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Table of Contents

Title	5
Contextualisation	5
Rationale	6
Problem statement	6
Research questions	7
Research objectives	7
Literature review	7
Introduction	7
Theories for research	8
Organisational reputational platform	8
Figure 1	8
Keller's brand equity model	9
Figure 2	9
Conceptualisation of key terms	9
Market affiliation	9
Network marketing	10
Influencer marketing	10
Consumer perceptions	10
Brand reputation	10
Market affiliation	11
Brand reputation with market affiliation	11
Influencer marketing as a part of affiliate marketing	12
Consumer perceptions and behaviour with market affiliation	13
Research Methodology	14
Research paradigm	14
Paradigm: Interpretivism	14
The epistemology	15
The ontology	15
The axiology	15
Research design	15
Population	16
Sampling	16

Data-collection method and Research instrument	16
Data analysis method	19
Trustworthiness	20
Contributions and limitations	21
Anticipated contribution	21
Ethical considerations	21
Limitations	23
Population and Sampling	25
Data Collection	26
Recruitment	26
Interview process	27
Data Analysis methodology	27
Presentation and interpretation of Findings	28
<i>Figure 3:</i>	28
Findings in context with the organisational reputational platform model	28
Findings in contrast to the organisational reputational platform model:	29
Vision:	29
Expectations:	29
Capabilities:	29
<i>Figure 4</i>	30
Findings in context with the brand equity model	30
<i>Figure 5:</i>	30
Salience:	31
Resonance:	31
Judgements and Feelings:	31
<i>Figure 6</i>	32
Noteworthy Themes and Concepts identified from the research and literature: ...	32
Market affiliation	32
Network marketing	33
Influencer marketing	33
Brand reputation	34
Addressing the research problem	34
Research problem:	34
Findings:	34

• The research questions that were explored:	35
Findings:.....	35
Comparing USN affiliated consumer perceptions with non-affiliated USN consumers:	36
Findings:.....	36
Research objectives.....	37
Objective 1:	37
Objective 2:	37
Objective 3:	37
Conclusion.....	38
Reference list (in alphabetical order).....	39

Introduction

This research proposal was granted ethical clearance. This study will be valuable as it intends to contribute to the global body of knowledge as well as provide crucial consumer insight onto the existing market affiliation programs of the brand Ultimate Sports Nutrition (USN). This field of research is needed to be explored as there are currently no published research papers analysing the consumer perceptions of South Africa in relation to the concept market affiliation. Market affiliation as a concept will be provided within the literature review of this proposal.

Title

The aim of this research is to gain an understanding in the consumers perceptions of interacting with market affiliates of the parent brand USN in South Africa.

Contextualisation

Market affiliation is a relatively recent marketing strategy utilised by brands and businesses world-wide. Market affiliation is the concept whereby a brand or organisation would allow an external independent individual or 'influencer' to assist in increasing a company's product or service sales. For example, let us use the brand USN, USN market affiliation would entail the brand to acquire the 'ideal' consumer and use them to influence others like-minded to the individual with incentive by commission for each sale referenced by the consumer. Affiliate marketers generally do not store or hold onto stock, a brand may send some products to the affiliate so that the affiliate can create digital content with the products. So, since USN is a health and fitness brand that specialises in hard-core exercise and workout supplements. USN would then sign with a frequent gym member (For example's sake the gym member will be referred to as the *affiliate*) who matches with the identity of the brand, and that specific *affiliate* would then be given a code or a personal unique website address to disseminate amongst their personal networks. Each time someone from the personal networks clicks or taps on that *affiliate's* specific link, USN would have tracked that and if the consumer from the personal network purchases a product, the affiliate then earns their commission from that online interaction. The realm of market affiliates is mainly restricted to the online platforms for tracking reasons.

Current research in the topic of market affiliation showcases that most forms of marketing affiliation strategies are successful, however, none of that of claim can be proven within the South African context. By conducting this research, the social relations within the South African climate of marketing affiliation and the consumers can be better seen and understood. This research is interesting as the results cannot be pre-determined and the research will either prove or disprove current research on the topic. This researcher believes that the world is created through social construct and social interaction, thereby this research would entail gaining the social understanding of market affiliation from consumers who have interacted with affiliates in South Africa.

Rationale

The reasoning behind this research is to provide insight into how separate the branding is from the affiliate marketers and the parent brand is through the lens of the consumers. Affiliate marketing has had a poor reputation among the past few years from a slight upsurge of improper affiliates, which damages the brand the affiliates partnered with. Well-run market affiliate companies can help grow a business globally through the use of international affiliates. There is currently a gap in the research for a customer centric approach on improper market affiliation.

This insight will hopefully aid in the assistance of preventing businesses from having to utilize affiliate strategies blindly. Understanding this information from the consumer is important as consumers are the main drivers of a company's bottom line.

Problem statement

The problem that is seeking to be explored is the effects of the use of the market affiliation strategies by brands on the consumers, to gauge this understanding better, the consumers of such strategies need to be interviewed to understand their lived experience with the brand interaction. There is currently a gap in the body of knowledge within the research of market affiliation, especially in the South African context. This research paper seeks to contribute to the global body of knowledge and hopefully encourage future researchers to conduct similar research.

Research questions

- How many brands in South Africa use market affiliates?
- What are the perceptions of South African consumers in relation to market affiliation?
- What are the consumers overall impression on the capabilities of what the brand is able to do?
- What are the implications on a brands reputation from a consumer perspective in South Africa?

Research objectives

Objective 1: To provide vision into the South African market for brands that operate within this region.

Objective 2: To encourage further research within the South African market affiliation sector.

Objective 3: To contribute to the global academic body of knowledge.

Literature review

Introduction

Market affiliation is a relatively new strategy for businesses; however, it is a concept that is over seven years old and there is not enough information available in the South African context. Market affiliation adds value to brands and businesses and helps promote industry profit. This research study seeks to understand the perspectives of South African consumers on interacting with market affiliates. The brand reputation is what is wanting to be analysed in a South African context. Market affiliation is a concept whereby a brand would use external members with influence to push product, whilst offering incentive for the sales. Thereby essentially outsourcing a sales department. Market affiliates may be misaligned with the brand image or may falsely advertise products to increase their sales commissions. There has been research conducted in reputation management regarding consumer perceptions, however, there is a lack of knowledge for consumer perceptions when interacting with market affiliates within a South African context. No research has been conducted into the perspectives and opinions of the South African society. This research will utilise brand reputation theories and models and adapt them in future according to the findings of the proposed research study.

Theories for research

Organisational reputational platform

The organisational reputational platform is a model that is used to measure reputation through the internal alignment and integration of activities that directly impact the brands stakeholders (Feldman, Bahamonde & Velasquez Bellido, 2014). This model helps in identifying the following: areas of reputational risk, relevant stakeholders, establishing systems that can evaluate each stakeholder group and prioritise the weak reputational areas to find solutions. By identifying these different elements of the model, the perceived risk of market affiliation can be compared to the findings of the interview process to be later used in adapting the model to align with the perceived risks and effects associated with affiliate marketing. This model can help in informing need for a re-evaluation of a brands position to increase their reputation (Feldman, Bahamonde & Velasquez Bellido, 2014). The importance of alignment is emphasised, market affiliates may not always align with the brand. However, the lack of alignment has an unknown effect in the South African context due to lack of information and thus warrants further investigation.

Figure 1. Organization's reputational platform

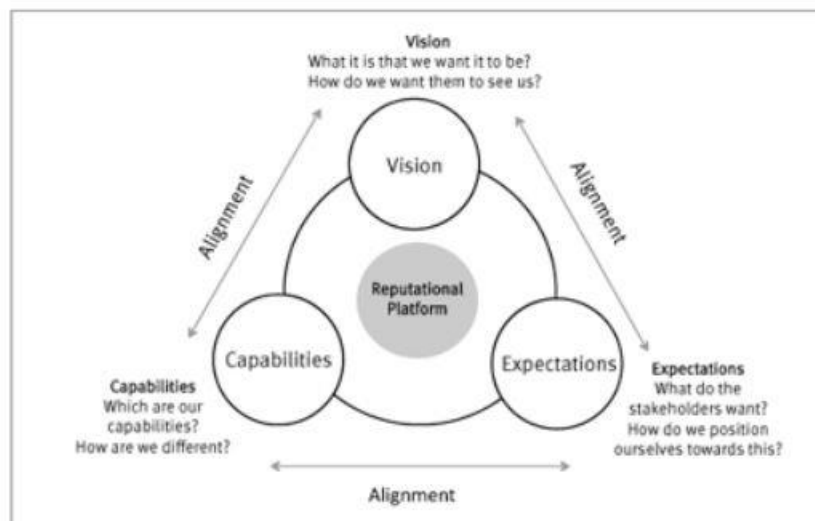


Figure 1: (Feldman, Bahamonde & Velasquez Bellido, 2014)

Keller's brand equity model

Keller's brand equity model assists in identifying the necessary regions of impact that when implemented will help build a successful brand. Keller's model has four stages and six building blocks. The four stages each ask a different question, 'who are you?', 'what are you?', 'what about you?', and 'what about you and me?'. The six building blocks are resonance, judgements, feelings, performance, imagery and salience. The salience block is tied to the brands identity, the who are you?. The performance and imagery are tied to the brands meaning, 'what are you?'. Judgments and feelings fall part of the brands response to 'what about you?'. The final building block, resonance, is the relationship between brands and their stakeholders, this block is associated with, 'what about you and me?'. When applying this model to the scope of market affiliation, more information is needed from the research study to adapt this model efficiently. Presently, this model is still usable however, some of the characteristics must be removed to increase the relevance. Considering market affiliation is mainly external, the internal aspects of the model are of less use (such as in the imagery building block, the history and heritage is not applicable for market affiliates).

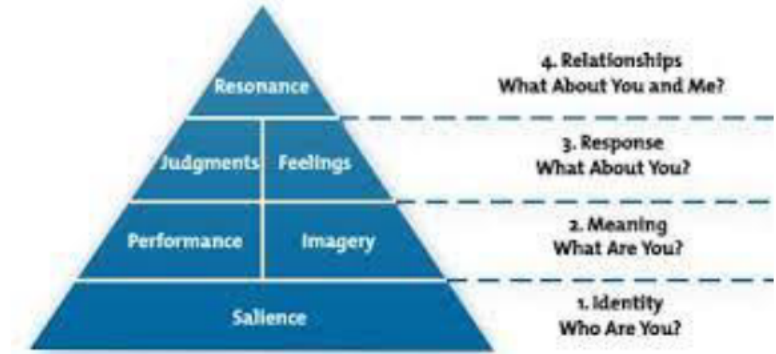


Figure 2: (Keller, 1999)

Conceptualisation of key terms

Market affiliation

Market affiliation as a concept similar to influencer marketing, however, market affiliation is more complex than influencer marketing and influencer marketing is a subset of market affiliation. Market affiliation is a concept whereby a brand or product uses an external entity (another organisation or an individual with power over their community) to promote and push product sales (Shukla, Vyas & Shastri, 2017). Market affiliation is fully tracked, brands can see exactly how many products the affiliate has sold through codes given to the affiliate or by viewing the number of stakeholders engaged with the brand because of their affiliate (this can be viewed by the 'mouse clicks' from an affiliates website or social media page).

Network marketing

Network marketing is a term for pyramid selling. Network marketing is similar to market affiliation however, with network marketing, the key difference is that network marketers are not as representative of the main brand as affiliates are. Network marketing forms part of the market affiliation discipline, however network marketing is reliant on one user gathering five users, and each of those five users recruited they each have to recruit another five each. Network marketing uses the networks of individuals and to recruit likeminded individuals (Napoletano & Curry, 2022).

Influencer marketing

This concept is defined as a social media user who are 'influential' and have power over their personal networks. This concept is similar to network marketing however influencer marketers are restricted to social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Blogs and Snapchat (Vodák, Novysedlák, Čakanová & Pekár, 2019). Influencer marketing, when properly implemented, is an effective method for two-way communication from brands to publics. To be an influencer, one must possess the ability to alter the perceptions of its network and hold power over their network.

Consumer perceptions

These are the beliefs, overall awareness and opinions of individuals who either consume or purchase a brands product (mbaSKOOL, 2021). For the purpose of this research, consumer perceptions in relation to market affiliates in South Africa are unknown and are wanting to be investigated in the proposed study. The consumer perceptions are essential to forming a part of the brand reputation which is discussed below.

Brand reputation

Brand reputation is the overall perception of a brand by internal and external groups. Brand reputation can determine whether a brand or business is credible, liked by the public, disliked by the public, how stakeholders view the organisation and how competitors view the organisation. Brands with good reputations earn larger amounts than brands with bad reputations (Hollenbeck, 2017). For the purpose of this study, brand reputation is used to justify the validity for the need for research to promote healthy brands in South Africa.

Market affiliation

The success for market affiliates relies on the affiliates ability of selecting the right niche to be explored (Shukla, Vyas & Shastri, 2017). Market affiliates earn commission based on the number of products they are able to sell. Although, issues arose in 2017 whereby the internet browsing cache memory (cookies) would falsely represent the commission earned. For example, the cookies within an internet browser typically have a life-time period of thirty days before expiring (Shukla, Vyas & Shastri, 2017). These inherently allowed affiliates to earn commission if their affiliate link was used before the cookies expired, meaning that the consumer has clicked on the affiliates link, then closed the page, within a period of thirty days, if that customer revisits that website to purchase a product, the affiliate is still going to be earning commission because the consumers browsing cookies had not expired yet (Shukla, Vyas & Shastri, 2017). However, this issue was reported in 2017, and has already been rectified. Shukla, Vyas and Shastri (2017) conducted a study that involves analysing consumers perceptions of affiliates, however, their study did not focus on a South African context and focussed on the perceptions associated with the American society. Again in 2017, another research study took place on market affiliation. The research study in 2017 showcased merely eighteen existing research studies conducted on the topic and this clearly demonstrated a lack of knowledge in this area of research (Dwivedi, Rana & Alryalat, 2017).

Brand reputation with market affiliation

Walsh, Schaarschmidt and Ivens (2017) argue that the perception of the brand is imperative to building a successful brand reputation. Consumers are aware and interested in the behaviour of brands and organisations, therefor causing brands and businesses to be responsible and engage in healthy business practices to positively impact their reputation (Walsh, Schaarschmidt & Ivens, 2017). There is a proposed opportunity within the reputational aspect of research, as a brands reputation can influence their expansion and opportunities (Mukherjee, Makarius & Stevens, 2020). The character and capabilities of brands were analysed from the viewpoint of the consumers; however, the analysis was based on international emerging markets. Walsh, Schaarschmidt and Ivens analysed the perceptions of consumers, which correlates with the research study being proposed, however, the authors did not analyse consumers in relation to affiliate marketing, the authors analysed the consumer perceptions in relation to fashion retailing and emerging

markets internationally. The purpose of including these studies for the research proposal is to have a basis on consumer behaviour analysis methods that can then be adapted to assist in gaining more information in the South African context. Currently there are minimal amounts of studies conducted on consumer perceptions in South Africa, the majority of the studies conducted on consumer perceptions in South Africa are in relation to live-stock and agriculture, not affiliate marketing. Nazarov (2020) argues that, globally more consumers are shifting towards an online buying atmosphere. Market affiliation tends to take place online, which means that more investigation is required in the South African context. Corporate reputation is needed to be maintained in the online era in order to succeed in having a good brand reputation (Aryee, 2021). Therefore brand reputation is needed to be maintained and grown, the information that this proposed research study can provide can assist with giving brands solutions and strategies to successfully affiliate within the South African society for optimal value and benefits.

With increased e-commerce, influencer marketing and market affiliation are becoming more essential to businesses marketing strategies and practices (Agmeka, Wathoni & Santoso, 2019). However, it is important to note that Agmeka, Wathoni and Santoso (2019) analysed the brand reputation and image associated with online consumer behaviour in an Indonesian context. Indonesia is also a developing country much like South Africa, although, Indonesia does not possess as much of a multi-cultural market and therefore their discussion is only applicable to South Africa theoretically until the research for the proposed study can be conducted, then only can an application of Agmeka, Wathoni and Santoso's work be applied to a South African context. Understanding the perceptions of online shoppers is imperative to a brands' digital marketing strategy and overall online reputation (Chang, Dokko, Min & Rakib, 2020). A positive perception of the brand will give room for the brand to excel in the digital environment whereas a poorly perceived brand will not last long in the digital environment.

Influencer marketing as a part of affiliate marketing

Influencer marketing, as a subset of market affiliates, is important to analyse as influence marketers effect the consumer's perceptions. Gilbert, Childers and Boatwright (2020) argued that influence marketing has become increasingly popular (their study found that 75% of the marketing agencies they contacted utilise this as a strategy). South Africa currently only has forty-three different brands hosting affiliate marketing opportunities (Brown, 2022). The internet and e-commerce rise has aided affiliate marketing in becoming

a good strategy for brands (Patrick & Hee, 2019). Patrick and Hee (2019) further argues that affiliate marketing needs to further investigate social media innovations, which links to the influence marketers. However, the success of this as a strategy is reliant on the affiliate to have social support (Patrick & Hee, 2019). To be an influencer, one must have the ability to influence other's perceptions. This method of marketing is becoming increasingly effective and important (Permana, Rohandi & Nugraha, 2021). As influencer marketing is becoming increasingly popular, there is more of a need for research in the South African context. South Africa has influencers, South Africa also has affiliate marketing agencies, however what South Africa does not have is research for consumer perceptions on affiliates and influencers in South Africa. The additional gap of research on influencer marketing in South Africa will not negatively impact the overall aim of this study but does create potential opportunities for future studies. Baranow (2019) notes that influencer marketing can contain risks associated with the brand reputation as consumers may lose trust dependent on the influencer's activities. The internet and social media have made interacting on digital platforms with affiliated influencers far more accessible (George, Anitsal & Anitsal, 2021).

Consumer perceptions and behaviour with market affiliation

Well affiliated businesses are able to acquire increased financial and intangible assets which maximises overall brand value (Ahmad, Oláh, Popp & Máté, 2018). Kipnis, Demangeot, Pullig and Broderick (2019) argue that consumers have become more segmented before through their own identity affiliation. A focus is placed on multi-cultural consumer identity affiliation which causes segmentations within the markets (Kipnis, Demangeot, Pullig & Broderick, 2019). South Africa is a multi-cultural market, understanding the difference in preferences of multi-cultural identities can assist in pin-pointing the need for research in a South African context. Consumers globally have shifted more towards the online markets and the online markets and platforms creates a better sense of consumer engagement (Shareef, Mukerji, Dwivedi, Rana & Islam, 2019). Consumers are also noted to have a disliking for traditional advertising and are more trusting of their personal networks (Shareef, *et al.*, 2019). Singh, Mondal, Singh, Sahoo and Das (2020) provided supporting evidence to Shareef *et al.*, and noted that in the Vietnamese context, consumer behaviour was becoming more favourable to e-commerce and personal networks. This heightened shift of online consumerism showcases the need for further investigation within the current knowledge gap.

A study has been conducted on the consumers perceptions of affiliates in relation to health and fitness trends. The health and fitness trends with affiliates have caused new issues. Trust was a large factor for the consumers perceptions for this study and the health and fitness affiliation promoted near impossible lifestyle standards and presented them as normal (Baranow, 2019). Baranow (2019) utilised a quantitative research approach to understand whether consumers still trusted affiliates. Consumer trust is noted to be of much importance when analysing consumer behaviour. Covid-19 has also shifted consumer behaviour in South Africa in five keyways, shifts towards values and essentials, flight to digital, shock to loyalty, health economy and homebody economy (Arora, Charm, Grimmelt, Ortega, Robinson, Sexauer & Yamakawa, 2020). The shift to values and essentials explains that consumers have become more aware of their spending and more conscious on purchasing decisions. The flight to digital explains the upsurge of e-commerce and online related methods of communication. Shock to loyalty was the realisation that consumers were noted to be displeased when they could not acquire their preferred branded product and did not want to settle for an alternative brand product. The homebody economy was due to government regulations and the consumer realisation that they do not necessarily need to leave their homes to continue living their life (through online work and online schooling) (Arora, *et al.*, 2020). Younger generations are increasingly adapting and integrating into the online atmosphere and are influenced by online services and promotions more than traditional media and advertising (Duffett, Petroşanu, Negricea, & Edu, 2019).

Research Methodology

Research paradigm

The research paradigm that will be most appropriate will be interpretivism. This research will encompass examining individual's lived experiences through their interactions with market affiliated services from USN. The individual's lived experience is more important as it will provide more in-depth answers and provide a larger scope of answers compared to quantitative positivism.

Paradigm: Interpretivism

This study will be of a qualitative nature as the opinions and perspectives of consumers are needed. Thus, meaning that the research is of a subjective nature. Understanding consumer behaviour for market affiliation cannot be objectively applied in the same way when

comparing brands and their affiliation strategies. As this paradigm is subjective, the research will continue along a qualitative research design.

The epistemology

The epistemology of this study in relation to interpretivism is subjective and seeks to discuss and understand the various viewpoints of the participants involved in this study to gain the necessary knowledge. Therefore the epistemology will be the information gathered from the interviewed participants of the study.

The ontology

The ontological aspect of this study revolves around the social relationships that occur between brand and customer. To further this explanation in relation to the proposed research, the way in which participants answer the questions (body language, use of diction and vocabulary, hesitation or lack thereof when answering) is important in understanding the social relationship, this can help determine the nature of the relationship between brand and consumer.

The axiology

The axiology of this research is the perspectives and opinions of the consumers in South Africa and how that perspective is influenced by affiliate marketing. The axiology of this study attributes value to the research as this research will be filling a gap in the body of knowledge for market affiliation.

Research design

The research will encompass a qualitative, interpretivist research design. The research questions that have been formulated have come from the key theories within this document. To answer these research questions, the insight from the consumers are needed. The research questions and the choice of interpretivism originates from the literature review conducted. The research will be worked on inductively, the general conclusions gained will only allowed to be generalised as long as an overwhelming majority of the participants provide a similar answer. This will be an exploratory study as this study will seek to understand the lived experiences of the consumers throughout their specific interactions

with affiliates. Another reason for this study to be exploratory is that there is not enough information around the topic and no prior research has been conducted within this field, therefore this study will need to be exploratory as the answers are currently unknown and need to be explored. This study will be done in a longitudinal manner .

Population

The population for my study will be participants who need to meet the criteria of having consumed products from the affiliates in South Africa. The accessible population is obtainable through the researchers and willing participants personal networks. The unit of analysis within the context of this research will be the consumers of USN products(People).

Another method to reach this population could be to reach out to the affiliates online and ask them if they are able to share or grant permission for the researcher to look through their social media following to query some of their followers (presumed consumers of affiliates) to see if they will be a willing participant in this study.

Sampling

This study will utilise purposive sampling as the participants are needed to have met the criteria of purchasing a product through an USN market affiliate. The estimated sample size for this study will be between five to ten participants. The sample method will be used as any other sampling method will not give the researcher access to relevant samples. For example, although quota sampling may work as it is similar to purposive sampling, the limitations of time and resources prevent quota sampling to being a viable option.

Data-collection method and Research instrument

The data collection method will use semi-structured interviews with open ended questions, to effectively best understand the consumers lived experience throughout their interaction. To recruit the researcher's population and samples, the researcher will utilise social media and personal networks of the researcher to gain access to the population and samples. Market affiliates profiles on Instagram generally have their portfolios of which brands that they have represented in the past. This can allow the researcher to see if they have affiliated with USN and with the Instagram messaging function, the researcher can direct message the affiliates on Instagram to ask for permission to query their following for interviews.

Currently, the researcher is acquainted with WhatsApp groups for gym training activities and with three individuals known to the researcher who will match the criteria of being a consumer of USN affiliate products.

The data collection will remain confidential, there is no anonymity since all participants will be interviewed in an online video conference therefore their identity will be known to the researcher. Confidentiality is when the identity of the participants are altered and or modified to prevent any data that is personal to the participant to be known to anyone other than the researcher (Allen, 2017). Anonymity is when no personal data is obtained throughout the research process (Allen, 2017). For this research study, anonymity will be impossible.

The interview process is known to be time and resource intensive (Strydom & Bezuidenhout, 2014). To try and mitigate the time and resource factor, the interview process will be conducted via online platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meets or FaceTime. The reasoning for scheduling online interviews is due to the implication that some of the population within the researchers' samples may not reside in Johannesburg, therefore limiting the possibility of conducting face-to-face interviews. Another reasoning for video conferencing is to mitigate the potential cost for the participants to all travel to the agreed venue, the online conferencing will ensure that participants are not incurring costs to be a participant, the researcher will also offer data compensation should any participant be without access to a Wi-Fi connection (The data compensation would strictly be for the amount used for the interviews, it is not giving participants an incentive to participate). To maximise the efficiency of the interview process, the interviews will need to be within similar settings, to also ensure that the participants are more comfortable. The desired setting for the interviews would be at the times convenient to the participants within a three-week period, to allow for the participants to have the interview when they are most comfortable. Ideally the interviewee would be in a place of comfort, and a small introductory conversation will occur to help ease the potential awkwardness of online interviews. The interviewer and participants will need to have their cameras on throughout the process.

Semi-structured interview format:

(questions will be asked from the understanding that the participant is a consumer of affiliate programs).

Question 1: How often would you say that you have consumed products from an USN affiliates?

If answer provides 'often': Why did your consumption of the product increase?

If answer provides 'not often': What are the reasons for consuming less?

Question 2: Do you have any preconceptions of the brand USN? (in terms of capabilities and brand image)

If yes: What are those pre-conceptions and or beliefs on USN?

Question 3: Has an affiliate program influenced your beliefs on what a brand is able/capable of accomplishing?

Why and How?

Question 4: In your experience, how have you perceived the affiliate in relation to the company that they worked for, in terms of the values portrayed?

If participant is unaware of the values a brief, objective description shall be provided of USN's values.

'The USN values: To develop and deliver the most advanced quality of nutrition to all sports and all athletes with a goal (Comparably, 2022).'

Question 5: In your experience has your interactions with the market affiliate been positive or negative?

Why?

If answered positive: has that created a relationship between you and the company? Or did you previously have a relationship with the company?

Question 6: Has an affiliate ever influenced your perceptions of the capabilities of the company?

If yes: In what way have you been influenced?

Follow up question: How did your perception on the brands capabilities become influenced?

Question 7: How do you perceive USN?

Question 8: How did you perceive your interactions with market affiliates in general?

Secondary Questionnaire for non-affiliate consumers:

Question 1: How do you perceive USN?

Question 2: How often would you say that you have consumed products from an USN affiliates? (In the past?)

Question 3: Have you ever been aware of the affiliate programmes, or have you ever witnessed an USN affiliate?

Question 4: What would you think about someone marketing a product in the gym you frequent?

Question 5: What inspired you to choose USN as a product?

Question 6: In the past, before initially buying the product, did you have preconceptions about the brand?

Question 7: Are you aware of the values USN tries to portray as a brand?

Data analysis method

The data analysis method selected for this study will be a thematic analysis. The thematic analysis will be used to help facilitate the correct research process for analysing the data that will be collected. The thematic analysis will assist in conceptualising the main themes and insights that will be derived from the interviews, this will allow for the data to be placed in better structure and force the researcher into a more thorough analysis (Mortenson, 2020).

To further the data analysis, the unique concepts that are applicable to this study would be the research is textual, the research will have the nature of subjectivity, society is constructed and symbolic and the analysis will be hermeneutic by nature. The concept of hermeneutics is to gain a subjective understanding behind the rationale of why people think and behave the way in which they do (Cronje & Bezuidenhout, 2014).

The data collected will need to be organised and represented accordingly to prevent an unorganised cluster of data (Cronje & Bezuidenhout, 2014). The raw data will need to be reduced and therefor will be summarised accordingly and structured to fit in-line with the thematic analysis.

For an official analysis, the data that will be collected must be fully transcribed into written text before the analysis can occur (Cronje & Bezuidenhout, 2014). Once the data has been collected and transcribed, the coding unit or 'concept' can then be identified from the transcriptions. The coding units helps better optimise the organisation of the data collection

(Cronje & Bezuidenhout, 2014). The coding unit can be a word, phrase, sentence, paragraph and or an entire document. For this research the relevant coding units would either be a phrase, sentence and paragraph. Due to the inductive nature of this research study, the grouping of the coding units can only be identified after the data collection. The coding, once attained, will be analysed in order to draw a hierarchical conceptual framework to further assist in the data organisation (Cronje & Bezuidenhout, 2014). Once the coding and conceptual framework are complete, the data interpretation can occur, which includes explaining the relationships discovered, the extraneous information to be taken into account and to take all relevant factors into account to prevent false interpretations (Cronje & Bezuidenhout, 2014). After all of the above has been conducted, the reporting of the methods and findings needs to occur.

Trustworthiness

The validity and reliability for a qualitative study is hard and near impossible due to the nature of subjectivity (Koonin, 2014). Therefore for this qualitative study trustworthiness will be the 'reliability' explanation. Validity and reliability are checked most often in quantitative research as different researchers could conduct the same or similar studies and conclude with the same or similar numeric results, therefore granting validity and reliability (Koonin, 2014). For this qualitative study, credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability are the terms used to measure the trustworthiness of the study.

The credibility of a research study refers to the accuracy in which the researcher is able to interpret the data provided by participants, the best way to heighten this type of credibility is for the researcher to spend time with the participants prior to the interviews to better understand the mannerisms and communication patterns with the participants (Koonin, 2014). The credibility of the study can also be affected by the research instrument, Koonin (2014) states that using multiple research methods optimises the credibility of a study.

The transferability concept refers to the findings ability to be applied to a similar situation and delivering similar results beyond the individual research (Koonin, 2014). For the sake of this research proposal, the transferability is unknown as it would be the first research paper within this specific field.

The research's dependability is the quality of the research process conducted prior to the data collection as well as the quality of the analysis. The overall integration of the data collection method, data analysis and the theories (Koonin, 2014).

The confirmability relates to the proficiency of the data collection in comparison to how the researcher can support their findings and interpretations (Koonin, 2014). This would entail that the research process has been explained in full so future studies can refer to that specific research process and scrutinise where necessary (Koonin, 2014).

Contributions and limitations

Anticipated contribution

The anticipated contribution for this research is to contribute to the global body of knowledge. This contribution extends from that reasoning, should this study be successful, future studies can be conducted on the other brands within South Africa to help assist in providing the South African business sector with vision into the market affiliate strategies potential benefits and shortcomings. In South Africa, market affiliation strategies are used blindly by companies, considering that there is no published research conducted within the market affiliation sector of South Africa. Hopefully, this research will provide as a document to encourage future studies within the South African context. Therefor the overall anticipated contribution is related to academia and brands and businesses. The current contribution would be assisting in providing brands with the thought processes and rationale of market affiliation from their consumers.

Ethical considerations

The ethical issues regarding research are that the researcher requires informed consent from their participants, collecting the data from the participants, dealing with sensitive information, providing incentives, avoiding harm, confidentiality versus anonymity and avoiding deception (Louw, 2014).

Informed consent implies that researchers need their participants willing and written consent in order to conduct any form of research. The participants must be made fully aware of exactly what the study entails and what is needed from the participants (Louw, 2014). This research study will not include any participants under the age of eighteen therefor no guardian consent will be needed.

When collecting data from participants, the researcher must be prioritising the participants physical and psychological comfort. In order to accomplish this the researcher must inform the participants on how their personal data will be protected, avoid asking embarrassing

questions that the participant will not want to answer out loud, avoid lengthy interviews and avoid wasting the participants time due to lack of organisation and carefully consider the physical and social context in which the data is gathered (Louw, 2014).

Dealing with sensitive information, the sensitive information disclosed during research may not be disclosed to anyone else. Louw (2014) provided ethical hypothetical examples; if the research is being conducted on a company and an employee expresses negative attitudes, when the report is published, the manager seeks to find out which employee was negative, ethically the researcher cannot disclose that information. The other example from Louw (2014) was that when conducting research on a married couple you find out that the wife has been having affairs and the husband is unaware, the researcher must not disclose any of the sensitive information of the wife to the husband. Regardless of the researcher's ethical beliefs, the confidentiality between researcher and participant must be maintained, no matter what (Louw, 2014).

Providing incentives is generally perceived to be unethical as incentives could distort the research in various ways (Louw, 2014). The research results can be distorted since, the incentives may attract a certain group of people (therefor limiting the researcher's samples) and incentives may also affect how participants interact with the study (Louw, 2014). Louw (2014) claims that whilst incentives may be used, they should then be a token of appreciation that can be universally liked, for example, if the incentive to participate in the study was a pack of organic smoking filters, realistically, only smokers are going to agree to participate in the study which could skew the researcher's data.

Researchers must conduct their research in a manner that avoids harm. However, within the social sciences context, causing harm is a complex concept and can be done without intention (Louw, 2014). Avoiding harm can be attempted by reducing the cause for emotional topics which may upset the participants. Another way to try and avoid harm is to not ask embarrassing questions within a group setting, this will not be applicable to my study as my interviews will all be one on one interviews. Creating a situation whereby a participant may be at risk of their job or place of employment. The last method to reduce harm is again not applicable to my study, however, when conducting research within a focus group, questions must be limited to prevent participants from feeling like their contributions are invalid in comparison to the other participants (Louw, 2014).

Confidentiality versus anonymity. Louw (2014) claims that it is important to the participants that their personal identity is protected. The rationale behind the participants data protection is to prevent their contact details to be exploited for marketing reasons, some participants

want their identity protected out of principle and the research study may include information that may cause the participant external harm (Louw, 2014). Confidentiality is when the participants details are only known to the researcher whereas anonymity is when the researcher is entirely unaware of the participants personal information. For this research proposal, all participants personal information will be confidential, the guarantee for this confidentiality will be signed off by the ethics committee within the confidentiality agreement. Anonymity is not possible within this research study as the researcher will be aware of the participants personal information. All data collected will be solely modified to remove all associations with the personal identity of the participants.

Deception in research can take on different forms. For example, Louw (2014) notes that the most common forms of participant deception are: falsely providing the participants with the aims and objectives of the study and providing the participants of the general purpose of the study without specifically informing the participants of what you are looking for. Deception must be avoided as much as possible within research (Louw, 2014). Louw (2014) did make mention that sometimes deception is necessary in order to receive credible results, however, the instances where deception is required is very few and when deception is used the researcher must inform the participants of the study how and why they were deceived, giving the participants a full debrief of the rationale and need for the use of deception.

The researcher as an ethical consideration. For researchers to act and behave ethically, the researcher must prevent themselves from falsifying information, distorting results, allowing bias to influence the result interpretation, misusing information and using inappropriate research methods (Louw, 2014).

Limitations

The limitations of a research study, refers to any form of constraints warranting the completion or practices of the study that is out of the researcher's control (Enslin, 2014).

The limitations for this proposed research study will be:

Accessibility, the market affiliates generally have large social media followings, chances of them replying to an honours student regarding a research study is slim.

Time, the data collection period for this research study is limited to approximately three weeks. The time is also limited due to the times available for the participants to be

interviewed, interviews are happening when the participants are most comfortable which may affect the interview schedule, seeing as there will be between five to ten interviews to be conducted.

Resources, considering the nature of online video conferences, participants are needed to have a Wi-Fi connection and a smart device or computer with a web camera to participate. The researcher is also limited within the resources of travelling, hence why the interviews are scheduled to be online interviews. The study is limited to five to ten participants as the researcher would not be able to afford research assistance to assist with the data collection process.

External phenomenon, or '*shift in conditions*' although rare, there is a chance that a story revolving around market affiliation goes viral during the data collection process which may alter the nature of the participants answers.

Due to the subjective nature of this research study, generalisations from this study cannot be applied to any brand and acquire the same or similar result. The results from this study will be subjective and related to the brand USN, applying the methodology of this proposed study to a different study on Travelstart for example would likely yield differing results. The results are dependent on the answers of consumers of USN products, however, similar brands to USN such as Coach Parry, eVitamins, The Health Nut, Pure Nutracare, Natural Wise, Master Health Products and Faithful to Nature would most likely yield similar results if the proposed methodology were to be followed.

Data Collection and results: Findings and interpretation of findings

This research sought to use Keller's brand equity model and the organisational reputational platform model to test alongside the brand implications from the consumers perspective of market affiliate related strategies. This research has followed a qualitative approach, seeking to understand the consumers perceptions of affiliate programs deployed by USN. The population and sampling will be discussed firstly. Secondly, the data collection methods and will be discussed, this will cover the recruitment processes and descriptions of the interview environments. Thirdly, the data analysis section shall be discussed, this discussion will include the presentation of the data summary and the constructs used within the coding processes used by the researcher. Noteworthy insights and themes used in the coding process will be identified and discussed. Lastly, the research problems are discussed in relation to how far the research problem was able to be addressed.

The research gap identified showcased the need for exploratory work within the fields of market affiliation in South Africa. The research focused on Ultimate Sports Nutrition (USN) as the brand example as USN has made use of market affiliation strategies in the past in South Africa. Currently there is still no direct research on market affiliation as a concept, let alone, South African market affiliation, this research paper seeks to contribute a framework for academic market affiliation understanding. This specific paper encompasses the data collection and analysis, which will include, interpretations of findings, presentation of the findings and placing the findings within context of the theories. The researcher has used the theories and altered them to represent the effects of the market affiliate strategy within the context of USN.

Population and Sampling

The population and sampling for this research focussed on consumers who have purchased from an affiliate of USN. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that the participants were previously having interactions with affiliates designated by the brand USN. To find access to the population to sample, the researcher used a blend of personal networks and digital recruitment. For the researcher's personal networks, the researcher privately contacted members within their personal network that was known to frequent the gym and use gym supplements. When recruiting digitally, the researcher posted a story on the social media platform 'Instagram'. Posting a story on Instagram merely showcases/advertises the researcher is looking for participants who fit the 'purchased from an affiliate of USN' criteria, once that is posted, users who view this story can choose whether to reply or not. The reasoning behind using Instagram and WhatsApp is because the researcher has been affiliated with consumers of performance enhancing exercise products in the past and these platforms provided the most accessible opportunities for the target audience to interact with the researcher's online advertisements for interview participants.

The target population was all South African consumers above the age of 18 who have previously made a purchase with an affiliate from USN in South Africa. The accessible population were all users with a smart device and internet connection as well as local students that the researcher was able to recruit. The unit of analysis for this research was the USN consumers. The characteristics of respondents were that each participant had a healthy and active lifestyle.

The sampling method chosen was non-probability purposive sampling. The reasoning for purposive sampling was that the participants needed to have met the criteria of having purchased and interacted with a market affiliate from USN. Etikan, Musa and Alkassim noted in 2016 that, purposive sampling can be useful to the researcher if there is limited resources, time and workforce. The data collection period allocated had a time restraint of little over a month to recruit, interview and analyse the data, with the restrained resources, purposive sampling was the clear choice.

Data Collection

The research design for this research was qualitative in nature and utilised semi-structured interviews as the form of data collection. The semi-structured interview guide was aimed at gaining insight into the constructs of the models created in Keller's (1999) brand equity model and the organisational reputational platform model (Feldman, Bahamonde & Velasquez Bellido, 2014), therefore, the questions in the interview guides were based off of those models identified. The models were altered to test the raw data against. Ethical clearance was obtained, all participants signed and dated participation forms. All ethical procedures were followed by the researcher when having obtained the data and all participants have ethical confidentiality and not anonymity.

Recruitment

When recruiting respondents for the research, the researcher used social media and personal networks. The researcher was previously affiliated with a gym and maintained acquaintances who had happened to match the sampling criteria. Upon receiving ethical clearance, the researcher interacted with various USN consumers through social media platforms (Instagram and WhatsApp story posts) by posting a publicly accessible advertisement seeking participants that met the criteria of having previously purchased from a market affiliate. Initially, the expected number of interviews that would have occurred was around eight to ten participants, however, unfortunately three participants became unable to participate during the data collection period, nevertheless, eight interviews were conducted, and data saturation appeared. Participants of the research were granted full confidentiality and were given research consent forms as well as audio and visual recording consent forms which the participants signed, dated and returned to the researcher.

Interview process

The interview processes occurred in various situations. One interview the researcher was able to conduct at a local coffee shop, three interviews were hosted in the same in-person setting (a formal family lounge with comfortable chairs) and the last four interviews were conducted online through WhatsApp video call. No participants incurred any costs to attend the interviews. The interviews lasted roughly ten minutes with each participant, each interview was recorded and transcribed to be coded. The interviews were conducted with a semi-structured interview guide as the research design was qualitative and the researcher believes that a discussion on the social perspectives of the participants are needed to draw valuable insights. The researcher has been in frequent contact with the participants for a period of longer than six months minimum, therefore, a casual, yet formal environment was maintained throughout each interview and the understanding and transcriptions of the interview answers made it easier for the researcher to detect emotive themes within the answers provided. Identifying emotive themes is important when discussing the comparison between the constructs and the findings. Different questions were designed to be asked to the two groups interviewed (those consumers related to affiliates and those who were related to product without affiliate influence).

Data Analysis methodology

The research methods used in this research was qualitative content analysis. The choice of coding was line-by-line coding as some of the questions asked by the researcher provided more information than expected and those answers from the participants supplied additional information that related to previous themes identified in the coding process. The line-by-line coding was selected as this method was proven to be beneficial in analysing the data using the constructs within the two theories discussed below. The themes that were identified in the coding will be discussed in the research presentation and context findings. The very nature of qualitative research is based within social subjectivity. The participants interviews were transcribed and coded, the codes were distinct as each code was related to the themes and constructs discussed. The interviews were transcribed in full, and the researcher listened to each interview recording a minimum of five times per interview aside from the transcription process. The data was analysed thoroughly by the researcher.

Presentation and interpretation of Findings

To date there are currently zero studies that have been conducted regarding South African market affiliation. Dwivedi, Rana and Alryalat (2017), published a review and overview of affiliate marketing and deduced that no literature reviews regarding the topic of market affiliation can be found. The findings from the study on USN market affiliation contributes to the global body of knowledge and contributes to the existing literature on brand reputation strategies in South Africa. This is currently the only study that exists that examines the consumers perceptions of market affiliate run strategies. The research was based on other qualitative research papers as there are no similar studies to contrast and compare with.

Findings in context with the organisational reputational platform model

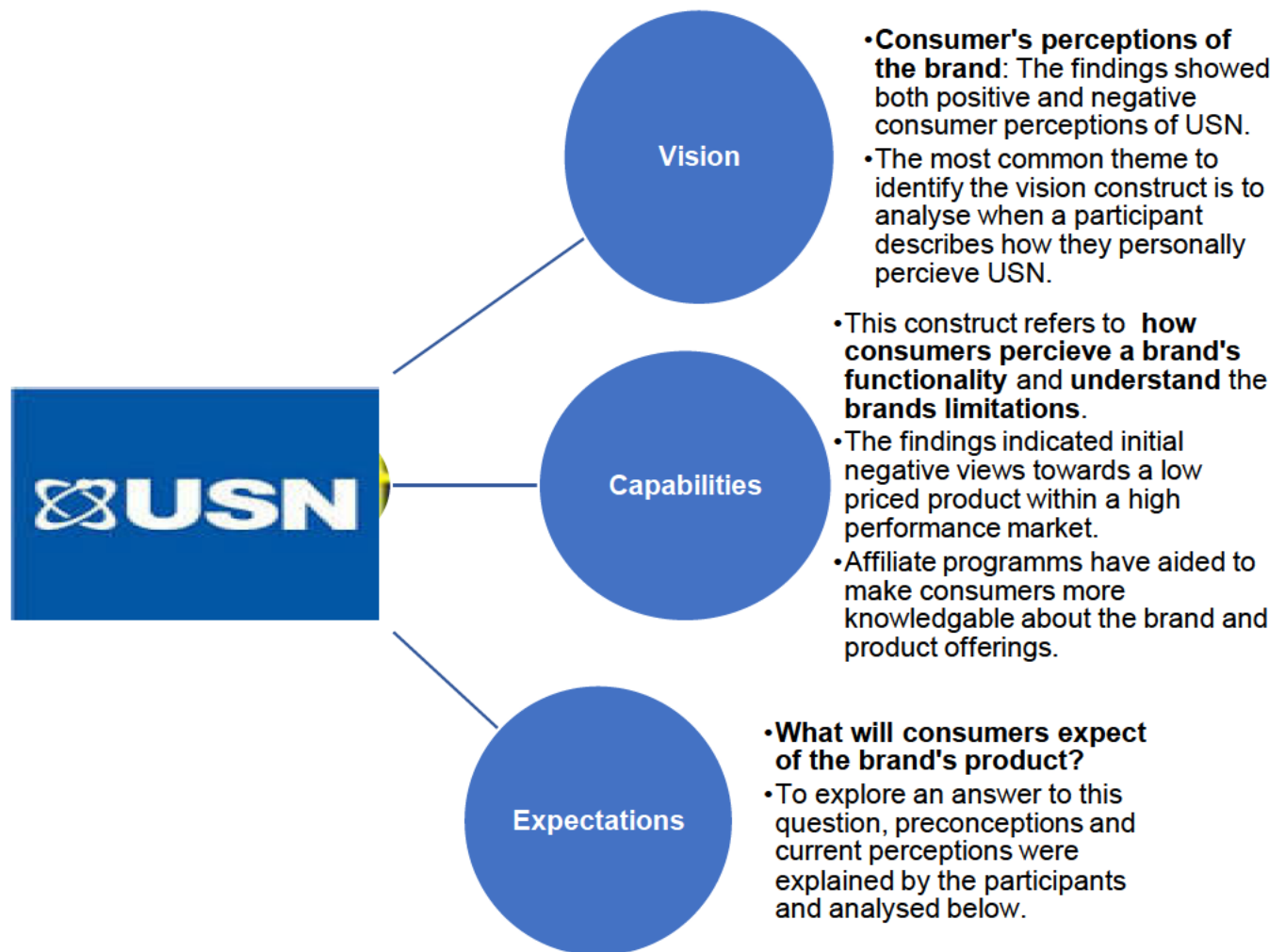


Figure 3: Summary of Data analysis model for the organisational reputational platform model

Findings in contrast to the organisational reputational platform model:

Vision: The vision of USN in terms of the organisational reputational platform model is how USN is wanting to be seen. USN is wanting to be viewed as the 'Ultimate Sports Nutrition' however, all participants noted that they had previously shared a negative perception around USN, after interactions with the USN affiliate, those consumer perceptions grew to become more positive. It is speculated that the prior and possibly still current reputation of USN has more of a negative perception from the unaware consumers. The majority of the participants viewed USN as a 'budget' or 'cheap' brand, even after their interactions with the affiliate.

Expectations: The expectations refer to what the stakeholders want from the organisation. In the context of this study, the stakeholders are consumers of the branded product. The respondents provided mixed feedback with this category as two participants had negative expectations of the brand. One participant noted negative side effects from using the product whilst two participants noted the product and brand was to their satisfaction. The other two respondents were more neutral, however, the overall expectations from the participants were that USN is a cheaper brand. Participants noted that the word of mouth surrounding USN was negative. The affiliate's ability for perception management has proven to be successful from the eyes of the participants. By living through the brand values, affiliates have been able to encourage sceptical consumers to research the brand on their own accord and not rely on negative word of mouth they received in the past. All participants have however noted that they have come to expect cheaper prices from USN when compared to other products within the same market. There remained one outlier in the data, however, it appeared to be an example of a negative interaction. Seven out of eight interviews provided relatively similar answers. The participants who have had direct affiliate interactions resonate more with the brands public values and support the brand by purchasing product, whereas non-affiliate related consumers were less aware of the brand and purchased the brands product more for popularity.

Capabilities: The capabilities of the brand USN encompasses providing nutritional sports enhancing supplements to athletes with any goal (USN, 2022). However, capabilities as the construct is known as how the brand is different and what the brand is capable of. According to the study conducted, USN is perceived as capable of supplying affordable product with good rates of accessibility. However, USN is not perceived differently enough when compared to their competitors. The affiliates used by USN were influential, however, the affiliates were unable to influence the brand differential, meaning the affiliates the

participants interacted with were more aligned to USN but not vocal enough about how USN differs from their competitors.

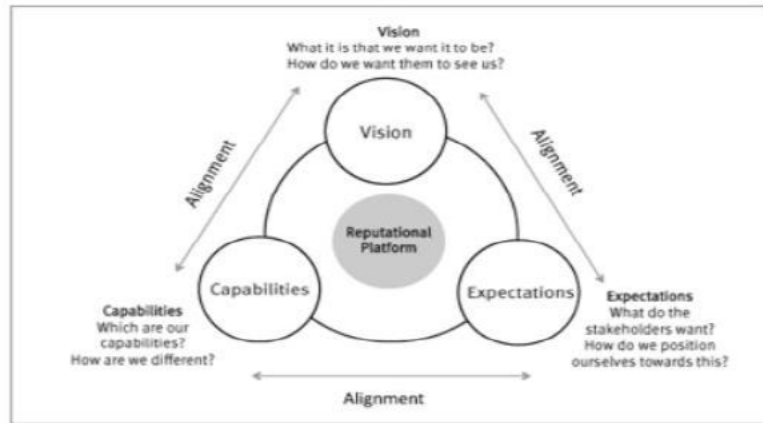


Figure 4: Organisational reputational platform model (Feldman, Bahamonde & Velasquez Bellido, 2014).

Findings in context with the brand equity model

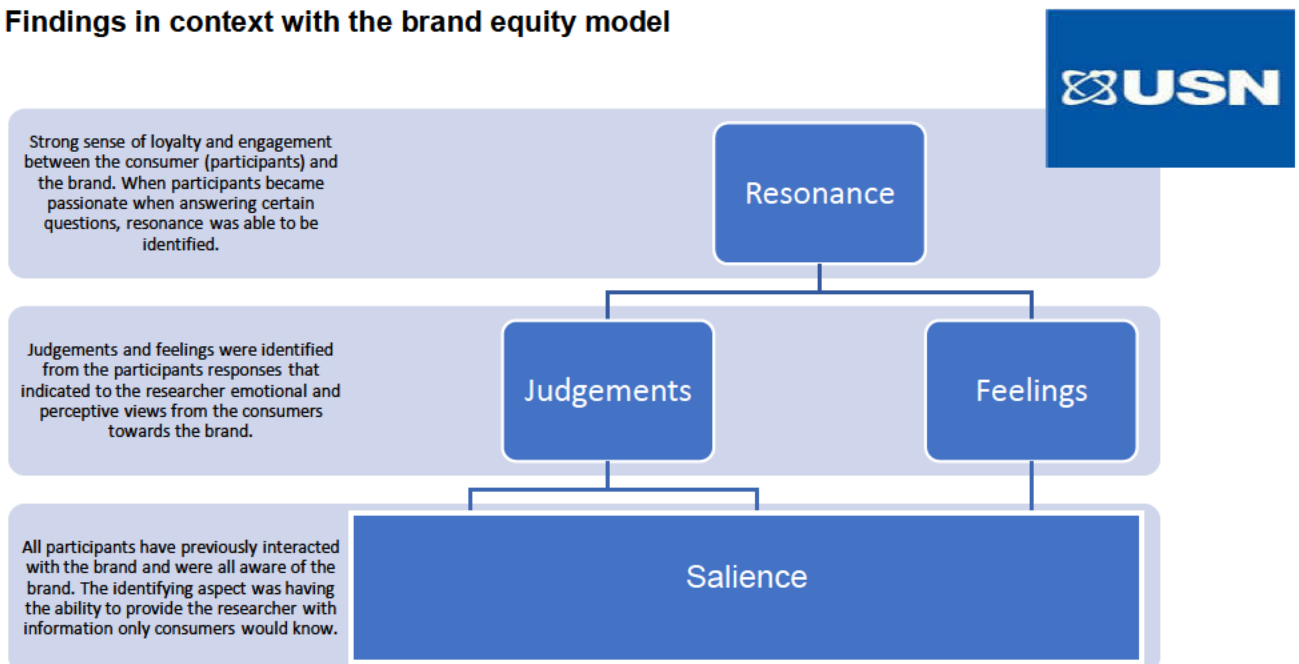


Figure 5: Summary of Data analysis for the altered Keller's brand equity model.

The research proposal identified the altering of Keller's brand equity model seeing as the performance and imagery blocks were discussed in the previous model. Due to the purposive sampling of consumers of the product, the blocks excluded from Keller's model was done so to assist in the data analysis and theoretical comparison of the data. The performance and imagery blocks are also interchangeable with the organisational

reputational platform model constructs hence why the performance and imagery is not displayed or discussed within this model.

Salience: This concept refers to who the brand USN is. All participants interviewed knew USN and at some point had previously identified themselves with the brand. This concept is important to organisations as salience refers to how consumers understand the brand and are aware of the brand. The insights from the interviews showcased 'low budget' being the most common theme as a descriptor of the brands reputation. Participants with affiliate interactions showcased the same level of awareness when compared to non-affiliated consumers. This may be an indication of the brand strength USN already maintains considering all participants noted to being previously aware of the brand before making an initial product purchase.

Resonance: Resonance from Keller's (1999) brand equity model, encompasses the concepts of attaining status with a consumer whereby the consumer has psychological bonds with your organisation. This entails active engagement with the consumers and having strong senses of loyalty. The findings from the study indicated the minority of the participants indicated true brand resonance for USN through having interacted with market affiliates in SA. One crucial insight was an affiliate becoming exhaustive of product placing and pushing that the participants became open to the idea of changing brands and this lack of alignment could potentially be causing damage to the brands equity. However, the affiliate programs proved to be successful in altering positive perceptual awareness amongst consumers by being a realistic embodiment of the brand. USN affiliate strategies appear to resonate with the target population in a positive lens.

Judgements and Feelings: Judgements and feelings as a construct (along with the other constructs discussed above) was used as key words in the coding process with the data analysis. The majority of the participants showcased positive perceptions towards USN, however, there were negative views and perceptions explained. The negative views related to having interacted with a market affiliate, was amongst the minority of the participants, however, the negative views described may indicate a need to alter the way in which market affiliation strategies are deployed by brands in future. Identifying the participants judgements and feelings regarding USN's use of market affiliate strategies showcased insight into how the consumers personally feel about the brand regarding the quality of the product, the popularity of the brand, and the credibility of the brand and product.



Figure 6: Brand equity model (Keller, 1999).

Noteworthy Themes and Concepts identified from the research and literature:

Market affiliation

Market affiliation as a concept which is similar to influencer marketing, however, market affiliation is more complex than influencer marketing and influencer marketing is a subset of market affiliation. Market affiliation is a concept whereby a brand or product uses an external entity (another organisation or an individual with power over their community) to promote and push product sales (Shukla, Vyas & Shastri, 2017). Market affiliation is fully tracked, brands can see exactly how many products the affiliate has sold through codes given to the affiliate or by viewing the number of stakeholders engaged with the brand because of their affiliate (this can be viewed by the 'mouse clicks' from an affiliates website or social media page).

As a research theme, the understanding of the effects of using market affiliated related strategies within a South African context is non-existent in academic literature. The researcher believes that more knowledge and literature is needed within this sector, and this study can provide the information to create a framework in the future in which brands can use market affiliate strategies effectively and brands themselves can better understand ways in which to deploy market affiliate related strategies. From the insights provided from the study, the market affiliate had proven to be highly influential for a period of time no shorter than a year towards the participants.

Network marketing

Network marketing is a term for pyramid selling. Network marketing is similar to market affiliation, however, with network marketing, the key difference is that network marketers are not as representative of the main brand as affiliates are. Network marketing forms part of the market affiliation discipline, however, network marketing is reliant on one user gathering five users, and each of those five users recruited they each have to recruit another five each. Network marketing uses the networks of individuals to recruit likeminded individuals (Napoletano & Curry, 2022).

One participant identified perceptions of the USN market affiliate program being a network marketing scheme, indicating that potentially the affiliate may have misrepresented his messaging towards the consumer, negatively impacting a consumer's overall perception of the main brand USN. This insight, although only one, is thought to be important because it opens the discussion of the importance in how the affiliate is representing USN and impacting the brands reputation.

Influencer marketing

This concept is defined as a social media user who is 'influential' and has power over their personal networks. This concept is similar to network marketing; however, influencer marketers are restricted to social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Blogs and Snapchat (Vodák, Novysedlák, Čakanová & Pekár, 2019). Influencer marketing, when properly implemented, is an effective method for two-way communication from brands to publics. To be an influencer, one must possess the ability to alter the perceptions of their networks and hold power over them.

The findings from the study showed that the majority of the participants resonated affiliate marketing as influencer marketing. The affiliates that interacted with the participants interviewed showcased influential status over them as consumers. This appeared to have a positive impact on USN's customer purchasing behaviour, working under the assumption that had the participants did not interact with the market affiliate, there is a high possibility the participants may have never tried USN's product in the first place. After interviewing both affiliated and non-affiliated consumers, it was evident that the affiliate programs were more successful in promoting heightened awareness and resonance amongst South African consumers.

Brand reputation

Brand reputation is the overall perception of a brand by internal and external groups. Brand reputation can determine whether a brand or business is credible, liked by the public, disliked by the public, how stakeholders view the organisation and how competitors view the organisation. Brands with good reputations earn larger amounts than brands with bad reputations (Hollenbeck, 2017). For the purpose of this study, brand reputation is used to justify the validity for the need for research to promote healthy brands in South Africa.

The importance of brand reputation as a theme is due to the research being based on understanding the thoughts behind consumers perceptions on the brand after having used an affiliate program. Brand reputation as a concept relates to both the theories used in this research as the brand reputation inadvertently effects all constructs discussed throughout the research. Understanding the perceptions of the consumers can help brands in South Africa have a framework and vision for how to successfully be reputationally aligned when strategizing the deployment and methods of market affiliated strategies. As mentioned above in the introduction and the presentation of findings, since there is no reputational information on this topic, brand reputation was a noteworthy theme throughout the research process.

Addressing the research problem

Research problem: The consumers perceptions of market affiliate strategies used by brands, in the case of this research, the brand chosen was USN as USN has had a popular market affiliation strategy in South Africa.

Findings: Overall, the majority of the participants concluded that the affiliate strategy introduced them to the brand and altered their preconceptions about the brand. According to most of the participants, their preconception of USN was painted in a negative light, however, after interacting with the market affiliate representatives, the participants noted that their perception had become more positive towards the brand. Interestingly, the participants did not draw a solid connection to the affiliate and the brand. For example, two participants explained that the affiliate they interacted with had begun losing momentum with their motivation, but the participants did hold any of these negative views against USN as a brand. Although market affiliation can be viewed as extending a brands reputation, the findings indicated that consumers would differentiate the reputation of the brand from the affiliate in terms of how the consumers perceive the two concepts. With this being said,

consumers with positive affiliate interactions, maintained positive perceptions of USN regardless of whether or not they lost interest in the affiliate. This program would be perceived as successful in terms of conveying a brand image to the public as well as maintaining and building positive public perceptions. Participants with no affiliate reactions identified USN as their product choice within their personal lifestyles due to the brands strong awareness. All participants who appeared to remain as consistent or recurring consumers were all participants who had interacted with an affiliate, regardless of positive or negative affiliate interactions with the consumers.

- **The research questions that were explored:** How many brands in South Africa use market affiliates?
- What are the perceptions of South African consumers in relation to market affiliation?
- What are the consumers overall impression on the capabilities of what the brand is able to do?
- What are the implications on a brands reputation from a consumer perspective in South Africa?

Findings: The participants were aware of competitors of other market affiliation strategies. However, secondary research has shown over forty different brands in South Africa use market affiliate programs, without understanding the social implications of deploying these affiliation strategies. This research has at least begun the process of information contribution within this field of research. Although the research could be more extensive, this was due to the limited resources available. Suggestions for future studies would be to include an added data collection method such as focus groups as this can help assist with larger target participant pools. The largest limitation to this study was time, resources and accessing a satisfactory amount of the desired target audience to participate in the interviews, however, after eight interviews, data saturation became apparent.

The majority of the participants indicated positive perceptions regarding the market affiliate in which they interacted with. The brands reputational implications from the consumers perspective was shown to be benefitted more than discredited towards USN. All participants were aware of negative perceptions with USN; however, the affiliate strategies brought more knowledge and awareness to the participants in which after receiving such knowledge, all but one of respondents noted a sizeable change in their perception towards USN (inclining more towards positive perceptions), only one outlier appeared to become present after analysing the data.

The market affiliate strategies do not seem to be impactful on improving consumers perceptions toward the capabilities of the brand. The participants involved in this study all noted that they had distinctly different perceptions of the affiliate themselves and the brand USN with small to little overlap in the participants understanding of their reputation. The participants made it appear to the researcher that the affiliate did not educate them on the capabilities of the brand or influence any brand capabilities towards them. This section warrants further research as understanding this concept could become crucial to understanding business reputations within the social context, this information could assist in restructuring affiliate programs to maximise the effectiveness of these strategies with a brands reputation and equity.

The fourth question has been discussed throughout the presentation of findings section above and has provided information relevant in a commercial and academic context for USN as a brand. Although, consumers perceptions were more strongly affected by having an affiliate interaction. Six out of the eight participants were frequent consumers of the product (four out of five from affiliated consumers and two out of three non-affiliated consumers). In total, out of the six frequent consumers, the most loyal and knowledgeable group of participants to USN are the affiliate related consumers. Therefor indicating that deploying the affiliate strategies the way in which USN deployed theirs in South Africa, showcases a positive consumer perception towards the brand.

Comparing USN affiliated consumer perceptions with non-affiliated USN consumers:

From the interview process, five affiliate related participants were interviewed, and three participants were not affiliated with an affiliate program but were however frequent consumers of the brands products.

Findings: Consumers with affiliate interactions were shown to be positive for the parent brand USN. Consumers that interacted with affiliate programs appeared to know far more information pertaining to the brand and the values the brand brings forward. Out of the five affiliated related participant's, there was but one outlier that had a negative brand interaction. Four out of the eight responses showcased the most knowledgeable consumers in terms of the brand image and values portrayed by USN. Three of the non-affiliated consumers were unaware of the brand values USN tries to portray. However, it is important to note, that one non-affiliated consumer was an avid fan of the brand and was able to indirectly supply the researcher with the brands values.

Participants who had positive affiliate related interactions assisted USN in better market placement and market share. Considering three out of the first five and two out of the last three participants had initially had close friends or family members suggest USN as product to them. In total, only three out of eight participants chose USN purely based on top-of-mind-awareness or 'popularity'. Whereas the remaining five participants had chosen to try USN products, despite, having heard poor brand imaging as discussed above. It is important to note that the three participants have not noted having heard any negative press regarding USN prior to their first purchase.

Research objectives

Objective 1: To provide vision into the South African market for brands that operate within this region.

Objective 2: To encourage further research within the South African market affiliation sector.

Objective 3: To contribute to the global academic body of knowledge.

The most notable insight from the participants interviewed showed that 80% noted a positive influence on the organisation's reputation itself from their perspective after interacting with affiliate programs. From the organisation's reputation, the alignment of the strategy from USN in South Africa with the three pillars of an organisation's reputation: Capabilities, Vision and Expectations was executed well from a consumer perspective. The alignment of the brand USN and the affiliates played an important role in achieving this level of influence. The last two objectives showcase the evidence needed for further research within this topic area. For objectives two and three, the findings have been discussed in relation to the brand equity and organisational reputational platform models discussed above. Should this study be conducted at a later stage with a larger scale of data collection, there would be more information to assess various outcomes and different levels of emotion towards USN. Due to the qualitative nature of this study, the results could differ based on different brands selected, however, the findings indicated that the strategies deployed by USN were successful on improving their brand reputation and equity. Their strategy was so successful that consumers who would initially never have purchased the products to begin with, had since become loyal and frequent consumers, clearly indicating positive perception management occurring as a result of the affiliate strategies.

The first objective has been achieved in the context of providing information to USN as a brand. The information provided showcases a personal and social view into the minds of

the brands consumers. This allows USN to re-assess their current strategies and implement any fixes where necessary. Due to the qualitative and social nature of this study, the results may vary depending on the brand studied so this paper merely provides USN with a vision into the theoretical and practical implications of deploying market affiliate strategies in South Africa. Furthermore, this study has also discussed and identified areas of improvement from the data gathered to assist in the creation of an academic debate on the influence of affiliate strategies.

The second objective can be tested from the citations used from this research when conducting future brand research.

The last objective can only be tested based on the publication and reliability of this paper.

Conclusion

This research proposal is qualitative and works off of the interpretivist paradigm. There is a gap in the body of knowledge in which the researcher has explained. There is no current information on South Africans perceptions of market affiliates. Market affiliation shows great potential in assisting to build brands and raise profits, however, none of this can be confirmed within the South African context academically and therefor warrants a need for this topic to be further researched. Market affiliation encompasses various disciplines however for the purpose of this study, the focus will be on market affiliation within a South African context. Opportunities for new studies based on the success of the proposed study have been discussed and justified within the literature review.

The concept of market affiliation has been clarified, along with the key concepts and theories regarding this research study. This research proposal seeks to gain ethical clearance and general approval so that this study may be conducted. The study will be qualitative and will focus on understanding the perceptions of the consumers experiences of interacting with an USN market affiliate. The aims and purposes of this study have been clarified to research and understand the social context of South African consumers and hopefully gain necessary insight from the consumers which will be valuable to South African brands. The data collection methods have been explained and justified, along with the proposed research anticipated contributions and limitations.

This paper has explained and discussed the research design alongside the methods to collect and analyse the data. Ethical processes and procedures were adhered to at all times throughout the research process. The raw data was transcribed, analysed, coded and

interpreted. The research methodology and design was discussed in relation to the models and theories. The findings have been interpreted alongside the theory and discussions around significant insights has been linked from the literature to the research. The research problem has been addressed in the context of this paper; however, this paper is merely a minor representation of how to address the problem. The limitations of this study are that the findings are only applicable to USN as a brand. Differed results may become prevalent if different brands are analysed, however this study was able to reach sufficient responses to reach data saturation. The research objectives have been attempted and have been addressed in the context discussed.

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Updated concept document

<u>Project details</u>		
Your Name: Justin Rees	Student Number:	
Supervisor: Nicole Mason	Date: 07/04/2022	Version: 1

<u>Proposed Title</u>	
Title	The consumers perceptions of interacting with market affiliates in South Africa.

<u>Research details</u>	
Problem statement	Market affiliation is the concept whereby a brand will permit the 'affiliates' to sell the branded products and earn commission per sale (essentially a sales and marketing type strategy). There is needed areas of study in understanding South African consumer perceptions when consuming through affiliate programs.
Purpose	The purpose of this study is to understand brand reputation in

statement	South Africa from the perspective of the consumers. The consumers' perception of the brand is what is being explored in this study when the consumer has engaged with a form of market affiliation.
Research question/s	How many brands in South Africa use market affiliates? What are the perceptions of South African consumers in relation to market affiliation? What are the consumers overall impression on the capabilities of what the brand is able to do? What are the implications on a brands reputation from a consumer perspective in South Africa?
Hypotheses/ Objectives	Objective 1: To provide vision into the South African market for brands that operate within this region. Objective 2: To encourage further research within the South African market affiliation sector. Objective 3: To contribute to the global academic body of knowledge.
Research rationale	The reasoning behind this research is to provide insight into how separate the branding is from the affiliate marketers and the parent brand is through the lens of the consumers. Affiliate marketing has had a poor reputation among the past few years from a slight upsurge of improper affiliates, which damages the brand the affiliates partnered with. Well-run market affiliate

	companies can help grow a business globally through the use of international affiliates. There is currently a gap in the research for a customer centric approach on improper market affiliation. This insight will hopefully aid in the assistance of preventing businesses from having to utilize affiliate strategies blindly. Understanding this information from the consumer is important as consumers are the main drivers of a company's bottom line.
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<u>Literature overview</u>	
Key theories	Organisation reputational platform This theory provides insight on the importance of the alignment of a brands identity and practices in correlation with the brands overall reputation. The theory explains that the brand reputation is built from the alignment of the brand's vision, expectations and capabilities. This theory assists the research as the theory provides a framework on brand reputation and the importance of a brands overall alignment. Improper market affiliation skews the brands alignment (Feldman, Bahamonde & Velasquez Bellido, 2014). Keller's brand equity model Keller's brand equity model essentially asks four questions, who are you? What are you? What about you? What about you and me? These four questions contain six building blocks which constructs the branding pyramid. Keller's model is a

	customer centric approach which is designed to help build the basis of a successful brand. Improper market affiliation may not allow a brand access to the building blocks needed to form Keller's pyramid (Keller, 1999).			
Semin al authors / sources	(Feldman, Bahamonde & Velasquez Bellido, 2014) (Keller, 1999)			
Literatur e review themes	<u>Theme 1</u> Market affiliati on.	<u>Theme 2</u> Consumer perception s and behaviour.	<u>Theme 4</u> Reputation management.	<u>Theme 5</u> Reputatio nal alignment with consumer perception s
Sources	(Vodák, Novysedlák, Čakanová & Pekár, 2019) (Nazarov, 2020) (Shukla, Vyas & Shastri, 2017)			
Key concepts	Market affiliation, Brand reputation, Organisational reputation platform, Stakeholder perceptions & Consumer perceptions			

<u>Provisional Research Approach</u>				
Paradigm	<u>Paradigm</u> Interpretivist	<u>Epistemology</u> Look and discuss different viewpoints from the sample bracket. Epistemology, from an Interpretivist viewpoint, highlights the subjective body of knowledge of learnt experiences.	<u>Ontology</u> The social relationship between the brand and customers. Ontology looks at the study of being.	<u>Axiology</u> Understanding the nature of consumer perception of the brand through affiliation. Interpretivism will have the Axiology as value driven. The researcher will need to analyse all the answers subjectively based off of the researcher's values.

Approach/ design	Qualitative This research will utilise interviews to gauge an in-depth analysis. A line-by-line content analysis approach will be taken as to fully understand the social implications amongst the brand reputation in South Africa.
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<u>Provisional Research Plan</u>	
Population	Target population: Consumers of affiliates (consumers that stem from the networks of the affiliates) in South Africa. Consumers of the brands products. I will need to contact current market affiliate programs and utilise their network to find out who purchases products through the affiliates - to engage with the right audience. Generally, a lot of online shops are a form of market affiliation and consumers of online stores are also characteristic of the research population. Accessible population: South Africans with access to Internet and a smart device as well as people who can physically make the interviews.
Sampling	Purposive sampling To access the sample, I can view the networks of the affiliate/influencer that is promoting the brands product, with permission to do so. The unit of analysis is the consumers. 5 to 10 interviews with insightful questions.

Data collection method(s)	Semi-structured, one-on-one Interviews. People known to the researcher.
Data analysis method(s)	Transcription and analysis of the interviews in comparison to the literature review. The themes detected in the literature review will dictate the order in which the data is analysed. In other words, a thematic analysis shall occur.

<u>Ethical considerations and limitations</u>	
Ethics	No children are allowed to participate in this study. All POPI policies shall be adhered to throughout the entirety of the study. The study will be conducted ethically and will have written consent from all participants claiming that they are willing and honest participants.
Limitations	I am limited to the number of consumers that use market affiliates. Limited access to information - more research is needed. Limited access to samples.

<u>Reference List</u>
<u>References are listed above</u>