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TITLE OF PROJECT: **THE POWER OF WHATSAPP AS AN EWOM TOOL**

DECLARATION:

In accordance with Rule G5.6.3, I hereby declare that the above-mentioned treatise/dissertation/thesis is my own work and that I have not previously been submitted to another University or for another qualification

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ABSTRACT

With the COVID-19 pandemic drastically effecting how businesses operate, it was crucial that they found ways to survive and keep the doors open. Social media platforms were the best option for this and one platform, WhatsApp, which is used by majority of South Africans, was underutilised. Word-of-mouth and electronic word-of-mouth are one of the best marketing tools a business has, and WhatsApp is a great and underutilised platform for these small businesses to make use of. This study aims to find the variables necessary in understanding how to implement an eWOM strategy and the effectiveness it has via the WhatsApp platform.

Keywords: Electronic Word-of-Mouth, WhatsApp

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

1.1   INTRODUCTION

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the world was forced to sit indoors, and social media was one of the main ways in which people remained in contact with friends, family and to consume content. Social media is a powerful tool which can be used effectively to promote positivity and spread reliable information (Wang, Pifer, Scremin & Zhang 2020:79). However, with anything there are drawbacks and negatives. With the power of social media on full display throughout the pandemic, it sparked an idea into its usefulness for small business owners and how their business can benefit from its use (De Valck 2021). An important tool in marketing communication is word-of-mouth (WOM) as it is recognised as a credible and trustworthy avenue of receiving information (Wang *et. al.* 2020:79). Electronic word-of-mouth has been adapted as the social media version of word-of-mouth as a tool to promote online businesses and create a strong and positive stamp on a business in terms of marketing (Fatma, Ruiz, Khan & Rahman 2020:944). It is well known that social media and word-of-mouth have a powerful impact on a business and are important tools in a business's communication arsenal (De Valck 2021 and Glover 2021). Social media and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) in particular, are increasingly becoming essential tools during the current pandemic (Glover 2021). With restrictions of movement imposed by the lockdown, greater numbers of consumers are turning to social media and eWOM to share their experiences (De Valck 2021).

There are numerous social media platforms available which may seem overwhelming to begin a social media campaign, not to mention expensive and most platforms just sell ads for consumers to purchase (WebFX 2021). While this may be effective, there are better, cost-effective ways to promote positive eWOM (Glover 2021). WhatsApp has emerged as a powerful tool that is underutilised as it is not seen as a traditional platform for advertising as one cannot purchase and run advertisements on the platform (van Gent 2019). With WhatsApp's new WhatsApp for Business platform, it is now a perfect opportunity for businesses, especially small businesses, to make use of this platform to grow an audience that is loyal and spreads a positive electronic

word-of-mouth message, which acts as essentially free advertising (van Gent 2019; Carmichael 2020).

In South Africa, 58 percent of the population makes use of the WhatsApp platform (Statista, 2020), meaning it is an obvious choice of a platform to make use of to connect with the businesses audience and build a loyal community. WhatsApp Business offers its user the ability to create a personal customer support line (Carmichael 2020), which makes a customer feel appreciated when receiving personal help and attention. This only seeks to grow a positive eWOM message for the business.

1.2   PROBLEM STATEMENT

Due to lockdown and the COVID-19 pandemic, small businesses have had to react to keep the doors open. Social media was the obvious choice to turn to, as advertising on social media platforms is easy and relatively inexpensive if not free, such as WhatsApp (Whatsapp.com 2021). The power of WhatsApp is that 91% of the South African population has access to a smart phone (McCrocklin 2021:1), thus can be reached as WhatsApp is deemed as one of the most influential social media platforms (van Gent 2019). There are many methods of mass communication such as group chats, broadcasts lists, WhatsApp Stories and interactions with other people where they hear and see reviews and referrals on businesses whether that be positive and negative, this is an opportunity for businesses to grab a hold of and make use of Wong 2021:256). It is important for businesses to act and push to create a positive eWOM message, but this can be tough and overwhelming (Dwivedi, Ismagilova, Hughes, Carlson, Filieri, Jacobson, Jain, Karjaluoto, Kefi, Krishen & Kumar 2021:2).

Against this background, the purpose of this study is to determine the electronic word-of-mouth variables which influence consumer purchases and lead to positive eWOM endorsements. By answering this question, businesses can improve their understanding of the importance of eWOM and increase their social media presence to ensure customers spread positive eWOM messages.

1.3   **RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

The following primary and secondary research objectives have been formulated to address the research question highlighted below.

1.3.1   Primary study objective

The primary objective of the study is to investigate electronic word-of-mouth variables via WhatsApp usage and their effect on consumers' purchase intentions.

1.3.2   Secondary study objectives

To assist in achieving the objective of the study, the following secondary objectives have been set:

- To understand the research area and its key components via a literature review.
- To investigate the variables of eWOM to gain a greater understanding of how they influence consumer purchase intentions.
- To Investigate how WhatsApp can be utilised to spread positive eWOM messages.

1.3.3   Methodological objectives

The following methodological objectives have been formulated to help achieve the above-mentioned primary and secondary objectives:

- Conduct a comprehensive literature review of the nature and importance of social media and WhatsApp in today's age as well as the influence of electronic word-of-mouth via WhatsApp;
- Develop an understanding of consumers usage and influence of eWOM on WhatsApp via data collection on a set of variables to test which of the set variables are most influential;
- Provide insight and recommendations on the findings of this research to South African businesses to enable them to better understand the variables that influences electronic word-of-mouth via WhatsApp.

1.3.4   Research questions

- How does eWOM via WhatsApp influence consumers intention to buy?
- Which electronic word-of-mouth variables via WhatsApp usage influence consumers' purchase intentions?

1.3.5   Significance of the research

The preliminary literature review indicates that there is currently a gap in literature with regards to the influence and impact of electronic word-of-mouth in its usage on the WhatsApp platform in a South African context. The study will therefore contribute to the existing literature on electronic word-of-mouth on the WhatsApp platform and indicate the importance of theoretical contributions of this study to the field of eWOM.

By investigating the variables that influence electronic word-of-mouth, the study could provide businesses and management with a greater understanding of the variables that influence consumers' purchasing behaviour, which businesses usually have limited control over in the eWOM context. The study could further provide businesses with an insight on how the application of marketing dimensions (such as word-of-mouth) can affect the way consumers make their purchasing decisions.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE OVERVIEW

2.1   INTRODUCTION

Social media has completely overhauled and transformed the day and age in the current environment. The advancements in technology have changed the way people live, businesses operate and how customers go about their shopping (Salem 2018:1). This chapter discusses previous literature around social media, WhatsApp and word-of-mouth as well as explain the theoretical framework that will form the backbone of the study's objective. The information sourced for this chapter is mainly from Nelson Mandela University's library facilities with access to Emerald and EBSCOhost. To supplement this, Google Scholar and various websites such as WhatsApp.com were consulted for information.

2.2   SOCIAL MEDIA

The Internet has shaped online customer attitudes, behaviours and use patterns over the years, as well as how customers communicate online (Salem 2018:2; Wan, Dastane, Satar, Ma'arif & Yusnorizam 2019:1091). Online shoppers have realised that it is not only the convenience of online shopping, but also the enjoyment that they miss out on when shopping in a physical store with others (Salem 2018:2). Social media in this sense is the electronic environment that brings people, ideas, businesses, and thoughts close together (Salem 2018:2). It is imperative for businesses to recognise the conversations between customers with social media (Salem 2018:2).

The rapid rise of social media has generated excitement amongst marketers (Li & Wu 2018:1331; Prasad, Gupta & Totala 2017:134). Li and Wu (2018:1331) and Prasad et.al. (2017:134) state that over two-thirds of businesses make use of social media for their marketing and services. Businesses have realised the vast information content and the transparency of social media platforms, the businesses in turn monitor and analyse the websites to gather information on customer perceptions (Prasad et. al. 2017:134).

Businesses must not neglect to see the new capabilities that social media can provide, therefore, it is important for business to have significant investment in social media if the business would want to leverage the potential these developments create to promote daily business operations and future planning (Salem 2018:2; Prasad et. al. 2017:134). According to Salem (2018:2) businesses should be aware of who their customer is and that the business needs to go further than just posting information online or having a social media presence but to actively respond to their customers' needs. One strategy that businesses can use is to integrate different social media platforms into the sales experience, giving customers the options to "like" products on the platform (Li & Wu 2018:1331).

Salem (2018:3) and Prasad et. al. (2017:134) state that social media platforms have changed the way in which businesses communicate with their customers by transforming the communication landscape. Social media and networks make use of a multitude of online communication channels with an equally wide range of services and utilities that helps the business with worldwide interaction and the sharing of information about products and brands (Salem 2018:3). According to Salem (2018:3) social media has reached such an important tool for businesses that if a business fails to make use of social media it might cease to be part of cyberspace. Social media has become the preferred media worldwide and is influencing consumer behaviour constantly (Prasad et. al. 2017:134).

According to Prasad et. al. (2017:134) social media has helped consumers to do comparisons and interaction as well as provide large amounts of information from across the world at any time. Social media has given individuals the ability to access all kinds of online stores from anywhere in the work without any time constraint by making use of their electronic devices such as computers and mobiles (Prasad et. al. 2017:134).

The number of individuals that make use of interactive social network sites such as Facebook, WhatsApp and Linkedin has increased over the years (Gvili & Levy 2018:482; Salem 2018:2). According to Gvili and Levy (2018:482) and Salem (2018:2), social network sites are seen as a web-based form of the social media application; social network sites are built on the conceptual and technological foundations of Web 2.0. The use of social network sites also allows for the creation of user-generated content and its virtually free exchange (Gvili & Levy 2018:482; Schamari & Schaefers

2015:1). There has been a drastic increase in social network sites with almost 25 percent of time being spent on social network sites and some 80 percent of users stating that they have at least one social network (Salem 2018:2).

2.3   MOBILE INSTANT MESSAGING (MIM)

It is widely agreed that mobile instant messaging is one of the most influential of current technologies in peoples' lives (Cruz-Cardenas, Guadalupe-Lanas, Zabelina, Palacio-Feirro, Velin-Farez and Staniewski 2019:456 & Martinez-Comeche and Ruthven 2020:1). Due to the current capacity of the knowledge on mobile instant messaging, many promising lines of inquiry can be identified to help with advancing the understanding of human and consumer behaviour in relation to mobile instant messaging (Cruz-Cardenas et. al. 2019:456). Mobile instant messaging can be viewed as an application in which social and physical context of use are important, it is beneficial to comprehend the ways in how consumers create value for themselves by integrating mobile instant messaging into their everyday lives (Cruz-Cardenas et. al. 2019:456).

2.4   WHATSAPP

WhatsApp is the leading mobile instant messaging application; WhatsApp was first introduced in 2009 and in the period between December 2013 and December 2017 (Cruz-Cardenas et. al. 2019:456). The WhatsApp usage rose from 400 users to 1 500m users worldwide (Cruz-Cardenas et. al. 2019:456; Martinez-Comeche & Ruthven 2020:1). According to Cruz-Cardenas et. al. (2019:457) and Wan et. al. (2019:1094) public statistics records the rise in use of mobile instant messaging and WhatsApp are confirmed by incipient academic research showing that WhatsApp now accounts for up to 20 percent of mobile phone usage. In South Africa, as of February 2020, 58 percent of the population makes use of the WhatsApp platform (Statista, 2020).

There are many reasons that aid in the increase in WhatsApp usage, these reasons include ease and speed of communication, improved student academic performance, the facility to coordinate group meetings, increased control and privacy and the potential it offers users to express their emotions (Cruz-Cardenas et. al. 2019:457; Bere & Rambe 2016:56; Elangovan & Agarwal 2015:3). WhatsApp has made it

possible for commercial brands to engage with customers by private chat conversations through direct messaging platform (Zarouali, Brosius, Hekberger & Vreese 2021:252).

Research into the use of WhatsApp and mobile instant messaging has been impacted by two concepts, namely, positive externalities and flow experience (Cruz-Cardenas et. al. 2019:457). Positive externalities can either be direct or indirect; with direct positive externalities relating to the enhanced utility derived from the greater number of service users, whereas indirect positive externalities relate to the extra services that are provided as the number of users grow in in size (Cruz-Cardenas et. al. 2019:457). According to Cruz-Cardenas et. al. (2019:457) flow experience in an online environment deals with the users' involvement in some form of online activity.

WhatsApp has been changed for commercial purposes as well, where Facebook has recently introduced WhatsApp for Business (Zarouali et. al. 2021:252). In January 2020 this development allows brands use a WhatsApp private chat conversation with customers, just like the customers would do with their family and friends (Zarouali et. al. 2021:252). This type of private chat conversation can happen between the customer and an employee or with a chatbot, which is a conversationalist agent that is programmed to communicate with people through natural language and when requested can automatically execute specific commands (Zarouali et. al. 2021:253). The ability for businesses to have private chat conversations with customers using WhatsApp has potential benefits such as responding relatively fast to customers, the chance to tap into new audiences, for example, younger consumers WHO~~that~~ are active on messaging platforms as well as the convenience of chatting to consumers in a conversational way (Zarouali et. al. 2021:253).

However, there might be the possibility of potential harm to consumers and society (Zarouali et. al. 2021:253). According to Zarouali et. al. (2021:253) the harm to consumer can be because of the private nature of the WhatsApp environment, the consumers might not always be aware what the commercial intention of a business is. There is also the possibility that the consumers' personal information is sold to other businesses without them being fully aware of the situation (Zarouali et. al. 2021:253). Thus, conflict with fundamental rights to data protection and privacy and consumer protection law and rules about unfair commercial practices might be breached (Zarouali et. al. 2021:253).

Table 2.1: Existing customer value proposition for WhatsApp

PRODUCT	TARGET CUSTOMERS	BENEFITS	PRICE	VALUE PROPOSITION
WhatsApp: Messenger app	Individuals with mobile devices who are looking for reliable apps to communicate with their contacts	Can be downloaded from multiple platforms. Voice, data and files encryption. Security and privacy protection through end-to-end encryption, block contacts and spam.	Free of charge	WhatsApp provides individuals with simple, easy, and reliable messaging
WhatsApp: Business apps	Small business owners	The business does not need a large investment as with websites. Reduces sales cycle. Better customer relationship management (CRM).	Free of charge	WhatsApp provides businesses with the ability to interact with customers easily by using tools to automate, sort, and quickly respond to messages.

Source: Adapted from Wan et. al. (2019:1095)

As can be seen from Table 1.1, WhatsApp has evolved from solely a communication tool between friends and family to a tool that businesses can use to better their service. Businesses have many benefits that require minimum investment but pays out tenfold, such as reducing the sales cycle. The sales cycle is the process in which take to obtain the sale from the customer (Prater 2020), the use of WhatsApp shortens the length of the cycle drastically so as it is a direct communication line with the customer with quick response times.

2.5   WORD-OF-MOUTH COMMUNICATION

It has been proven that the behavioural intentions of consumers are influenced by word-of-mouth communication (Kumar, Chandaran, Anand & Singh 2019:1; Prasad et. al. 2017:134). Word-of-mouth communication is considered a much more effective tool over other sources like editorial recommendations or advertisements because customers perceive word-of-mouth information to be more reliable (Prasad et. al. 2017:135). According to Prasad et. al. (2017:134) it is believed that word-of-mouth

communication is very persuasive because of the trustworthiness and higher perceived credibility of the source. In the past, word-of-mouth communication was referred to as face-to-face conversation between consumers about a given product or service (Prasad et. al. 2017:135). However, the popularity of the Internet globally has given rise to a new kind of word-of-mouth communication known as electronic word-of-mouth communication (Prasad et. al. 2017:135).

Kumar et. al. (2019:2) explain that in word-of-mouth marketing the information about a product or service is communicated from person to person through the use of word-of-mouth communication. Individuals trust the opinions of those that they know such as friends, family and closely known authorities (Kumar et. al. 2019:2). Word-of-mouth marketing would be restricted if only friends and family are the main focus points (Kumar et. al. 2019:2). Kumar et. al. (2019:2) state that social media should be utilised to spread word-of-mouth marketing since majority of individuals use social media to gather information.

2.6   ELECTRONIC WORD-OF-MOUTH COMMUNICATION

Electronic word-of-mouth can be defined as any statement by a potential, actual or former customer about a product or company that can be either negative or positive and is made available to the public through the Internet (Gvili & Levy 2018:482). Gvili and Levy (2018:482) state that customers trust in electronic word-of-mouth due to its higher perceived credibility, with this type of customer-to-customer communication assisting customers to have interpersonal interactions with one another. Customer-to-customer communication can in turn affect attitudes toward brands and ultimately affect the buying decisions made by individuals (Gvili & Levy 2018:483).

According to Gvili and Levy (2018:483) a top challenge that is faced by marketers when attempting to build strong and desirable relationships with customers is to get the customers to actively engage in any brand-related activities. Social networking platforms have become vital in helping marketers cope with this challenge as the social networking platforms aid the marketers in translating customer relationships with brands and other customers into brand advocacy (Gvili & Levy 2018:483).

The electronic word-of-mouth communication process is facilitated and accelerated by its perceived credibility (Gvili & Levy 2018:483). In order for marketers to encourage consumers to accept and share the brand-related information, marketers primarily use social media to communicate brand messages so that consumers can view the messages as being more credible (Gvili & Levy 2018:483).

When people interact with each other on the social network sites they share information regarding product opinions and brand experiences which helps generate different forms of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), such as subjective statements, objective statements, and knowledge sharing (Gvili & Levy 2018:482).

2.7   THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to Crawford (2020:38) a theoretical framework relates to how the study will go about the generation or testing of theory. Research on electronic word-of-mouth on customers can be researched by looking at one theory, therefore, this study will make use of a theoretical framework as one theory will be sufficient to determine the influence of consumer behaviour factors on electronic word-of-mouth. Variables were selected based on the researcher's valuation of its practical effects that it could have as well as based on research from eWOM literature. Chu and Choi (2011:271) developed a set of variables to measure eWOM and its effectiveness, namely social capital, tie strength, trust and interpersonal influence. In the context of the current study, trust and interpersonal influence will be utilised for the current study. Interpersonal influence is seen as one of the primary determinants of a customer's decision making (Kamolov 2019:53). Kamolov et. al. (2019:53) state that there are two types of influences, namely, normative and informational. To gain a better understanding of both types, interpersonal influence will be split between these two types to gain a deeper understanding of the effects in the current study. To complete the list of variables, opinion leaders and opinion seekers will be utilised which was evaluated by Flynn, Goldsmith and Eastman (1996:137) on its effectiveness. These two variables showed high consistency in Flynn *et. al.*'s (1996:145) tests as well as free from response bias. This deemed them variables to help measure eWOM effectiveness.

2.7.1   Normative Influence

Normative influence takes place when individuals want to be accepted by society, so these individuals then adopt the beliefs and norms of that society (Kamolov et al 2019:53). Farias (2017:855) similarly states that normative influence is the conforming to social norms in order to be liked by those around them.

2.7.2   Informational Influence

Informational influence comes into play when individuals are influenced by others that are known to have expert knowledge about a product or service (Kamolov et. al. 2019:53). Farias (2017:855) states that informational influence is the belief of information received from other knowledgeable individuals which Farias suggests that it is a self-aware trait that other individuals can have more accurate information than any one person. A study by Chu & Choi (2011:) found a positive relationship between both normative and informational influence in eWOM on social networking sites.

2.7.3   Trust

It is important for trust to be considered as a significant construct in studies about electronic word-of-mouth (Kamolov et. al. 2019:54). Individuals are more willing to rely on an exchange partner if the individuals are confident about the partner (Kamolov et. al. 2019:54). Kamolov et. al. (2019:54) suggest that an individuals' willingness to exchange messages on social media highly depends on trust. Similarly, individuals have more trust in social networking websites than advertising material (Kamolov et. al. 2019:54).

2.7.4   Opinion Leader

Opinion leaders is an individual who employs an influence on the decisions of others (Flynn *et. al.* 1996:138). An individual who is early to the pack and gains insight into a product or service that the individual passes on knowledge to others. Flynn *et. al.* (1996:138) suggests that while the knowledge of the product and communication are key aspects of opinion leadership, the influence is the main aspect of the theory of opinion leaders. "Opinion leadership occurs when individuals try to influence the

purchasing behaviour of other consumers in specific product fields" (Flynn *et. al.* 1996:138).

2.7.5 Opinion Seeker

Flynn *et. al.* (1996:138) states that opinion seeking occurs when someone searches for advice from others who are more knowledgeable when making a purchase decision. In other terms, opinion seeking is the idea of product information search that is trustworthy, this information seeking process leads to need-satisfying purchase decisions (Flynn *et. al.* 1996:138).

These variables will be used further in this study to identify the impact eWOM has on consumers intention to purchase via the WhatsApp platform. This will be achieved via a survey and the methodologies of this will be further discussed in the chapter to follow

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

3.1   INTRODUCTION

Within writing a research treatise, the author must define how and with what research methods that will be used in conducting the research in answering the research objectives. According to DiscoverPHD's (2020), research is the process of uncovering novel knowledge in the form of a new concept or a new theory that can be added to the body of current knowledge. Western Sydney University (2021) elaborates on the definition by adding that while conducting new research leads to new theories, concepts and methodologies, the synthesis and analysis of past research can also lead to new findings and outcomes. Research is an important aspect in the lives of human beings, as it provides the necessary insight and knowledge needed to progress and grow, making it vital to undertake research. The purpose of research entails uncovering what is known and unknown via a literature review and what can be developed further (DiscoverPHDs 2020).

According to Aaker, Day and Khumar (2007:760) research design can be depicted as a blueprint that will guide the study towards the achievement of its objectives. Amoah, Ferreira and Potgieter (2020:72) similarly state research design outlays the details and steps that are required in gathering data that will lead to the formulation and structure of information that leads to answering the research question.

In the context of the current study, descriptive and exploratory research will be used. Exploratory research will be used as it aims to acquire greater insight into and develop an understanding of a problem to gain a clear investigation path (Surbhi 2017). The study will also make use of a descriptive research approach to develop a conclusive research study as it leads to describe a set group of factors (Surbhi 2017).

Three research paradigms exist within research, namely, positivism, interpretivism and critical theory (Pham 2018:1; Rehman & Alharti 2016:51). Rehman and Alharti

(2016:51) explain that the positivism research paradigm assumes that reality exists independently of humans. Interpretivism research paradigms reject the notion that a single, verifiable reality exists independently of the people's senses (Pham 2018:1). Critical theory assumes that a reality exists, but has been shaped by cultural, gender and religious factors which interact with each other to create a social system (Rehman & Alharti 2016:57). The research paradigm that will be used in the current study is a positivistic research paradigm. This allows the researcher to look at a set of variables and obtain data to then be analysed which is necessary to give small business owners insight to the usefulness of the WhatsApp platform in their social media presence. A positivistic research paradigm requires a quantitative research approach (Plooy-Cilliers, Davis & Bezuidenhout 2016:10).

Plooy-Cilliers et. al. (2016:14) states that the quantitative research approach is concerned with statistical data. An advantage of working with numbers is that numbers cannot be interpreted differently (Teharani, Martimianakis, Stenfors-Hayes, Wadwa & Varpio 2015:5). The quantitative research approach also assists the researcher to describe the behaviours objectively (O'Dwyer & Bernauer 2014:63). One of the disadvantages of the quantitative research approach is that survey instruments are vulnerable to errors such as mistakes in measurement and flawed sampling techniques (Plooy-Cilliers et. al. 2016:14). Quantitative research was selected as it allows the researcher to analyse a set of variables and research its effects on a sample and from that, draw conclusions to aid small business owners in their use of WhatsApp in their social media presence.

3.2   RESEARCH POPULATION AND SAMPLING

A research population is the act of defining the reference of the study holistically and characterising the common features of them (Surbhi 2017). The population of the study needs to be defined and decisions regarding the sampling frame need to be made after the purpose of the study has been determined (Surbhi 2017). Thereafter, it is important for the researcher to decide on how the sampling will take place and whether probability and non-probability methods will be used. Once the above-mentioned decisions have been made by the researcher, the sample size is then

determined (Surbhi 2017). The determined sample size must be representative of the population and large enough for findings of the study to be generalised (Surbhi 2017).

Cutler, Doherty and Carmichael (2016:1073) describes the target population of a study as the total group of people or objects, which are primary, focused and from whom information is required. For the purpose of this study, the population will be all Gqeberha residents who have consulted others via WhatsApp in regard to a business and its products or services. The sample will be drawn from the researcher's WhatsApp contact list alongside the researcher's father's vast contact list of clients to obtain the sample.

According to Struwig and Stead (2013:115) sample frame is defined as the list of all sampling units in the population where the sample for a study is drawn from. The sample frame for the current study is smartphone users who are active and engage on WhatsApp and these users are whom the researcher has access to via broadcast lists consisting of members of all occupations and age. Due to ethical clearances, the sample frame will exclude children up to 17 years of age as well as university students.

Sampling can be defined as the selected portion from the population, which the research is based on (Cherry 2018:1). The use of sampling in research is due to various reasons such as, saving time and cost. A sample that is appropriately selected can give results that are quite accurate (Cutler et. al. 2016:1074). There are two types of sampling, probability sampling and non-probability sampling (Cutler et. al. 2016:1073). The context of the study refers to the impact of eWOM on WhatsApp and therefore there are no restrictions, aside from ethical restrictions, on sample selection.

According to Sarstedt, Shaltoni and Bengart (2017:662) probability sampling ensures that every member of the population has a known, non-zero probability of being selected for the research. There are various probability sampling techniques, namely, simple random sampling, stratified sampling, systematic sampling and cluster

sampling (Cutler et. al. 2016:1073; Sarstedt et. al. 2017:662). However, probability sampling will not be followed in this study.

Non-probability sampling takes place when units of the sample are selected based on personal judgment or convenience, meaning the probability of any other member of the population being for the sample is not known (Cutler et. al. 2016:10730). Sarstedt et. al. (2017:663) state that a number of non-probability sampling techniques exists, namely judgmental sampling, quota sampling, snowball sampling and convenience sampling. The chosen sampling method for this will be convenience. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown restrictions, it was not possible for the researcher to obtain responses in person, thus convenience sampling was utilised as it allowed for the research to take place regardless of the pandemic. An advantage of convenience sampling is that respondents can be contacted relatively quickly and cost effectively (Cutler et. al. 2016:1073). A disadvantage of convenience sampling is that it can be biased to the social or professional context of the research (Plooy-Cilliers et. al. 2016:142).

Twenty to twenty-five Gqeberha residents will be selected as the sample for the study. Twenty to twenty-five respondents will produce an insight into the influence of eWOM in the Gqeberha area which can then be statistically analysed for the findings of the study.

3.3   DATA COLLECTION

Data collection is an important component of this research study, as data that is not collected correctly would lead to the results and findings being deemed invalid (Dudovskiy 2018:1). Cutler et. al. (2016:1074) defines data collection as the method/s used to gather primary and secondary data. The method of data collection in this study would be quantitative data collection. The following section will discuss the primary and secondary methods of data collection which will be used in the current study.

3.3.1 Primary Data Collection

Primary research is viewed as the empirical investigation of the study in which the researcher's approach is the first-hand collection of data for an academic purpose (Dudovskiy 2018:1). In order for primary data collection to take place the researcher must make decisions on the population, sample frame and sample. Two methods of collecting primary data are available to researchers for doing quantitative research, namely, interviews and questionnaire surveys (Struwig & Stead 2013:89). Questionnaire surveys will be utilised in the context of the study to determine customers' opinions and thoughts of the influence eWOM has on their intention to purchase. The data collection, due to COVID-19, will be via a web-based survey and QuestionPro will be the tool used.

Founded in 2002, QuestionPro (2021) is a website that provides software to develop and administer surveys to aid the research process. It provides all the tools and more required in developing a survey as well as analysis through graphs and statistics of the outcomes of the survey (QuestionPro 2021). QuestionPro (2021) simplifies the market research process for the user in developing the survey and analysis of the results.

3.3.2 Secondary Data Collection

Secondary research is a frequently used research method which uses information that already exists, especially information collected through primary research (Ellram & Tate 2016:250). In order to achieve the primary objective of the study, the secondary objective of the study will consist of an extensive literature review in order to identify and describe the nature and importance of electronic word-of-mouth. The secondary research will be conducted by consulting a various textbooks and peer-reviewed journal articles. In addition, the library facilities at Nelson Mandela University will be used to access national and international databases such as, Emerald and EBSCOhost, which will be used to identify the current research on electronic word-of-mouth. To ensure the reliability and validity of the sources, peer-reviewed, trusted journal articles and textbooks will be cited as well as ensure cross referencing to find the relevant and legitimate information.

3.4   DESIGN OF THE MEASURING INSTRUMENT

A measuring instrument can be defined as a scale that is used to measure the variables of the study (Amoah et. al. 2020:155). The measuring, instrument is designed in accordance with the quantitative research design. For the purpose of this study, the measuring instrument to be used is a questionnaire. The questionnaire, accompanied by a covering letter, will be utilised as the measuring instrument to collect the primary data. Plooy-Cilliers et. al. (2014:152) state that a questionnaire can comprise of close-ended questions, checklist and rating scales. A questionnaire is used to simplify and quantify the responses (Plooy-Cilliers et. al. 2014:152). The questionnaire is a vital aspect of the research as it gains an understanding and obtains the data required to completion of the primary objective.

The covering letter will be the introduction to the respondent to the measuring instrument. The covering letter will explain the purpose of the study, what information is needed from the respondent and how they will need to answer the questionnaire. It will also provide details of ethical considerations in terms of who can or cannot fulfil the questionnaire. It outlines a guarantee to the respondent that their personal information will be kept confidential and that it will only be used in the context of the study.

The questionnaire design will be closed ended questions as this will output numerical or quantitative data (Plooy-Cilliers et. al. 2014:152) that will then provide the primary data to help achieve the primary objective of the study. The respondents of the research will be required to evaluate statements relating to the variables influencing electronic word-of-mouth using a 5-point Likert scale, as well as answer multiple choice questions to collect data about the respondents' demographic profile.

Table 3.1: Variables relating to eWOM influence via WhatsApp on purchasing decisions.

Factor	Operationalisation	Number of items
Normative Influence	This factor looks to establish the extent of influence the respondents' contacts influence their decision making in terms of obtaining a standard of social behaviours.	6

Informational Influence	This factor looks to establish the extent of influence the respondents' contacts influence their decision making in terms of obtaining informative information regarding products.	5
Trust	This variable looks to gain insight into which respondents trust the contacts they have on WhatsApp.	5
Opinion Leadership	This variable looks to understand respondents' use of WhatsApp in terms of giving out their own opinions on products and offering information to their contacts on WhatsApp.	6
Opinion Seeking	This variable looks to understand respondents' use of WhatsApp in terms of seeking out their contacts' opinions on products and obtaining information from their contacts on WhatsApp.	6

3.5 DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis is the process of converting raw data into meaningful information (Amoah et. al. 2020:228). Once primary data has been collected, it will be analysed using appropriate methods. For the purpose of this study, the primary data collected from the research questionnaire will be captured via web-based data collection tool, QuestionPro. The data will then be cleaned and analysed via the same program. The data will then be drawn into graphs and tables to better understand the outcome of the primary data sources and to summarise what was revealed through the questionnaire.

3.5.1 Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics is analysing and summarising the data set through a hard set of techniques such as mean, median and mode (Chaudhari 2018). Descriptive statistics provides the researcher with summaries about the sample and the measure (Mishra, Pandey, Singh, Gupta, Sahu and Keshri 2019:67). Using descriptive statistic techniques aids in understanding of the data set (Chaudhari 2018)

The mean is probably the most used method of describing central tendency (Chaudhari 2018). According to Chaudhari (2018), in order to calculate the mean, the

researcher needs to add all the values and divided by the number of values. The median is the score that is found in the middle of the set of values (Research Connections 2021). The mode is the value that occurs the most frequently in the set of scores (Research Connections 2021).

3.6   ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

World Health Organisation (2021) states that conducting research in an ethical manner should maintain the confidentiality and privacy of the respondents of the research study. The respondent should also have the option to withdraw from the study if the respondent no longer feels to participate.

The research study should follow clear established ethical principles. Upon obtaining ethical clearance form Nelson Mandela University, the researcher follows inherent research ethics. It is the researcher's responsibility to acquire informed and voluntary consent from all the respondents within the study. The researcher must inform the respondents of the purpose and objectives of the study on the cover letter of the chosen measuring instrument.

The confidentiality and anonymity of the respondents will be guaranteed by the researcher, as no personal identification is being asked from the respondents. The researcher will not discriminate against respondents based on the racial orientation, religious and political beliefs, gender and gender identity or sexual orientation.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION OF DATA

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter 3 of the study consisted of the research methodology, research design and data collection and analysis methods and techniques to be utilised in the study. Furthermore, Chapter 3 concluded that the five appropriate dimensions for the questionnaire were normative influence, informational influence, trust, opinion leadership and opinion seeking. These variables were deemed essential eWOM factors to aid in capturing relevant data and to solve the research question of the study. Chapter 4 covers the analysis and interpretation of the collected data. Various graphs and tables are utilised to illustrate the gathered information and responses from 23 respondents. The survey was constructed via QuestionPro and a link to the survey was then sent out to potential respondents via WhatsApp contacts of the researcher. 35 individuals responded to the survey however 12 started the survey and did not complete it. In total 65 people viewed the survey.

4.2 PROFILE DETAILS OF THE RESPONDENTS

In this section, the researcher will discuss the profile details of the 23 respondents that have completed the survey. The profile characteristics are the demographics of each of the 23 respondents. These demographics were asked in Section A of the survey and consisted of the respondent's gender, age, population group, level of education and other social media platforms used for making a purchase decision.

4.2.1 Gender

The researcher discovered that the survey fetched a near 50/50 split in gender, with 12 females and 11 males responding totalling 23. 52.17% female respondents to 47.83% male respondents. Gender is not relevant to the study however it is interesting and important to ensure the study fetches a broad and equal response.

4.2.2   Age

With regards to the age of respondents, the researcher found that out of the 23 respondents that completed the survey, the age group that most responded to the study were 20-29 years with a response of 43.48% or 10 responses. Figure 4.1 below states the age composition of the study.

FIGURE 1: AGE COMPOSITION OF THE STUDY
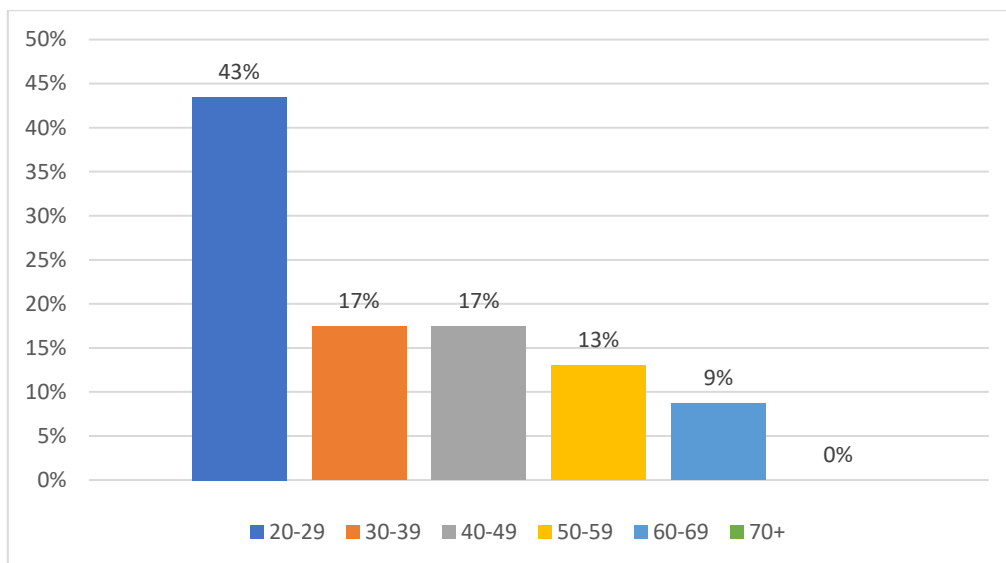
4.2.3 Population group

The population group of the 23 respondents that answered the survey for this study shows that the majority of respondents were Indian/Asian at 39.13% or 9 respondents. Coloured and White respondents were 7 and 6 out of the 23 respectively and there was 1 Black respondent. Population group of respondents do not hold bearing on the study however it is interesting to note the diversity of the respondents and their respective answers.

4.2.4 Level of Education

The respondents of the survey were asked to provide their highest level of education to symbolize mainly the diversity in responses. Similarly, to population group, this bears no impact on the study itself. The below Figure 4.2 states the composition of the respondents' level of education.

FIGURE 4.2: LEVEL OF EDUCATION COMPOSITION OF THE STUDY

- ■ Grade 11 or less
- ■ Grade 12 or equivalent (matric)
- ■ National Diploma or equivalent certificate
- ■ Bachelor's Degree
- ■ Post Graduate Degree (e.g. Honours/Masters/MBA/Doctorate)
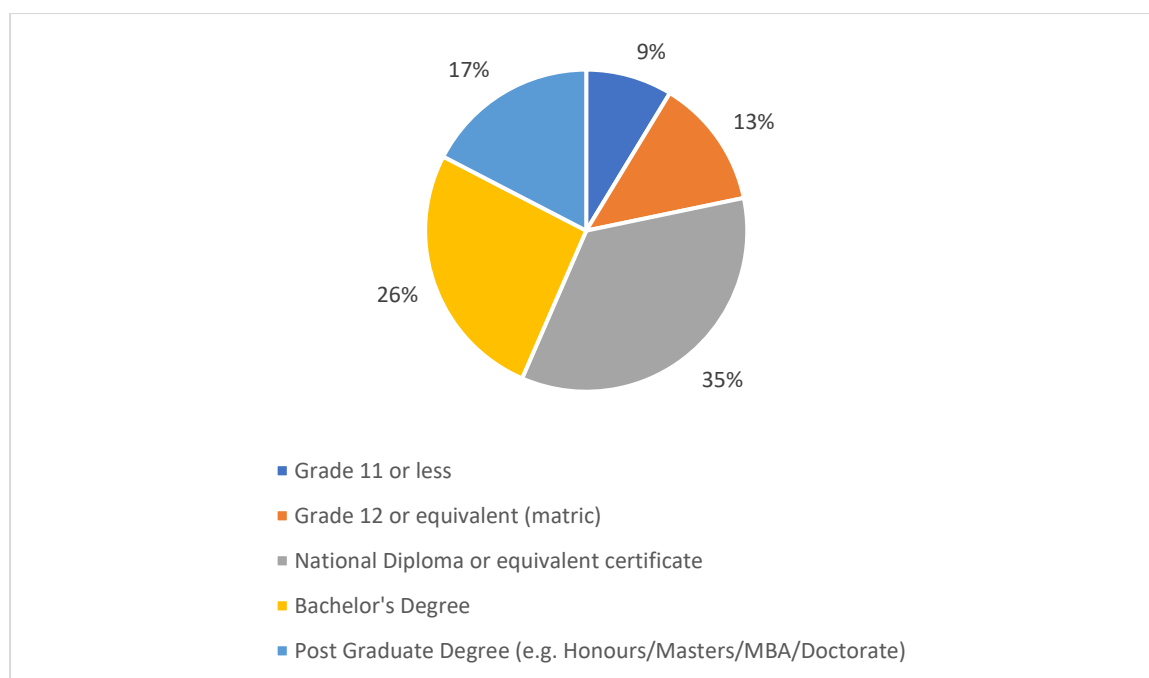
4.2.5   Other social media platforms consulted for making a purchasing decision

The final question in Section A aimed to investigate whether respondents used other social media platforms to make an informed purchasing decision and also opens up avenues for further research. Only 1 respondent stated they don't use any platform, 1 used LinkedIn while the remaining 21 respondents chose from the given list. The list of social media platforms used included 6 respondents selecting Facebook, 2 selected Twitter, 5 selecting Instagram and the majority of respondents utilising YouTube for making an informed purchasing decision with a total of 8 respondents.

4.3   RESPONDENTS' OPINIONS ON eWOM VARIABLES' INFLUENCE ON PURCHASING DECISION VIA WHATSAPP

Five eWOM variables that potentially affect purchasing decisions have been investigated, namely: normative influence, informational influence, trust, opinion leader and opinion seeking. Each variable was separately investigated to understand and gain insight into their specific influence on purchasing decision, however to gain a true understanding of the variables, the questions were randomized as to not indicate to the respondent the specific variable being analysed. Respondents were

requested to indicate their level of agreement with the statements, under each variable, in the context of the WhatsApp social media platform specifically. Responses were obtained using QuestionPro with a link to the survey being sent to respondents through WhatsApp.

To tabulate the results, the researcher found it best to combine "Strongly Disagree" and "Disagree" under the term "Disagree". Similarly, "Strongly Agree" and "Agree" have been combined to form "Agree".

4.3.1 Normative influence

Table 4.1 analyses the eWOM variable, normative influence's results from the survey. These questions related to how respondents are influenced by their WhatsApp contacts in terms of their purchasing decisions impressions.

Table 4.1: Descriptive statistics for respondents' view of normative influence variables to affect purchasing decisions

		Disagree %	Neutral %	Agree %	Total %	Mean	Standard deviation
1	When buying products, I generally purchase those brands that I think others will approve of	60,87%	17,39%	21,74%	100%	2,347826	1,112274
2	If other people can see me using a product, I often purchase the brand they expect me to buy	82,61%	13,04%	4,35%	100%	1,913043	0,792754
3	I achieve a sense of belonging by purchasing the same products and brands that others purchase	73,91%	17,39%	8,7%	100%	2,043478	0,928256
4	It is important that others like the products and brands I buy	65,22%	30,43%	4,35%	100%	2,26087	0,751809
5	I like to know what brands and	30,43%	21,74%	47,83%	100%	3,130435	1,217462

	products make good impressions on others						
6	I often identify with other people by purchasing the same products and brands they purchase	52,17%	34,78%	13,04%	100%	2,347826	1,027295
7	TOTAL	60,87%	22,46%	16,67%	100%	2,34058	1,042851

Normative influence yielded the lowest possible mean score of 2,34 indicating that in terms of making a purchase decision based on the opinions and behavioural influence of others, respondents disagree and would rather make their decision based off of other factors. A total of 60,87% of respondents disagree with all statements regarding this variable, highlighting that "If other people can see me using a product, I often purchase the brand they expect me to buy", 82,61% of respondents disagree with this particular statement. In regard to the fifth statement, 47,83% of respondents agree with and is the highest agreement level of the normative influence statements.

4.3.2   Informational influence

Informational influence's results are analysed below in Table 4.2. Informational influence seems to be a different story to normative influence as here, over a half of respondents agree with statements relating to this variable, at 52,17% of respondents. This indicates that respondents utilise WhatsApp to gain informative information from the contacts they have on WhatsApp that they believe will help influence their purchasing decision. The third statement, "To make sure I buy the right product or brand, I often observe what my contacts on WhatsApp are buying and using" was the statement most disagreed with at 43,48%. Statements 1 and 4 both had agreement levels of 69,57% which is the highest of this variable.

Table 4.2: Descriptive statistics for respondents' view of informational influence variables to affect purchasing decisions

		Disagree %	Neutral %	Agree %	Total %	Mean	Standard deviation
1	If I have little experience with a product, I often ask my friends on WhatsApp about the product	13,04%	17,39%	69,57%	100%	3,521739	0,845822
2	I frequently gather information from my contacts on WhatsApp about a product before I buy	21,74%	39,13%	39,13%	100%	3,086957	0,949308
3	To make sure I buy the right product or brand, I often observe what my contacts on WhatsApp are buying and using	43,48%	30,43%	26,09%	100%	2,695652	1,019571
4	If I have little experience with a product, I often ask my friends on WhatsApp about the product	17,39%	13,04%	69,57%	100%	3,478261	0,897956
5	I often consult WhatsApp contacts or other people to help choose the best alternative available from a product class before I purchase	17,39%	26,09%	56,52%	100%	3,347826	1,152416
6	TOTAL	22,61%	25,22%	52,17%	100%	3,226087	1,009263

4.3.3 Trust

With a mean of 3,52, trust was the highest valued variable amongst respondents. This shows that respondents must have a sense of trust and familiarity with their contacts on WhatsApp to take the information they have received and let it influence their purchasing decision. Statements 3 and 4 both recorded 73,91% agreement levels

whereas statement 5, "The contacts on WhatsApp will do everything within their capacity to help me purchasing a product" was the most disagreed upon with 26,09% respondents. Statement 1, "I trust my friends on my WhatsApp contact list", recorded zero disagreements amongst respondents.

Table 4.3: Descriptive statistics for respondents' view of trust variables to affect purchasing decisions

		Disagree %	Neutral %	Agree %	Total %	Mean	Standard deviation
1	I trust my friends on my WhatsApp contact list	0%	34,78%	65,22%	100%	3,652174	0,486985
2	My contacts on WhatsApp offer honest opinions	4,35%	43,48%	52,17%	100%	3,521739	0,665348
3	I feel confident in having open discussions with the contacts on my WhatsApp	4,35%	21,74%	73,91%	100%	3,73913	0,810016
4	I feel confident about having discussions with the contacts on WhatsApp when purchasing a product	8,7%	17,39%	73,91%	100%	3,652174	0,831685
5	The contacts on WhatsApp will do everything within their capacity to help me purchasing a product	26,09%	34,78%	39,13%	100%	3,043478	0,975997
3	TOTAL	8,7%	30,43%	60,87%	100%	3,521739	0,798549

4.3.4 Opinion leader

Opinion leadership, detailed in the below table 4.4, was answered fairly neutral by respondents, with a mean score of 3,12. This variable was evenly dispersed with different opinions from respondents totalling a neutral response, with statement 3, a fairly even 30,43%, 30,43% and 39,13% disparity of disagree, neutral and agree respectively. Statement 5 and 6 both had the highest agreement rate of 43,48%.

Table 4.4: Descriptive statistics for respondents' view of opinion leader variables to affect purchasing decisions

		Disagree %	Neutral %	Agree %	Total %	Mean	Standard deviation
1	I often persuade my contacts on WhatsApp to buy products that I like	39,13%	26,09%	34,78%	100%	2,826087	1,072473
2	My opinion of products seems not to count with my contacts on WhatsApp	17,39%	56,52%	26,09%	100%	3,130435	0,919701
3	When they choose products, my contacts on WhatsApp do not turn to me for advice	30,43%	30,43%	39,13%	100%	3,173913	0,984063
4	My contacts on WhatsApp pick their products based on what I have told them	21,74%	52,17%	26,09%	100%	3,043478	0,705708
5	On WhatsApp, I often influence my contacts' opinions about products	21,74%	34,78%	43,48%	100%	3,26087	1,009833
6	I tend to pass along my contacts' positive reviews of products to other contacts on WhatsApp	21,74%	34,78%	43,48%	100%	3,26087	1,009833
7	TOTAL	25,36%	39,13%	35,51%	100%	3,115942	0,951928

4.3.5 Opinion seeking

Table 4.5: Descriptive statistics for respondents' view of opinion seeking variables to affect purchasing decisions

		Disagree %	Neutral %	Agree %	Total %	Mean	Standard deviation
1	I like to get my contacts' opinions via WhatsApp before	21,74%	26,09%	52,17%	100%	3,26087	1,053884

	I buy new products						
2	I like to seek my contacts' opinions via WhatsApp as I can get a variety of information that could be positive or negative about the product	13,04%	21,74%	65,22%	100%	3,608696	0,988071
3	When I consider new products, I ask my contacts on WhatsApp for advice	13,04%	26,09%	60,87%	100%	3,521739	0,947224
4	When seeking opinion, I tend to ask a contact of mine on WhatsApp who is knowledgeable in that area	13,04%	4,35%	82,61%	100%	3,869565	1,01374
5	I feel more comfortable choosing products when I have obtained my contacts' opinions on them	26,09%	26,09%	47,83%	100%	3,26087	1,053884
6	Seeking product information from my contacts helps me make a purchase decision	21,74%	21,74%	56,52%	100%	3,391304	1,033051
6	TOTAL	18,12%	21,01%	60,87%	100%	3,485507	1,019772

In the above table, opinion seeking was analysed and with a mean score of 3,49, it is the second most important variable to respondents behind trust. With no more than 18,12% of respondents disagreeing and over 60% of respondents agreeing with the statements relating to opinion seeking. 3 statements had an equal amount of the lowest disagreement between respondents being statements 2, 3 and 4. Statement 4, "When seeking opinion, I tend to ask a contact of mine on WhatsApp who is knowledgeable in that area", over 80% of respondents agreed.

5.1   INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 4, the findings and the interpretation of the results of the study were reported. As mentioned, a targeted sample size of 20-25 respondents was selected for the study and the survey obtained 23 completed responses. The quantitative methodology was utilised to analyse the data obtained for the study. The objectives of Chapter 5 are to provide the problem statement and research objectives, a synopsis of the study, the main findings from both the literature review as well as the empirical results, conclusions, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

5.2   PROBLEM STATEMENT

With the sudden hit to business due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdowns that ensued, small businesses needed to react to stay alive. Social media became the easiest and cost-effective way to stay in contact with customers and gain their continued support. eWOM is a vital tool for small businesses to utilize and thus it is important for businesses to encourage positive eWOM endorsements.

Against this background, the purpose of this study is to determine the electronic word-of-mouth variables which influence consumer purchases and lead to positive eWOM endorsements. By answering this question, businesses can improve their understanding of the importance of eWOM and increase their social media presence to ensure customers spread positive eWOM messages.

The problem statement in Chapter 1 concludes that the purpose of this study is to determine what electronic word-of-mouth variables influence the consumer's purchasing decision. These aids small businesses in understanding it's importance and displays the utility of a platform such as WhatsApp and its effectiveness it is in spreading positive eWOM endorsements. WhatsApp should be a social media platform that is favoured by small businesses.

5.3   RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of the study, mentioned in Chapter 1 is to investigate electronic word-of-mouth variables via WhatsApp usage and their effect on consumers' purchase intentions. The following objectives, previously stated in Chapter 1, is to aid in achieving the primary objective:

- To understand the research area and its key components via a literature review. This was achieved in Chapter 2 of this study and found the key variables; normative influence, informational influence, trust, opinion leadership and opinion seeking.

- To investigate the variables of eWOM to gain a greater understanding of how they influence consumer purchase intentions. The investigation was conducted via a survey distributed to twenty-three respondents and the results of which presented in Chapter 4.

- To Investigate how WhatsApp can be utilised to spread positive eWOM messages.

Chapter 2 addresses first objective in the research required in understanding the current body of literature knowledge. Five variables were selected based on their perceived utilisations in the literature sourced to aid the understanding of the effects of eWOM. Objective 2 was investigated in Chapter 4's results and will be further explored in the current chapter. The final objective will be addressed later in this chapter as to what the survey responses unveiled and how WhatsApp can be useful in spreading positive eWOM endorsements.

5.4   MAIN FINDINGS FROM EMPIRICAL RESULTS AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The following section outlines the results from the twenty-three survey responses in terms of the respective variables and how respondents valued each variable. The variables selected were found in different studies pertaining to eWOM that were found in Chapter 2 that pertains to their usefulness in its influence in consumer purchase decision. The overall results were lower than expected with normative influence being the lowest with a mean of 2,34 and the highest mean of 3,52 being trust.

5.4.1 Normative Influence

Normative influence was defined in Chapter 2 as wanting to be accepted by society and thus adopting the beliefs and norms of that society to fit in (Kamolov et al 2019:53). Question 2 of this variable, "If other people can see me using a product, I often purchase the brand they expect me to buy" yielded the lowest mean response out of all the questions with a mean of 1,91. With a disagreement of 60,87%, it indicates that WhatsApp users do not generally make a purchase with the thought that their purchase must conform to social norms. The highest mean of this variable came from question 5, "I like to know what brands and products make good impressions on others" with a mean of 3,13 which indicates that WhatsApp users are neutral and at best suggests that some users would purchase luxury products based on the impression the product would have on others.

5.4.2 Informational Influence

Informational influence is receiving information about a product from a knowledgeable source that ultimately influences the consumers intention to purchase (Farias 2017:855). 52,17% of respondents agree that they don't always are the most knowledgeable about a product and thus obtaining this information from sources via WhatsApp will have an effect of the purchase decision. With a mean of 3,22, it more indicates a neutral stance instead of an agreement amongst respondents which was what was expected. This difference in outcomes could be due to reasons such as the way the questions were posed or that respondents utilise informational influence subconsciously and when asked about it, do not realise it affects their purchase decision.

5.4.3 Trust

Trust is an important aspect of eWOM, and it shows through the results of the survey as a mean of 3,52 and an agreement of 60.87% of the statements of trust, shows how important it is to trust the source of eWOM a user interacts with. Without the familiarity and trust that one has with the source of the eWOM influence, the influence is rendered useless as the consumer would not utilise that information to make a purchase decision. The questions relating to trust in the survey not only indicated the importance

of trust but also the trust the respondents have with the contacts they chat to on WhatsApp from which they can draw a purchase decision from.

5.4.4 Opinion Leader

Opinion leadership could be another variable that suffers from subconscious usage as it received a lower-than-expected mean of 3,11 indicating that respondents felt neutral upon. With a standard deviation of close to 1 (0,95), it indicates an almost even distribution of disagreement, agreement and a neutral stance of opinion leadership. Users of a product that exceeds their expectations will share that information with their friends on WhatsApp and perhaps without knowing they are influencing their contacts. However, one must draw conclusions based on the results and not from hypotheticals and thus opinion leadership drew a varied response that suggests some users like to share their opinions on products whereas some users prefer not to. It would be interesting to hear the opinions of respondents who suggested they don't share their opinions, and this can be a suggestion for future research to include a more qualitative/mixed approach in the research.

5.4.5 Opinion Seeker

With a 60.87% agreement level amongst respondents, it indicates that WhatsApp users seek the opinions of their WhatsApp contacts before making a purchase decision as they respect and trust their opinions and feel more comfortable obtaining their opinions before buying. With a 3,49 mean, it sways close to an agreement of opinion seeking however throughout the survey results, it indicates a much lower expected result and leans more to a neutral outcome from the respondents.

5.5 CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

With an expected outcome of agreement between most of the variables, the survey yielded a fairly neutral response based on the selected variables for the study. Normative influence was interesting to note that WhatsApp users and respondents

don't necessarily believe that their purchases must stick to social norms and beliefs, and this comes down to the self-awareness of the respondent. With how direct some of the questions were phrased, it may have been a fault of the survey as it appeared with the question that there was a wrong and right answer to the question which should never be the case.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, only a small sample size was allocated due to restrictions and thus can be seen as a limitation of the study and something that can be improved on in post-COVID life in research. Due to this reason the researchers cannot generalise the findings to the entire population, thus, it is recommended that future researchers should make use of a larger sample size.

Another limitation of this study that was experienced, is that the researchers only made use of a quantitative research approach. This approach was chosen as it was used as an overview to gather the opinions from a larger population. A qualitative aspect was not considered; thus for future research, a qualitative research approach or a mixed approach could be uitilised to better understand the influence WhatsApp has in eWOM. This will see a more in-depth analysis of a wider audience. With such a small sample size from this study, more data can be gathered to obtain a greater understanding the variables that influence consumer purchase decision.

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APPENDIX 1

APPENDIX 1

test 2

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APPENDIX 2

NELSON MANDELA

UNIVERSITY

FACULTY OF BUSINESS AND ECONOMIC SCIENCES

ETHICS CLEARANCE FOR TREATISES / DISSERTATIONS / THESES

Instructions:
- Should be completed by study leader and student
- Must be signed off by student, study leader and HoD
- Submit completed form to Ms Lindie van Rensburg
- Please ensure that the research methodology section from the proposal is attached to this form
- *Please note that by following this Proforma ethics route, the study will NOT be allocated an ethics clearance number*

FACULTY: Faculty of Business & Economic Sciences

SCHOOL / DEPARTMENT: Business Management

I, (surname and initials of study leader) ___Gray, BA_____

the study leader for (surname and initials of

candidate) Jacob M

_____

217918301_____

a candidate for the degree of BCom Honours Business Management

with a treatise/dissertation/thesis entitled (full title of treatise/dissertation/thesis):

The Power of WhatsApp as an EWOM tool

considered the following ethics criteria *(please tick the appropriate block):*

		YES	NO
1.	Is there any risk of harm, embarrassment of offence, however slight or temporary, to the participant, third parties or to the communities at large?		X
2.	Is the study based on a research population defined as 'vulnerable' in terms of age, physical characteristics and/or disease status?		X
2.1	Are subjects/participants/respondents of your study:		X
2.1.1	Children under the age of 18?		X
2.1.2	NMMU staff?		X
2.1.3	NMMU students?		X
2.1.4	The elderly/persons over the age of 60?		X
2.1.5	A sample from an institution (e.g. hospital/school)?		X
2.1.6	Handicapped (e.g. mentally or physically)?		X
3.	Does the data that will be collected require consent of an institutional authority for this study? (An institutional authority refers to an organisation that is established by government to protect vulnerable people)		X
3.1	Are you intending to access participant data from an existing, stored repository (e.g. school, institutional or university records)?		X
4.	Will the participant's privacy, anonymity or confidentiality be compromised?		X
4.1	Are you administering a questionnaire/survey that:		X
4.1.1	Collects sensitive/identifiable data from participants?		X
4.1.2	Does not guarantee the anonymity of the participant?		X
4.1.3	Does not guarantee the confidentiality of the participant and the data?		X
4.1.4	Will offer an incentive to respondents to participate, i.e. a lucky draw or any other prize?		X
4.1.5	Will create doubt whether sample control measures are in place?		X
)4.1.5	Will be distributed electronically via email (and requesting an email response)? Note: • If your questionnaire **DOES NOT** request respondents' identification, is distributed electronically and you request respondents to return it *manually* (print out and deliver/mail); **AND** respondent anonymity can be guaranteed, your answer will be NO. • If your questionnaire **DOES NOT** request respondents' identification, is *distributed via an email link and works through a web response system (e.g. the university survey system); **AND*** respondent anonymity can be guaranteed, your answer will be NO.		X
5.	Do you wish to publish an article from this study and submit to an accredited Journal?		X

> *Please note that if **ANY** of the questions above have been answered in the affirmative **(YES)** the student will need to complete the full ethics clearance form (REC-H application) and submit it with the relevant documentation to the Faculty RECH (Ethics) representative.*

and hereby certify that the student has given his/her research ethical consideration and full ethics approval is not required.

_____   4 October 2021
STUDY LEADER(S)   DATE

_____   _____
HEAD OF DEPARTMENT   DATE

_____MJ_____   _____10/05/2021____
STUDENT   DATE

APPENDIX 3

NELSON MANDELA
UNIVERSITY

Unit for Management Sciences
Department of Business Management
School of Management Sciences
Summerstrand South Campus
Tel. +27 (0)41 504 4745 /+27 (0)504 4065
Email: Beverley.Gray@mandela.ac.za

14 September 2021

Dear Respondent

RESEARCH PROJECT: THE POWER OF WHATSAPP AS AN ELECTRONIC WORD OF MOUTH TOOL

I am a BCom (Honours) student in the Department of Business Management at Nelson Mandela University and am currently conducting research for my treatise on the influence of electronic word-of-mouth endorsements via WhatsApp on consumer purchase decisions.

The **objective** of this study is to investigate electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) variables via the WhatsApp social media platform and their effect on consumers' purchase intentions.

For the purpose of this study, the respondent must be over the age of 18 years and not a current Nelson Mandela University student. Following this, a major requirement of this study is that respondents must make use of the WhatsApp social media platform.

All information will be treated in the strictest confidence and you are under no obligation to participate. Please note that the information obtained from the data analysis will be used for research and publication purposes only. Personal particulars of the respondents in this study **will not be identified in any way**, including the final report.

Please do not hesitate to contact my study leader, Ms Beverley Gray, at the contact details above if you require any further information.

Thanking you in advance for your willingness to participate in the study. Your participation is greatly

appreciated.

Yours sincerely

MR MICAEL JACOB (STUDENT NUMBER: 217918301)
RESEARCHER (BCOM HONOURS PROGRAMME) – DEPARTMENT OF BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

MS BEVERLEY GRAY
STUDY LEADER AND LECTURER
DEPARTMENT OF BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

NELS●N M▲NDELA
U N I V E R S I T Y

A GENERAL INFORMATION

Please indicate your responses to the following questions with an (X) in the columns on the right.

1 Please confirm that you meet the three requirements for participating in this research.

(i) You are over the age of 18.	Yes		1
(ii) You are not currently a registered student at Nelson Mandela University.			
(iii) As a WhatsApp user, you also share messages with others to discuss products, whether it be seeking information or giving your opinions on this platform.	No		2

2 Please indicate your gender.

Male		1
Female		2

3 Please indicate the age category to which you belong (for statistical purposes only).

20-29 years		1	40-49 years		3	60-69 years		5
30-39 years		2	50-59 years		4	70+ years		6

4 Please indicate the population group to which you belong (for statistical purposes only).

Black		1
Coloured		2
Indian/Asian		3
White		4
Not willing to say		5

5 Please indicate your highest level of education.

Grade 11 or less		1
Grade 12 or equivalent (matric)		2
National Diploma or equivalent certificate		3
Bachelor's Degree		4
Postgraduate Degree (e.g. Honours/Masters/MBA/Doctorate)		5

6 Aside from WhatsApp, please select any other social media platforms you consult and/or use in making a purchasing decision.

Facebook		1
Twitter		2
Instagram		3
YouTube		4
Snapchat		5
Other: Please mention below		6
_____		7

B   THE INFLUENCE OF ELECTRONIC WORD-OF-MOUTH (eWOM) VIA WHATSAPP ON PURCHASE DECISIONS

Below are a number of statements relating to word-of-mouth endorsements via electronic communication tool, WhatsApp which could possibly influence consumer purchase decisions. Please indicate with an **X** the extent to which you **agree or disagree** with each statement. The columns are graded from **1 to 5**. Number **1** denotes **strong disagreement** with a statement and at the other end of the scale, number **5** denotes **strong agreement** with a statement. There are no right or wrong answers.

	Statements relating to word-of-mouth endorsements via electronic communication tool WhatsApp	Extent of agreement				
		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral or no opinion	Agree	Strongly agree
1	I often consult WhatsApp contacts or other people to help choose the best alternative available from a product class before I purchase	1	2	3	4	5
2	I often persuade my contacts on WhatsApp to buy products that I like	1	2	3	4	5
3	It is important that others like the products and brands I buy	1	2	3	4	5
4	I feel more comfortable choosing products if I have obtained my contacts' opinions on them	1	2	3	4	5
5	I like to seek my contacts' opinions via WhatsApp as I can get a variety of information that could be positive or negative about the product	1	2	3	4	5
6	I feel confident about having discussions with the contacts on WhatsApp when purchasing a product	1	2	3	4	5
7	If other people can see me using a product, I often purchase the brand they expect me to buy	1	2	3	4	5
8	The contacts on WhatsApp will do everything within their capacity to help me purchasing a product	1	2	3	4	5
9	When they choose products, my contacts on WhatsApp do not turn to me for advice	1	2	3	4	5
10	I trust my friends on my WhatsApp contact list	1	2	3	4	5
11	On WhatsApp, I often influence my contacts' opinions about products	1	2	3	4	5
12	My opinion of products seems not to count with my contacts on WhatsApp	1	2	3	4	5
13	I like to get my contacts' opinions via WhatsApp before I buy new products	1	2	3	4	5
14	If I have little experience with a product, I often ask my friends on WhatsApp about the product	1	2	3	4	5
15	My contacts on WhatsApp offer honest opinions	1	2	3	4	5
16	My contacts on WhatsApp pick their products based on what I have told them	1	2	3	4	5
17	I often identify with other people by purchasing the same products and brands they purchase	1	2	3	4	5
18	When I consider new products, I ask my contacts on WhatsApp for advice	1	2	3	4	5
19	I frequently gather information from my contacts on WhatsApp about a product before I buy	1	2	3	4	5
20	I like to know what brands and products make good impressions on others	1	2	3	4	5
21	When seeking opinion, I tend to ask a contact of mine on WhatsApp who is knowledgeable in that area	1	2	3	4	5
22	If I have little experience with a product, I often ask my friends on WhatsApp about the product	1	2	3	4	5
23	Seeking product information from my contacts helps me make a purchase decision	1	2	3	4	5
24	I achieve a sense of belonging by purchasing the same products and brands others purchase	1	2	3	4	5
25	To make sure I buy the right product or brand, I often observe what my contacts on WhatsApp are buying and using	1	2	3	4	5
26	I tend to pass along my contacts' positive reviews of products to other contacts on WhatsApp	1	2	3	4	5

27	I feel confident in having open discussions with the contacts on my WhatsApp	1	2	3	4	5
28	When buying products, I generally purchase those brands that I think others will approve of	1	2	3	4	5

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION