Brand love or hate: Online influencers' role in promoting brands in the SME sector

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ABSTRACT

Could this be a world where customers fall head over heels for brands with influencers acting as the love potion that makes the magic happen? This article explores the role that online influencers play in promoting brand love through hedonic experiences, brand hate, and the key considerations small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) need to be mindful of when recruiting influencers. Choosing an influencer who will enhance customer engagement, brand loyalty, and commitment, ultimately driving the success of the brand, is vital for an SME. Adopting a qualitative research design and purposive sampling, this study interviewed eleven SME customers in the Gauteng province of South Africa who have active social media accounts and follow SMEs online. The findings reveal four key themes, namely identifying factors of influencers, the meaning of brand love, the meaning of brand hate, and considerations when choosing the right influencer to let customers fall in love with your brand. The study findings bridge the gap in understanding the relationship between influencers and brand love from a South African perspective. SMEs will be able to enhance their brand love and the hedonic experience by choosing the appropriate influencer for their brand to enhance customer engagement, brand loyalty and commitment from their customers, and to, ultimately, drive brand success.

Keywords: Brand Hate, Brand Love, Influencer

1. INTRODUCTION

The South African government acknowledges the important role that small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) play in job creation, economic growth, and eliminating poverty (Malau 2024). The failure rate of South African SMEs is one of the highest in developing countries, with a failure rate of between 60% and 80% during the first and second years of operation (Mhlongo & Daya 2023: 591). The study by Ma'aji, Shrubsall, and Anderson (2023:1) indicate that marketing skills is a main element in directing the sucess or failure of SMEs. They further indicate that developing marketing skills will help the SMEs to be successful. . Rajagopaul, Magwentshu and Kalidas (2020:3) explain that SMEs in South Africa represent more than 98% of businesses in South Africa and employ between 50% and 60% of the country's labour force across industries. As such, SMEs play an important role in the economy, job opportunities and establishing inclusive growth in a country (Rajagopaul *et al*. 2020:4; Sharabati, Ali, Allahham, Hussein, Alheet, & Mohammad 2024: 8667). SMEs are often restricted by a lack of funds and resources (Istipliler, Bort & Woywode 2023:1), resulting in fewer resources being allocated to marketing (Cant 2012: 1107-1116), which plays a key role in business, and leads to an overreliance on word-of-mouth and product popularity (FNB n.d.). Sharabati *et al*. (2024: 8667) reveal that digital marketing is extremely important for SME success, with Bala and Verma (2018:322) indicating that digital marketing is a cost-effective tool that can significantly enhance an organisation's profitability when implemented appropriately. Thus, knowing which social media sites their target audience uses and increasing online engagement are important factors in achieving online marketing success. With SMEs' lack of funds, knowledge, and resources to implement appropriate marketing strategies, digital marketing (especially influencer marketing), if understood and implemented correctly, could improve SME survival rates and achieve success in a highly competitive market.

2. RESEARCH PROBLEM AND OBJECTIVES

As social media continues to grow and the digital landscape evolves, brands and SMEs in particular, must explore and adopt innovative strategies to capture and engage their target audiences. Social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, WhatsApp, Pinterest and YouTube have become central destinations for news, entertainment, information, purchases, trends, and learning, often positioning niche influencers as trusted sources of authority and influence (Forbes, 2022). With this shift, the exponential growth of social media (5.20 billion users worldwide, with Facebook being the leading platform with 3.15 billion active users, followed by YouTube (2.5 billion active users), Instagram (2 billion active users), and TikTok (1 billion active users), and adoption by consumers across genders and ages, with more than 50% of users being between 18 and 34 years of age (Priori data, 2025), brands need to explore the efficacy of integrating influencer marketing into their digital marketing strategy (Campbell & Farrell, 2020:9). Priori data (2025) indicates that influencer marketing on various social media sites is growing at an exponential rate. Many brands, such as Revolve, Gymshark and Vanity Planet, have taken advantage of influencer marketing, which is successfully reflected in their revenue (Levin 2020). Rosengren and Campbell (2021: 505-509) further support the call to investigate influencers and the interconnected digital and social advertising systems that exist.

Jin, Muqaddam and Ryu (2019: 567-579) assert that customers exposed to Instagram posts from celebrities indicate that they perceive the information to be more trustworthy, thus feeling more positive towards the brand; they feel a stronger social presence and are more envious of the source than those customers exposed to traditional brand posts. However, evidence indicates that audiences perceive traditional and Instagram celebrities differently. Jin *et al*. (2019: 567-579) findings explain that influencer marketing is an effective branding strategy, and, generally, social media can be considered an informative and inspiring origin for marketing planning.

There is a hedonic experience that links influencers and brands. When influencers increase their hedonic expertise, they are more effective, gain more followers and increase opinion leadership (Barta, Belanche, Fernández & Flavián 2023:1). This hedonic experience is the link that brands need to be loved by their customers (Siddique & Rajput, 2022: 1-13). Recent studies stress the hedonic importance of providing SMEs with marketing options to utilise chatbots for a more individualised and humane experience (Kedi, Ejimuda, Idemudia & Ijomah 2024: 2332-2341). AlFarraj, Alalwan, Obeidat, Baabdullah, Aldmour and Al-Haddad (2021) supported by Çelik (2022:153) mentions that influencer attractiveness, which refers to the physical characteristics, admiration of, as well as personality and athletic ability of an influencer, has a mediating role in the effect of brand love and confirms the link between influencer

attractiveness and brand love, but recommends further studies in this area. . Lestiyani and Purwanto (2024: 886-898) further support these findings with a quantitative study that indicate how influencer marketing and brand love effect purchasing decisions.

Sarkar posits that few qualitative studies have been done to explore the antecedents of brand Love (Sarkar 2014: 481-494). To further confirm the knowledge gap, Hegner, Fenko and Teravest (2017[a]: 26-41) stipulate that research discussing the factors that influence brand love is limited. Furthermore, limited investigation has been done on the antecedents of brand love, and that there is room for more knowledge on the subject (Sarkar 2014: 481-494; Hegner *et al.* 2017[a]: 26-41; Palusuk, Koles & Hasan 2019: 97-129; Napontun, Senachai, Julagasigorn & Chuenpreecha 2024:1-26). Rosengren and Campbell (2021: 505-509) have also called for research on influencers to understand the increasingly interconnected digital and social advertising system.

This study seeks to understand the relationship between influencers and brand love in South Africa. Further, it identifies aspects to consider when evaluating influencers to collaborate with that will assist in building brand love, and potential threats that may lead to brand hate amongst customers. The study's primary objective is to establish influencers' role in shaping brand love and brand hate in South African SMEs. The outcome of this study can provide an understanding of the relationship between influencers and brand love. SMEs will be able to enhance their brand love and the hedonic experience thereof by choosing the appropriate influencer for their brand to enhance customer engagement, brand loyalty and commitment from their customers, and to, ultimately, drive brand success.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

31. BRAND LOVE

Hussain, Khan, Lakho and Saleem (2022: 152-162) assert that if customers experience brand love, the resulting behaviour can benefit the brand, with Siddique and Rajput (2022: 1-13) noting that brand love is considered a construct that evaluates satisfied customers' passionate emotional attachment to certain brands. It is known that more hedonic or self-expressive brands tend to be more loved by customers, and, therefore, companies should focus on the hedonic value of their products/services to enhance the emotional response from customers (Siddique & Rajput 2022: 1-13).

This hedonic approach refers to the achievement of happiness or pleasure and the avoidance of pain (Ryan & Deci 2001: 141-166). Hedonic consumption is also defined as the multisensory, emotional and imaginary aspects relating to product experience (Holbrook & Hirschman 1982: 132-140). Self-expressive benefits from the brand provide more potential for brand love and, thus, positive post-consumption behaviour (Carroll & Ahuvia 2006:79). Palusuk *et al*. (2019: 97-129) assert that brand love provides possibilities to increase customer engagement, brand loyalty and commitment from customers while Leite, Rodrigues and Lopes (2024: 11) claim that brand love is significant in shaping strategic decision-making, being customer-focused, and presenting insights into competitiveness. They further indicate that brand love is considered crucial in understanding the multifaceted dynamics of consumer-brand dealings for organisations, and for organisations to make knowledgeable decisions, keep customers satisfied and stay competitive.

3.2 BRAND HATE

The concept of brand hate refers to a set of negative customer emotions towards a specific brand (Walter, Vale, Au-Yong-Oliveira, Veloso & Sousa, 2023: 1-19). The implications hereof include less profit for the company and lower market share (Walter *et al*., 2023: 1-19). Brand hate leads to four very distinct behaviours, namely: brand avoidance (Hegner, Fetscherin & Van Delzen 2017[b]:13-25; Slamet & Yuliana 2024: 311-323), negative word of mouth (Hegner *et al.* 2017[b]:13-25; Slamet & Yuliana 2024: 311-323; Walter *et al.* 2023: 1-19), brand change (Walter *et al.* 2023: 1-19) and brand revenge (Hegner *et al.* 2017[b]:13-25; Walter *et al.* 2023: 1-19). Hegner *et al.* (2017[b]:13-25) further explain that ideological incompatibility (the social, legal, moral and ethical wrongdoings of a brand), symbolic incongruity (not being an authentic brand) and negative past experiences (interaction with the employees, service

or social media will refer to the level of loyalty of the consumers) has the strongest influence on brand hate. Thus, Hegner *et al.* (2017[b]:13-25) advise that employees should be skilled in dealing with dissatisfaction based on the different triggers when a dissatisfied consumer should approach a brand.

3.3 INFLUENCER MARKETING

Heggde and Shainesh (2018) note that the world is ever-changing, and that social media is changing society in a radical manner. They also confirm that consumer behaviour is multifaceted, and the digital changes and updates make digital consumer behaviour very complex (Heggde and Shainesh 2018).

Influencer marketing is when a brand collaborates with an online influencer to market their products or services. Some influencer collaborations are less tangible, and influencers only assist in improving brand recognition (Influencer Marketing Hub 2025). In recent years, the term influencer has developed to include four types: mega influencers, macro influencers, micro-influencers, and nano influencers (Hass & Laverie 2020:14-16). These terms indicate the extent of an influencer's reach. Micro-influencers and nano-influencers' content does not have a very wide reach, but they have high engagement, including shares, likes and comments (Hass & Laverie 2020: 14-16). Gottbrecht (2016), cited in Hass and Laverie (2020: 14-16), explains the differences between the different influencers as follows: macro influencers are usually bloggers or expert influencers with 100,000 to one million followers. Micro influencers have fewer than 100,000 followers, and nano influencers have fewer than 10,000 followers. Micro and nano influencers have the lowest number of followers, but the most engagement online. Dhanik (2016), cited in Hass and Laverie (2020: 14-16), explains that companies would rather choose micro-influencers to collaborate with since they offer a more personal connection, and audiences are more targeted, more approachable and reasonably priced.

A global study conducted by Statista (2022) indicates that (as of March 2022) 54% of companies use up to 10 influencers to assist with marketing their organisation, and 3% use up to 1,000 influencers for this purpose. The global influencer marketing market size has also more than doubled from 2019 (Statista 2022). According to Statista (2025) the number of active social media users in South Africa was 26 million in 2024.

In digital media, algorithms process information and provide recommended content to viewers; a rather pervasive process, according to Metzler and Garcia (2024: 735-748). Yang, Zhang and Zhang (2024: 1-21) mention that consumers often view a stream of videos without a clear purchasing goal in mind. The interest to purchase might then be activated through the video that the consumer views. The product engagement (PE) score measures the extent to which a product is shown in the most engaging part of an advert. Based on heat maps, Yang *et al*. (2024: 1-21) indicate that the most engagement is not necessarily where the product is featured, and therefore, a misalignment of payment is provided to influencers focused only on the number of followers and their engagement and not necessarily portraying the product during the most engaging part of the video to enhance sales for the product.

According to Yang *et al.* (2024: 1-21), there is no evidence to suggest that a link exists between the influencer's experience and the PE score. They further note that measuring the PE scores of influencers and using higher scores for adverts will increase company sales. Yang *et al*. (2024: 1-21) also mention that human presence and emotions increase engagement, which links to the hedonic approach described by Barta *et al.* (2023:1).

Viewers usually do not like product adverts during an entertainment video (Elpers, Wedel & Pieters 2003 & Wilbur 2016, cited in Yang *et al.* 2024: 1-21). Influencers also lose followers when posting sponsored videos (Cheng & Zhang 2024: 1). Challenges such as fatigue, distrust or privacy affects influencer marketing strategies (Rajput, Suryavanshi, & Gandhi 2024: 319-355). Therefore, influencers may choose to optimise content for engagement rather than increased sales (Yang *et al.* 2024: 1-21). Since engagement increase with the appearance of people and feelings as well as stimulating or storytelling content, it can be powerful to integrate product adverts with these engaging factors SMEs should consider the PE score to ensure that their paid marketing to influencers will directly increase their sales (Yang *et al.* 2024: 1-21).

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework that underpins this study is the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA), which explains how behaviour can be predicted by the attitude of a person when engaging in behaviour through the mediating effect of behavioural intention (Ajzen 1988; Fishbein & Ajzen 1975, cited in Al-Suqri & Al-Kharusi 2015:189). The TRA suggests that volitional behaviour is influenced directly by behavioural intentions. Volitional behaviour refers to a voluntary decision to take part in a particular behaviour (Hale, Householder & Greene 2002:259). Behavioural intentions are the likelihood of performing a behaviour (Montano & Kasprzyk 2015: 231); it is an outcome of attitudes towards performing a behaviour and subjective norms towards the behaviour (Montano & Kasprzyk 2015: 231; Hale *et al*. 2002:259-286). A study conducted by Peslak, Ceccucci and Sendall (2011:11) concludes that the TRA can be used to understand and predict social media use.

Figure 1 refers to the TRA model adapted from Hale *et al.* (2002:259-286). The TRA model explains the effect that social media influencers have on the attitude and subjective norms of customers, which can lead to loving the brand and engaging with it (which can be measured by the volitional behaviour as stipulated in the model), or hating the brand and disconnecting. The persuasive communication that aims to influence attitudes and subjective norms is linked to the drive from the influencers.
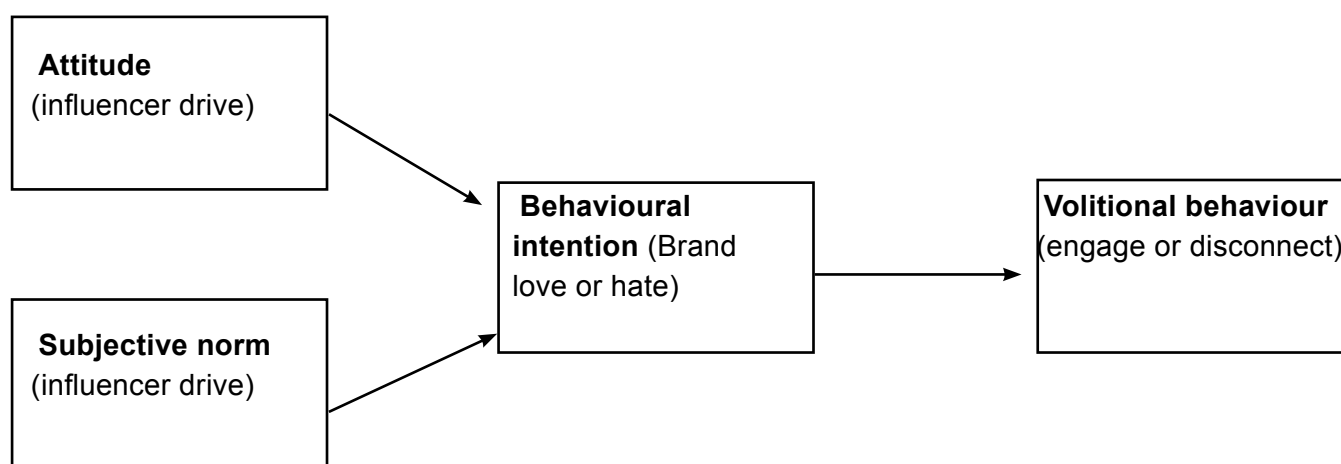

FIGURE 1. THEORY OF REASONED ACTION (HALE ET AL. 2002:259-286).

5. METHODOLOGY

To gain a deeper understanding of influencers' role in promoting brand love and brand hate amongst brands, this study followed an interpretivist research paradigm. The study was exploratory in nature, as there is currently limited research to serve as a reference point between influencers and brand love. The ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the Independent Institute of Education, in accordance with its ethics review and approval procedures (R.000172). Data were collected via interviews using the MS Teams platform during April 2024. The target population for the study was social media users that engage with SMEs in the Gauteng region of South Africa. A non-probability sampling methodology, namely purposive sampling and the snowball technique, was used. Participants were consumers of SME products or services and had an active online social media presence. A qualitative study was conducted in Texas on Instagram influencers; 22 interviews were conducted (Hass & Laverie 2020: 14-16). Further to this, the antecedents and outcomes of brand love were conducted qualitatively, and 12 participants were selected to be interviewed by Skoog and Söderström (2015). This study's data collection concluded with 11 interviews. Social media users who did not support and purchase regularly from SMEs were disqualified from participating.

Participants were recruited via personal social media platforms, such as Facebook, WhatsApp, LinkedIn, and Instagram, who responded to a call to participate in the study. The call to participate provided the audience with the purpose of the research and invited social media users interested in participating in the study to sign up using a registration link that was provided. A total of 12 social media users responded to the call. Out of the 12 individuals, the 11 who met the screening criteria were selected to participate. A Microsoft Teams meeting invite was sent to all participants individually for an agreed time to conduct the interview online. The online interview was, on average, 30 minutes in duration and included the transcribing and recording on Microsoft Teams. A semi-structured open-ended interview schedule that links to the main concepts of brand love, brand hate and influencer marketing discussed in the literature review, as well as the research questions, guided the interview. Participant consent was obtained to participate in the study and have the interview recorded. Participants were informed that they could leave the interview at any time. Their confidentiality and anonymity were also guaranteed in the study.

The qualitative responses from the interview were organised through the text data by investigating any patterns in the responses to ultimately link them to what is relevant in terms of the research questions. Content analysis was performed on the raw data. The transcribing function on MS Teams was used and processed further on ATLAS. ti software to divide responses into themes and sub-themes to derive conclusions. From the analysis, four themes emerged. Identifying factors of influencers, the meaning of brand love, the meaning of brand hate, and considerations when choosing the right influencer to let customers fall in love with your brand.

6. RESULTS

DEMOGRAPHICS

From the 11 interviews conducted, the participants were White or Indian, ranging in age from 31 (youngest respondent) to 65 (oldest respondent), and residing in Gauteng, South Africa. Of the 11 participants, 82% were female, and 18% were male. The social media platforms that the participants engaged with include WhatsApp, Facebook, LinkedIn, TikTok and Instagram. Of the 11 participants, 64% were very engaged on social media, 18% were slightly engaged, and 18% were online spectators, not engaging on social media. Participants were screened prior to the interviews to determine if they supported any SMEs by purchasing from them. Participants who were interviewed followed influencers in the following categories: skincare, travel, lifestyle, fashion, baby, health, jewellery and sports.

THEME 1: IDENTIFYING FACTORS OF AN INFLUENCER

Participants describe influencers as individuals with large social media followings who actively engage audiences and impact brand perception. They are considered marketing tools, trendsetters, and idealised figures who shape consumer aspirations. Influencers gain visibility through online algorithms and often promote products through ads or posts. Participants also highlight a sense of aspirational association with influencers, while personal familiarity with someone can exclude them from being classified as an influencer.

According to Participant 1, "*[i]nfluencers are marketing tools, people trying to influence people, people that other people look up to, people with a large following base on social media, online engaged individuals*".

Participant 10 defines influencers as "*[i]ndividuals that, through social media, online algorithms reach you,*" amplifying the reach of influencers and brands.

Participant 3 adds that influencers are "*up to date, and they have an impact on how people respond to brands*".

"*Normally they would kind of have a lot of ads or products that they are talking about or posting,*" noted Participant 5.

Participant 4 states that "*[y]ou idealise the people who do say, for instance, you sort of also want to look like them*". A similar sentiment was echoed by Participant 6 noting that "*we associate with that influencer or we want to be like that influencer,*" with Participant 7 describing an influencer as a "*trendsetter*", indicating that they establish trends and influence cultural or consumer norms.

However, personal connections can disqualify someone from being perceived as an influencer, as noted by Participant 11: "*If I know somebody personally, I wouldn't classify them as an influencer*".

The participant's perception of what an influencer and their role is correlates to the definition of influencer marketing postulated by Influencer Marketing Hub (2025), Ki and Kim (2019: 905-922) and Vaidya and Karnawat (2023: 81-86), of an influencer marketer being an individual who leverages their substantial social media following and credibility to affect the purchasing decisions of their audience by promoting products or services. They are often integrated into a brand's communication strategy to enhance reach and engagement. Vaidya and Karnawat (2023: 81-86) further note that they are trendsetters who quickly increase consumer awareness of the product and influence consumers' purchase decisions (Lou and Yuan, 2019: 58- 73) based on their knowledge, credibility, authority and engagement with their followers, transcending from "merely marketing tools" to "social relationship assets with which brands can collaborate to achieve their marketing objectives" Vaidya and Karnawat (2023:82). AlFarraj, Alalwan, Obeidat, Baabdullah, Aldmour and Al-Haddad (2021:356) further note trust as an influencer's key quality.

THEME 2: THE MEANING OF BRAND LOVE

The participants highlight that brand love fosters an unconscious preference, emotional connection, trust, and loyalty. It leads to advocacy, repeated purchases, and prioritising beloved brands over competitors. Consumers value alignment with their needs, quality, and price, while also appreciating brands that offer mutual support and resonate with their values. These elements collectively strengthen the bond between consumers and brands.

Unconscious Preference

Participant 1 emphasises an instinctive attraction to beloved brands, suggesting that brand love can influence consumer behaviour even without conscious awareness: "*Not even a conscious awareness, but you would be drawn towards the brands that you do love and look to them first before you look at any other brands.*" On the other hand, Participant 2 points out how love for a brand affects how one treats its products, including a tendency to advocate for the brand by sharing it with others, indicating a strong emotional investment and word-of-mouth promotion: "*I definitely look after the products that I have bought from those brands that I love very differently. I would definitely tell people more about it and share more about the Brand with them as well.*"

Trust and Loyalty

Participant 2's statement above closely links to Participant 3's sentiments: "*Trust and honesty, so if there's something that you learned to love, it's because you trust it. There's a sense of loyalty, and that comes with love, with, with loving a brand and loving what they do*", suggesting that a strong emotional connection stems from the brand's reliability and authenticity.

Participant 3 mentions how trust is built on social media: "*follow to see what they're doing because it builds trust for me in their brand*".

Participant 8 succinctly ties brand love to loyalty, reinforcing its central role in sustained brand-consumer relationships: "*Similar to loyalty*".

Emotional Connection

In addition to trust and loyalty, Participant 5 notes that "*[i]f the brand makes me feel good, I will buy them more. I would choose them over and above, and I would seek them out over and above other products, services, or brands in that category*". This highlights how brand love leads to preference, repeat purchases, and seeking out specific brands over competitors, reinforcing the idea of brand loyalty.

Participant 6 introduces the idea of reciprocity, where consumers value brands that provide support or align with their needs and values: "*A brand that supported me as much as I have supported them*".

Further to this, Participant 10 discusses the importance of resonance, quality, price, and alignment with personal expectations, emphasising how these factors contribute to brand love: "*to resonate with that brand and you believe in its quality and price and what it gives you is really what you are seeking from that brand*".

However, Participant 5 indicates that brand love will depend "on what they stand for", underscoring the importance of the alignment of brand values to customer values.

The participant's feedback connects to Hussain *et al*. (2022: 152-162), who note that if a customer loves a brand, there will be advantages for the brand itself. Siddique and Rajput (2022: 1-13) also refer to the emotional attachment that exists when customers love a brand – something that was visible in the responses with phrases like "drawn towards the brand", "look after", "trust", "honesty and loyalty", "seek them out", and "makes me feel good". As per Ryan and Deci (2001: 141-166), all these responses align to the achievement of happiness or pleasure instead of pain. Palusuk *et al.* (2019: 97-129) note the increase in customer engagement, brand loyalty and commitment from customers when a brand is loved, something that was emphasised by the participants.

THEME 3: THE MEANING OF BRAND HATE

Participants generally viewed brand hate as strong dissatisfaction with or disapproval of a brand's products, values, or actions. This sentiment is shaped by several factors – product and value misalignment, quality and pricing discrepancy, spuriousness and unreliability, actions toward content and negative experiences as well as negative brand associations. Most participants felt "brand hate" was too strong a term, preferring to frame their feelings as dislike, often based on a specific, personal experience or perceived misalignment.

Product and Value Misalignment

Participant 1 defines brand hate as "*brands where you do not enjoy their products or not relate to the values the brand stands for. You would dislike the brand and won't purchase from them or support them.*" This indicates the importance of the alignment between customer and brand values. Participant 10 shares similar sentiments on value alignment, by confirming an "*emphasis on values, so that would definitely influence me as well*".

Participant 2 reports "*I think also if it's a brand that doesn't necessarily align with your personal values, if you see them as an unsustainable brand as well, I imagine that that would mean that you don't support them in any way, shape or form. I also think that brands that exploit children or exploit their customers, I don't want to associate with them and, therefore, as opposed in translation, hate them.*"

Quality and Pricing Discrepancy

Participant 1 indicates that the brand would be hated when "*product quality decreased, all the products no longer provided me what I needed, and then I would look at switching brands*".

Participant 10 indicates that they would not support the brand and would even engage in negative word of mouth if the brand/product is of "*really bad quality and overpriced*", emphasising the importance quality and price play in brand love.

Spuriousness and unreliable

Participant 3 explains how an influencer has affected her brand hate and purchasing for a product by "*pretending to love it, not congruent with what they say they are. Then, pretended to be something that's not, and I think that for me would create a strong dislike and immediately if that trust is broken as you are pretending. And I must say that, that made me very wary, and every time now I think about it, the posts and comments that were deleted.*"

Participant 2 adds that "*when a brand is kind of associated with so many different people and not necessarily people that I think are positive influences or not necessarily that I would trust. I would probably unfollow the brand and the influencer in that instance*".

On the other hand, Participant 11 advocates that it is just a business for the influencer and promoting the products is for only monetary gain; hence, they would not trust the influencer: "The *influencers, I don't feel the truth is always there. I always think for influencers, there's always money behind that for a business.*"

Actions toward content and negative experiences

In terms of brand advertisements that did not resonate well with participants, they reacted quite negatively by deleting the advertisement, not buying the product, and not supporting the brand.

"*I will delete it because I don't want to see it, so that is how I will act towards that kind of brand*" Participant 4.

"*You go out of your way not to basically buy that product or support that brand*", Participant 5 added to show how they would react towards a brand they had negative experiences with.

Negative Brand Associations

Sometimes, a brand is associated negatively with a specific person, and customers will go out of their way not to support the brand. As noted by Participant 6 "*brands sometimes are associated negatively with a specific person and sometimes it has nothing to do with the product, then I distance myself from the brand and the individual*".

Similar sentiments were noted by Participants 8 and 10, with these individuals going further than not supporting the brand to actively talking negatively about the brand:

Participant 10 states they will "*not support them, and I would tell other people that if they think about supporting them, about my experience*", and Participant 8 supports this by saying "*I will not support them, and I would tell other people that if they think about supporting them, about my experience*". Both participants refer to the personal experience impacting a customer's hate for a brand.

However, Participants 7 and 11 felt the term brand hate was very strong and not something they would prefer to use if they were disappointed by the brand. "*[B]rand hate is such a strong word*", mentioned Participant 7, with Participant 11 agreeing that it is a "*[v]ery strong word*".

The findings align with the TRA, which claims that influencer attitude impacts customer brand hate and, ultimately, the decision to disengage with the brand and not support it. It further aligns with Walter *et al.* (2023: 1-19), who found that if customers hate a brand, they will not purchase the products, leading to less profit for the company and a lower market share. Literature indicates that brand hate leads to four distinct behaviours, namely brand avoidance (Hegner *et al.* 2017[b]:13-25; Slamet & Yuliana, 2024: 311-323), negative word of mouth (Hegner *et al.* 2017[b]:13-25; Slamet & Yuliana 2024: 311-323; Walter *et al.* 2023: 1-19), brand change (Walter *et al.* 2023: 1-19) and brand revenge (Hegner *et al.* 2017[b]:13-25; Walter *et al*. 2023: 1-19). The study participants mentioned avoiding the brands, unfollowing them and deleting comments as well as negative word of mouth; two elements that were not very clear in the participant responses were to change the brand and take revenge on it. Hegner *et al.* (2017[b]:13-25) explain that ideological incompatibility (the social, legal, moral and ethical wrongdoings of a brand), symbolic incongruity (not being an authentic brand), and negative past experience (interaction with the employees, service or social media will refer to the level of loyalty of the consumers) have the most decisive influence on brand hate. Responses aligned with the theory, and many participants explained that if their values are not aligned with the brand, they will hate the brand; participants indicated how influencers that pretend to be someone who they are not could lead to brand hate, and participants ultimately made mention of previous service experiences on how comments were deleted on online profiles/pages.

THEME 4: CONSIDERATIONS WHEN CHOOSING THE RIGHT INFLUENCER TO LET CUSTOMERS FALL IN LOVE WITH YOUR BRAND

Participants displayed polarising attitudes toward influencers and brands, revealing distinct connections based on personal preference, trust factors, follower count dynamics, locality of the influencer, social media algorithm, visual evidence and product relevance. A certain degree of scepticism was also noted. Ultimately, participants linked their support for SMEs and brands. Trust developed with influencers over time, but they demanded congruence, authenticity, and local relevance from those influencers.

Connection

Some participants felt a stronger connection with the brand directly, while others connected more with the influencer who introduced the brand to them. Those who remembered specific influencers felt a human connection, viewing their relationship with the influencer as one built over time. Conversely, participants who focused on the brand or product often disregarded the influencer's identity.

> *"I can't see her face, but I do remember the link to the brand. … I definitely feel closer to the brand than the influencer because I think that the way that it's marketed is worth a specific focus to the brand,"* explains Participant 1.

Participant 2 also associates with the brand and not the influencer because *"I don't know the influencers; I also don't always know whether their modes behind the promotion of what they are promoting. Is it purely because they are being endorsed to do so"*.

Participant 11 feels a closer connection with the brand because they perceive it as more customer-oriented, while they question the influencer's authenticity and truthfulness when it comes to their promotions and motives, as they are driven by monetary rewards: *"The brands that I follow are very customer orientated whereas the influencers… there's always money behind that for a business"*.

Participant 4 adds, *"I am not a person that would idolise another person very much. You know, I'm hesitant to trust that person with all my heart and admire and follow a person because I would say they can be disappointing, but someone else can take their place five months"*, highlighting the fragile loyalty, scepticism, distrust and replaceability of influencers.

However, some participants prefer the human connection, hence feeling a greater connection to the influencer than the brand, as noted by Participant 10: *"Because you know the human connection and you don't feel that with a brand so much."*

Participant 6 states: *"I feel closer to the influencer and not necessarily the product or the brand because I might not be able to afford the brand, but I know the influencer and the information is accessible to me, and I can catch up on them all the time."* Thus, there may be a personal connection to the influencer and not the brand, based on accessibility and affordability. Further, the influencer's appeal is not fully transferred to the brand, and the brand is perceived as more aspirational than attainable; the influencer cannot drive conversations and purchases of the brand.

Participant 2 notes: *"I remember who the influencer was, and I really appreciated how they spoke about the quality of those products, how they presented the look and feel of the product and the packaging that those products. It was a 4000 followers' influencer, and she influenced me."* This aligns with research showing that micro-influencers often have higher engagement rates and stronger trust with their audience than mega-influencers.

Influencer Trust and Motives

Participants prefer brands over influencers if they question the influencer's motives or authenticity. Visible paid sponsorships led to scepticism, unless the influencer's content aligns with their usual expertise (e.g., skincare influencers promoting skincare products). Trust in influencers stem from shared values, follower count, transparency, and the perception that they genuinely use the products they promoted.

"*Think you just wouldn't naturally trust them more because they have more followers. I wouldn't necessarily kind of disregard what a person with fewer followers would say. I think the trust would most likely be with the influencer that has more followers*" (Participant 1). However, this contradicts Participant 2's preference for influencers with fewer followers.

> "*If I trust the influencer, then I would take advice, irrespective of whether it's paid for or not because I would think that I would only advertise products that they feel they would also use*" (Participant 9). Participant 11, on the other hand, is sceptical about trusting the information from the influencer as they know the influencer is being paid to promote the product: "*I put my trust in them to at least choose brands that are valuable to them, and if I follow them, it means that that brand should be valuable to me as well. So, I would take their advice.*" Participant echoes Participant 11's sentiments: "*Yes, it has to have this whole feel of like I'm using it in my everyday life, and I'm not marketing it.*"

Follower Count Dynamics

Some participants equate a large follower base to greater influence, while others prefer influencers with smaller, more relatable followings. Influencers with fewer followers were favoured for promoting accessible and locally relevant products, avoiding frustration from inaccessible global promotions.

"*I think it's actually worth the more followers, and I think that's where the power of influence comes in, but I wouldn't necessarily disregard what a person with fewer followers would say*" Participant 1.

Participants 10 and 6, however, prefer influencers with fewer followers:

"*Less people, because with like the millions of followers and your international type of influences, I don't think all of the products and things that are advertised are so regularly available in South Africa and not for our market and our needs*" Participant 10.

"*Less people, more authentic because some of the influencers are crowd pleasers,*" notes Participant 6, with Participant 3 sharing similar sentiments:

"*Also, sometimes they advertise things, and I feel like I really want to use this product, but it's not available in our country, and that kind of demotivates me in terms of keeping on following them as an influencer and looking into the products that they are advertising.*"

Locality of the influencer

Local influencers resonate more with participants, directly addressing their needs and increasing the likelihood of purchase. Trust in influencers was built over time, reinforced by consistent product use and alignment with their lifestyle and values (e.g., brands, vehicles, schools).

"*For example, looking at the way where they eat, the vehicle they drive and the schools, that they send their children to, the other brands that they associate themselves with, unless that actually draws a parallel to what I feel I'll, I'll take it as an advert*" Participant 6.

Social media algorithm

Participants mention that through the online social media algorithm, they notice products and influencers. Referring to an influencer they follow, Participant 10 notes that they "*didn't follow the influencer previously but noticed it based on the algorithm*". Participant 10 highlights the importance of search engine optimisation and algorithms in a brand's marketing strategy.

Visual Evidence and Product Relevance

Illustrations such as before-and-after comparisons or authentic demonstrations enhanced participant trust in products and influencers.

> *"It was an influencer that you used the new pram, and then I followed them and bought it. And she made a video of it and to say how it fits in an airplane and all of that"* (Participant 10).

> *"Influencers using it and, you know, doing a review on it, posting a video showing the difference between before and after and how well the concealer works, so it's generally the brands that I support to use these influencers, and that's how I've come about finding the brand"* (Participant 1).

However, Participant 1 values advice from influencers but does not idolise them, remaining cautious about fully trusting or taking them seriously: *"I think a little bit more or just be a bit more careful to take anything that they say as true."*

The findings align with Dhanik (2016), cited in Hass and Laverie (2020: 14-16), who state that companies prefer micro-influencers for their personal connection, targeted audience, and affordability. Participants echo this, noting that influencers will smaller followings feel more accessible. Yang *et al. (*2024: 1-21) introduced the PE score, measuring how effectively a product appears in an advert's most engaging parts. Misalignment occurs when influencers are paid based on followers rather than actual product engagement. This could explain why participants recall brands but not influencers. SMEs should prioritise PE scores to drive sales. Jin *et al.* (2019:567-579) point out that celebrity endorsements build trust but do not explore influencers' motives or impact on purchase intent. Notably, participants favour video content for brand engagement.

Brands need to be cognizant of the following considerations when choosing an influencer so as not to develop brand hate. Based on the participants' responses to the previous themes, they have several concerns regarding brand associations with influencers, particularly negative perceptions of influencer partnerships, overuse of influencers, and trust erosion. However, participants did indicate the low impact of influencers on brand hate. These findings emphasise the delicate balance brands must maintain when leveraging influencer partnerships, as overuse or associations with disingenuous influencers can harm trust and loyalty. Participants will unfollow both the brand and the influencer if the latter is seen in a negative light. Associating with too many influencers is considered a sign of desperation, diminishing brand loyalty. Awareness of influencers being paid to promote products leads to scepticism about their authenticity. Participants are of the opinion that influencers often only pretend to love products, prompting them to ignore such promotions entirely.

Influencers who enhance their hedonic experience become more effective, gain followers, and strengthen opinion leadership (Barta *et al.* 2023). Participants noted that if an influencer associates a brand with negativity, the brand may be perceived negatively. They also attribute human traits like authenticity and trustworthiness to brands and influencers. Trust is crucial – influencers lose credibility and influence if they promote products insincerely. Overpromotion by multiple influencers can make a brand seem "desperate". Products should be integrated naturally into influencers' daily lives rather than feeling overly sales-driven. Hegner *et al*. (2017[b]:13-25) emphasise the need for skilled handling of consumer dissatisfaction. Participants reported deleting comments, highlighting the importance of brands effectively training influencers to manage brand-related criticism.

CONCLUSION

This study emphasises how important influencers are in determining whether a brand is loved or hated. Influencers are seen as trendsetters and marketing tools that define consumer goals, but their efficacy hinges on their authenticity, reliability, trust, and compatibility with the values of their audience. Emotional ties, perceived reciprocity, and trust are the main drivers of brand love, which breeds advocacy and loyalty.

Conversely, brand hate emerges from misalignment with values, poor quality, overuse of influencers and inauthentic influencer partnerships, often resulting in brand avoidance or negative word-of-mouth. Consumers value credibility, product relevance, and local resonance when selecting influencers over mere follower count. Micro-influencers often

foster deeper connections, while overuse of influencers or inauthentic promotions can erode trust. These findings suggest that brands must strategically choose influencers who are authentic, align with the brand's identity, mission, vision and audience expectations, ensuring engagement that fosters long-term brand relationships rather than temporary visibility. These influencers must be purpose-driven and truly use the brand's products.

This study was limited to one province in South Africa, with only 11 interviews being conducted. It is recommended that the study be replicated across provinces in South Africa to establish if similar findings are noted.

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