

Exploring the Dynamics of Online Influence

An analysis of how online influencers optimise their influence on their audience when bringing awareness to socio-environmental issues.

James Strauss

Research Report

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Lecturer: Franci Cronje

Supervisor: Hendrik Conradie

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

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This is dedicated to all of the online influencers who want to make positive changes in these challenging times. Strive On.

Abstract

The online influencer marketing sphere within South Africa is a fairly new and unexplored phenomenon that has only started gaining traction over the last few years. Because of the pressure on South African online influencers to catch up to their international peers, it has become necessary to explore the dynamics of the online influencer marketing sphere in South Africa. This research study leans on The Social Learning Theory by Albert Bandura (1971) which assisted in the analysis of the ways in which online influencers optimise their influence on their audience when bringing awareness to socio-environmental issues. In alignment with a qualitative research design, this study administered in-depth interviews to a sample of 3 active and prominent online influencers in South Africa. The findings of the research pointed out that an adherence to pop-culture content creation trends and the maintenance of brand loyalty through constant interaction with audience members are vital factors for a positive return on engagement. By establishing a positive brand tone of voice and refraining from negative communication techniques, online influencers will strengthen their position in the minds of their audience members and thus increase their likelihood of optimal engagement, when creating awareness around socio-environmental issues.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Online influencers have become key players in social conversations, especially on social media platforms such as Instagram, which has achieved a 416% increase in average engagement of content posted to the platform in the last two years (Smith, 2017). With this significant increase in engagement, it has become debatable whether online influencers should highlight critical and non-critical social and environmental issues in order to use their influence to not only promote brands, but socio-environmental concerns as well.

However, with over 95 million photos and videos being shared on the platform every day, it can be difficult for users of the social media platform to consume all of the content posted by the online influencers they follow - for that reason, 70% of Instagram posts are not seen and engaged with (Osman, 2018). The majority of Instagram's users demand entertaining and engaging content from the accounts they follow, which places pressure on online influencers to post self-promotional and pop culture related content that has a better chance of attracting users of the platform to engage with them (DeMers, 2018).

The purpose of this research study is to investigate the engagement online influencers receive from their audience when they create content that provides awareness around socio-environmental issues in the current pop culture saturated online media sphere wherein online influencers are encouraged to promote their lifestyles or sought-after brands. The practices online influencers may need to implement to increase engagement on socio-environmental content will also be explored.

This qualitative research study will be carried out in South Africa on a sample of adult online influencers who are a part of the 8-10 Socio-Economic Measures (SEM) groups. Since it is not possible for the researcher to access every element of the population because of time and financial constraints, the research study will follow a non-probability sample method (Du Plooy-Cilliers, 2014). Furthermore, this study will implement convenience sampling which consists of the elements of the population who are accessible and in proximity to the researcher (Du Plooy-Cilliers, 2014).

The methodological design of the research questions for this study will be assembled with an anti-positivist perspective as this paradigm separates the natural world from the social realm which is necessary since analysing online influence in the digital social sphere can be interpreted in various ways (Ipfs.io, 2017). An anti-positivist approach to the research questions will also provide an ideographic understanding of online influencers, social media, pop culture and socio-environmental issues - which are all ideological thus a narrative will be necessary to thread these concepts together (Conner, T. S., Tennen, H., Fleeson, W., & Barrett, L. F. (2009).

1.1 Concept Introduction

An analysis of how online influencers optimise their influence on their audience when bringing awareness to socio-environmental issues.

1.2 Problem Statement

A potential problem online influencers, especially those who aim to bring awareness to socio-environmental issues, face with the current setup of social media apps, such as Instagram, is that high levels of engagement is predominantly provided to posts wherein influencers promote trending brands, their lifestyles or their opinions on pop-culture news - because of the over-saturated nature of these apps (Thomson and Greenwood, 2018). This ultimately means that online influencers who post content that creates awareness around socio-environmental issues are overlooked by social media users as such posts are rarely promoted by social media algorithms.

Furthermore, there is insufficient research that examines the relationship online influencers have with their audience, particularly in a South African context, which leaves a gap in the knowledge related to the research topic. This knowledge gap therefore provides an opportunity to explore and analyse the complex nature of social media engagement and the focus of the research study will be on ways to optimise engagement for both critical and entertainment purposes.

1.3 Purpose Statement

The purpose of this research study is to investigate the engagement online influencers receive from their audience when they create content that provides awareness around socio-environmental issues compared to the engagement they receive when they create content that promotes pop-culture, themselves or sought-after brands. This research study will also explore the best practices to implement in order to increase engagement on socio-environmental content.

1.4 Rationale and Relevance

It is important to note that emphasis should be placed on 'influence', when analysing online influencers - as this is the most important aspect of the phrase. Influence is defined as "the power to make other people agree with your opinions or do what you want" (Collinsdictionary.com, 2018). Furthermore, the influence individuals have is most potent within the realms of the social sphere they partake in. Online influencers, or social media influencers, transcend the physical realm of influence and have the ability to apply their influence in a digital social sphere through social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter and Facebook (Smitha, 2018).

According to Solis (2012), the abilities of online influencers can be narrowed down to three pillars: Relevance, Reach and Resonance. Online influencers create content that is relevant to their personal brands, they have the ability to reach audiences that bring value to their brand and they are able to make their audience resonate with the content that they have created (Brian Solis, 2012).

However, the increasing number of users joining social media platforms, such as Instagram which has over 800 million users, has made it challenging for online influencers to connect with their audience seeing that users have a wider variety of content creators to consume content from. It is therefore vital for online influencers to create entertaining, engaging content that aligns with the current trends of pop-culture if they want to maintain their relevance (Agrawal, 2016).

The Cape Town water shortage crisis is an example of a critical socio-environmental issue within South Africa that needs awareness – especially with the approaching “Day Zero”, the day water will not be available to a large number of residential taps and businesses (Winter, 2018). It has therefore become necessary for online influencers within Cape Town to use their platforms to educate and enlighten their audience about the water shortage crisis – especially since 72% of South Africans use Instagram (Fin24, 2017).

The problem these online influencers face lies in how they can best keep their followers engaged on socio-environmental issues, such as water shortage awareness posts, for long enough to drive change through their influence.

The relevance of this study, and exploring it further, lies in the fact that social media usage in South Africa is increasing at a relatively rapid rate and that there is limited research that examines the relationship South African online influencers have with their audience. The aim of this study is therefore to contribute to the research topic by providing new theory that will be beneficial to the online influencer market.

1.5 Main Research Question

When sharing socio-environmental content, such as content that creates awareness about the water shortage crisis in Cape Town, how should online influencers engage with their audience in order to optimise their influence?

1.5.1 Secondary Research Questions

Answering secondary research questions, which are connected to the main research question, will be advantageous to successfully tackling the research topic as this will assure that insights into the main research question are comprehensive and thorough.

1.5.1 a) Brand Loyalty

Is brand loyalty a factor that online influencers should consider when attempting to shape the discourse, and create social change, around socio-environmental issues?

1.5.1 b) Appropriate Online Influencers

Is it necessary to have specific and appropriate online influencers to bring awareness to certain socio-environmental issues, such as the water shortage crisis in Cape Town?

1.6 Research Objectives

- To identify how online influencers should engage with their audience in order to optimise their influence when sharing socio-environmental content, such as content that creates awareness about the water shortage crisis in Cape Town.
- To determine if brand loyalty is a factor that online influencers should consider when attempting to shape the discourse, and create social change, around socio-environmental issues.
- To establish if it is necessary to have specific and appropriate online influencers to bring awareness to certain socio-environmental issues, such as the water shortage crisis in Cape Town.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The following literature review assesses research that has been done on topics related to the research study. Relevant literature from key authors, seminal texts and appropriate concepts will be discussed in order to gain insight into the research topic. This review will also demonstrate how the research study will contribute to existing knowledge and, most importantly, engage with the information presented by highlighting the relevance between existing knowledge and the research study.

2.1 Theoretical Foundation

2.1.1 Social Learning Theory

A considerable amount of research on media, especially New Media, focuses on examining if exposure to specific content can impact or influence one's beliefs or behaviour. This research study will use theory by a social behaviour specialists who has successfully made the connection between the change in a group's, or an individual's, behaviour that is brought on by an influential entity.

Albert Bandura (1971), a contemporary psychologist who specialises in social science stated that new patterns of behaviour are obtained in situations of direct observation or interaction with the behaviour of other people (Bandura, 1971). Furthermore, Bandura wrote that "on the basis of informative feedback, [society] develop[s] thoughts or hypotheses about the types of behaviour most likely to succeed" (Bandura, 1971). Bandura coined the aforementioned sequence of behaviour the "Social Learning Theory" which, at its core, hypothesizes that human beings learn from each other through observation and imitation.

Bandura's social learning theory correlates with the current nature of social media and online influencers, with social media users constantly looking for new trends to partake in and online influencers being the tastemakers and trendsetters who lead by example.

The most significant aspect of Bandura's theory may well be the fact that he concluded that one decides to adopt another person's behaviour or beliefs based on the perceived consequences – whether or not you will be rewarded or punished for adopting the behaviour in question (Nekatibebé, 2012). This aspect to Bandura's social learning theory will help in the progression of the study when the likeability of pop culture related content, and the necessity of socio-environmental content, are examined.

2.2 Conceptualisation

Now that the theoretical foundation of the research study has been formed, existing literature that is relevant to the research topic will be analysed in order to identify links between existing literature and the research study. Analysing existing literature will also shed light on potential gaps that this research study can explore.

Considering that there is a limited amount of research covering the research topic, various concepts and seminal texts are conceptualised as they will be investigated and measured once a research plan is set in place.

2.2.1 Online Influencers

It is important to note that emphasis should be placed on 'influence', when analysing online influencers - as this is the most important aspect of the phrase. Influence is defined as "the power to make other people agree with your opinions or do what you want" (Collinsdictionary.com, 2018). Furthermore, the influence individuals have is most potent within the realms of the social sphere they partake in. Online influencers, or social media influencers, transcend the physical realm of influence and have the ability to apply their influence in a digital social sphere through social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter and Facebook (Smitha, 2018).

Online influencers are social media users who have built a reputation for themselves because of the knowledge and expertise they have on specific topics. These social media users often post content regularly about the topics they have knowledge of - up

to several times a day on the social media platforms that they prefer. As a result, they generate a considerably large following, or fan base, of social media users interested in the same topics and therefore engage with them (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2018).

When considering an online influencer's following, metrics should not be considered on an isolated basis, as an online influencer with 2,000 followers could have a larger impact than one with 20,000 followers. The reason being that there are many variables that come into play when considering an online influencer's followers; such as whether or not the online influencer operates in niche markets, the amount of engagement they receive from their followers and the extent of the reach the content by the online influencer has (HireInfluence, 2018).

According to Solis (2012), the abilities of online influencers can be narrowed down to three pillars: Relevance, Reach and Resonance. Online influencers create content that is relevant to their personal brands, they have the ability to reach audiences that bring value to their brand and they are able to make their existing audience resonate with the content that they have created (Brian Solis, 2012).

However, the increasing number of users joining social media platforms, such as Instagram which has over 800 million users, has made it challenging for online influencers to connect with their audience seeing that users have a wider variety of content creators to consume content from.

Businesses and brands are attracted to online influencers because of the fact that they are able to sway the purchasing power of their followers which in turn leads to larger profit margins for the brands who hire online influencers (HireInfluence, 2018). While online influencer marketing is a profitable industry, there is little research on the power of online influencers with regards to social, political and environmental issues, therefore this research study will examine the extent to which online influencers are able to impact their followers.

2.2.2 Online Engagement

Online engagement, an integral part of online influencer marketing, is defined as “the interaction between people across a range of social networks” (Creative, 2015). The aforementioned definition of online engagement acts as the foundation for a much more complex system. Each social media platform has a unique way of allowing users to engage with each other based on the features and the functions of the platform (Creative, 2015). Facebook, for example, uses “likes”, “shares” and “comments” as tools for online engagement.

The success of an online influencer relies largely on their ability to have a two-way conversation, as this is the basis of engagement. The most successful online engagement is strong enough to capture the attention of an audience while at the same time maintaining the trust of the audience (Creative, 2015). Online influencers who implement the tools of online engagement correctly do so by taking a humanistic approach in order to ensure that they present themselves as approachable and friendly.

Online engagement is a time-consuming activity that requires the development of patience and the maintenance of trust with an audience on a social media platform. The best online engagement is also efficient in terms of the usage of resources (Creative, 2015). Return on engagement (ROE) is an online engagement tool that measures the brand strength received from online actions and strategies by social media users (Charriez, 2014). A simple way to understand the crux of ROE is analysing whether or not any benefits have been received from the online interactions between, for example, an online influencer and their following. Benefits such as an increasing number of followers, business prospects or a stronger brand presence – to name a few (Charriez, 2014).

Creating online content that is engaging, creative and relevant to a specific target audience has proven to be the best form of optimizing ROE. Online influencers who create content that start conversations on trending topics in the industry they are in, or pop culture news, tend to be the most successful at ROE. Interaction by an audience is often limited, and as a result so is ROE, when online influencers do not have enticing topics to create content around. A rule of thumb in online influencer marketing, to

optimise online engagement, is to “always do more of what’s making an impact and less of what isn’t” (Creative, 2015).

Certain trending topics and niches; such as make-up, fitness and cuisine (Darma, 2018), tend to drive higher levels of engagement on social media platforms and it is therefore important for online influencers to create content that utilizes the online engagement received from these trending topics by creating similar content and conversations on various social media platforms (Charriez, 2014).

Seeing that high levels of online engagement on social media platforms are specific to certain trending topics that largely deal with the entertainment sector (Darma, 2018), this research study aims to investigate the various ways online influencers utilize the online engagement received by these trending topics and how they best divert this attention to social, political and environmental issues without losing the attention of their audience.

2.2.3 eWOM

Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) is an additional theory that will further interpret the mechanism of social media and the success of the online influencer space. eWOM is defined as positive and negative declarations by any prospective, current or ex consumers about a topic, product or brand through the internet, especially social media (Glucksman, 2017). Traditional word of mouth has for decades been a reliable and credible source of marketing, so it is fitting for eWOM to be popular with online influencers who are the leaders of eWOM (Cheung and Thadani, 2010). eWOM aids online influencers in forming their audience’s opinions on current topics and products, however, making it seem like it is in the interest of the audience or consumer to have similar beliefs to those of the influencers is an integral part of eWOM and successful online influencer marketing (Glucksman, 2017).

Just like the characteristics of traditional word of mouth, eWOM:

- Includes interpersonal communication between a select few, which sets it apart from mass communication channels such as traditional advertising.
- Relies heavily on the communicators being non-commercially motivated in order for communication to be received as genuine, unbiased and honest by an audience.
- Uses the internet and social media platforms as a means of spreading information.
- Reaches a large number of people at the same time and therefore has a greater impact (Kremers, 2017).

eWOM can be linked to Albert Bandura's social learning theory when analysing the social behaviours of eWOM. The power in eWOM lies in the fact that people tend to seek advice online from accredited sources or personalities. An example of this is are online influencers who create product reviews for their audience because they understand their audience's need for trusted opinions (Kremers, 2017).

Whether the trust online influencers build with their followers through eWOM is just as effective when it comes to social, environmental and political issues, will be analysed in this research study.

2.2.4 Pop Culture

A potential problem online influencers face with the current setup of social media platforms is that the over-saturated nature of the platforms only allow for optimum engagement on popular culture posts that are related to influencers promoting trending brands, their lifestyle or their opinions on entertainment news (Thomson and Greenwood, 2018). This ultimately means that online influencers who post content that creates awareness about socio-environmental issues are overlooked by social media users as such posts do not fall into the generic criteria of social media.

Popular culture, or pop culture, can be traced back to the mid-19th century where it was used to refer to the culture of the masses – rather than the culture of the elite. The term has evolved over centuries because of technological and cultural advancements, but is still deeply rooted in the ideology of mass culture (Student Brands, 2017). Pop

culture is often seen as the gathering of cultural ideas and products such as art, film, dance, fashion and music consumed by the majority of a population.

Pop culture, is largely influenced by professional entities that provide the general public with information. Sources such as the news media, scientific publications and opinions from “opinion leaders” who are seen as authority figures in the field of discussion. For example, when a news media outlet reports on a specific topic, such as the effects watching violent music videos has on teens, they will often source an established psychologist or sociologist who has a large body of work on the topic (Delaney, n.d.).

The significance of pop culture is its easy accessibility and appealing nature (Crossman, 2017). There is a general agreement on the elements that comprise pop culture. Pop culture includes the most current and contemporary aspects of our lives. These aspects that make up pop culture change very quickly because of the speed of the technological realm where media is consumed instantly. Therefore, the commonly held beliefs and standards that are reflected in pop culture reflects and influences society’s everyday life (Delaney, n.d.).

2.2.5 Personal Branding

Online influencers depend on personal branding, which makes it an important concept that contributes to this research study.

Individuals who do not possess a powerful and visible personal brand in today’s society place themselves at a disadvantage in their personal, professional and business lives. Personal branding is not only recommended, but required, for individuals who would like to grow their businesses, secure better jobs, garner attention from the media or gain an audience in real life or online (Sweetwood, 2018).

Personal branding is an ongoing process by individuals who market themselves – and their careers – as brands by establishing a prescriptive image and/or impression about themselves in the minds of other individuals (Sweetwood, 2018). Each and every human being, and animal, has a personal brand that is unique only to them. However, a personal brand is only successful if it is powerful, intriguing and palpable

(Sweetwood, 2018). Matt Sweetwood, a guest writer at Entrepreneur.com, defines a successful personal brand as one which consists of “an online and in-person authentic display of the engaging aspects of [an individual’s] professional and personal activities and interests” (Sweetwood, 2018).

Sweetwood (2018), also states that there are eight factors that ensure a successful personal brand. Of the eight factors, two are relevant to this research study:

1. Opportunity finds you:

A powerful and intriguing personal brand is more likely to attract potential companies, clients, media outlets and audience members.

2. Online networking power:

A compelling personal brand has a high chance of providing an individual with a large following and engagement rate on social media and other forms of online platforms.

Trust

Trust is the name of the game when it comes to personal branding. It has to be cultivated on a daily basis in order to achieve a successful, unique personal brand. Moreover, consumers trust individuals more than they do companies (Wood, 2018). While corporate branding is more visible, it is seen as less trustworthy. This phenomenon has led to brand messages by individuals being shared 24 times more often than those by companies (Wood, 2018). Authenticity and sincerity are key factors in building trust between consumers and an individual’s personal brand.

Online influencers rely largely on personal branding as it is at the core of their operation, and personal branding can catapult them into a “thought-leader” status within their niche of the online influencer market (Sweetwood, 2018).

2.2.6 Brand Loyalty

Brand loyalty is an important component of brand value and also contributes to the meaning of branding as a valuable resource. Brand loyalty occurs when a consumer

has favourable beliefs and behavioural patterns toward a brand which results in the consumers continuously buying into the same brand (Keller, 1993). Keller (1993) also states that consumer-brand loyalty increases when brand awareness, positive brand image and brand choice increase.

According to Oliver (1999), brand loyalty is “a deeply held commitment to rebuy or repatronize a preferred product/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand or same-brand-set purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behaviour.”

Keller (2008) identifies four variants of brand loyalty that are related to online influencer marketing:

Behavioural loyalty – which occurs when consumers have no special attachment to a brand.

Attitudinal attachment – which occurs when consumers purchase goods or services from a brand and also have a personal attachment to the brand. Attitudinal attachment usually occurs when consumers feel a high level of satisfaction with a particular brand.

Sense of community – this occurs when consumers of a brand feel as if they are part of a specific group associated with the brand and therefore develop a social belonging. This aspect of brand loyalty is especially beneficial to online influencers.

Active engagement – when consumers are actively engaged with the brand and invest time, energy, money and other resources in a brand beyond just buying a product or service means that there is a strong affirmation of brand loyalty (Keller, 2008).

There are several approaches to brand loyalty as a concept and, in order to maintain its relevance to the research study, the focus will be on the emotional ties between a brand and its buyers as this research study deals with online influencers and personal branding (Denoue and Saykiewicz, 2009).

2.2.7 Socio-environmental Issues

In contrast to pop culture, topics that comment on social change - such as political, environmental and social issues - are on the other end of the spectrum. The social environment, or socio-environment, consists of a society's customs, beliefs and behaviours as a reaction to their environment (Grimsley, n.d.). Therefore, a socio-environment can be viewed as a response to the natural environment.

In terms of socio-environmental issues, every society regularly has to deal with various issues within their society – whether it be political, natural environment or health related.

The Cape Town water shortage crisis has become a critical socio-environmental issue within South Africa – especially with the glooming “Day Zero”, the day water will not be available to a large number of residential taps and businesses, expected in 2019 (Ma, 2018). It has therefore become necessary for online influencers within Cape Town to use their platforms to educate and enlighten their audience about the water shortage crisis and sustainability techniques.

2.2.8 Zero Waste/Sustainability

Zero waste (or sustainability), a 21st Century philosophy and design concept, is a holistic approach to the management of resources and waste in societies (Grnn.org, 2018). The ultimate objective of a zero waste movement is to minimise waste while simultaneously maximising recycling, this leading to a reduction in consumption and the reuse of products. Additionally, zero waste aims to ensure that products are repairable for future use, or able to be recycled back into nature. Most importantly, zero waste allows communities to sustain local economies that are efficient, sustainable and self-sufficient.

2.2.9 Instagram

Instagram, owned by Facebook.Inc, is a photo and video sharing online social platform launched in October 2010.

Instagram's noteworthy features include (Sprout Social, 2018):

User Feed: A curated display of videos (up to 1 minute in length) and photos by users of the online platform

Followers and Following: Users are able to follow, and be followed by other users

Live Video: Users are able to share live stream videos to their followers

Direct Messaging: A messaging feature within the platform where users are able to have threaded conversations with other users

Stories: A feature wherein users are able to share 10 second photos and 15 second videos that vanish after 24 hours

IGTV: A feature wherein users are able to share videos that are up to 1 hour in length

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

Seeing that the aim of this qualitative study is to understand online influencer marketing, and further to examine the engagement online influencers receive from their audience, the study adopted an interpretivist stance. An interpretivist stance, which uses methodologies oriented around meaning instead of measurement, is fitting since the main concept of this study is influence – which cannot be scientifically measured (Thanh, N.C. and Thanh, T.T., 2015).

Interpretive researchers often perceive social reality as being ingrained in, and difficult to dissociate from, social settings and therefore interpret reality through a sense-making approach (Given, 2016). An interpretivist stance therefore best provided knowledge into the engagement online influencers receive from their audience when they create socio-environmental content, such as content on the water shortage crisis in Cape Town, in the current pop culture saturated online media sphere. Interpretivist researchers also implement methods that allow them to understand the depth of the relationship human beings have with the environment they are in and the impact they have on the “social fabric they are a part [of]” (Thanh, N.C. and Thanh, T.T., 2015.).

This study assumed a nominalist approach since the exploration into online influencer marketing and engagement is figurative and can be interpreted in multiple ways. A nominalist approach also assisted in the exploration of the practices online influencers have adopted, or may need to adopt, in order to increase engagement on socio-environmental content since the individualistic nature of this study does not make it possible for there to be only one, standard result – which a realist approach would lead to (Thanh, N.C. and Thanh, T.T., 2015).

Phenomenology was an appropriate research approach for this qualitative research study as this approach focuses on the common threads of the lived experiences within a particular group of people (Creswell, 2013). The goal of this approach is to end up with a description of a particular phenomenon and is usually conducted through interviews with individuals who have first-hand knowledge of the phenomenon or

experience (Creswell, 2013). This is fitting as the individuals used in this research study all have unique, lived experiences of the research topic.

3.2 Research Plan

Three online influencers were sampled via Instagram as this social media platform was the most efficient at assisting the researcher with identifying online influencers. In-depth interviews were conducted with the select few online influencers in South Africa. In the Cape Town area.

3.2.1 Online Influencers

Once a list of five perceived online influencers was created, the researcher direct messaged them with the necessary background information regarding the study, and the researcher then request email addresses from the individuals in order to continue communication via email. Online influencers who made their email addresses available on their Instagram profiles were emailed directly, bypassing the direct message stage.

After the researcher received responses from the potential online influencers for the research study, the researcher selected three individuals who appeared suitable for the study. The researcher then scheduled a meeting with the three filtered online influencers in order to conduct in-depth interviews.

The in-depth interviews consisted of a list of well planned, and thought, out questions. All answers to the researcher's questions were recorded and any additional information, such as verbal cues, were written down on a notepad. Recording the interviewees' answers allowed them to elaborate on any questions that the researcher needed more information on without interfering with the interviewing process.

Interview questions included, but were not limited to:

Obtaining background information about each online influencer, finding out why each online influencer felt they are unique within their niche in the online influencer market, how each influencer viewed their personal brand, how they perceived their brand loyalty from their audience, their view on socio-environmental issues on online platforms, how they currently approach socio-environmental issues and how their audience engaged with them when they created content regarding socio-environmental issues.

3.2.2 Population and Sampling

The population group of this research consisted of adults who are part of the 8-10 Socio-Economic Measures (SEM) groups in South Africa, in the Cape Town area. However, since it was not possible for the researcher to access every element of the population because of time and financial constraints, the research study followed a non-probability sample method. A non-probability sampling method was also beneficial to this research study because the core characteristic of non-probability sampling techniques is the fact that the researcher was able to select samples based on subjective judgement (Du Plooy-Cilliers, 2014). This was beneficial as the individuals used in this research study are unique and rare.

Furthermore, this study implemented convenience sampling which consisted of the elements of the population who were accessible and in proximity to the researcher (Du Plooy-Cilliers, 2014). Because of the qualitative nature of this study, a sample size of 3 individuals was used with a confidence level of 90% as the probability that the sample accurately represented the population (SurveyMonkey, 2018).

3.2.3 Data Collection

Face-to-face qualitative interviews was be the main data collection method used for this research, conducted over 14 days. This data collection method was beneficial to

the study as it was a form of synchronous communication, of time and place, which aided in the fact that there were no significant time delays between the interviewer's questions and the interviewees' answers, which allowed for spontaneous answers that were most accurate of the interviewees' thoughts and opinions (Opdenakker, 2006). The set of interview questions were standardised to enhance the accuracy of the study and care was taken to be considerate of the interviewees' time by not making the interview too long (Opdenakker, 2006). Interviews were recorded on an audio recording device.

3.2.4 Interview Questions

In-depth interviews were the chosen qualitative research approach as the technique involved conducting intensive individual interviews with a small number of people. As exploring perspectives and experiences on a particular phenomenon was the aim of this research study, in-depth interviews were appropriate (Boyce and Naele, 2006).

In-depth interviews are a complex method of research collection therefore the interviewer made sure that they collected detailed, rich and valuable data from the interviewees by creating a comfortable relationship with the interviewees. Effective interview techniques - such as avoiding questions that only require 'yes'/'no' answers, not asking leading questions, using appropriate body language and not sharing personal opinions during the interview – were implemented (Boyce and Naele, 2006).

In contrast to questionnaires, which restrict participants' answers as the interviewer cannot observe the interviewees' true feelings, conversational in-depth interviews allowed the interviewer to observe non-verbal cues, long pauses, uncertainty and emotion (Zikmund and Babin, 2013).

3.2.5 Data Analysis

Given that this is a qualitative research study, a narrative ideographic outcome was expected. The data from this study was processed by first transcribing and organising the data collected. Thereafter, the transcripts were systematically analysed through coding the data and comments on similar themes were grouped together in order to interpret them and come to a conclusion (Maree, 2016). The reliability of the research study was greatly enhanced after the researcher appointed an unbiased, skilled individual who looked through the data collected and assisted in deciding on which information was relevant to the study.

Graphical representations were used in the form of tables which assisted in creating a qualitative narrative (Maree, 2016: 205). Microsoft Word was the only program used for data analysis.

4. FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS

Introduction

In the following section, the researcher will analyse and interpret the results of the research by using coding as a means of data analysis. Smith and Davies (2015:110) state that coding does not represent the entirety of the analysis of qualitative data, but that it helps in the organisation of the data so that any concealed messages available in the data will become more transparent to the researcher. Throughout the coding process, some codes may appear frequently which indicates emerging patterns. Parallelism amongst the coding, or the emergence of patterns, leads to the creation of categories in order to better analyse the data. While coding refers to labelling data, it also includes linking that very data to an idea. Coding, at its core, is cyclical and leads to the generation of high-grade meanings, themes and concepts from collected data (Theron, 2015).

The following section therefore focuses on the findings obtained regarding the engagement online influencers receive from their audience when they create content that provides awareness around socio-environmental issues in the current pop culture saturated online media sphere. The findings were obtained from three in-depth interviews conducted in Cape Town, South Africa with online influencers.

The in-depth interviews were transcribed (see Appendices A – C) and then coded to generate categories, and then themes were established from the categories which better highlighted the core beliefs of the participants. Poggenpoel (1998:340) suggests using Huberman and Miles's approach to analysis of data, the researcher will therefore use data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing as a three step process to establish the categories and themes which will be used to analyse the collected data.

The three categories, which were generated from the research questions for data reduction purposes, are:

- 1. An Online Influencer's Raison d'Etre**
- 2. Audience Relationship Dynamics**
- 3. Content Creation**

The three themes which have been established, in order to obtain clearer insights and findings within each category, are:

1. An Online Influencer's Raison d'Etre
 - 1.1 Definition of an online influencer***
 - 1.2 Decision to become an online influencer***
 - 1.3 Personal brand description***
2. Audience Relationship Dynamics
 - 2.1 Engagement with the audience***
 - 2.2 Audience loyalty***
 - 2.3 Reception of off-brand content***
3. Content Creation
 - 3.1 The type of content created***
 - 3.2 The various ways to create content within a niche***
 - 3.3 The relevance of socio-environmental issues on online platforms***

4.1 Category 1: An Online Influencer's Raison d'Etre

Most online influencers have a reason for being, a *raison d'être*, and are not simply in the influencer marketing sphere as a recreational activity. Barker (2017) states that among the reasons people decide to enter influencer marketing, and become online influencers, is because of its radical difference from traditional marketing. Online influencers do not appear "pushy", which is a pitfall of traditional marketing, and therefore are able to organically attract audiences to their content and messaging (Barker, 2017). Barker (2017) further explains that the organic nature of online influencer marketing leads to credibility since online influencers spend a large portion of their time and effort gaining the trust of their followers. This credibility leads to

online influencers benefitting from engaging and long-lasting relationships that they have built with their audience (Barker, 2017).

In order to establish Category 1, an interview sample was derived from questions 1 to 6 (see Appendices A – C) of the interviews with the participants. The findings from the participants' responses assisted the researcher in narrowing the focus of Category 1 on the desire and motivation to become an online influencer. In order to refine the category further for richer insights, the participants' responses were filtered into themes within the category. Findings of value for Category 1 are provided in Table 1.1 below:

Category 1: An Online Influencer's Raison d'Etre	
Themes	Verbatim Quote
<i>Definition of an online influencer</i>	• "Someone that has any kind of influence over their audience, their ability to sway their opinions or influence their buying decisions" – Participant 1 • "You need to have quite a few followers otherwise you're not influencing that many people. And I think it just depends on content, because you can get positive influencers and, very like, non-positive influencers." – Participant 2 • "It's not a term I like very much. It sounds strange, something I need to get used to. But ja, it's nice to be able to influence people not to just buy things but to influence people to actually change." – Participant 3
<i>Decision to become an online influencer</i>	• "I guess because I am very passionate about sustainability and I felt like it was an easy way to, kind of, get my opinions and feelings and passions and beliefs out there... You'll see social influencers are not only popular, but they are used in business and people look to social influencers. So I thought that it would be worthwhile to grow a following to be able to use that for a positive change." – Participant 1

	• “So I started getting more into the content that’s on [my] page and then I changed my name from my personal name... It wasn’t really a decision, it was just what I was passionate about and what I was going for... I just slowly did it. And then it got to a point where I did realise I was getting a lot of follows from people who were interested in what I was posting so it swopped over from, ‘oh, I know these people’ to people who just want to learn more.” – Participant 2 • “It is how I found zero waste. It’s how I was very inspired to change. And especially in South Africa, I started two years ago and zero waste was very new in South Africa. So I thought, people see it can be done in Los Angeles so I thought it would be nice to show people that we can also do it... In South Africa.” – Participant 3
Personal brand description	• “It’s a combination of education around sustainability and the positive side of sustainability. So, like, moving away from the doom and gloom. And rather looking at the positive actions that everybody can take. Um, and also linking it up with creativity. So things like design, things like music.” – Participant 1 • “I was trying to think about what I was promoting and I didn’t like the words “zero waste” because that is thrown around a lot... So that’s where I got ‘minimal waste’ from. So it’s just about actually focusing on minimising your waste.” – Participant 2 • “I give a lot of tips if you are living with your parents and they don’t understand why you are [living a zero waste lifestyle]. So I thought it would be nice to show people who are living at home.” – Participant 3

Table 1.1 An Online Influencer’s Raison d’Etre – findings

4.1.1 Theme: Definition of an online influencer

The general understanding of an online influencer on social media is someone who has assembled a reputation for their expertise and insight on a particular topic through the creation of regular content on their preferred social media platforms. And as a result, generating a large community of engaged, interested and attentive followers (Agrawal, 2016). This definition, however, does not account for the personal views and opinions online influencers have of themselves and their career choice.

All participants defined an online influencer as someone who has the ability to change the behaviours of other people - correlating with the literature which defines influence as “the power to make other people agree with your opinions or do what you want” (Collinsdictionary.com, 2018). Participant 2 elaborated on the various types of online influencers and said, “You can get positive influencers and, very like, non-positive influencers. So ja, I would say, when I think of an influencer, the first thing that comes to my head is a lot of people are following this person and they might be getting sponsored by places to maybe sell, or advertise, their products for them. Which I don’t do. A lot of people I know, who are these eco social media influencers, we don’t actually do that.” This statement by Participant 2 showed that morals and ethics play a large role in the way online influencers operate. In their definitions of an online influencer, Participant 1 and 3 included the ability to influence people’s buying decisions. Participant 2 expanded on that sentiment by saying, “We get gifted stuff, and whether or not we want to speak about stuff is, kind of, up to us. So that happened with Lush. Lush gave us products and we could like – It’s so funny, because we all got it on the same day so you just saw all these Instagram pages – Because obviously I follow all the others, we are all friends, we meet up once a month or so and just like, on one day, we were all posting about our Lush products. So that’s kind of like, what it is to me. When I think influencer, I usually think like, those stereotypical girls who are in bikinis or whatever. And they are, like, getting sponsored -- And they are like, ‘ah, I’m wearing so and so.’ But ja, that’s not what we do.”

These statements by the participants made it clear to the researcher that the online influencer marketing sphere has many complexities in relation to how online influencers identify themselves.

4.1.2 Theme: Decision to become an online influencer

It was vital to understand why the participants decided to become online influencers, with it being a very individualistic career path. Participants 1 and 3 explained that their decision to become online influencers was based on their desires to showcase their beliefs and what they are passionate about. This correlates with the literature which states that online influencers have expertise within particular niches (Brian Solis, 2012). Participant 1 said, “I think, because it’s such a big, um, movement at the moment. Like, you’ll see social influencers are not only popular, but they are used in business and people look to social influencers. So I thought that it would be worthwhile to grow a following to be able to use that for a positive change.” This statement shows that online influencers see online influencer marketing as a tool that they can use to reach millions of people that they would otherwise not be able to reach. Participant 3 further strengthened this discovery by saying, “And then it got to a point where I did realise I was getting a lot of follows from people who were interested in what I was posting so it swopped over from, “oh, I know these people” to people who just want to learn more. So I didn’t know most of the people that were following me. So when that kind of happened I was like, ‘okay, I’m going to roll with this.’”

Participant 2 noted that the online influencer marketing sphere within the zero waste niche was underdeveloped in South Africa, and took that as an opportunity to become an online influencer and help inspire South Africans the way they were inspired. Participant 2 said, “It’s how I found zero waste. It’s how I was very inspired to change. And especially in South Africa, I started two years ago and zero waste was very new in South Africa. So I thought, if people see it can be done in Los Angeles so I thought it would be nice to show people that we can also do it.” While passion and beliefs were driving factors behind the participants’ decisions to become online influencers, it was evident that the growth of social media within South Africa

(Kleintjes, 2017) was seen as an opportunity by these participants to establish themselves as experts in their specific niches.

4.1.3 Theme: Personal brand description

Participants' descriptions of their personal brands further enlightened the researcher on the dynamics of online influencers. Participant 1 described their brand as a creative one and explained that they infused creativity into their content as a way to differentiate themselves from other online influencers in their niche. Participant 1 said, "Rather looking at the positive actions that everybody can take. Um, and also linking it up with creativity. So things like design, things like music... Probably the music aspect does play a part. Even though it's not everything, there is that side of writing sustainable folk music and I suppose I'll go more into that as I grow. I'd like to."

Participant 2, on the other hand, explained that the fact that they were in the midst of obtaining a university degree around the topics their personal brand was based on made them especially unique within their online influencer marketing niche.

Participant 2 said, "I come from a very strong marine background. So I was a volunteer at the Two Ocean's Aquarium since I was 15. And then I went on to study marine biology and stuff. So, for me, the other people are coming from this, "oh, I want to reduce my waste" or they are realising the eco problem but... I think I bring a completely different aspect to it. Because I am at UCT, I have worked a lot in the labs with plastic pollution in South Africa so I come from the university side. Whereas none of the others do. All of the others are in the working field already and that kind of thing."

All participants mentioned the fact that their personal brands were educational made them unique within their specific niches. Participant 1 said, "My personal brand, it's a combination of education around sustainability and the positive side of sustainability. So, like, moving away from the doom and gloom. And rather looking at the positive actions that everybody can take." While Participant 3 said, "I give a lot of tips if you are living with your parents and they don't understand why you are [living a zero waste lifestyle]. So I thought it would be nice to show people who are living at home."

This further correlates with the literature which states that successful influencers build a reputation for themselves through showcasing their knowledge on specific topics (Barker, 2017).

Participant 1 and 2 noted that they aim to dispel any myths within their respective niches through their content. Participant 1 said, “I try to come from a place of knowledge and not greenwashing. So, I’m not saying that everybody greenwashes that’s in the space of sustainability influencers but I do think that there is a tendency to oversimplify things. Like, ‘let’s save the planet,’ but what are we saving the planet from? You know, when we are actually saving ourselves.” Participant 2 added on to Participant 1’s sentiment by saying, “I was trying to think about what I was promoting and I didn’t like the words “zero waste” because that is thrown around a lot. I didn’t like it because that is basically a lie, you are not producing zero waste. There is still waste going into it... None of us are perfect, especially in South Africa. So that’s where I got “minimal waste” from. So it’s just about actually focusing on minimising your waste.”

The participants’ views on their personal brands showed that a lot of care and thought goes into the creation of personal brand within the online influencer marketing sphere.

4.1.4 Interpretation of Category 1: An Online Influencer’s Raison d’Etre

All participants confirmed the fact that every online influencer has a reason for being. The majority of the participants also solidified the literature, which states that a successful personal brand is one that is an authentic display of professional and personal activities (Sweetwood, 2018). Participant 1 summed up a successful online influencer career to one that is “about honesty and integrity and just trying to be very educational.” The participants have provided valuable information into the intricacies of being an online influencer, especially in a South African context, and have provided a strong foundation for the categories to follow.

4.2 Category 2: Audience Relationship Dynamics

Online influencers are of no use without an audience, or followers, to influence. It is therefore necessary to explore the relationships online influencers have with their audience. Fastenau (2018) considers credibility, attractiveness and relatability as key factors audience members consider when deciding which online influencers to follow which leads to the researcher's desire to unpack the various tactics online influencers use to engage with their audience.

In order to establish Category 2, an interview sample was derived from questions 7 to 12 (see Appendices A – C) of the interviews with the participants. The findings from the participants' responses assisted the researcher in narrowing the focus of Category 2 on the relationships online influencers have with their audience. In order to refine the category further for richer insights, the participants' responses were filtered into themes within the category. Findings of value for Category 2 are provided in Table 1.2 below:

Category 2: Audience Relationship Dynamics	
Themes	Verbatim Quote
<i>Engagement with the audience</i>	• “My followers are much more on Instagram – like I find on Instagram -- are far more than on other platforms. And it has grown a lot faster than I expected. But I would say the engagement comes a lot in the stories and people asking questions in response to stories. Asking me to help them, you know, show what I would do in a day to avoid plastic for example. Or lots of direct messaging.” – Participant 1 • “I think I get a lot of replies and comments and DM's. A lot of DM's. Sometimes they reply to a story with a question that is not even related to the story. So I do get a lot of DM's.” – Participant 2 • “I get a lot of very long messages. Where they are like, ‘help me do this’, which is very difficult.” – Participant 3

Audience loyalty	• “Whether they are loyal, I don’t know. Because I feel that loyal is quite a strong term. And people can flip the way they feel about someone very easily. So, I think as long as I align with how they feel about things they will be loyal. And if that changes, they won’t be loyal anymore.” – Participant 1 • “I think they [are]. But I think, a lot of my followers are kids which is unique from the other influencers as well because I do speak at schools. A lot of them start following me after that. And then when they are doing something plastic free, they’ll send me a private message saying, ‘oh, look I am doing this.’ So I feel like they feel like – they are quite connected.” – Participant 2 • “I would say so. Ja. I do have some people who call me out occasionally.” – Participant 3
Reception of off-brand content	• “I find if I post a lot of things about plastic pollution - that gets a lot of engagement and people like that... And sometimes when I post things that are not in my usual way, there is less engagement.” – Participant 1 • “I think you don’t get as many likes, as you usually do. I don’t know why, it could be because the people who are following you are not drawn to that, maybe they just scroll past. Or it could be hashtags, because I use hashtags as well. So maybe you’re not reaching the audience that you are used to getting. Also, when I do post stuff that is related to my content people repost it and share it so you also get wider people.” – Participant 2 • “I lose a lot of followers when I post something about beach clean ups on my stories. People don’t like it. Like I lost 100 the other day just because I did 3 beach clean ups in a row and I posted it. And people don’t like it because it is not on brand and what I usually post.” – Participant 3

Table 1.2 Audience Relationship Dynamics – findings

4.2.1 Theme: Engagement with the audience

The interactions online influencers have with their followers play a pivotal role in their success. Online engagement is only successful if it stands strong enough to build trust with an audience while capturing their attention. Furthermore, the literature shows that a humanistic approach works best when engaging with audience member in order to appear friendly and approachable (Creative, 2015). Return on engagement (ROE), is an efficient tool that helps in the success, or failure, of interactions online influencers have with their followers. This theme, which will explore the various ways online influencers engage with their audience, will act as an ROE tool and provide insights into the best engagement practices in order to receive a positive ROE (Charriez, 2014).

All participants stated that the most noteworthy way their followers engaged with them was through Direct Messaging, a messaging feature on social media platforms. While Participant 1 and 2 added that their followers replied to their stories, another social media feature which is available on Instagram, Facebook and Whatsapp and lets users post videos and photos that expire after 24 hours. Participant 1 said, "But I would say the engagement comes a lot in the stories and people asking questions in response to stories. Asking me to help them, you know, show what I would do in a day to avoid plastic for example."

Participant 2 and 3 relied on creativity when engaging with their followers through the use of emoticons, giveaways and the Q&A widget in their stories. Participant 3 said, "I have been working on asking people, 'so what do you want to see?' And the polls, people really like polls in the stories. And giveaways, I've gotten really good feedback. Rather than just sharing a post." This correlates with the literature, which states that online influencers who start conversations on trending topics within their industry through creating relevant and creative content were most successful at optimising ROE (Creative, 2015).

Being perceived as perfect was an issue Participant 1 and 2 dealt with when engaging with their followers. This was an issue that the researcher anticipated, seeing that the literature shows that one of the factors of being an online influencer is being perceived as an expert in the field or practice (Barker, 2017). Participant 2

said, “Um, I think people try to attack you sometimes. They don’t realise that you can’t be perfect” and Participant 1 added, “People think, probably, that I am even more sustainable than I really am. Even though I try and show where I fail, um, I still feel that people try and put you on a pedestal. I feel like that is a drawback because I think that we shouldn’t do that with influencers.”

Much like the literature, the participants proved that they have implemented creative and resourceful ways of interacting with their followers in order to ensure a positive ROE.

4.2.2 Theme: Audience loyalty

An online influencer’s ability to obtain the loyalty of their followers is one of the key factors in positive audience relationship dynamics. Of Keller’s (2008) four brand loyalty variants identified in the literature, ‘sense of community’ and ‘active engagement’ are noteworthy elements that the researcher kept in mind while exploring the loyalty the participants had with their audience.

Participants 2 and 3 stated that their followers were loyal to them, highlighting that there was a sense of connectedness and accountability. Participant 2 said, “I think, a lot of my followers are kids... And then when they are doing something plastic free, they’ll send me a private message saying, ‘oh, look I am doing this.’ So I feel like they feel like – they are quite connected” and Participant 3 added, “I would say so. Ja. I do have some people who call me out occasionally.” This showed the sense of community the participants’ followers feel with them, as they feel comfortable enough to share aspects of their lives with the online influencers and the freedom to hold the online influencers accountable whenever any issues arise.

Participant 1 appeared to be on the fence with regards to loyalty and summed up loyalty as something fickle. This correlates with the literatures, which states that positive ROE, which is a result of gaining the loyalty of followers, is obtained through creating more content that makes an impact and less content that makes no impact at all (Creative, 2015). Participant 1 said, “I think my audience is interested in what I have to say because I have been told I have helped change people’s perceptions

which is a really great compliment for me. Whether they are loyal, I don't know. Because I feel that loyal is quite a strong term. And people can flip the way they feel about someone very easily. So, I think as long as I align with how they feel about things they will be loyal. And if that changes, they won't be loyal anymore."

The response from the participants showed that loyalty is an aspect of audience relationship dynamics that takes hard work to achieve and maintain, but can be very fruitful once obtained.

4.2.3 Theme: Reception of off-brand content

The researcher aimed to explore the outcome online influencers received when they created and shared content that their audience was unaccustomed to. According to the literature, Sweetwood (2018) states that a successful personal brand is achieved through establishing a prescriptive image and impression in the minds of audience members which therefore begs the question; what happens when online influencers go off brand and surprise their audience with foreign content?

All participants stated that sharing off-brand content led to less engagement from their followers for various reasons. Participant 1 and 3 mentioned that engagement from their audience was so complex that even sharing off-brand content within their niche led to less engagement. Participant 1 said, "I find if I post a lot of things about plastic pollution - that gets a lot of engagement and people like that. But I might post something about mining... there is less engagement." And Participant 3 added on to this occurrence by saying, "I lose a lot of followers when I post something about beach clean ups on my stories. People don't like it. Like I lost 100 the other day just because I did 3 beach clean ups in a row and I posted it. And people don't like it because it is not on brand and what I usually post."

Participant 2 shed light on possible reasons why online influencers receive less engagement from their audience when they post off-brand content by saying, "It could be hashtags, because I use hashtags as well. So maybe you're not reaching the audience that you are used to getting. Also, when I do post stuff that is related to my content people repost it and share it so you also get wider people."

Sharing off-brand content that audience members are not used to seems to lead to a negative ROE, according to all participants. Online influencers should therefore stay as true as possible to their personal brands if their aim is to successfully engage with their followers.

4.2.4 Interpretation of Category 2: Audience Relationship Dynamics

The findings available in category 2 included useful data that the literature lacked because of the limited amount of research done on South African online influencers and the relationship dynamics with their audience.

The ways in which the participants interacted with their followers, for example, by personally responding to messages correlates with the literature which places an emphasis on creating a sense of community, according to Keller (2008). This then naturally leads to a more loyal and attentive audience base.

4.3 Category 3: Content Creation

Similar to an audience, an online influencer is useless without content to share. Content creation therefore plays a large role in the existence of an online influencer. While the rule of thumb in online influencer marketing is to create impactful content, it is important to note that, according to the literature, there are specific trending topics and content creation techniques that online influencers are advised to take advantage of, in order to drive higher levels of engagement (Charriez, 2014). The researcher aimed to explore the various ways the participants created content within their specific niches, seeing that most of the trends on online social platforms revolve around pop-culture and the entertainment industry (Darma, 2018).

In order to establish Category 3, an interview sample was derived from questions 13 to 18 (see Appendices A – C) of the interviews with the participants. The findings from the participants' responses assisted the researcher in narrowing the focus of Category 3 on the dynamics of content creation. In order to refine the category

further for richer insights, the participants' responses were filtered into themes within the category. Findings of value for Category 3 are provided in Table 1.3 below:

Category 3: Content Creation	
Themes	Verbatim Quote
<i>The type of content created</i>	• “A combination of photographs that I take. So usually, I very seldom post something from someone else on my platform. Um, and then I have a couple of little graphics with words on them that I design sometimes. And then videos. Those are like the three main – but I would say mostly photographs.” – Participant 1 • “I don’t really like videos. More posts and pictures. I think in stories I do stuff, like more everyday things. Maybe if it’s not as good quality as something that would be on a post. Then it goes on a story.” - Participant 2 • “A lot of tips. DIY. To help people learn, it’s not just pretty photos. It’s to help you.– Participant 3
<i>The various ways to create content within a niche</i>	• “Photographs are huge on Instagram specifically and I’ve noticed more photographs than videos, to be honest... And it definitely gets aligned with environmental calendars, so the type of content that you post will be posted around Earth Day, or World Overshoot Day, or World Oceans Day or when a country announces a big ban on something. So it’s very newsworthy and I think it’s very much driven by the environmental calendar in terms of the content.” – Participant 1 • “Recently, events... Promoting events people can attend. People watch live feeds of the events.” – Participant 2 • “A lot of people within the zero waste community collaborate a lot. They get together. Which is quite nice. People help each other out.” – Participant 3

<i>The relevance of socio-environmental issues on online platforms</i>	• “I view it as a growing movement. So I see, like, more and more people are becoming interested in it. And probably because we have to become more interested in it. I also do feel, though, that sometimes it is oversimplified because sustainability is quite technical. And because I do sustainability as part of my day job, I know that... You just see a lot of misinformation but hopefully that will change as people become more aware.” – Participant 1 • “I think it’s popular because my friend found out about it and she shared videos. I mean obviously this started ages ago. You wouldn’t have found out about it unless you were part of groups or spoke to people. But now, like on Instagram, you have zero waste hashtags with millions of posts. I would say it is definitely on the rise.” – Participant 3
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Table 1.3 Content Creation – findings

4.3.1 Theme: The type of content created

There are various ways in which online influencers can create content on social media in order to create ROE positive engagement with their followers. The literature shows, for example, that an array of features such as live videos, story posts and main feed posts are available on social media platforms like Instagram (Lee, 2018). An exploration of the various ways online influencers implement these content creation features within a South African context was a vital aspect of the research study.

Participant 1 ranked their means of content creation; with photographs taking the number one spot, typographical illustrations placing second and videos being the last means of content creation. Regarding their content creation techniques, Participant 1 said, “A combination of photographs that I take. So usually, I very seldom post something from someone else on my platform. Um, and then I have a couple of little graphics with words on them that I design sometimes. And then videos. Those are like the three main – but I would say mostly photographs.” Participant 2 said, “I don’t

really like videos. More posts and pictures. I think in stories I do stuff, like more everyday things. Maybe if it's not as good quality as something that would be on a post. Then it goes on a story." Which made it clear that Participant 2 also valued photographs as their best means of engaging with their audience, with story posts as a secondary option. Participant 3 included educational, tip based content as a valuable means of content creation and said, "A lot of tips. DIY. To help people learn, it's not just pretty photos. It's to help you."

All participants stated photography as their primary means of content creation, while Participant 1 and 2 created content through videos as a last resort. Participant 1 reduced their hesitancy to create video content to a resource issue and said, "Videos do tend to get a lot of engagement. Um, I just don't always do them because of time."

4.3.2 Theme: The various ways to create content within a niche

A macro analysis into various niches within online influencer marketing spheres is important, if the researcher aims to get a thorough, wider understanding of online influencer dynamics. One of the challenges of navigating as an online influencer within a specific niche is constantly creating content that is relevant to the targeted audience. This is especially challenging because of the ever-changing social media landscape, with new features for social media platforms being available to the public on a frequent basis (Kleintjes, 2017). The participants of this research study can therefore shed light on the various ways specific niches create content in order to appeal to their audience.

Participant 1 noted that, within their sustainability niche, photographs were the most popular means of creating content and further explained that photographs were often shared on specific public holidays or awareness days. Participant 1 said, "Photographs are huge on Instagram specifically and I've noticed more photographs than videos, to be honest... And it definitely gets aligned with environmental calendars, so the type of content that you post will be posted around Earth Day, or World Overshoot Day, or World Oceans Day or when a country announces a big ban on something."

Participant 2 stated that the promotion of events was a trending way of content creation within their sustainability niche. Participant 2 said, “Promoting events people can attend. People watch live feeds of the events.” This was an interesting finding, as the literature did not show evidence of live videos being used as an effective means of content creation. Furthermore, Participant 2’s observation aligned with the need for social awareness content to begin driving people to not only share the content from their favourite online influencers, but to actually makes changes in the physical world. Participant 1 had a similar point of view and said, “what I think would be ideal for me to become a “real influencer”, or macro influencer, you know what I mean – is that it’s not slactivism, that it’s backed up by action. So it’s not just about posting pictures, but it’s about documenting something real that’s happening. And that it’s not about getting lost in this online space that can be detrimental to everyone’s mental health. But that people also get outside and are inspired to get off their phones.”

Participant 3 considered collaboration between online influencers within her sustainability niche as the most popular means of content creation and stated that the online influencers helped each other to create content. The participants’ responses led the researcher to believe that there is still much to explore in terms of various ways to create content within specific niches because of the stark differences in the niches.

4.3.3 Theme: The relevance of socio-environmental issues on online platforms

Exploring relevance of socio-environmental issues on social media platforms is the final piece of the content creation puzzle. With traditional media’s constant misrepresentation of social and environmental issues, have led many activists to relying on social media to push their movements forward (Devora, 2018). The findings from the participants will therefore provide necessary information for the further development of the research through the unpacking whether or not social media is an effective tool for social and environmental activism in a South African context.

With regards to the relevance of socio-environmental issues on social media Participant 1 said, “I view it as a growing movement. So I see, like, more and more people are becoming interested in it. And probably because we have to become more interested in it.” This correlates with the literature, which places emphasis on socio-environmental issues has factors of society that need to be dealt with (Devora, 2018). Participant 1 further explained, “I also do feel, though, that sometimes it is oversimplified because sustainability is quite technical. And because I do sustainability as part of my day job, I know that... You just see a lot of misinformation but hopefully that will change as people become more aware.” This finding shows that while social media may be an effective tool for activism, there is also room for misrepresentation of information.

Participant 3 agreed with the sentiment that socio-environmental issues are trending on social media and said, “I think it’s popular because my friend found out about [sustainability] and she shared videos. I mean obviously this started ages ago. You wouldn’t have found out about it unless you were part of groups or spoke to people. But now, like on Instagram, you have zero waste hashtags with millions of posts. I would say it is definitely on the rise.”

The participants’ responses, along with the fact that the participants had built a career for themselves around sharing social and environmental issues on social media, led the researcher to believe that there are many opportunities for online influencers in socio-environmental niches.

4.3.4 Interpretation of Category 3: Content Creation

All of the participants provided valuable information on the nature of content creation and the techniques that are currently being used. Correlating with the literature, which places an emphasis on a positive return on engagement as being the most important part of content creation (Charriez, 2014). Each participant had their own preference with regards to content creation and there was a consensus of photography being the most efficient way to create content – all resources considered.

Pop culture and social media trends influenced the majority of the participants and they noted that, while they do not try to imitate popular content creators on social media, it is advantageous to follow trends in order to appeal to followers. Participant 1 said, “It definitely influences the way I would jump on the band wagon for certain things as well. If you look at pop culture now, at least from a sustainability perspective, you’ve got a lot of people jumping on the no straw band wagon and it’s becoming trendy to not use straws. So that might be good avenue, or focus, for a while. So it kind of helps you pick and choose where to put your focus on. It’s more relatable to people. People think it’s cooler because it’s part of pop culture.” This statement further shows that a healthy fusion of personal, authentic content and pop-culture trends may be an online influencer’s path to the golden ticket.

Conclusion

The findings and interpretations available in this section are related to the research objectives and the research problem of insufficient research that examines the relationship online influencers have with their audience, particularly in a South African context. Through coding as a data analysis method, the researcher sufficiently analysed the information provided by the participants which led to the creation of categories and themes.

The interpretations of the categories within this section will undoubtedly aid the researcher in identifying the best practices to implement in order to increase engagement on socio-environmental content. The three categories, and their interpretations, will also assist in providing recommendations in the section to follow, which will ultimately solve the research question.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Trustworthiness of Research Study

In qualitative studies, such as this research study, instruments with established metrics which determine validity and reliability – used in quantitative studies – were not applicable. Because of the obscure nature of qualitative research, it was important to establish that the research study would be credible, transferable, confirmable and dependable in order to maintain and assure trustworthiness (Statistics Solutions, 2018).

Credibility – refers to the confidence the researcher had in the research study's findings. This was achieved through the triangulation of data, which this research study implemented during the data analysis phase when patterns and commonalities were observed (Statistics Solutions, 2018).

Transferability – the transferability of the research study was demonstrated by ensuring that the findings of the study were applicable in other contexts; such as similar phenomena, situations. The researcher is confident that the wide scope of the concepts within the research study warrants the transferability of the research study (Statistics Solutions, 2018).

Confirmable – a vital aspect of the research study's findings is neutrality. Findings were based on, and only on, the participants' responses and any potential bias or personal inclinations of the researcher were avoided. (Statistics Solutions, 2018).

Dependability – the extent to which the research study can be repeated by other researchers and that their finding would be consistent with this research study is referred to as dependability. This research study establishes its dependability through having provided a sufficient amount of information in the research report so that other researchers can obtain similar findings (Statistics Solutions, 2018).

5.2 Ethical Considerations

The main ethical considerations and concerns of this research study were to ensure that participants were fully informed about the evaluation taking place. The participants of any study must be aware of the purpose of the study and how the findings will be used (Maree, 2016). The implementation of voluntary participation was another ethical consideration that was vital to the success of this research study, the researcher therefore ensured that participants, at all times, felt free from coercion. Furthermore, participants were free to withdraw from the study without providing a reason – and doing so did not have a negative impact in any way (Maree, 2016). Lastly, impartiality was an important ethical consideration, especially since face-to-face interviews were being conducted, therefore the researcher did not share their own opinions or beliefs with the participants.

5.4 Limitations and Suggestions

With the secondary research on existing literature and theories about online influencers, online engagement, Albert Bandura's social learning theory, eWOM, pop culture and socio-environmental issues analysed, it is clear that there is a need for further research within a South African context. To the knowledge of the researcher, the research done on the dynamics of online influencers is limited to the entertainment and pop culture sphere. Research on how online influencers optimise their influence to bring awareness to socio-environmental issues in a South African context is minimal. Furthermore, research on online engagement and the various factors which lead to high levels of engagement are specific to the entertainment sector only, therefore further research into the current nature of online engagement regarding social and environmental issues could allow for online influencers to better engage with their audience.

Seeing that this research study had an unavoidable due date, was a limitation and this research study could therefore not be a longitudinal study, as not more than 14 days in total could be spent on the data collection process. Financial resources also limited

the reach of this research study as more finances would have allowed for a larger sample size of online influencers to interview, which would ultimately have enriched the research study further – avoiding the convenience sampling method which was used.

The limited amount of research studies done on online influencer marketing and brand loyalty in a South African context increased the difficulty of this research study and lengthened the research process, as the researcher spent a large amount of time sifting through the literature and deciding whether or not specific concepts and seminal texts were appropriate for the research study.

However, the limited amount of existing research on the research study also meant that there are opportunities for the researcher, and future researchers who may use information from this research study, to be at the forefront of defining and identifying new concepts regarding online influencer marketing and socio-environmental issues in a South African context.

5.5 Research Questions & Objectives

In the following section, the researcher aims to answer each research questions and objectives established in the Introduction section. This will be done through the consideration of the literature that has been reviewed, keeping the research methodology which has been implemented in mind and including the coded and categorised findings. After the researcher has successfully answered the research questions and objectives, recommendations will be proposed and a conclusion to the research study will be provided.

5.5.1 Research Question 1: When sharing socio-environmental content, such as content that creates awareness about the water shortage crisis in Cape Town, how should online influencers engage with their audience in order to optimise their influence?

Online influencers' first point of contact with their audience should be through creating relevant, interactive and original content. Because of the saturated nature of online platforms, it has become a challenge to capture the attention of social media users. Online influencers should therefore create original, authentic content that aligns with their personal brand. Photographs are the best means of content creation as they are most convenient for social media users to engage with. Online influencers should therefore share socio-environmental content through photographs in order to engage with their audience and create a positive return on engagement (ROE).

Streaming live videos of events that online influencers are attending is another ROE positive content creation method. Because of the real-time nature of live streams, audience members are more likely to engage with online influencers. Creating content that is in alignment with social and environmental calendars, such as Earth Day and Human Rights Day, proves to be the best means of sharing socio-environmental awareness content in order to receive engagement from audience members.

Lastly, it is important that online influencers tap into trending topics and movements on online platforms because of the appealing nature of the trends. Audience members are more inclined to engage with online influencers' content if they identify trends in the content that they are a part of.

5.5.2 Research Question 2: Is brand loyalty a factor that online influencers should consider when attempting to shape the discourse, and create social change, around socio-environmental issues?

Brand loyalty is a factor that online influencers should consider if they aim to capture the minds of their audience. Online influencers can achieve brand loyalty through interacting with their followers by replying to any questions or comments that their audience members have. Online influencers are best off replying to their followers through the Direct Messages feature on social media platforms, as this is more personal and will build brand loyalty. The use of emoticons when replying to followers is important as well. Online influencers should also reply to any messages they receive when they share content through the stories feature. As followers tend to ask

questions in online influencers' stories that they would not necessarily ask in the public comments section.

Through the implementation of constant engagement and interaction with followers, online influencer will build brand loyalty over time, which will lead to a higher likelihood of influencing their followers with regards to socio-environmental issues.

5.5.3 Research Question 3: Is it necessary to have specific and appropriate online influencers to bring awareness to certain socio-environmental issues, such as the water shortage crisis in Cape Town?

In order for maximum awareness of socio-environmental issues, online influencers who operate in niche markets are necessary. Because of the broad scope of social and environmental issues, with various issues existing and arising every day, online influencers who have a background and expertise in specific topics within socio-environmental issues can best influence people to create a social change. Because of their knowledge, they will be able to create content with the correct information, therefore avoiding misinformation.

5.9 Recommendations

For the development of this study, the researcher provides the following recommendations for online influencers regarding the research topic:

- For a positive ROE, online influencers should create content in the following ways:
 - Share original, aesthetically pleasing and professionally shot photographs.
 - Live-stream events to followers and engage with them during the live stream.

- If it is absolutely necessary to share off-brand, only share such content in the stories feature because of ephemeral functionalities.
- Pay attention to pop-culture trends and incorporate them into content.
- Online influencer must adhere to the following communication techniques if they wish to maintain brand loyalty and positive ROE with their audience:
 - Reply to all Direct Messages – and should there be too many, find the most common questions and create content around those questions.
 - Maintain a positive brand tone of voice by implementing emoticons.
 - Refrain from taking a negative approach when addressing socio-environmental issues, as this may turn audience members off.

5.10 Conclusion

The purpose of this proposed research study was to investigate the engagement online influencers receive from their audience members on social media platforms, such as Instagram. How these online influencers use the brand loyalty they have garnered from their loyal consumers in order to create awareness around content based on socio-environmental issues, such as the water shortage crisis in Cape Town, in the current pop culture saturated online media sphere was also the aim of the research. The practices online influencers should implement to increase engagement on socio-environmental content was also be explored.

While existing literature related to this research study created a firm foundation, the researcher ensured that the topic remained the focus of the study by using a deductive approach. Research approaches in existing research studies also provide clarity in terms of the appropriate research methods to implement in order to achieve success and gain insights.

Qualitative research methods were implemented in this research study because of the subjective nature of brand loyalty, personal branding and online influencer marketing. Meaning, instead of measurement, was used as a research method which made interpretivism an appropriate approach. Convenience sampling was been a suitable

sampling method because of time and financial constraints. The theoretical framework, the Social Learning Theory created by Albert Bandura propelled the research study forward because of the relevance of the theory.

The researcher is confident that this research study has created an opportunity for further exploration into the possible ways online influencers can optimise their influence on their audience when bringing awareness to socio-environmental issues in a South African context.

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