, a sample size of 14 participants were included in the data collection process as recommended by the phenomenological design of the research as well as its methodologies and objectives (Nieuwenhuis, 2019).

Data Collection Method(s)

The data collection strategy that was actioned and deemed the most appropriate method for the study were online focus groups. The focus-group strategy assumes that group interactions are more productive in expanding the range of responses, triggering previously forgotten details of experience as well as freeing inhibitions that potentially discourage participants from revealing information (Nieuwenhuis, 2019). A focus group is fundamentally an interaction between a dynamic group of individuals, namely the moderator (which in this case was the researcher) and the participants (Borochoff, 2021), and helps mine data rich/detailed responses which can be somewhat difficult to achieve with other research methods such as an online survey.

Traditionally focus groups are conducted face-to-face (Nieuwenhuis, 2019). However, due to the current pandemic and the circumstances surrounding it, it seemed more appropriate to host an online focus group via the digital chat-based tool Zoom instead. Evidently, much like the research put forward, its data collection methods also fully embraced online social channels to assist in the conducted research. Furthermore, conducting an online focus group does present some advantages (Bonchek, 2014). For instance, online focus groups tend to produce better insights from its participants responses as it provides them with the opportunity to attend from the comfort of their own home, which is a familiar and safe environment, this could help them feel more at ease and comfortable enough to speak their mind (Bonchek, 2014). Therefore, encouraging them to be more forthcoming with information about themselves, their opinions, and experiences (Bonchek, 2014). This ultimately provided the researcher with more honest responses as well as clearer and more precise data.

A significant feature of the focus group method is that the discussion is geared to a specific topic where debating and even conflict/disagreements are encouraged as such group dynamics assisted with the data that was generated (Nieuwenhuis, 2019). Thus, group forces/dynamics were an integral part of the process where the participants were engaged in discussion with one another rather than merely directing their feedback solely to the moderator/researcher (Nieuwenhuis, 2019). This kind of group dynamic essentially became an important element of what was analysed in terms of the data generated. In the focus group setting, participants built on one

another's views, ideas, and comments to provide more in-depth views of the questions/discussions that were put forward during the sessions (Nieuwenhuis, 2019). Thus, unforeseen comments as well as new perspectives were explored more organically within the focus group which therefore has the potential to add value to the research.

Application of Data-Collection Method(s)

In preparation for the online focus groups, a WhatsApp group chat was created by the researcher on Thursday the 12th of August 2021 and a convenience, non-probability sample was selected and added to the group chat. This group consisted of a network of individuals who were known to the researcher in both a personal and professional capacity and were readily available/accessible. A broadcast message was then sent by the researcher explaining why the group was created as well as if the participants would like to join an online focus group hosted by the researcher for the purpose of conducting data related to social media and their experience with it during Covid.

The group members swiftly responded and provided the necessary information such as their email addresses, and two separate online focus groups were promptly set up and scheduled based on the participants availability. The participants were sent Zoom meeting requests via email whereby a link was provided so that the participants could easily and conveniently access the digital portal where the online focus groups were held. The relevant consent forms were also sent via email to the participants prior to the online focus groups to be read, understood, and signed before the actual data collection process took place.

The first focus group, which included 7 of the 14 participants took place on Friday evening, August 13th (Group A) and the second online focus group took place on Monday, the 16th of August (Group B). The reason as to why the focus groups were split into two separate sessions was partly due to the participants availability and time as well as for the overall experience of the focus group, it is less overwhelming for both the moderator and the participants to be involved in a guided conversation with 7 people (excluding the moderator) rather than all 14 at once. It also allowed more opportunity for better response quality in terms of participant feedback and insight. Furthermore, hosting the online focus groups on a Friday and Monday does pose

significance to the research and has the potential to influence the data derived from the two groups.

For instance, on a Friday evening, people tend to behave, think, and feel differently than they would on a Monday evening, seeing as Fridays tend to be less chaotic and people are settling into a more relaxed and calm state of mind for the weekend. Whereas Mondays are the start of a new week and people might feel more stressed and anxious in anticipation of a busy week ahead. This is important to note as it may have an impact on the data that was collected when comparing Group A's responses to that of Group B's

The discussions for the online focus groups, were directed by the moderator (researcher) among a total of 14 participants as identified in the above sampling of the study, with the purpose of collecting in-depth qualitative data regarding the group's perceptions, attitudes, and experiences on the topic of the rise of social media marketing post-covid. The format for the online focus group discussion was representative of a "funnel structure" whereby the moderators started with broad and less structured sets of questions to help ease the participants into the conversation (Nieuwenhuis, 2019). The purpose of this was to hear participants' general perspectives to help guide them into the process where they ultimately ended up discussing certain topics and issues. As the discussion gained traction, the questioning then became more structured and began to directly address the topics applicable to the study (Nieuwenhuis, 2019). The overall objective here was to cultivate as many views, perceptions, and experiences as possible from the participants.

Data Analysis Method(s)

Based on the above data collection methods, a thematic analysis method was undertaken to examine the data collected. This type of analysis is considered an ideal approach when trying to explore/uncover insights from individuals' views, opinions, knowledge and/or experiences from a set of qualitative data (Caulfield, 2020). During this type of analysis, the researcher closely examined the data to identify common themes, ideas, and patterns of meaning that repeatedly occurred (Caulfield, 2020).

There are different approaches that can be taken when conducting a thematic analysis, but the steps that were conducted for the purpose of the study are as follows:

1. Familiarisation

The first step is to get well-acquainted with the data, it is important to get a thorough overview of all the data that was collected before the analysis of individual items began (Caulfield, 2020). This process involved transcribing the audio/recording of the online focus groups, making additional notes as well as thoroughly going through the data to get familiar with it.

2. Coding

In the context of the study, coding refers to calling attention to sections of the data – usually phrases or sentences – and determining labels (codes) to describe their content, ideas and/or feelings expressed within that section/piece of data (Caulfield, 2020). At this stage, the researcher needed to be thorough and go through every participant's feedback and highlight any piece of information that struck them as relevant or potentially interesting. As well as highlight all the phrases/comments that match these "codes" (Caulfield, 2020). Once the data was collated into groups identified by code, the researcher could then gain a consolidated overview of the main points and common meanings that reoccurred throughout the data (Caulfield, 2020).

3. Generating Themes

The next step required the researcher to identify patterns among the codes identified in step two and formulate themes (Caulfield, 2020). These themes are broader than the codes that helped formulate them. The purpose of this step was to determine which of the identified codes are too vague or irrelevant because they didn't occur often enough in the data, so they can then be abandoned/discarded (Caulfield, 2020).

4. Reviewing Themes

Here, the researcher had to ensure the identified themes were considered useful and is accurately representative of the data (Caulfield, 2020). To do so, the researcher returned to data and compared the themes against it. if there were any problems

regarding the themes, they were then re-examined to ensure they were useful and accurate (Caulfield, 2020).

5. Defining and Naming Themes

At this stage, the themes were finalised and the researcher was able to name and define each of them (Caulfield, 2020). This process involved formulating exactly what was meant by each theme and determining how it assists in understanding the data as well as providing relevant names to the themes so that they are succinct and understandable (Caulfield, 2020).

6. Write Up

This last step required the researcher to write up the analysis of the data which is inclusive of the data's results/findings and explains the primary takeaways from the data collected as well as how the analysis had addressed the research question/aim (Caulfield, 2020). This is unpacked in further detail in the latter of the research report.

Application of Data Analysis Method(s)

The first step in establishing a trail of evidence is a clear procedure of data analysis which has already been identified in the data analysis methods mentioned in the above section, this is to ensure the process is clearly documented and understood (Rabiee, 2004). Although the primary source of data analysis is the recorded spoken language derived from the participants included in the focus group, the settings as well as capturing the non-verbal communication expressed by the members of the groups also add a valuable dimension to the construction and analysis of the data (Rabiee, 2004). This was captured in the video and audio recordings of the focus groups that took place on the 13th and 16th of August 2021.

It is important to note that data analysis is not linear, but rather, one part of the process tends to overlap the other (Rabiee, 2004). Moreover, framework analysis which refers to an analytical process that includes a number of distinct and interconnected stages (Rabiee, 2004) i.e., familiarisation, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining, and naming themes, and write-ups. Is an important aspect of this type of

analysis and although it is considered a thematic approach, it does allow for themes to develop both from the research questions as well as from the narratives of the research participants (Rabiee, 2004).

In this case, the process of data analysis began during the data collection process by means of the researcher skilfully facilitating the discussion and generating rich data from the focus group interviews that took place as well as complementing them with observational notes (Rabiee, 2004). This was then followed by familiarisation with the data, which was achieved by listening to the audio recordings of the focus groups several times and going back over the observational notes taken during the focus groups as well as the summary notes which were written directly after the sessions. The goal here is to immerse in the details and for the researcher to get a sense of the focus group sessions as a whole before breaking them into parts (Rabiee, 2004). During this familiarisation process, certain themes began to emerge, a summary of these codes and themes are outlined below:

Coding | Key Codes and Themes Identified

Codes:	Themes:
• Educational • Repetitive • Anonymity • Invasive • Validation • Trend • Aesthetic	Social Media Content and Marketing
• Conscious • Basic needs • Confidence • E-commerce • Local • Convenience • Interaction	Shifts in consumer behaviour

• Engagement • Trust • Experience	
• Purpose • Authenticity • Storytelling • Loyalty • Accountability • Transparency	Brand Resonance

Figure 1: Table including key codes and themes extracted from the focus groups

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is of the utmost importance in terms of qualitative research (Nieuwenhuis, 2019). Furthermore, assessing trustworthiness is referred to as the acid test of the proposed research's data analysis, findings, and conclusions. The following procedures/criteria as outlined by Guba (1981) have been performed to assess the trustworthiness of the research conducted as well as the analysis of the data.

1. Credibility

In the present research, credibility has been ensured through the adoption of well-established research methods and design that is well suited to the research question(s) (Nieuwenhuis, 2019). Furthermore, theoretical underpinnings such as the renowned and widely accepted EKB model is aligned with the research questions and methods. Credibility is further enhanced through the development and preliminary familiarisation of the participants included in the study as outlined in the above-mentioned non-probability sample (Nieuwenhuis, 2019). Moreover, the comprehensive, thorough, and "thick" descriptions of the Covid-19 (and social media) phenomenon introduced and contextualised throughout the research further confirms the credibility of the study and the information it puts forward.

2. Transferability

Transferability in the context of qualitative research refers to the degree to which the results of the qualitative research can invite the readers of the research to make connections between elements of the study and their own experience and/or research (Nieuwenhuis, 2019). Not only is a complete understanding of the context of the research provided through means of thick descriptions of content as all readers are provided with a full and purposeful account of the context, participants as well as research design (Nieuwenhuis, 2019). Also, through the means of the research's sampling, it is recommended that to ensure transferability of the research, careful thought should be given to selecting the participants with the intrinsic notion that they somehow represent the entire population in terms of the phenomenon being studied (Nieuwenhuis, 2019). Although the participants of the study were selected by means of non-probability/convenient sampling, they still did accurately represent a large portion of the population due to the phenomenon being the global Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, readers and/or other researchers can begin to make connections from the data that has been collected. Thus, the possibility of the research demonstrating highly successful transferability is plausible.

3. Dependability

Dependability is closely used in preference with credibility in qualitative research (Nieuwenhuis, 2019). Dependability is typically expressed through the research design and its implementation, the operational detail of the data gathering as well as the reflective appraisal of the project (Nieuwenhuis, 2019). It is likely that the initial research design may have changed when the research was conducted and potentially new techniques were included to strengthen the study (Nieuwenhuis, 2019). Thus, it is recommended that the analysis process be documented so that others can witness the decisions the researcher made, how the analysis was conducted as well as how interpretations were derived (Nieuwenhuis, 2019). The data collection method for the research serves as the measure and reassurance of dependability in the study. Hence, the data collected was a recorded online focus group which serves as a "memo" in terms of data collection and analysis which will help others/observers follow the reasoning of the research conducted.

4. Confirmability

Confirmability is described as the degree of neutrality which refers to the extent to which the research findings/conclusions are casted by the participants and not by the researcher's bias, motivations, and interests (Nieuwenhuis, 2019). To reduce the risk of any bias seeping into the study, the researcher needed to admit and disclose any predispositions (Nieuwenhuis, 2019). As previously mentioned, the central phenomenon explored in the proposed research is Covid-19 and being that the study outlines an interpretivist approach, the researcher would have their own lived experience of the phenomenon which can be considered as a limitation/problem for the study (Nieuwenhuis, 2019). However, as previously discussed the recorded online focus groups serve as a "audit trail" which allows for any observer to witness/trace the course of the primary research step-by-step in terms of decisions made and procedures followed whilst the data was collected. This has ensured confirmability was maintained throughout the research process.

Presentation of Findings

Focus Group Guide

The format of the online focus group discussions followed the "funnel structure" as proposed by Nieuwenhuis (2019), whereby the moderator (researcher) started with broader, less structured sets of questions to help ease the participants into the conversation (Nieuwenhuis, 2019). Then, as the discussion gained traction, the questioning then became more structured/detailed and began to directly address the research objectives/aim. This guide is illustrated below:

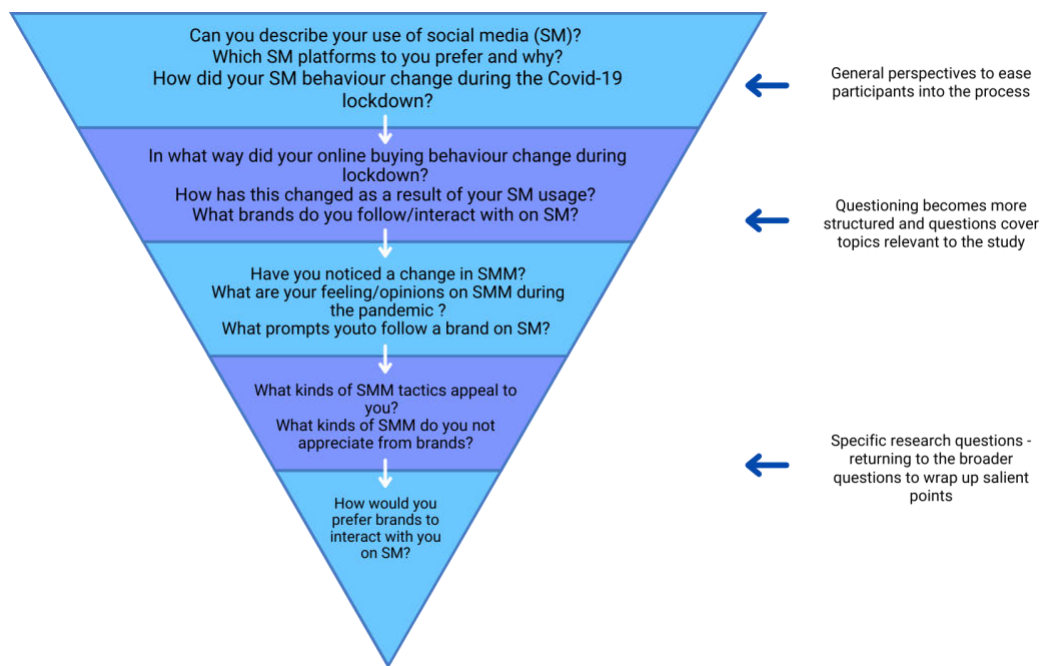


Figure 1: Focus Group Funnel

As previously mentioned, a thematic analysis approach was undertaken to examine the data collected. This type of analysis is considered an ideal method when trying to explore/uncover insights from individuals' views, opinions, knowledge and/or experiences from a set of qualitative data (Caulfield, 2020). During the analysis, the researcher closely examined the data to identify codes, common themes, ideas, and patterns of meaning that repeatedly occurred. These findings are presented as follows:

Key Questions Discussed and the Relevant Responses from the Groups

Which Social Media Platform Do You Prefer and Why?

Majority of the participants noted TikTok as their preferred social media platform. Reason being is the content is considered far more “*enjoyable*” and “*fun*”. One participant in particular noted that video content is a lot easier and quicker for them to consume, while another stated they preferred video content over static images. Multiple participants also credited TikTok’s algorithm as one of the reasons why they preferred the platform because the experience and content is personalised to the user and offers variety whereas when the participants compared it to Instagram’s algorithm, it was described as “*repetitive*”. Members of the focus group also described Instagram

as “*saturated*”, “*cluttered*”, “*superficial*”, and “*sponsored*”. One participant in particular stated that they use TikTok to “*escape Instagram*”. Whilst another described TikTok as a “*place where you can connect on a very human kind of level*” as opposed to seeing “*models and big brands*” on Instagram.

A couple of participants also named YouTube as their social media platform of choice due to the video-based content, they also noted that they enjoyed being able to “*learn*” and “*educate*” themselves on the platform as it provides stimulating content that they can use to “*upskil*”. Overall, the general feedback from the participants regarding social media platforms such as TikTok and YouTube (video-based platforms) were very positive. Whereas, Instagram, Twitter and Facebook were negative. Words such as “*stagnant*”, “*feels like war*” were used when describing these platforms. Many of the participants claimed they don’t use the Facebook app anymore, except to check in on daily news updates as well as friends and family members birthdays, one participant in particular described the platform as their “*calendar*”. It was also the least mentioned social media platform in both focus groups, with some participants claiming to have deleted the Facebook app off their devices permanently.

How Did Your Social Media Behaviour Change During the Covid-19 Lockdown?

Majority of the participants across both focus groups agreed that their time spent on social media platforms increased drastically during lockdown. A few participants stated the reason for their increased time spent on social media was due to having more spare/free time during lockdown. However, majority of the participants pointed out that the reason they spent a lot more time on social media during lockdown was to “*connect*” and “*engage*” with people online. Covid-19 and the lockdown that ensued forced people to stay home and isolated, which meant not being able to see family and friends, and physically connect with others. One participant described their social media usage as “*an opportunity to hang out with them (friends and family) virtually*” and claimed it to be paramount to them actually surviving lockdown. Another participant then went on to add that, lockdown, and how it changed their (social media) behaviour was their desire to reach out to people they have always wanted to speak to, and actually scheduling time to speak with them.

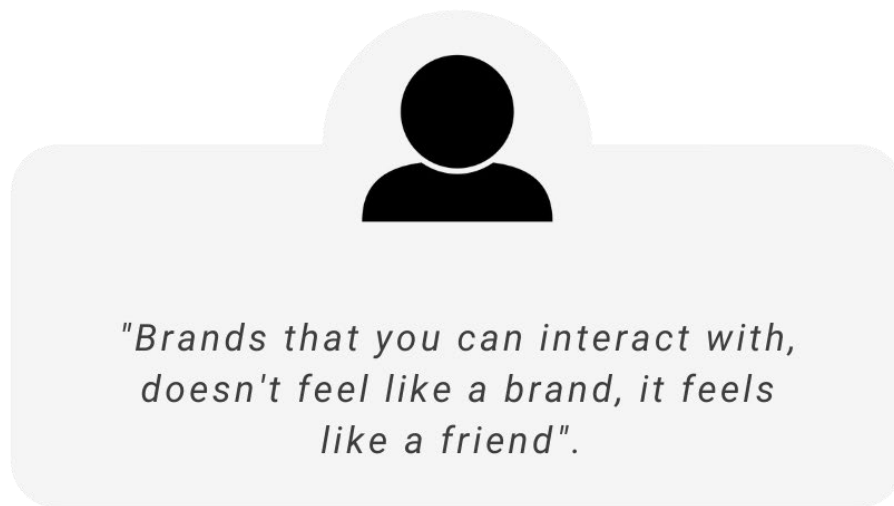


Figure 2: Noteworthy Quote 1

In What Ways did Your Online Buying Behaviour Change During Covid-19 Lockdown?

Some participants claimed that the lockdown gave them the confidence to shop and buy online because initially it was the safest and most convenient way to shop during that time. One participant stated that they had shopped online for the very first time during the first lockdown last year (2020) and described it as “*so convenient and easy*”. A few participants also made mention that they stopped buying online, unless it was for groceries or necessities and claimed that they were “*putting away safety nets*” while another noted that what they invested their money in “*definitely changed*”. In the sense that they no longer cared to buy items such as clothing but rather spent more on

groceries/food because they wanted to *“bake and create nice dishes”* as well as prioritised home décor items because they were aware that they would be spending more time at home.

Moreover, majority of the participants were aligned in the sense that they started to support more local and smaller brands/businesses when shopping online during Covid and the lockdown. One participant in particular claimed that it *“shifted their mindset to supporting locally”* because they understood the economy needed support, and consuming local products would help communities and people. Another group member added that their buying behaviour shifted from previously wanting to support international brands and *“chase after trends”* to thinking about the impact of their Rands. One participant also pointed out they started to *“recognise the value of local brands”*, from a quality perspective and claimed it to be a *“big eye opener”* in terms of the quality we have available locally and that they should be supporting that because quality *“is not just delivered by global brands”*.

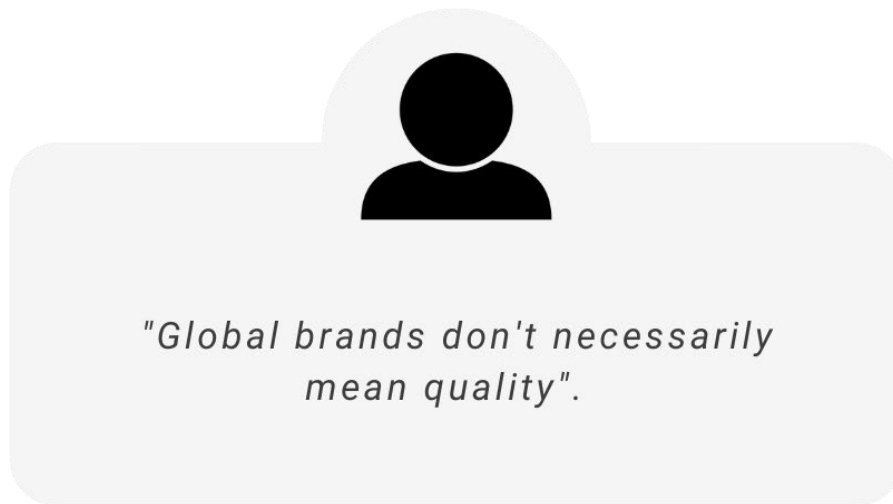


Figure 3: Noteworthy Quote 2

What Brands Do You Follow/Interact with on social media?

Most of the participants across both focus groups claimed to not follow many of the “*big brands*” on social media. Reason being is that they were aware that those brands would be targeting advertising to them anyway via the use of sponsored ads, etc. There was an expectation amongst the group members that they would see big brands (and their marketing efforts) on their social media platforms regardless of whether they followed them, or not. Majority of the participants, who did follow brands on social media, followed them because they were relative to their jobs/careers or competitors

of their own businesses/brands to *“watch what they are doing”*. Whilst other participants made a point of following local brands and small businesses because even if they couldn't make a purchase from the brand right away, they had an intention to one day buy, but in the meantime would show local support by following and interacting with the brand.

One group member in particular went on to add that they liked to follow brands they could engage with in terms of content and *“learn”* from and be *“inspired by”*. Another participant claimed that Covid helped *“put a microscope”* on the accounts they did not like and as a result did a *“big declutter”* and replaced those accounts with more *“purpose driven brands”* and *“focused”* brands whereby they displayed interest and concern for *“people living in society”* and social issues such as Black Lives Matter, Gender Based Violence, etc. Some participants also preferred to follow people instead of brands such as public figures they admired because their content is *“authentic”* and not *“sales driven”*. Additionally, when the participants were asked which platform they used most to interact with these brands, all members, from both groups answered *“instagram”*.

Interpretation of Findings

The title of the research conducted is: The rise of social media marketing during Covid: An explanatory study of consumer buying behaviour based on the online experience curated by brands. Social media as we have come to know it today is very different than before the dawn of Covid-19 and will likely change again in the pending future. However, despite changes in social media since the pandemic outbreak – research on the above mentioned topic was previously limited. Hence the below interpretation of the research conducted and derived findings seek to understand the experience of consumers as well as brands during Covid.

Interpretation of Key Themes and Findings | Reviewing, Naming and Defining Themes

Theme 1: Social Media Content and Marketing

When the members of the focus groups were asked questions centred around social media such as which platforms they preferred and why, their social media usage, and what brands they follow/interact with on social media. All their responses pointed to

the content displayed on these platforms. The term social media content, in this case, refers to anything that someone has posted and shared with others on social platforms. Furthermore, content marketing refers to methods used by brands or people whereby they generate content to attract and retain customers and/or followers (Patel, 2015).

Key Finding One

The preferred social media platform amongst consumers, the most frequently used, and which received the most positive response was TikTok due the entertainment value and variety of the content. However, TikTok does not directly influence consumer buying behaviour or the brands that are followed. Whereas Instagram was named the platform used by consumers to interact with brands, as they have an expectation that they will be targeted by brands on said platform and where they are more inclined to directly follow and engage brands and branded content. Hence, brands should therefore prioritise Instagram with regards to their social media marketing efforts/tactics as this is the platform, they are most likely to engage with consumers.

Theme 2: Shifts in Consumer Behaviour

Consumer behaviour refers to the study of consumers and the processes they use to select, consume, and dispose of products and services (Radu, 2019). This is inclusive of consumers' emotional, mental, and behavioural responses. When the group members were asked questions centred around their online buying behaviour during lockdown as well as how it changed. The general consensus from the participants is that they became more aware and conscious of their spending as well as what they invested their money in. There seemed to be a big support of local brands and small businesses amongst participants. The group members also referred to seeking human interaction and connection due to being isolated during the Covid-19 lockdown.

Key Finding Two

Consumers have shifted their behaviour in the sense that they are humbler and more modest in their purchasing decisions during Covid. They seem to have retracted and stepped down in Maslow's hierarchy of needs to level 2 (safety and security) and 3

(love and belonging) (Cherry, 2021). During the pandemic and lockdown, the participants of the focus groups seem to have re-evaluated what is important to them and their communities/surroundings. Anything above safety and security as well as love and belonging (human connection) was not prioritised by members of the group.

Theme 3: Brand Resonance

Brand resonance is indicative of how well one can relate to a specific brand as well as how intense the relationship with the brand is perceived to be (Hayha, 2020). When the participants of the focus groups were asked questions regarding brands such as what brands they follow, what prompts them to follow brands as well as what brand tactics appeal to them and how they would prefer to interact with brands on social media. The overall feedback from the participants was they tend to interact and build relationships with brands that are driven by purpose, authenticity, transparency, and accountability.

Key Finding Three

Consumers want to be inspired by brands and are very selective of the brands they choose to follow, interact with and purchase from. Consumers are also not ignorant to the marketing tactics used by brands; they are able to identify and scrutinise them. Thus, consumers view their relationship with brands online as conditional. Consumers will reciprocate engagement, loyalty, and support of brands if they feel they are getting the same outcomes from brands. Consumers have an expectation of brands to know and live their purpose, be forthcoming and transparent with their operations as well as stand united when it comes to social movements and equality.

Conclusion

The section(s) above reported the results of the research conducted, as determined through the thematic analysis. In the below section, the study is concluded and recommendations have been made based on the results.

Research Questions/Objectives addressed

The purpose of the research conducted was to explore and gain a better understanding of South African consumers buying behaviour based on the online experience curated by brands via social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and TikTok post the Covid-19 outbreak. This section includes how the findings answered the research questions as well as how the research objectives were reached/achieved.

Primary Research Question

How has social media marketing impacted consumer buying behaviour as well as the brands trying to target them online during Covid?

Although the primary research question of how social media marketing impacted consumer buying behaviour as well as the brands trying to target them online during Covid cannot be directly answered/provided to the broadness of the topic and the findings that were derived. The secondary research questions and objectives as listed below did assist the investigation of the research problem and helped provide clarity and responses to the above-mentioned primary research question as well as achieving the study's goal as outlined above.

Secondary Questions

1. *How has Covid-19 affected social media marketing for brands?*
2. *How has Covid-19 affected consumer behaviours?*
3. *What are the consumer preferences of brand interaction on social media post-covid?*

Objectives

1. *Understand how Covid-19 affected brand's (social media) communication strategies.*
2. *Gain a deeper understanding of the changes in consumers buying and social media behaviour during Covid-19.*
3. *Explore the SMM content that is deemed important/relevant to consumers post-covid.*

The primary research conducted did achieve the objective of understanding how Covid-19 affected brands' social media communication strategies by outlining what communication tactics the research participants did not appreciate from brands as well as the recommendations they put forward as to the tactics they would prefer to see from brands on social media platforms. For instance, consumers prefer to be targeted by brands on Instagram and want authentic, purpose driven communication from brands online. Furthermore, the research allowed for deeper understanding of the changes in consumer buying behaviour and social media behaviour during Covid.

As outlined above consumers' social media usage increased drastically. However, their ranking on Maslow's hierarchy of needs reverted back to the need for safety and security as well as love and belonging. Hence consumers became more conscious and mindful of what they purchased and invested their money in. Lastly, the exploration of the social media content and marketing deemed important/relevant to consumers post covid was achieved. Consumers respond best to content that is authentic and tells a story.

[Ethical Considerations, Limitations and Heuristic Value](#)

The primary research conducted holds no potential ethical misconduct in relation to all parties involved including the participants, the participants representing the brands as well as the researcher. Participants and any representatives of brands included in the research had an understanding that their participation was voluntary and gave their consent by signing an explanatory information sheet and consent form (Annexure A) as well as a consent form for audio and video recording (Annexure B) seeing as the primary research was conducted by means of online focus groups. These consent forms required the participants signatures/permission prior to the focus groups taking place. No personal information apart from the participants age, gender, and/or professional title were asked/recorded. All information gathered has been used for the purpose of the research project only and all authors who contributed to the secondary research have been acknowledged by the researcher according to IIE referencing.

Ironically, the very phenomenon being addressed in the research is what presented limitations to the study. The Covid-19 pandemic is still ongoing as are the social

restrictions and lockdown regulations put in place to help mitigate the spread of the virus. Thus, various Covid-19 safety protocols needed to be put in place to ensure the safety of the researcher as well as the participants included in the study. Hence why online focus groups were the primary method of collecting the necessary data. But this did host some disadvantages/limitations in terms of the observations as well as interactivity with the participants. For instance, it was difficult to observe body language in an online setting. Whilst it was possible to cultivate thought-provoking responses on a chat-style interface (Zoom). It was more difficult to see the same body language and facial expressions one would typically be able to witness in a face-to-face focus group (Borochoff, 2021).

It was also challenging for the researcher to pick up subtle hints, gestures, innuendos, and social cues. Whereas in-person focus groups benefit from being able to generate customer insights through these interactions (Borochoff, 2021). However, this was not the case in an online group setting. Whilst the above-mentioned limitations were encountered when conducting the research, the safety and well-being of the researcher and participants were ensured, and the research conducted still made a meaningful contribution to the broader literature the currently exists.

The study conducted provides insight into minds of consumers during the ongoing pandemic, their buying and online behaviours/habits, as well as best practices brands can adopt when trying to engage/interact with consumers on social media during this time. The research findings could interest various brands within South Africa who are looking to adjust their social media marketing strategies and communications to help form stronger relationships and brand resonance with their customers/audiences.

Therefore, the findings of this study should inspire brands and other industry participants to be proactive during the pandemic and adapt to the shifts in consumer buying behaviour and online habits that have occurred since the outbreak of the Covid-19 virus. However, based solely on the findings from the sample, this would not be applicable to all brands within South Africa. Furthermore, it is recommended that future studies on the topic, or similar to, include a larger sample in their research, one that is more accurately representative of the population as a whole as well as conducts the research face-to-face as opposed to online.

Annexure A | Explanatory Information Sheet and Consent Form

Explanatory information sheet and consent form for participants
To whom it may concern, My name is Stephanie Christina Jooste and I am a student at Vega School of Brand Leadership. I am currently conducting research under the supervision of Amalia van Schalkwyk about an exploratory, qualitative study. I hope that this research will enhance our understanding of the rise of social media marketing post-covid in terms of consumer buying behaviour based on the online experience curated by brands. I would like to invite you to participate in my study. 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 (insert reason). If you decide to participate in this research, I would like to (explain exactly what participation will involve). 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 (insert what you are examining). 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 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 BCom Honours in Strategic Brand Management. 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:

Stephanie Jooste

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

The contact details of my supervisor are as follows:

[INSERT NAME OF SUPERVISOR]

[INSERT TELEPHONE NUMBER OF SUPERVISOR]

[INSERT E-MAIL ADDRESS OF SUPERVISOR]

Annexure B | Consent Form for Audio and Video Recording

Consent form for participants	
I, _____, agree to allow Stephanie Christina Jooste to audio record my interviews as part of the research about the rise of social media marketing post-covid in terms of consumer buying behaviour based on the online experience curated by brands. 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

Annexure C | Ethical Clearance Letter



Date 19 July 2021

Student name: Stephanie Jooste

Student number: [REDACTED]

Campus: Vega Online

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 name:

Signature:

Campus Postgraduate Coordinator (CPC) name: Dr Tish Taylor

Signature:



Annexure D | Final Research Report Summary Document Table

Research Purpose/ Objective	Primary Research Question	Research Rationale	Seminal Authors/ Sources	Literature Review – Conceptual Framework	Paradigm	Approach	Data Collection Method(s)	Ethics	Key Findings	Recommendations
Gain a better understanding of SA consumers and their online buying behaviours	How has the rise of social media marketing impacted consumers and brands during Covid?	Despite changes in social media since the pandemic – research on the topic is limited	Engel, Kollat and Blackwell (Engel et al, 1968)	Theme 1: Social media marketing (SMM) Theme 2: Consumer behaviour Theme 3: Brand communication strategies post the Covid-19 outbreak	Paradigm Interpretivism Phenomenology Understanding the essence of the experience about a phenomenon (Covid-19)	Qualitative Population Population Parameters South Africans who were in lockdown and experienced the phenomenon	Online focus groups via Zoom	There is no ethical misconduct in relation to all parties involved in the research	Social media Content and Marketing, Shifts in Consumer behaviour, Brand Resonance	Future studies to include larger sample and conduct research face-to-face
Research Problem	Secondary Questions/ Hypotheses/ Objectives	Key Concepts	Key Theories			Sampling	Data Analysis Method(s)	Limitations	Key Contribution	
No qualitative research which seeks to understand the experience of consumers and brands during Covid	What were the smaller objectives you used to solve the problem?	SMM, Consumer behaviour and brand communication	EKB Model			Non-probability Sampling method Convenience Size 14 Participants	Unit of Analysis Thematic Analysis Data Analysis Method(s) Inductive Approach	Covid-19 is a limitation to the study. The pandemic is still ongoing as are the social restrictions and lockdown regulations	Better understanding of shifts in consumer behaviour on social media during Covid	

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