

How Marketing Influencers Impact Consumer Purchase Intention toward South African Sneaker Brands?

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Keywords

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Abstract

In recent years marketing influencers have made a notable impact on how consumers make purchase decisions and these influencers can range from Celebrities, Industry experts, Bloggers and Vloggers. This study was inspired by the impact that global footwear brands have made on society transcending across sports and popular culture. More specifically the present research sort to investigate factors that impact consumers' willingness to purchase branded sneakers in South Africa. In order to achieve this, a hypothesised model was proposed. The study was quantitative in nature adopting a non-probability approach to determine appropriate participants. Fieldwork was conducted where 372 willing participants completed and returned the questionnaire for processing. The collected data was analysed in SPSS 27 and Amos 27 for descriptive statistics and hypotheses testing respectively. Key findings indicated that brand attitude and purchase intention were the most closely associated constructs after hypotheses were tested with expertise, and brand loyalty having the weakest relationship. The study presented a picture of how local consumers' perceived brands produced for their communities.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Social media carried on what has become an independent third-party brand endorser known as the Social Media Influencer (Lim, Radzol, Cheah, & Wong, 2017). Influencer marketing fundamentally refers to influencing consumers' perception, attitude and behavior through online engagement with the consumers (Sethi & Khan, 2023). They are generally viewed as opinion leaders characterised by their capability to grow Social Networks who follow them on the same Social Platforms that they use for their activities (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). They leverage these platforms by influencing and sharing trends with whom they show their lifestyle, tastes, and hobbies (Curiel & Clavijo, 2017). Over the years clothing brands have taken to Social Media as a Marketing Agent for their products.

The present research looks how these Influencers have impacted consumer perceptions surrounding South African sneaker brands. Influencers use platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram to name a few as a way to create and maintain a consistent link with their followers. According to De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders (2017) Influencer endorsements are likely to be perceived as highly credible as electronic Word of Mouth (WoM) rather than paid advertising as they often form part of the daily narratives Influencers post on their social media pages.

Consumers tend to resonate more with Influencers and view them as more credible and accessible than mainstream celebrities (Ki & Youn, 2019). Customers prefer items recommended by celebrities they consider attractive and this generates higher buy intentions than unattractive celebrities (Erdogan, 1999 & Baniya (2017). Seventy-two percent of luxury brands reported sneakers as their bestselling product globally by 2026. Sneakers will account for \$120 Billion in the market, despite the Covid-19 pandemic.

This rising demand for sneakers (Wintermeier, 2022) has led to the success of our own local sneaker brands, Bathu and Drip, which was heavily promoted by Influencers, before reaching ground breaking success within the local market. The South African Landscape has not had enough research linking the importance of local sneaker brands, and the use of Social Media Influencers, as the momentum of local sneakers has only gained traction within the Country since 2019 to date.

The objectives of the current study are therefore to investigate the impact of Social Media Influencers on potential predictors of brand loyalty and purchase intention of South African sneaker brands.

1.2. Problem Statement

Like any other retail product, sneaker brands do face barriers to enter, as highlighted by Hayes (2022). Barriers for entry include; start-up costs, natural events, government regulations and policies, pressure from existing companies, inability to gain traction with the market and failure to access trade channels.

Social media in Africa is growing and so is the use of Social Media Influencers (Acu, 2019). Studies are less on the topic of Social Media Influencers within a South African context compared to the global narrative. This is more so the case when it comes to the role played by Social Media Influencers, commonly referred to as “Influencers” (Dhewi & Oktaviani, 2023), especially within the context of South African branded sneakers. The research objectives are presented in the following section.

1.3. Research objectives

The research objectives of this study are to establish the extent to which source credibility influences brand loyalty and purchase intentions, as far as locally branded sneakers are concerned. Research objectives are two-fold. There are primary and secondary objectives.

Primary Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to understand how the model “*Source Credibility utilising Social Media Influencers*” can have an influence on Brand Loyalty and Purchase Intention of Local Sneaker Brands.

Secondary Objectives

The secondary objectives of this is to study and investigate the purchasing behavior of young adults aged 18 to 32 of local sneaker brands, as well as the attitude to different local sneaker brands in South Africa. The perceptions of local Social Media Influencers also need to be established using Brand Awareness, Brand Associations, Brand Loyalty, Brand Attitude and Perceived Quality as to how this will influence the young generations’ choice of local sneaker brands.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Grounding

The theory that has been adopted in the past in terms of assessing celebrity endorsement effectiveness is the source credibility theory with the most widely utilised dimensions being trustworthiness, attractiveness, and expertise (Ohanian, 1991). Social Media Influencers could also be viewed as being closely associated with source credibility as they are defined as Online Users who create and share content that is targeted toward a niche audience with the intent of influencing it (Clout, 2014). The Source Credibility model, which was used for this research was first developed by Ohanian (1991). Spry, Pappu, and Cornwell (2009); Baniya (2016) using this model in two different research articles. The Source Credibility Theory is defined by Hovland, Janis and Kelley (1953), as when a source presents itself as more credible, the people who are classified as receivers are more likely to be persuaded.

The Source Credibility Model itself suggests that what can impact on effectiveness, endorsements are the perceived level of and Endorsers attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise (Mohd Suki, 2014),

as well as the perceived legitimacy of an Influencers' assertions and knowledge. The conclusion from this is that this model has been thoroughly tested on Celebrity Endorsers and it is a valid scale to test the credibility of an Influencer Endorser.

The other model that is used to support the Source Credibility Theory for this study is customer-based brand equity. Stated, this model is relevant to the present research to use as it determines the value that consumers associate with a brand. (McCracken 1989). Consumer Based Brand Equity Model identifies the extent to which the name of a brand offers value from the consumers' perspective (Keller, 1993). It has multiple components such as brand loyalty, brand associations, perceived quality, brand awareness and brand attitude (Aaker, 1991).

This research looks at South Africa sneaker brands, in particular how Social Media Influencers have impacted how local consumers perceive these brands. Brands often have to pay remunerated Social Media Influencers who showcase and advertise on their behalf.

Independent Influencers have risen to the extent of having entities that match Influencers with major organisational affiliations on Social Media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram and YouTube. (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019). Social Media Influencers are highly sought after by organisations and brands who desire to take advantage of their accumulated social capital. Martins, Costa, Oliveira, Gonçalves and Branco (2019) stated purchase intention is the chance that consumers will plan or be willing to pay for a certain product or service at some point.

A positive brand engagement is linked to consumers having a positive purchase intention (Asif, Xuhui, Nasiri, & Ayyub, 2018).

In the following section, the study proposed Conceptual Model and hypotheses are presented.

2.2 The Role Played by Influencers in Marketing

As the Internet continues to grow, numerous changes have emerged and one is that of the "Influencer", who are Social Media personalities that promote brands online (Ooi, et al., 2023). The role played by Influencers has been investigated by Harrigan, Daly, Coussement, Lee, Soutar and Evers (2021) to name just a few. In contemporary marketing literature, the role of Influencers has become prominent receiving the attention of a multitude of studies. Ooi, Lee, Hew, Leong, Tan and Lim (2023) explore factors that shape a consumer's attitude toward Social Media Influencers and the advertised product or service. Chee, Capper and Muurlink (2023) discuss the influence of Social Media Influencers on pregnancy, birth, and early parenting practices. Wies, Bleier and Edeling (2023) who investigate the extent to which the number of followers an influencer has would drive Social Media. Hsieh, Kumar, Tang and Huang (2023) examine the relationships that exist between Influencers and their followers through the Human Brand Theory. The role of influencers' content and engagement strategy has been reviewed by (Al Khasawneh, Abuhashesh, Ahmad, Masa'deh & Alshurideh, 2021; Femenia-Serra,

Gretzel & Alzua-Sorzabal, 2022; Tafesse & Wood, 2021; Sette & Brito, 2020). The following section discusses brand awareness, attitude and loyalty within the context of influencer marketing.

2.3 Brand Awareness, Attitude and Loyalty

Brand Awareness is concerned with the extent to which consumers are familiar with the accessibility and availability of a company’s offering (Malik, et al., 2013). Social media creates brand awareness for consumers as they are exposed to brands online on a regular basis (Hutter, Hautz, Dennhardt, & Fuller, 2013). Ajzen (1991) referred to an attitude as the level at which an individual has a favourable or unfavourable opinion or appraisal of the conduct in question. Loyalty is described by Uncles, Dowling and Hammond (2003) as buying because of one’s circumstances, purchase intention and even the individual’s situation. The sneaker has evolved from being merely an everyday form of active wear into a fashion product (Yipa & Lando, 2020). Over the years, the sneaker consumption market has developed considerably (Chu, 2020), and market size stated in 2018 was \$58 billion and is predicted to grow to \$88 billion by 2024 (Russell, 2019).

The two most dominant sneaker brands at the moment are Nike, valued at \$24.2 billion in 2018, and Adidas footwear valued at \$15 billion. This could have potentially inspired the growing trend in South Africa of local brands in the sneaker market; one prime example currently is Bathu Sneaker created by Theo Baloyi (Oberholzer, 2020), the company is currently worth R18,5 million in turnover, in just three years since it started (Ngwadla, 2019). With the support of influencers and celebrities, the sneaker has made a positive impact within the South African sneaker market (Ntobela, 2020). The present study was grounded in the source credibility theory which is explored in the following section.

3. Conceptual Model and Hypotheses Development

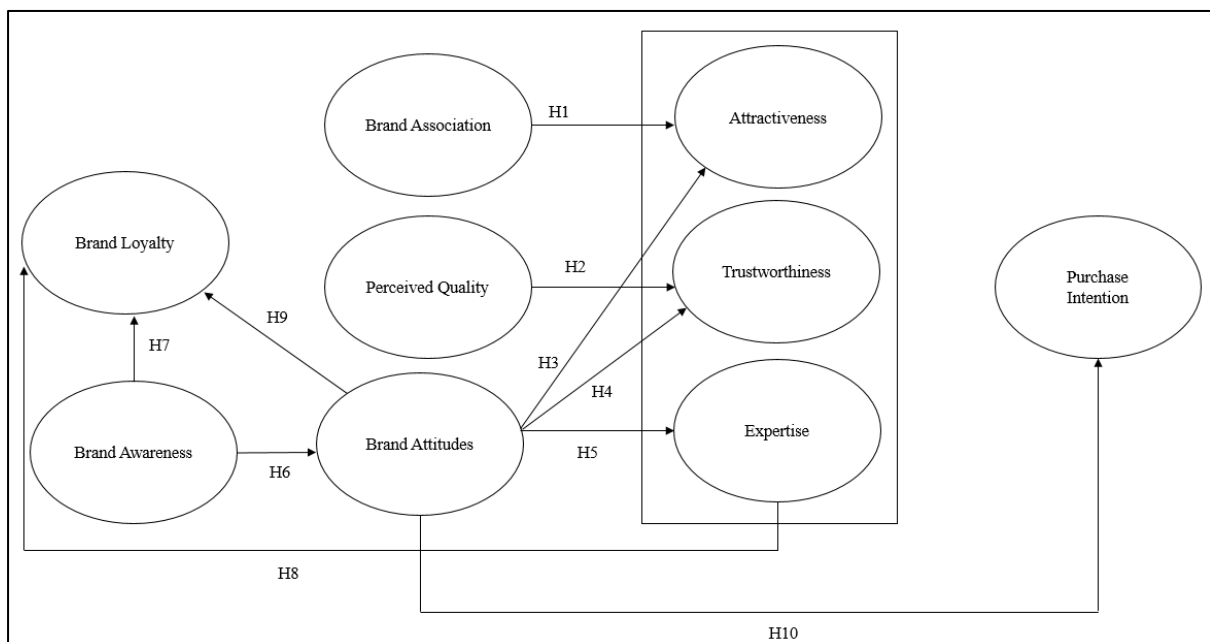


Figure 1. Conceptual model.

Based on the conceptual model above (Figure 1) the following hypotheses were formulated for the study.

3.1. Brand Associations and Attractiveness

The attractiveness of an influencer could be based on physical attributes such as weight, height and beauty as judged by the public (Albert, Ambroise & Valette-Florence, 2017; Gilal, Paul, Gilal & Gilal, 2020; Pornpitakpan, Li & Fu, 2017). Brand associations symbolise anything connected to a particular brand which includes opinions, thoughts, feelings for the brand's tangible and intangible attributes that are stored in the consumer's memory (Aaker, 1991; Kim & Park, 2023). The attractiveness of an influencer is directly connected to associations with the brands such as brand attachment (Kim & Park, 2023). This relationship is supported by Sethi and Khan (2023) who postulated that influencers' attractiveness comprises of not only brand associations but influencer reputation and personality. Based on the abovementioned literature, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₁: There is a relationship between brand associations and attractiveness

3.2. Perceived Quality and Trustworthiness

Celebrity trustworthiness is the attribute of honesty, credibility, empathy, and/or dignity possessed by the endorser (Bergqvist & Zhou, 2016; Gilal, Paul, Gilal & Gilal, 2020; Lee, Ham & Kim, 2015). Research has proven that the trustworthiness of celebrities is the most effective approach to make the consumers extra assured about the product and that when consumers accept that the source is trustworthy, they perceive the endorsed brand as highly dependable (Kim, Wang & Ahn, 2013; Paul & Bhakar, 2018). Based on the abovementioned literature, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₂: There is a relationship between perceived quality and trustworthiness

3.3. Brand Attitudes and Attractiveness

According to Lin, Crowe, Pierre and Lee (2021) attractiveness directly influences attitudes toward a brand which ultimately leads to purchase intention. There is a strong and positive association between the attractiveness of a celebrity and consumer attitudes toward the brand being endorsed (Oh & Park, 2020). Further support of this notion comes from Chekima, Chekima and Adis (2020) who state that social media influencer directly impact brand attitudes. Based on the abovementioned literature, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₃: There is a relationship between brand attitudes and attractiveness

3.4 Brand Attitudes and Trustworthiness

The perception of trustworthiness associated with a social media influencer, directly and positively influences brand attitudes (Chekima et al., 2020). In addition, the power of a social media influencer determines the extent to which he/she is considered trustworthy, and that trustworthiness directly feeds into attitudes toward the brand being endorsed (Nafees, Cook, Nikolov & Stoddard, 2021). Brand attitudes are not only a result of trustworthiness held by consumers toward an influencer but also the

perceived expertise of the influencer (Nafees, 2021). Based on the abovementioned literature, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₄: There is a relationship between brand attitudes and trustworthiness

3.5. Brand Attitudes and Expertise

Expertise of social media is a direct antecedent of brand attitudes (Chekima et al., 2020). However, these expertise are not limited to brand attitudes but also extend to attitude toward the advertisement and the actual purchase (Chekima et al., 2020). Brand attitudes are considered a direct outcome of a social media influencer's expertise (Oh & Park, 2020). Brand attitudes occur because of the perceived expertise that a social media influencer is assumed to possess (Nafees et al., 2021). Based on the abovementioned literature, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₅: There is a relationship between brand attitudes and expertise

3.6. Brand Awareness and Brand Attitudes

Brand awareness is the consumer's ability to identify and recall the first brand that comes to mind in a precise product category and to link the brand and product category in question (Çelik, 2022). As for as social media advertising, influencers have an impact on both brand awareness and attitudes (Saydan & Dülek, 2019). Brand attitude is directly dependent on brand awareness when it comes to social media (Langaro, Rita & de Fátima Salgueiro, 2018). Based on the abovementioned literature, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₆: There is a relationship between brand awareness and brand attitudes

3.7. Brand Awareness and Brand Loyalty

Brand awareness refers to the ability of a consumer to recognize a brand, Fetais, Algharabat, Aljafari, and Rana (2023) while brand loyalty is the customer's progressive continuous support to a brand (Aaker, 1991; Çelik, 2022). Additionally, Malik (2013) suggest that brand awareness, loyalty and the consumer's intention to purchase an advertised brand are all associated. The idea that brand awareness and brand loyalty are associated is reinforced by (Zhao, Butt, Murad, Mirza & Saleh Al-Faryan, 2022). This assertion is supported by Fetais (2023) who also postulate that awareness of a brand is necessary for brand loyalty to occur. Based on the abovementioned literature, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₇: There is a relationship between brand awareness and brand loyalty.

3.8. Expertise and Brand Loyalty

Expertise directly and positively influence a consumer's loyalty towards a brand (Oh & Park, 2020). This postulation is supported by Nafees et al. (2021) who propose that expertise of a social media influencer combined with the goodwill and trustworthiness that consumers associate the influencer with has a direct impact on brand loyalty towards the advertised brand. Based on the abovementioned literature, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₈: There is a relationship between expertise and brand loyalty.

3.9. Brand Attitudes and Brand Loyalty

Brand attitudes are viewed as a direct precursor of brand loyalty (Hwang, Choe, Kim & Kim, 2021). Furthermore, Hwang et al. (2021) postulate that brand loyalty is not only impacted by brand attitudes but by brand attachment and brand satisfaction. The assertion that brand attitudes influence the extent to which customers are loyal to a brand is reinforced by (Nguyen, Le, Truong, Truong & Vu, 2023). Based on the abovementioned literature, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₉: There is a relationship between brand attitudes and brand loyalty.

3.10. Brand Attitudes and Purchase Intention

Brand attitudes and purchase intention have a strong positive association (Tan, Geng, Katsumata & Xiong, 2021). Brand attitude directly leads to the consumer's intention to purchase a product (Abzari, Ghassemi & Vosta, 2014). Further support for the impact that brand attitudes have on purchase intention is provided by (Herrando & Martín-De Hoyos, 2022). When it comes to brands endorsed by celebrities, fans form positive attitudes towards these brands and are more likely to purchase them (Pradhan, Duraipandian, & Sethi, 2016; Singh & Banerjee, 2018). Brand attitudes, prior to impacting intention to purchase celebrity endorsed brands, itself is impacted by that celebrity's perceived credibility (Singh & Banerjee, 2018). Based on the abovementioned literature, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₁₀: There is a relationship between brand attitudes and purchase intention.

4. Research Methodology

4.1. Research Design

The study adopted a quantitative survey method. A convenience sampling technique was used to identify suitable participants. An online survey was distributed to a target population of participants residing in Johannesburg, South Africa. This was because the sneaker brands under investigation are exclusively bought and sold in South Africa therefore the target audience selected were the most familiar with the brands. All participants were above 18 years of age and provided consent prior to participation in the study. They were briefed on the purpose and objectives of the study, informed that it was both voluntary and anonymous.

4.2. Questionnaire Design and Data Analysis Approach

A research instrument was developed to assess the relationships of constructs. These constructs were attractiveness, trustworthiness, expertise and brand attitudes, adapted from Wang, Kao and Ngamsiriudo (2017), perceived quality, taken from Ha and John (2010), brand association, taken from Chieng and Goi (2011), brand awareness, adapted from Seo, Park and Choi (2020), and lastly, brand loyalty and purchase intention were both taken from Osei-Frimpong, Donkor and Owusu-Frimpong (2019). The research instrument was used to generate the sample profile which depicted social media

habits of consumers of South African sneaker brands. A total of 372 responses were returned and processed for data analysis in SPSS 27 and Amos 27 for descriptive and hypotheses testing respectively. Structural equation modelling was conducted to test proposed hypotheses adopting a two-step approach beginning with confirmatory analysis (model fit assessment) followed by hypotheses testing.

4.3. Ethics

The researchers obtained an ethics clearance certificate prior to conducting fieldwork. The ethics clearance number and the institution from which it was obtained have not been provided in this submission to allow for double-blind review.

5. Results and Findings

The section presents the findings of the study. The profile of the participants is presented as well as reliability measures of the study. The results from hypotheses testing are also presented in this part of the research followed by managerial implications and contribution of research.

The largest age group (Table 1) was that of 18 to 24 year olds which accounted for over 80% of the sample which is safe to say the majority of the participants were young adults. Gender distribution was fairly even with male and female respondents accounting for just under 50% each with a few respondents of about 4% declining to identify with any gender. Bathu and Drip were the most popular sneaker brands representing over 70% of the sample. The most represented group in terms of average sneaker spend at just under 45%, stated that they pay about R500 to R1000. Social media usage had a somewhat even spread across the board with no single platform out-rightly dominating. However, the most used platform to follow influencers of sneaker brands was Instagram. The majority of the respondents indicated that they spend at least 2 to 3 hours at a time on social media.

Table 1: Profile of Research Participants

Age	Frequency	Percentage
18-24	300	80.64
27 and older	55	14.78
Prefer not to say	17	4.57
Total	372	100.0
Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	183	49.2
Female	173	46.5
Prefer not to say	16	4.3
Total	372	100.0
South African Sneaker Brand	Frequency	Percentage
Bathu	149	40.1
Drip	116	31.2
Other	107	28.8
Total	372	100.0
Sneaker Spend (ZAR - Rand)	Frequency	Percentage
< 500	49	13.2
500 - 1000	166	44.6
1000 - 1500	101	27.2
1500 - 2000	42	11.3
>2000	14	3.8
Total	372	100.0
Social Media	Frequency	Percentage
Facebook	81	21.8
Instagram	140	37.6
Twitter	57	15.3
YouTube	94	25.3
Total	372	100.0
Time Spent on Social Media	Frequency	Percentage
30 min - 1 hour	45	12.1
2 - 3 hours	179	48.1
4 - 5 hours	148	39.8
Total	372	100.0

Table 2: Accuracy Analysis Statistics

	ATT	TT	EX	PQ	BAS	BA	BT	BL	PI
Mean	3.648	3.619	3.628	3.424	4.105	3.524	3.227	3.270	3.378
Standard Deviation	1.195	1.149	1.131	1.093	3.420	1.190	1.310	1.282	1.221
Cronbach's Alpha	0.829	0.812	0.828	0.876	0.784	0.855	0.907	0.888	0.872
Average Variance Extracted	0.500	0.473	0.500	0.596	0.433	0.551	0.664	0.617	0.534

Key: ATT: Attractiveness, TT: Trustworthiness, EX: Expertise, PQ: Perceived Quality, BAS: Brand Association, BA: Brand Awareness, BT: Brand Attitudes, BL: Brand Loyalty, PI: Purchase Intention

Table 2 above shows that there was normal distribution of data as the mean values were all close to each other ranging from 3 to 4 and the standard deviation values ranged from -2 to +2 confirming the same. The Cronbach's alpha value were all above 0.7 confirming construct reliability while average variance extracted values were mostly above 0.5 confirming validity of the constructs. Measurement model fit values were as follows: $\chi^2/df = 1.838$; GFI= 0,907; CFI= 0,969; IFI=0,969; TLI= 0,957; RFI=0,905; NFI= 0,927; RMSEA= 0,032. All surpassed the necessary threshold for confirmatory factor analysis. The following table presents the results from hypotheses testing.

Table 3: Results of Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesized Relationship		Path Coefficient	P-Value	Outcome
BAS \rightarrow ATT	H1	0.678	***	Supported and significant
PQ \rightarrow TT	H2	0.770	***	Supported and significant
BT \rightarrow ATT	H3	0.073	0.078	Supported but not significant
BT \rightarrow TT	H4	0.534	***	Supported and significant
BT \rightarrow EX	H5	0.204	***	Supported and significant
BA \rightarrow BT	H6	0.552	***	Supported and significant
BA \rightarrow BL	H7	0.158	***	Supported and significant
EX \rightarrow BL	H8	-0.004	0.919	Unsupported and insignificant
BT \rightarrow BL	H9	0.870	***	Supported and significant
BT \rightarrow PI	H10	0.956	***	Supported and significant

Key: ATT: Attractiveness, TT: Trustworthiness, EX: Expertise, PQ: Perceived Quality, BAS: Brand Association, BA: Brand Awareness, BT: Brand Attitudes, BL: Brand Loyalty, PI: Purchase Intention

Discussion and Theoretical Implications

This section provides an in-depth explanation of the nexus between the results of the hypotheses testing and its implications. The first hypothesis, H₁ (BAS: brand association is related to ATT: attractiveness) has an estimate of 0.678 and a p-value of a p<0.01 (denoted by ***) suggesting that the relationship is both supported and significant at the p<0.01 level of significance. This implies that the more consumers perceive a social media influencer to be attractive, the more positive their brand associations will be.

This result is similar to that of Sethi and Khan (2023). The second hypothesis, H₂ (*PQ: is related to TT: trustworthiness*) has an estimate of 0.770 and a p-value of a p<0.01 (denoted by ***) suggesting that the relationship is both supported and significant at the p<0.01 level of significance. The implication is that perception of desirable quality occurs when a social media influencer is considered to be honest. Thus, the more trustworthy an influencer is, the more the endorsed brand is viewed to be of good quality. This finding is supported by Paul and Bhakar (2018).

The third hypothesis, H₃ (*BT: brand attitudes are related to ATT: attractiveness*) has an estimate of 0.073 and a p-value of a 0.078 which is greater than the required 0.01 necessary to confirm significance suggesting that the relationship is both supported but not significant. This finding implies that consumers do not consider the link between brand attitudes and the attractiveness of influencers to be of much importance as they are likely to have pre-conceived notions about a brand and regardless of the image portrayed by the influencer, their decision-making is less likely to be influenced by that brand. This outcome is in line with Chekima and Adis (2020).

The fourth hypothesis, H₄ (*BT: brand attitude is related to TT: trustworthiness*) has an estimate of 0.534 and a p-value of a p<0.01 (denoted by ***) suggesting that the relationship is both supported and significant at the p<0.01 level of significance. The implication is that brand attitudes are positive towards influencers perceived to be trustworthy thus the more an influencer appears to be credible, the more positive consumer attitudes will be towards that influencer and the brand being endorsed. This result is endorsed by Nafees et al. (2021). The fifth hypothesis, H₅ (*BT: brand attitudes are related to EX: expertise*) has an estimate of 0.204 and a p-value of a p<0.01 (denoted by ***) suggesting that the relationship is both supported and significant at the p<0.01 level of significance. This finding implies that consumers are more likely to have favourable attitudes towards an influencer who appears to be knowledgeable on a subject. This finding is supported by (Oh & Park, 2020).

The sixth hypothesis, H₆ (*BA: brand awareness and BT: brand attitudes*) has an estimate of 0.552 and a p-value of a p<0.01 (denoted by ***) suggesting that the relationship is both supported and significant at the p<0.01 level of significance. This means that consumers' attitudes towards a brand are dependent on the level of awareness they have of that brand. This implies that in order for consumers to respond positively towards a brand, it is imperative for influencers to actively and constantly raise awareness of that brand. This result is similar to that of Langaro et al. (2018). The seventh hypothesis, H₇ (*BA: brand awareness is related to BL: brand loyalty*) has an estimate of 0.158 and a p-value of a p<0.01 (denoted by ***) suggesting that the relationship is both supported and significant at the p<0.01 level of significance. This finding implies that consumers need to first be aware of the influencer and the brand being endorsed prior to becoming loyal to both the influencer and the associated brand. This is outcome is supported by Fetais (2023).

The eighth hypothesis, H₈ (*EX: expertise are related to BL: brand loyalty*) has an estimate of -0.004 and a p-value of 0.919 (denoted by ***) suggesting that the relationship is no relationship between the perceived expertise of an influencer and their loyalty towards the endorsed brand. This implies that consumers do not necessarily rely on an influencer's knowledge of a brand to become loyal to it. This may suggest that either, consumers already have brand loyalty prior to viewing an influencer's online content or they do their own research regardless of what an influencer says about a brand. This finding however contradicts this study's assumption that the perceived expertise of an influencer is related to consumers' loyalty towards the endorsed brand. It is important to note that of all the proposed hypotheses, this is the only one that could not be accepted. A study conducted by Oh and Park (2020) found a similar outcome.

H₉ (*BT: brand attitudes are related to BL: brand loyalty*) has an estimate of 0.870 and a p-value of a $p < 0.01$ (denoted by ***) suggesting that the relationship is both supported and significant at the $p < 0.01$ level of significance. The implication is that for loyalty towards a brand to occur, there has to be some level of favourable attitudes towards both the influencer and brand. This result is supported by reinforced Nguyen et al. (2023). Lastly, the tenth hypothesis, H₁₀ (*BT: brand attitudes are related to PI: purchase intention*) has an estimate of 0.956 and a p-value of a $p < 0.01$ (denoted by ***) suggesting that the relationship is both supported and significant at the $p < 0.01$ level of significance. This implies that consumers are driven to purchase products that they develop desirable attitudes towards, thus influencers should dedicate a significant amount of effort in preserving favourable consumer attitudes towards the brands they endorse. Herrando and Martín-De Hoyos (2022) found the same outcome as of the present study. The following section presents the contribution of the research from both a practical and theoretical perspective.

6. Managerial Implications

Based on the findings of the research, managerial implications emerged. The study established that brand attitude and purchase intention have the strongest association, where brand attitude has a very significant impact on purchase intention. The implication is that in order to increase consumers' purchase intention toward locally branded sneakers, marketers ought to put more effort and resources in the generation of positive brand attitudes towards these brands. This could be achieved by more target approach to the right audience based on preliminary research and using a promotional strategy that best fits the target audience which is also flexible enough to appeal to future prospects, as well as customers who would naturally not purchase locally branded sneakers. The study found that attractiveness and brand attitudes had a weak and insignificant association. The implication from this finding is that marketers for local brands should make the case to local consumers on how locally branded sneakers could be perceived as attractive. This could use the use of more relevant brand endorsers in this case personalities that are considered by local consumers as attractive.

Previous research on social media influencers in South Africa, although growing, is still limited, with studies by Iqani (2019), looking at the cultural labour of social media brand influencers in South Africa and Wellman (2020) investigating social media influencers and the production of sponsored content. Additional studies have highlighted the power of influence pertaining to the traditional celebrity compared to the social media influencer (Nouri, 2018) and on how fashion influencers have also had an impact on purchase intention. The current studies done on the sneaker industry are focused on gender bias within the sneaker industry (Miller, 2019), yet there is still limited research on how social media influencers in South Africa influence younger consumers to purchase local sneakers brands.

7. Contribution of Research

The contribution made by the research was two-fold. Firstly, it presented a picture of how consumers who reside in South Africa perceive their local sneaker brands and how social media platforms influence their perceptions of these brands. It is evident that social media platforms, as proposed by the study do impact consumers to a larger extent as far as their consumption of local sneaker brands is concerned. On the other hand, the theoretical contribution made by the study is based on the proposed model that confirmed anticipated predictors of brand loyalty purchase intention such as brand awareness and brand trust. This suggests that social media influencers are trusted enough by consumers to influence loyalty and purchases of local sneaker brands. Since local sneakers have gained popularity in South Africa in recent years there's not been enough research linking the use of social media influencers and the importance of local sneaker brands hence this research makes an attempt to address this gap.

8. Conclusion and Suggestions for Further Research

The study explored the impact made by South African sneaker brands on social media with the goal of evaluating whether influencers indeed played a significant role in consumers' purchase decisions. In as much, the present study attempted to highlight the impact South African sneaker brands made within their local communities, it was not without limitations. Firstly, the research was conducted on an audience that was not very diverse in terms of ethnicity, culture as well as geographical location. This could have resulted in respondent bias. It would therefore be recommended that a broader audience be used for similar further studies. Another suggestion that could move the discussion of this topic further is to consider revising the current model, maybe additional hypotheses or additional constructs. For instance, it would be exciting to know how trustworthiness would directly impact brand awareness, brand loyalty and purchase intention. This could potentially explain how these branding constructs are influenced by the perceived trustworthiness of a social media influencer as well as whether this trustworthiness will ultimately directly lead to intention to purchase advertised brands. Similarly, removing mediators namely; brand associations, brand attitudes and perceived quality could generate interesting findings such as explaining how these mediators influence constructs they are tested against and their influence on the model as a whole.

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