INVESTIGATING THE IMPACT OF NAMIBIAN SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS IN CHANGING PUBLIC HEALTH OPINION: A COVID-19 CASE STUDY

A research project report submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Media Studies (Honours) to the University of Namibia, Faculty of Education and Human Sciences, Department of Social Sciences

By

Lydia Sageus
(STUDENT NO: 201709326)

2021

Supervisor: **Mrs. Antonette Kakujaha-Murangi**

I

ABSTRACT

The research study investigated the impact of social media influencers in changing public health opinion with regard to Covid-19. It focused specifically on whether influencers' audiences are receptive to the messages shared and take action. The study sought to find out whether those messages played a role in changing public perceptions.

The study used a mixed method approach which consisted of interviews with four local influencers as well as a questionnaire imploring on respondents whether Covid-19 messages posted by influencers played a role in their decision-making concerned how they treated Covid-19.

Study findings revealed that most respondents indicated that social media influences them to some extent. Overall findings showed that Covid-19 content posted by influencers were impactful in making the audiences aware and by providing useful information that aided respondents in taking Covid-19 more seriously.

DEDICATIONS

It is with genuine gratitude that I dedicate this research study to the following people:

Firstly, I would like to dedicate this to my wonderful and wonder-working God without whom I would not have made it this far. His love, grace, mercy and favor has kept me going even on days when I could not do so myself. It has been Him and I throughout all the battles I've had to fight whether emotionally, financially and academically. He has sustained me and I am eternally grateful.

My parents without whose constant support, all this would not be possible. They always inspired me to focus and work hard on my studies. At the same time, many thanks go to my beloved siblings whose care, support and advice often kept me going as I worked on this study. Thank you all for your prayers that have fueled me to keep going every day.

My cousins and turned best friends Heinrich and Miryam, thank you for your support and for always lending an ear when I needed to express this study's ideas out loud. Lord knows when I express my ideas to you two, they always sound sensible and through such consultations I was able to identify loopholes and shortcomings within this study. I highly appreciate your unfailing support and advice.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

DECLARATION

I, Lydia Ndeshipanda Sageus hereby declare that this study is a true reflection of my own research, and that this work, or part thereof, has not been submitted for a degree in any other institution of higher education.

No part of this research may be reproduced, stored in any retrieval system, or transmitted in any form, or by any means (e.g., electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior permission of the author, or the University of Namibia on her behalf.

I, Lydia N. Sageus grant the University of Namibia the right to reproduce this thesis as a whole or in part, in any manner or format, which the University of Namibia may deem fit, for any person or institution requiring it for study and research; providing that the University of Namibia shall waive this right if the whole thesis has been or is being published in a manner satisfactory to the University

_____   _____

Student's name   Date

_____   _____

Supervisor's name   Date

LIST OF ABREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

Covid-19	Coronavirus disease of 2019
CDC	Centre for Disease Control
JCI	Joint-Commission International
ROI	Return on Investment
WHO	World Health Organization
SLT	Social Learning Theory
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1
Introduction

Title: Investigating the impact of Namibian social media influencers in changing public health opinion: A covid-19 case study

2. Introduction

In the 20th century, people are leisurely following the activities of famous actors and musicians through social media, but they are also tuned into a new and trendy social experience; that of social media personalities who have loyal audiences build through regular direct communication and engagement with followers ("The Power of Social Media Influencers," 2019).

Social media influencer is not a new concept. According to Biaudet (2017), as the world becomes more digitaly transformed, people are becoming more media literate. These people are also more critical of commercial messages and adverts, so it has become more difficult for marketing messages out there to get the attention they aim to. That is why more and more brands are turning to influencer marketing (Biaudet, 2017). This is the most important and popular approach to marketing in a decade of people glued to their screens browsing through the social media pages of salaried socialites at the leading edge of consumer decision-making.

In fact, in the wake of covid-19 millions of dollars had to be spend on traditional public health advertising. Elrod & Fortenberry (2020), remarked that more than ever, brands as well as national broadcasters had to reach their audiences with timely and relevant messages on the progression of the virus and updates on how to stay safe.

It is important to note that the fundamental aspects of marketing are the same whether they are to meet the need of a commercial product or public health services. Byrne, Kearney & MacEvily (2017) assert that influencer marketing is the digital equivalence of word-of-mouth marketing. They further implied that social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter and Facebook have led to an increase in the number of social media influencers, sharing all sorts of useful information. As a result, the part played by these influencers in changing individual behaviour is growing each day (Byrne, et al., 2017)

This research project sought to provide an overview of the role played by Namibian social media influencers in changing the public's perception about Covid-19. In addition, it provided an in-depth insight into the different strategies used by these influencers to create covid-19 awareness campaigns and messages for their respective audiences, as well as a measure of success for those campaigns. The study has gathered, evaluated and classified digital responses to Covid-19 content communicated by influencers in order to better understand the changing communication behaviour resulting in the creation of a framework for better and more effective health marketing.

2.1 Orientation of the proposed study

Namibians make extensive use of social media networks such as Instagram, Twitter and Facebook to exchange experiences and gather important information. Datareportal found that there were 1.28 million internet users in Namibia with over 710 000 social media users, which brought the country to a social media penetration of 28% in January 2020 (Kemp, 2020). Identifying channels for sharing and exchanging information is key in executing successful health promotions.

According to Pilgrim & Bohnet-Joschko (2019), online relationships developed through social media networks can strengthen behavioural norms and establish common interests and trust.

For instance, an influencer such as Maria Nepembe, Top Cheri or The Dogg posting awareness messages and encouraging the wearing of masks to their audience is said to instil those behaviours in the individual. International research indicated that young adults are more likely to access and engage with health information online through social platforms e.g., Instagram and Twitter with the help of social media influencers (Kapadia, (2020). Additionally, global stats-counter found that 48.59% of Namibians were active Facebook users, while Twitter users amounted to 13.87% and Instagram 4.29%.

Extensive research has been carried out about influencer marketing even as far as how it is incorporated into public health but I specifically think the Namibian population has not been studied thoroughly to see what marketing strategies were implemented and what the end result was. After the initial rush to respond to the pandemic, now was the perfect time to identify what is going to best help people moving forward and in doing so helping to ensure marketing companies tackle the next crisis as well as possible (Hollis, 2020). This according to him, is not necessarily about growing revenues, it is about supporting and helping to safeguard lives.

2.2 Statement of the problem

How social media can best be used to attain public health outcomes is a topic of much discussion and study in the public health community. According to Heldman et a. (n.d) recent studies have examined the effectiveness of and implications for using social media and other digital media in health promotion and disease prevention endeavors. What these studies found is that mixed and, in some cases, less than compelling evidence of effectiveness in impacting public health, however there is very little evidence to indicate that social media are being adequately used by public health organizations in ways that leverage the ability to have meaningful conversations with the audiences.

Other studies have issued calls to action for increased study and focus on social media and other emerging technologies as part of a comprehensive public health communication strategy (Heldman et al, n.d).

This study answered to that call to action. It sought to investigate the impact of Namibian social media influencers is changing public health opinion. It was important to know and understand the extend of the effectiveness of the strategies used by influencers in changing public health opinion. Lives could be improved if the people who influence opinions are preaching or airing the right messages.

2.3 Objectives of the study

The main objective of this study was to gain knowledge about the viewpoint of digital influencers by the respondents, their role in the functioning of the online promotional system, and the potential impact on the changes of behaviour in these people with regard to public health.

Below are the sub-objectives that have been formulated:
- This study aimed to build on the growing body of knowledge of works that assesses audience receptivity and the extend of reach of public health marketing on social media.
- The research sheds light on underlying methods by which health marketing strategies influence and actually reach their targets.
- It examined the public health content posted by Namibian social media influencers to find the best strategies for the dissemination of health messages.
- To find the most effective marketing strategy to 'selling health'.

The variables to be measured were, simply put, advert/message VS effect. The study will look at the impact that social media influencers have on the local people, looking closely at the strategies used as well as the content created in line with those strategies and the effect they had on the general public.

2.4 Significance of the study

Having an understanding of the impact that Namibian social media influencers have on their audiences regarding public health could help find health marketing strategies that work. This study's findings will redound to society's public health benefit, considering the fact that influencer marketing on social media is more effective than traditional marketing e.g., TV and billboards (Heldman et al, n.d). If public health is marketed effectively, lives

could be saved in situations like the Covid-19 pandemic. Here were some significant and beneficial achievements that the proposed study is expected to provide:

The results of the study would be of great importance to the marketing industry as the data provided will provide Namibian marketing agencies with information on how to best promote public health messages.

The study would help evaluate the effectiveness of different public health messages posted by influencers. The results might help in developing effective tailor-made public health marketing solutions.

An important issue in the context of using influencers for marketing is that studies have proved them to be highly cost-effective compared to traditional ads. 'The state of influencer marketing, 2018' reported that 39% of surveyed companies/organisations planned to increase their budgets for influencer marketing, considering them to have a positive return, (Wielki, 2020).

2.5 Limitation of the study

The general purpose of this study was to investigate and look at the impact of Namibian social media influencers with regard to changing public health opinion. Within this study, the researcher looked at the different Covid-19 postage by influencers on social media sites (Instagram, Facebook and Twitter) and how (if at all) that changes the minds of local people.

It is important to note that, despite the relative freshness of activities in the influencer marketing area, a number of emerging challenges were observed, along with threats related to this form of online promotion. The most important of them is the influencer fraud phenomenon whereby some influencer accounts or profiles do not belong to real people. These fraudulent accounts are but a waste of influencer marketing funds. The activities and

personalities of influencers are what leads to the humanization of messages of influencers and these accounts do not belong to the people behind the pictures and messages.

Another important challenge connected with influencer marketing is the change in the algorithms 'controlling' content delivery to users on social media platforms, these social algorithms often change, making the content posted by influencers less visible for the target groups. Followers of these influencers may not see their posted content sometimes.

There is another limiting phenomenon whereby certain influencers increase their following by purchasing 'ghost followers'. In addition, it is possible to manipulate the number of likes and comments with the help of automated chat bots thereby creating false following engagement.

Another factor limiting this study was accessing former messages, pictures and live videos of these influencers to look at the audience engagement. It can be a struggle to measure the success of influencer marketing in precise and concrete numbers thus we look at their engagement rates for posts.

3. Literature Review and the social learning framework

In 1952, G. D Wiebe raised the question "why can't you sell brotherhood, like you sell soap?" That question implied that sellers of commodities such as soap where generally effective while 'sellers' of social causes are generally ineffective (Kumar et al., 2009). Wiebe examined four social campaigns to determine what conditions or characteristics accounted for the relative success of campaigns or lack thereof. According to Kumar et al., (2009), Wiebe found that the more the condition of the social campaign resemble those of a product campaign, the more successful it will be.

Over the years, influencer marketing has gained more popularity as technologies become more advanced. Fertik (2020), asserted that the digital world has fueled the power of influencers across all areas of interest, from politics to products, from makeup to

marketing, and today, influencer marketing is having a dramatic impact on the modern marketers' strategy. He noted that influencer marketing puts brands on the map and that clients were shifting focus to influencer marketing to propel their brands through social media (Fertik, 2020). Why? Because it works. Fertik (2020) noted that Nielsen's Consumer Trust Index reported that 92% of consumers trust influencer marketing over traditional advertising. Not only that, influencer marketing content delivered 11 times better return on investment (ROI) than other more traditional marketing tactics. Previous studies in marketing have have used the social learning theory, which promotes the idea that individuals are motivated to behave in a certain way based on direct or indirect social interactions – even those forged through social media (Yasra, Olalekan & Adewunmi, 2020).

Fertik (2020) established that what makes influencers so successful is that the influencers create their own content, integrate the company's specifications into it then disseminate it to their many loyal followers. The influencer is in control of a brand's message, choosing how they will portray it. This promotes authenticity and instead of people being skeptical of commercials or social media ads (which people often use special software to block), they are trusting that if their influencer of choice loves the product, then they will too (Fertik, 2020).

Early in 2020, the world began to experience a healthcare pandemic from a novel coronavirus commonly known as Covid-19. According to Andrew, Narcum & Mason (2021), previous research on the impact of a pandemic has focused on behavior for preventive health, while little attention has been given to the impact of a pandemic on consumer behaviors. To bridge this gap, the Consumer Decision-Making Model was used as a framework to investigate changes in consumers' social media behaviors that have occurred since the Covid-19 pandemic was declared. Investigating the impact of this pandemic on consumers' social media marketing behaviors is important because recent findings indicate that the pandemic is has had significant and structural impacts on consumers' purchase behaviors as well as their decision-making processes, which could result in significant changes in marketing practices (Andrew et al., 2021).

Andrew et al., (2021) stated that according to the Consumer Decision-Making model, consumers can be influenced by external entities even on social media. That is, consumers are subject to societal influence and therefore prone to imitate the behaviors of others. Covid-19 is a new phenomenon, consequently, little has been published on how influencer marketing has played a role in Namibian consumers decision-making, with regard to Covid-19.

The issue with the current study is that recent studies have shown that in this age of the internet, information can be disseminated instantly. Another issue noted was that with pandemics like Covid-19 so little is known and new developments are being discovered by the day so the mobile app would need to be updated and Angula & Dlodlo (2015) claim that when communities are not informed on time on disease prevalence, epidemics can spread quickly.

Namibian health organizations need to turn to social media influencer marketing because it is instant in disseminating information. Formost (2019) implied that social media has become the best marketing tool as it capitalizes on the fact that when a post is put in front of a viewer by someone they trust, they are much more likely to connect to the content, and have a positive association with the message, brand or product being shown.

It is important to note that we are living in an age of so much misinformation especially online. Covid-19 especially, is surrounded by so much untrue information and conspiracy theories, all which could be counteracted by trusted social media influencers who have a social responsibility towards their followers

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

The aim of this research was to investigate the public health impacts that Namibian social media influencers had on the public with regard to Covid-19. This study intended to find out how Covid-19 related content posted impacted the audience. The research looked at the different changes in opinion regarding the virus people experienced while interacting and engaging with social media influencers on Instagram and Twitter. The study analysed the different strategies used by influencers to share and engage with their audiences and how effective those strategies were.

The study used a mixed method approach. The first half of the study consisted of a series of interviews with four local social media influencers to find out the strategies they used when posting Covid-19 related content and what their aim was when posting them. The other design used was a questionnaire sent to 100 people selected from the general public (who follow either one of the aforementioned influencers). The questionnaires will be sent to participants via email.

These were the various steps that were undertaken to carry out this study. The study collected and analysed content posted by local influencers. These were in the form of three types; posted message/ story updates, captioned pictures and Instagram live videos. The viewers or audience will then be asked about their interactions with these influencers online and what effects (if any) played a role in their decision making during the pandemic. A questionnaire will be conducted on a group of individual Internet users in order to obtain primary data.

4.2 Data collection methods

For this study, data was collected from original sources of information such as primary data which is more reliable and has more assurance because the respondents have had direct contact with social media influencers online. The following data collection tools were used for this study:

1. Interviews
2. Online questionnaires

These original sources of information were; 1) the influencers who will be asked about the strategies they use in posting Covid-19 related content and what their aim is for those messages and 2) the general public who responded to questions about how Covid-19 related posts by influencers impacts their decision-making. The influencers were interviewed while the general publics' data was obtained through an online questionnaire.

However, before conducting the survey and handing the questionnaires out, a pilot study was carried out. Four different participants were be selected from the general population to test whether the questionnaire questions can be understood by participants. This also tested to find out whether the questionnaire will provide the answers to the study's research question. The interview and questionnaire were in English. It is important to note that due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, interviews with the influencers took place telephonically or through Zoom/Skype or WhatsApp; whichever the influencers preferred. In the study, each respondent will be invited to reply to a list of questions. The questionnaire contained a mix of open-ended and closed-ended questions so that biasness is prevented. The study hoped to obtain relationship data which will highlight associations and relationships between our two variables.

4.3 Population

The study population will be selected from two categories of participants. The first category consists of social media influencers. Four influencers from different genres of the entertainment world will be selected. Maria Nepembe – actor, director, TV presenter and fashion brand owner, Top Cheri – award winning singer and entrepreneur, Gazza – multi award winning music artist and Joint Commission International (JCI)'s most outstanding young Namibian award winner, and Pombili Shilongo – brand influencer, media personality and PR consultant.

The second category of the study's population was from the general public in Windhoek. Randomly selected from the 18-50 age group, provided that they use Instagram and, or

Twitter and that they follow any of above-mentioned influencers. The population was derived from Windhoek's 446 000 population.

4.4 Sample

A simple random sampling was used to select the respondents for the study. The simple random sampling guarantees that each member of the population has an equal chance of being selected or the chance of getting a response which can be more than equal to the chance depending on the data analysis justification. This study's population was all found in one place; on the influencer's social media pages, liking and commenting on posts - a clear indication of audience engagement.

A total of of 100 questionnaires were handed out for this study. The respondents were randomly selected from population.

4.5 Research Instruments

For this study, a series of interviews were conducted with four social media influencers. The purpose of the interviews was to acquire the different strategies used by these influencers when posting Covid-19 related content on their platforms. Interview questions were drafted; they will include questions that will be critical to answering the research questions.

Each influencer was interviewed using the same structured interview questions. Each interview with an influencer is expected to take an average of 30 minutes. The interviews will be conducted in English and will be recorded. In total, four interviews were conducted.

The study also included online questionnaires for the general public who met the criteria of being social media users and were following any of the mentioned influencers. The questionnaires were created using Google Forms and consisted of precise open-ended and closed-ended questions. In total, 100 questionnaires were distributed.

4.6 Reliability and validity

To ensure validity, this study opted for valid data collection methods. Interviews and questionnaires are considered valid when collecting information. For reliability purposes the study compared the results to other relevant theories. Since we are developing our own questionnaire instead of using a standardized one, we will be basing it on established theories or findings of former studies. The interview and questionnaire questions were phrased the exact same way for each respondent and all participants were given the same information.

4.7 Procedure

The research is aimed at acquiring primary data and covers four social media influencers and 100 people who actively use social media. During the study, contents of two different computer-aided social networks, Instagram and Twitter will be analysed. The starting point of this analysis is to identify and collect Covid-19 related content (pictures, messages, live videos etc.) posted by the four selected social media influencers. These influencers will be interviewed, in person or telephonically about the content to find out their motivation for posting it.

The study's age demographic was 18-50 year-olds. The Namibian Social Media Use Policy (2016-2010), stipulated that 18-50 was the biggest age group that uses social media. When it comes to Instagram and Facebook use, the biggest age group was 18-50. Therefore, this study used that as a sample frame and questionnaire respondents were selected from that age group. When respondents are answering the questionnaire, they had to select to which age group they belong as set up in the questionnaire. During the duration of the study, notes on observations and experiences of the respondents were taken, along with recorded interviews of influencers for analysis.

In addition, 100 randomly selected social media users were surveyed on how content posted by social media influencers impacts them. The questionnaire will be created using Google Forms and will be distributed to the respondents via email.

4.8 Data analysis

The fundamental objective drove the collection of data and subsequent analysis was to build on the body of knowledge intending to find solutions to better health marketing in Namibia. The study sought to understand the impact of local social media influencers in changing public health opinions with relation to Covid-19.

After carrying out the quantitative research, a statistical data analysis was used to present the study's findings. Since the study's conclusions/ findings apply to the entire Namibian population, an inferential statistics analysis will be used to examine how information relating to healthcare can be distributed and accessed through mobile technologies.

5. Research Ethics

For this study, it was ensured that informed consent is obtained from potential study participants. We did not intent to invade people's privacy. There was a short consent section on top of the research questionnaire which include the purpose of the research, the methods being used, the possible outcomes of the research, as well as associated demands, inconveniences, and risks that the participants may have faced.

The study also ensured that the anonymity and confidentiality of participants was protected. For this purpose, no personal information was required on the questionnaire except for the age group that the respondent belongs to. It was made clear to the study respondents that they had the right to withdraw from the research any time that they wish to.

6. Summary
This chapter oriented the proposed study as well as the objectives of the research. It also stated the significance of the study and the limitations that the study poses. The social learning framework intended for use in the study was briefly discussed. This chapter also touched on the research design that will be used to conduct the study.

Chapter 2
Literature review

2.1 Introduction

In many online communities, content creating audience members have become particularly influential and act as opinion leaders. Lutkenhaus, Jansz & Bouman (2019), state that these social media influencers play the role of introducing new information to their social circles and set the agenda for conversation. In today's media landscape, audiences are increasingly turning to online communities for media consumption and to exchange information about specific niche interests such as health-related topics (Lutkenhaus et al., 2019).

Studies have been carried out to examine what factors affect consumer behaviors relative to social media marketing.

Despite the progress made by researchers, development in this area of study have been limited in Namibia. Research needs to expand by providing an in-depth understanding of health promotional effects obtained from social media marketing. Most importantly, these studies need to go beyond theorised outcomes in order to gain knowledge of real-life applications. This review of literature critically evaluates existing knowledge about marketing health through influencers. It critically analyses the significances of using influencers for public health marketing and examines previous studies to find out if influencers really change public health opinion.

The review pays close attention to the approaches of other countries to marketing public health through the use of influencers.

According to Lutkenhaus et al., (2019), it is important to understand how communities engage with each other on issues such as health, if marketers are to appropriately target and tailor health communication to specific online audiences. They further noted that analysing online conversations of health topics among online communities contributes to understanding that community's knowledge and attitudes which are crucial determinants for behavioral change (Lutkenhaus et al., 2019).

2.2 Algorithm personalisation

Platforms like Google, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter present similar audiences with similar information; moreover, individuals engaging in certain communities become more closely connected with each other and engage with each other more intensely and about anything, Paquette, (2013). This reinforces their opinions because these people are like-minded and share similar qualities. Paquette (2019), shared that influencer marketing offers health communication opportunities that bypass the boundaries of echo chambers (environments where a person only encounters information or opinions that reflect and reinforce their own) and introduce new ideas into online communities. Collaborations between health communicators and social media influencers can engage various audiences thereby enhancing the preconditions for careful processing and behavioral impact (Paquette, 2019).

2.3 Who are social media influencers?

It is important to understand who exactly social media influencers are and the role they play in changing opinions and behaviors of those who follow them. Social media influencer's role in online communities resemble that of opinion leaders in Katz & Lazersfeld's classic two-step flow model (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey & Freberg, 2013). This model states that ideas flow from mass media to opinion leaders who further develop and disseminate that information to their peers. Moreover, opinion leaders use social media sites like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter to share their thoughts with the world thereby spreading and scaling up the information dissemination process (Freberg et al., 2013).

Lutkenhaus et al., (2019) states that social media influencers can make important contributions to setting and shifting the public agenda of online communities. They do this by always inviting their followers to leave their thoughts in the comments or reacting by liking posts. Lutkenhaus et al., (2019) further asserts that this is how influencers foster digital story circles and set the agenda for conversations in online communities thus they

can collaborate with health organizations to create health interventions that tailor to the preferences, perceptions and cultures of different online communities.

Today, social media influencer marketing has become a major marketing tool for brands all over the world. According to Yasra, Olalekan & Adewunmi (2020), this is enabled by the popularity and wide acceptance of platforms like Instagram, Facebook and YouTube, which enabled ordinary, everyday people to become social media influencers Influencer marketing has become the fastest growing trends in terms of communication with consumers. Wielki (2020), notes that the number of social media influencer campaigns and posts has grown exponentially year after year from 2015 onwards. As shown by studies completed by McKinsey & Company in India, the power of digital influencers can be truly significant. According to their results, 80% of consumers will consider a new brand based on the recommendation of a key influencer (Wielki 2020). Similarly, the Harvard Business review showed that 19% of American consumers bought goods or services recommended by digital influencers in 2018.

According to Wielki (2020), the growing significance of social media influencers is also confirmed by organizations increasing the expenditure allocated to this form of marketing. The Influencer Marketing Benchmark reported that the value of influencer marketing as an industry was 9.7 billion in 2020 and is projected to reach 15 billion in 2021.

Several categories of influencers can be distinguished according to different characteristics. Wielki (2020) points out that influencers are divided by their range, which is connected with the number of people who follow them. A series of recent studies distinguished several categories of influencers namely: celebrities (over 5 million), mega influencers (1-5 million), top influencers (over 500 thousand), macro-influencers (100-500 thousand), middle level influencers (20-100 thousand), micro-influencers (less than 20 thousand) and nano-influencers (1000-10 thousand) (Wielki 2020; TapInfluence 2019).

In his study, Wielki (2020) came up with a taxonomy of digital influencers according to four main categories; number of followers, motivation to take action, communication platform and the type of activity.

2.4 The consequence of using social media marketing for public health

Social media strategists have proposed several models for social media marketing that render it effective for information dissemination in this day and age. Social media marketing allows public health communicators opportunities to potentially tap into the large audiences online as the level of digital media consumption continues to grow (Heldman, Schindelar & Weaver (2013). Notably, as of 2019 and 2020, the average daily social media usage of internet users worldwide amounted to 2h 45 minutes per day thereby making social sites important channels for public health communication (Heldman et al., 2013).

Several models have been proposed to effectively help public health communication strategies, however, it is important to note that no single way of engaging the public is right or wrong as long as each strategy strives to incorporate the following principles on the part of the public health communicators:

- **Engaging with influencers** – Public health organizations can identify key partners and social media influencers driving online conversations on health topics of interest and develop mutually beneficial relationships with them (Heldman et al., 2013). These influencers can include both organizations and individuals who exhibit credibility, persistence in convincing others and have the ability to drive conversations so that others take notice of the topic and show support.

- **Listening to social media conversations –** According to Heldman et al., (2013), by listening to online conversations, public health communicators can identify the health information that users need. They further explained that this can be accomplished through the use of social media monitoring tools. Public health organizations should use 'social media listening' to identify what people are saying on social media about priority public health topics, gaps in messaging and understand what people care about and thereby respond with relevant messages (Heldman et al., 2013). Furthermore, this can be overridden by urgency in situations. According to Anwar, Malik, Raees, Anwar (2020), with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the media allowed for timely interventions by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the World Health Organization (WHO), enabling a fast and widespread reach of public health communications.

The results were an upward trend for the promotion of health and hygiene practices worldwide by adaption of safe health practices such as increased hand washing, use of face coverings, and social distancing (Anwar et al., 2020).

- **Responding to questions or comments received via social media channels** Heldman et al., (2013), assert that social media channels are powerful tools for customer service and correct use of social media by health marketing organizations can demonstrate that they are paying attention to the conversations and know what is going on. They further stated that that this includes responding to health-related questions and comments – both negative and positive. Likewise, simple content approaches such as asking users to comment on social media material can also demonstrate a commitment to engaging with users (Heldman et al., 2013).

- **Soliciting user-generated content** – A series of studies have indicated that encouraging users to share their stories, participate in message creation and collaborate on ideas can have a meaningful impact on public health marketing. In fact, this can be as simple as asking users to submit photos related to a campaign or share their personal stories; this increases user's engagement and reaction to public health messages (Heldman et al., 2013). A recent study by Willis (2018) found that social media consumers perceive the user-generated content three times more accurately and credible than communication by organizations or brands.

Fox & Duggan (2013), noted that that the social life of health information is robust and it is being driven forward by the availability of social tools as well as the motivation among people affected by conditions to connect with each other and share information. With this in mind, social media engagement among those deemed opinion leaders and their audiences need to be embraced as it has the potential to impact health behaviors (Fox & Duggan, 2013).

2.5 Do influencers really influence public behaviour?

Although there are a whole range of reasons for using social influencers in the marketing activities of organisations, recent studies have tried to prove if social media influencers can really change public perceptions. These studies used two major theories that are widely used in the field of communication and marketing. 1)The technological determinism theory

which at its core posits that the development of any society and its cultural values are driven by that of society's technological development and progression (Ray, 2013). Technological determinists believe that the media and communication technologies are the sole causes of change in society. 2) The Social learning theory, set forth by Bandura in 1963, which suggests that people learn by observing others (Yasra et al., 2020). This theory promotes the idea that individuals are motivated to behave in a certain way based on direct or indirect social interactions – even those forged through social media. Many studies in marketing make use of this theory to understand how consumer consumption behavior is influenced by socialization agents like family, peers and celebrities (Yasra et al., 2020).

For instance, in a recent study by Moshi (2020), 135 participants completed a quantitative survey regarding their attitudes towards influencers and their buying decisions. The study showed that people do get hugely impacted by influencers. Most respondents (90%) say that they have followed recommendations from influencers while 80% of respondents say that they will try a new product / service because influencers recommend it (Moshi, 2020). When asked why they trust influencer recommendations, 66% of respondents answered that they trust influencers because they have more knowledge and expertise than them, while 31% trust influencers because of their personalities. 20% of respondents had other reasons (Moshi, 2020).

Whereas Moshi (2020)'s study shows evidence of effective influencer marketing, Heldman et al., (2013) study did not obtain conclusive evidence to show the precise impact that social media influencers have on their audiences. However, the study found that social media users expect individuals on social media to listen, respond and interact in a personal way that reflects both the communicator's personality and priorities; 78% respondents agreed that seeing a 'person' behind the public health organization improves trust and credibility (Heldman et al., 2013). At a fundamental level, interaction with influencers often require that users do something with the information they get from influencers – listen, share, create, act, respond or ask and according to Heldman et al., 2013, public health communicators ultimately want the audience to take some action to improve their health by practicing healthy behaviors.

Subsequently, Abidin, Lee, Barbetta & Miao (2020) carried out a cross cultural study to review the issues and tensions that have been captured and popularized by influencers and the influencer industry during the Covid-19 pandemic. The study specifically drew on a number of online news articles compiled from four countries; Australia, China, Japan and South Korea. It sought to offer an understanding of how influencers across the four markets have shaped public understanding of the impact of the pandemic. Abidin et al., (2020) found that influencers were faced with a numerous number of pressures such as; content had to be more 'emotive' and 'sharable' to appeal to the audience and influencers had to keep up with the 'new information symmetry' such as the 24/7 news cycle as social networks became key information channels.

This study observed that in light of Covid-19, some governments have formally enlisted the help of influencers to manage the information landscape. Prominent examples include the Finnish government's classification of influencers as 'critical actors' during the pandemic – alongside 'doctors, bus drivers and grocery workers' – as they have been designated to disseminate information on social media to make up for the fact that government communication does not reach everyone (Abidin et al., 2020). Likewise, the UK government has employed influencers to help spread accurate health information especially among younger audiences who may be more vulnerable to fake information (Prichard, 2020).

2.6 Other countries approaches to influencers

Before Covid-19, the Australian government had partnered with influencers to promote specific health messages through dedicated social media campaigns. In one instance, it invested more than AUD700,000 to the Health Department's 18-month #girlsmakeyoumove campaign (Long, 2018). However, post-campaign assessments revealed irregularities between the campaign message and influencers' track records with some having been found promoting alcohol and diet pills, and expressing homophobia (Long, 2018). Consequently, in 2018, the Australian government banned the use of influencers in its future marketing campaigns due to the lack of a thorough selection process: nevertheless, some influencers were subsequently hired for various government campaigns pertaining to tourism (Abidin et., al 2020).

According to Shao & Qin (2020), Chinese reports speculate that influencers have become more influential as viewer traffic and engagement have increased in light of stay-home advisories amid the Covid-19 pandemic. In particular, online live streaming experienced a boom and being an influencer had been deemed one of the most attractive jobs during the pandemic (Shao & Qin, 2020).

According to Abidin et al., (2020), an article asserted that rewarding collaborations between influencers and brands were growing during the pandemic in Japan. Their results portrayed influencer marketing as the key for brands to adapt to the new patterns of 'stay-at-home consumption' that characterized the pandemic grew.

Despite positive results from the other three countries, Abidin et al., (2020) found that Australian corpus tended to highlight the economic impact of the pandemic on influencers; emphasizing their income loss, strategies for recuperating losses and a general sense of helplessness due to restrictions on mobility, and therefore, content creation. This situation reveals that Australian influencers have overtly relied on client engagements for their income and have yet to diverse their income streams which were swiftly toppled over by the contingencies of Covid-19 (Abidin et al., 2020).

2.7 Influencer engagement in response to the pandemic

In wake of Covid-19, many influencers around the world responded by initiating respective local trends to promote good social behaviors, such as social distancing and good hygiene practices. Abidin et al., (2020) found that in China, local reports took interest in a group of foreign grandmothers based abroad, with two articles focused on how they used Instagram and YouTube to urge people to commit to hygiene practices, and to stop discriminating against those who have contracted Covid-19.

Australian and Korean influencers were similarly noted for promoting social distancing, handwashing techniques, mask use, and responsible cough etiquette. In Australia, this included handwashing dances and memes on the short video app TikTok, and viral retweet chains on Twitter that were estimated by the government to be worth around $30 million in advertising (Abidin et al., 2020). Abidin et.al (2020) found that several articles pointed

to influencers participating in formal campaigns with health agencies and governments to assist in Covid-19 recovery efforts. In Korea, many influencers Covid-19 campaigns were initiated or sponsored by the Korean government or international organizations, especially targeting young people. For example, the Korean government partnered with animation companies and child influencers such as Awesome Haeun, a 13-year-old YouTuber, to introduce social distancing rules with songs and dancing (Abidin et al, 2020).

In Japan, multiple articles covered the interventions of influencers individually promoting self-isolation and handwashing practices; something that many social media influencers worldwide were doing since the inception of the pandemic. Namibian influencers i.e., Top Cheri, Gazza and Maria Nepembe were some of the local influencers promoting safe practices such, regular handwashing or sanitizing of hands, social distancing and the use of face masks.

2.8 Influencer strategies

In general, reports from these countries present two of strategies for influencers to reach their followers. Firstly, many influencers took to social media to share their personal experiences in daily diaries, mental health tips, their own coping strategies, and generally, just to foster a sense of solidarity among others under lockdown or in self-isolation.

Japanese influencers primarily shared their personal experiences during the pandemic through interviews in news articles or by writing such articles themselves. In an interview, an influencer openly addressed the issue of mental health and distress caused by social isolation (Abidin et al., 2020).

Secondly, to cope with income loss and the constraints around content production, some influencers extended their personal brands and commercial endeavors by branching out into e-commerce, participating in merchandising online, and starting other related businesses. An Australian brand management agency, Sly Letica, revealed that they had a 200% increase in entrepreneurs and influencers wanting to start their own activewear labels during the pandemic (Abidin et al., 2020).

From the foregoing, it seems that literature supports the fact that many brands and even governments deem social influencers effective in disseminating information and changing public perception, hence the continuous efforts by brands to use influencer marketing as opposed to other marketing channels.

However, a media user cannot usually go on any social media platform without stumbling upon social media influencer's sponsored posts. This is because marketers and advertisers find influencer marketing effective and spend a lot of money on such advertisements. It is based on this premise that the researcher seeks to investigate the impact of Namibian social media influencers in changing public health opinion.

2.9 Theoretical framework

The purpose of this is to provide knowledge of how receptive audiences are with regard to public health marketing on social media by examining the public health content posted by Namibian social media influencers and their effectiveness in influencing or changing public health opinion. Specifically, this study sought to answer the following question, whether Covid-19 related health messages posted by social media influencers are effective in changing public health opinion.

The influence and impact of social media public health messaging can best be determined using theories that indicate mechanisms of behaviour change.

Theories that aim to study society's behaviour are employed in this study. The first theory is the technological determinism theory which speculates that media technology shapes how individuals think, feel, act and how society operates. This theory emerged from the role of the media and the nature of its influence on societies (Zaeid, 2020). The creator of this theory, Marsha McLuhan held that the content of the media cannot not viewed independently from the technology of the media itself (Zaeid, 2020).

However, the primary theory guiding this study is the social learning theory (SLT) which suggest that people learn by observing others (Nabavi, 2012). The basis of this theory states that people lean by watching other people. These people can be anyone; teachers, parents, peers, co-workers, actors, social influencers, etc. According to this theory, people observe behaviour and then they mimic that behaviour (Nabavi, 2012).

After observing the behaviour of others, people start to assimilate and imitate that behavior, especially if the observational experiences seem positive or include rewards related to the observed behavior (Nabavi, 2012). Nabavi (2012), further notes that the principles of social learning are assumed to operate in the same way throughout life and can take place at any age. He added that as long as there is exposure to new influence then people are always going to be influenced and social learning will take place.

In 1961, Bandura, who coined the social learning theory conducted an experiment (the Bobo doll experiment) to study patterns by demonstrating that children are able to learn social behavior such as aggression through the process of observation learning. Similarly, individuals learn and shape their own behaviors after observing actions of models (Cherry, 2020).

SLT posits that people learn from each other through (Nabavi, 2012)

- Observation
- Imitation and
- Modeling

Imitation and A study by Moreno & Whitehill (2014), which aimed to find the influence of social media on alcohol use in adolescents and young adults. It made use of the social learning theory and found that social media has a broad reach into the lives of many people and therefore has the potential to strongly influence their decisions. Therefore, this study will employ the social learning theory in determining the impact that Namibian social media influencers have in changing public health opinion regarding Covid-19.

Aside from the fact that the social learning is loosely organized, some criticism of the social learning theory arises from its commitment to the environment as the chief influence on behaviour. It is limiting to describe behaviour solely in terms of either nature or human interactions, to do this underestimates the complexity of human behaviour (McLeod, 2016).

2.10 Summary

This chapter provided more information on past studies that were undertaken on the research topic. It elaborated on who exactly social media influencers are and the significance of using social media influencers for public health information dissemination. This chapter also discussed other counties approached to using social media influencers for public health marketing. In this chapter, two theories (determinism theory and the social learning theory) that aim to study society's behaviour were also discussed.

Chapter 3
Research methodology

Introduction

Currently, over 60% of the world's population use the internet and social media has grown to be the fastest growing mass communication medium (Hootsuite & We Are Social, 2021). As social media penetrates into many people's lives, it offers social marketers' interactive interventions that encourage audiences to adopt healthy living, and community development behaviours. As the Covid-19 pandemic continues to ravage the world, now is the time to look into the role of local social media influencers in changing public health opinion so that public health messages are effectively used in ways that positively impact their audiences. This study, in application of the social learning theory aims to find the corelation between local social influencers and their followers with regard to deterring Covid-19.

This chapter plans out the research methodology of this research. In detail, it outlines the research design, the research method, the research approach, data collection methods, the selection of the sample, the research process, data analysis, ethical considerations as well as the limitations of this research project.

3.1 Research design

The research undertaken with regard to this dissertation is to investigate the public health impacts that Namibian social media influencers have on the public with regard to Covid-19. This study aims to find out how Covid-19 related content posted by local influencers impacts the audience and looks carefully at the changes in opinion regarding the virus that people experienced while interacting and engaging with influencers on social media. This dissertation uses a descriptive research design to investigate the two variables that were measured; message vs effect. The study analyses the different strategies used by influencers to share and engage with their audiences and how effective those strategies were.

There exists a great number of past applied academic research that draw on the impact of social media influencers in changing the behaviours and attitudes of their audiences, however none have covered the Namibian context making this particular dissertation new research on an existing research subject. In a descriptive design, the researcher is solely interested in describing the situation or case under their research study. This design is based

on theory and it creates, gathers, analyses and then presents the data collected thereby allowing the researcher to provide insights into the how and why of research.

3.2 Research methodology

To satisfy the objectives of this research, a mixed-method research was carried out. Also referred to as the pragmatic approach to research, this research method integrates both the qualitative and quantitative approaches within a single investigation or research enquiry (Wisdom & Creswell, 2013). The mixed method approach grands the researcher the freedom to use any of the methods, techniques and procedures, however this research will only draw on a few features of each of the methods in play; non-numerical data from the qualitative method and numerical data from quantitative method.

While the qualitative aspect of this research emphasises the socially constructed nature of reality and is primarily about recording, analysing and attempting to uncover the deeper meaning and significance of human behaviour and experiences, the quantitative aspect will classify features, count them, and construct numerical models in an attempt to explain what is observed (Langkos 2014). This research aims to gain more knowledge about the social impact that local influencers have on their followers/ audiences with respect to Covid-19 messaging or communication. So, while the study sought to uncover the impact that Namibian social media influencers have on their followers, it also counted and proved in numbers, the findings that came about.

The first half of the study comprised of a series of interviews with four local social media influencers to find out the strategies they used when posting Covid-19 related content and what their aim was when posting them. The other design that was used was a questionnaire sent to 100 people selected from the general public (who follow either one of the aforementioned influencers). The questionnaires were sent to participants via email. The study also collected and analysed content posted by local influencers. These were in the form of three types; posted message/ story updates, captioned pictures and Instagram live videos. The viewers or audience were then asked about their interactions with these influencers online and what effects (if any) played a role in their decision making during the pandemic. A questionnaire was conducted on a group of individual Internet users in order to obtain primary data.

3.3 Research approach

This research employed an inductive approach. According to this research approach, the researcher begins with a specific observation which is then used to produce generalised theories and conclusions (Dudovskiy, n.d). The reason for using the inductive approach is that it takes into account the context where the research is active. This approach uses a known premise to generate untested conclusions. Likewise, for this study, it is known that "using influencers for online promotions is effective and generates leads" (Moshi, 2020), however the impact of social influencers in Namibia is untested, especially with regard to public health messaging. While the deductive approach emphasizes causality and is aimed at testing theory, the inductive theory that is employed by this research is focused on exploring new phenomena or looking at previously researched phenomena from a different perspective (Gabriel, 2013).

In the case of this research, the phenomenon of using social influencers for the dissemination of public health information has been researched and even "employed by the government of Australia, Korea, China and Japan to promote Covid-19 health messages" (Abidin et al., 2020) but this experience has not been studied or researched from the Namibian perspective.

3.4 Data collection methods and tools

For this research, data was collected from two sources of original data (the four selected influencers and the respondents) to ensure that results are more reliable and have more assurance as the respondents have had direct contact with social media influencers and were exposed to public health messages posted by influencers online. Since this study uses a mixed method of data collection, the following data collection tools will be used:

1. Interview guides
2. Online questionnaires

The original sources of information for this research are the influencers who were asked about the strategies they use in posting Covid-19 related content and what their aim is for those messages, and the general public who responded to questions about how Covid-19 related posts by influencers impacts their decision-making with regard to Covid-19. The influencers were interviewed while the general publics' data was obtained through an

online questionnaire. Before conducting the survey distributing the questionnaires out to respondents, a pilot study was carried out. Four different participants were selected from the general population to test whether the questionnaire questions can be understood by participants. This was also used to find out whether the questionnaire provided the answers to the study's research question. It is important to note that due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, interviews with the influencers took place telephonically or through Zoom/Skype or WhatsApp; whichever the influencers preferred.

For the purpose of this research, each respondent was invited to reply to a list of questions that are geared towards getting their opinions on weather local social influencers impacted their views, attitudes or behaviours regarding Covid-19. The questionnaire contained a mix of open-ended and closed-ended questions so that biasness is prevented. The study hopes to obtain relationship data which will highlight associations and relationships between the research's variables.

1. Interviews

    An unstructured interview will be conducted with each of the four influencers to get a better understanding of their messaging strategies for communicating Covid-19 public health messages. According to Doody (2013), interviews generate deeply contextual accounts of participant's experiences and their interpretations of them. Langkos (2014), notes that unstructured interviews offer flexibility in terms of the flow of conversation thereby leaving room for the generation of conclusions that might not have been intended in the research subject. The interview process will go as follow:

    - The researcher will reach out to the influencers, tell them about the research and schedule an interview.

    - During the interview, the researcher will explain to the respective influencer the nature of the research as well as what will be expected from him/her – which is, the strategies used and ways of messaging they used to communicate with their followers regarding Covid-19.

    - The researcher and influencer will discuss some selected content with Covid-19 public health messages posted by influencers.

2. Online Questionnaire

   A semi structured questionnaire will be used to collect information from respondents. This online questionnaire will allow the collection of data through an electronic set of questions and can be administered on a computer or cell phone. Participants can submit their answers by ticking a simple check box, selecting from drop down menus or typing information in text boxes that will allow respondents to provide more detailed responses. (Macfailan 2014) The questionnaire will be distributed to 100 respondents who meet the criteria; are regular social media users, follow social media influencers who post Covid-19 related content. The questionnaire will be sent to respondents via email. The questionnaire will contain both open and closed ended questions aimed at determining whether social media influencers have had any influence over their opinions, attitudes / behaviours.

3.5 Population

The study population was selected from two categories of participants. The first category consisted of social media influencers. Four influencers from different genres of the entertainment world were selected. Maria Nepembe – actor, director, TV presenter and fashion brand owner, Top Cheri – award winning singer and entrepreneur, Gazza – multi award winning music artist and Joint Commission International (JCI)'s most outstanding young Namibian award winner, and Pombili Shilongo – brand influencer, media personality and PR consultant.

The second category of the study's population is from the general public in Windhoek. Randomly selected from the 18-50 age group, provided that they use Instagram and, or Twitter and that they follow any of above-mentioned influencers. The population will be derived from Windhoek's 446 000 population.

3.6 Sample selection

A simple random sampling method was used to select the respondents for the study. The simple random sampling guarantees that each member of the population has an equal chance of being selected or the chance of getting a response which can be more than equal to the chance depending on the data analysis justification. This study's population was all found in one place; on the influencer's social media pages, liking and commenting on posts

- a clear indication of audience engagement. A total of 100 questionnaires were handed out for this study. The respondents were randomly selected from population.

3.7 Reliability and validity

Assessing the reliability and validity of a study allows for one to make judgements about the soundness of the research with regard to the application and appropriateness of the methods undertaken as well as the integrity of the final conclusions (Noble & Smith, 2015). While reliability enables for confidence of the measures taken and seeks to guarantee that they are close to the true measures/methods; validity ensures the quality of being logical and factual in research.

To ensure validity, this study opted for valid data collection methods such as interviews and questionnaires, which are considered valid when collecting first-hand information. However, the essence of this research was to study a specific phenomenon in a focused locality and its interpretations are subjective to the researcher as they are tied to opinions and experiences of people. This, according to Noble & Smith (2015), has been criticised for lacking scientific rigour, lacking transparency in the analytic procedure and the findings thought of as a mere collection of personal opinions that are subject to research bias. Therefore, for reliability purposes, this study will compare the results to other relevant theories. Also, since we are developing our own questionnaire instead of using a standardized one, it will be based on established theories and findings of former similar studies.

The interview and questionnaire questions were phrased the exact same way for each respondent and all participants were given the same information. For validity purposes, a pre-test of the questionnaire was carried out on four people in a bid to:

1. Ensure that all questions are easy to understand for the respondents. Should there be any recommendations regarding this, they were put into consideration and the necessary amendments were done.
2. This pre-test also acted as a trial to find out the time taken by respondents to answer the questionnaire.

3.8 Research process

The research is aimed at acquiring primary data and covers four social media influencers and 100 people who actively use social media. During the study, contents of two different

computer-aided social networks, Instagram and Twitter were analyzed. The starting point of this analysis was to identify and collect Covid-19 related content (pictures, messages, live videos etc.) posted by the four selected social media influencers. These influencers were interviewed, in person or telephonically about the content to find out their motivation for posting it. The study's age demographic was 18–50-year-olds. The Namibian Social Media Use Policy (2016-2010), stipulated that 18-50 was the biggest age group that uses social media. When it comes to Instagram and Facebook use, the biggest age group was 18-50. Therefore, this study used that as a sample frame and questionnaire respondents were selected from that age group. When respondents were answering the questionnaire, they had to select to which age group they belong as set up in the questionnaire. During the duration of the study, notes on observations and experiences of the respondents were taken, along with recorded interviews of influencers for analysis.

In addition, 100 randomly selected social media users were surveyed on how content posted by social media influencers impacts them. The questionnaire was created using Google Forms and was distributed to the respondents via email

3.9 Data analysis

Firstly, content analysis was used to analyse the content posted by local influencers relating to Covid-19. According to Langkos (2013), content analysis gives the researcher the ability to structure the qualitative data collected in a way that satisfies the accomplishment of research objectives. An in-depth analysis will be done on influencers' social media accounts. The research analysed the Covid-19 related content posted by the influencers focusing especially on viewer engagement; likes, comments shares, reposts. This helped by providing more information into the audience's receptivity to the content.

After carrying out the quantitative research through the questionnaires, a statistical data analysis was used to present the study's findings. Since the study's conclusions/ findings apply to the entire Namibian population, an inferential statistics analysis was used to examine how information relating to healthcare can be distributed and accessed through mobile technologies. However, it is important to note that human error is highly involved in content analysis due to the risk of the researcher misinterpreting the data gathered thus generating false and unreliable conclusions (Langkos, 2013).

3.10 Ethical considerations

For this study, it will be ensured that informed consent is obtained from potential study participants. There was a short consent section on top of the research questionnaire which include the purpose of the research, the methods being used as well as the possible outcomes of the research.

This research also ensured that the anonymity and confidentiality of participants was protected. For this purpose, no personal information was required on the questionnaire except for the age group that the respondent belongs to. It was also made clear to the study respondents that they have the right to withdraw from the research any time that they wish to.

3.11 Research limitations

The general purpose of this study is to investigate and look at the impact of Namibian social media influencers with regard to changing public health opinion and involves collecting and analysing data from social sites such as Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. Some limitations are noted. Firstly, there is currently limited access to data such as Instagram live videos that local influencers used regularly to share information and engage with their audiences regarding Covid-19. However, there is still a lot of other content such as captioned pictures and Covid-19 promotional posters.

Secondly, there may be conflicts from cultural bias. This research may appear biased due to the fact that all selected influencers belong to the same cultural tribe despite the country having diverse cultures and tribes. Thus, it is important to note that the four influencers were chosen purely based on their level of influence as well as their diverse followings.

Another important challenge connected with influencer marketing is the change in the algorithms 'controlling' content delivery to users on social media platforms, these social algorithms often change, making the content posted by influencers less visible for the target groups. Followers of these influencers may not see their posted content sometimes. The researcher cannot mitigate this constraint.

3.12 Summary

In this chapter the researcher discussed the research design used for this study. A pragmatic approach to research was used which intergraded both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. This chapter also discussed tools used for data collection; questionnaires and interviews. In this chapter the study's population was defined and the research process was elaborated. Issues of reliability and validity were also expounded on as well as the research limitations-.

Chapter 4

Data presentation

Introduction

To complete this study properly, it was necessary to analyse the collected data for in order to of answer the research questions. This chapter comprises of findings, analysis and presentation of both qualitative and quantitative data that was collected. Qualitative data was analysed using content analysis and to analyse the quantitative data, the researcher used the SPSS. Data entry and tabulation of all questionnaires are converted into pie charts and bar graphs.

In this chapter, data analysis and interpretation are carried out in two parts. The first part consists of the results from the questionnaire while the second consists of the result of the interview in a qualitative interpretation.

4.1 Part one

Analysis of questionnaires

This section consists of findings from the questionnaire. A total of 100 questionnaires were answered that were used to interpret findings. The questionnaires were filled in by the general public who responded to questions about how Covid-19 related posts by social media influencers' impacted their decision-making with regard to Covid-19. A theme and explore approach is used to review data by identifying main themes and then exploring how individuals responded around the theme. These responses to the questions, are then quantified and presented in percentage forms. It was of the researcher's belief that to obtain reliable results, only the people who follow the influencers in question could respond and fill in the questionnaire and their results analysed.

4.1.1 Demographics

The first section of the questionnaire sought to find out the gender and the age group that respondents belonged to. Figure 1 below represents the respondents' gender ratio. Figure 1 shows that there were more males (52.5%) than females (41.6%) who filled in the questionnaire. There was also an 'other' category for those who neither identified themselves as male of female at that accounted for 5.9% of the respondents.
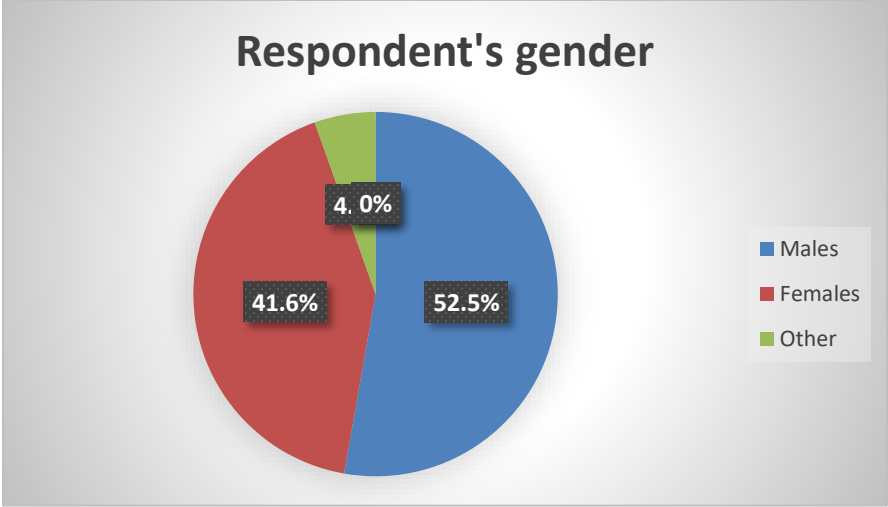
Figure 1. Respondent's gender

This research focused on people from the 18-50 age group, provided that they use Instagram and, or Twitter and that they follow the influencers in question. The study found that most respondents belonged to the 26-35 age group making up 51 of respondents. The 18-25 age group made up 37% of respondents while the older age groups of 36-45 and 56-50 made up 12% of respondents combined.
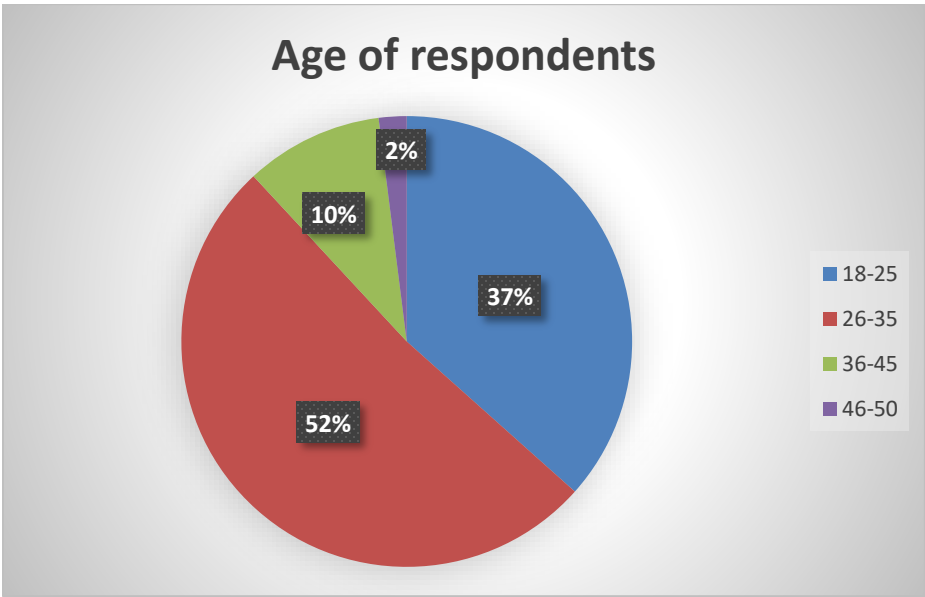

Figure 2. Age of respondents

4.1.2 Social media usage

Next, the researcher wanted to determine respondent's social media usage patterns. Respondents had to indicate how many hours a day they spend on social media as well as what social media platforms they used often. Table 1 below shows daily hours that respondents use social media for.
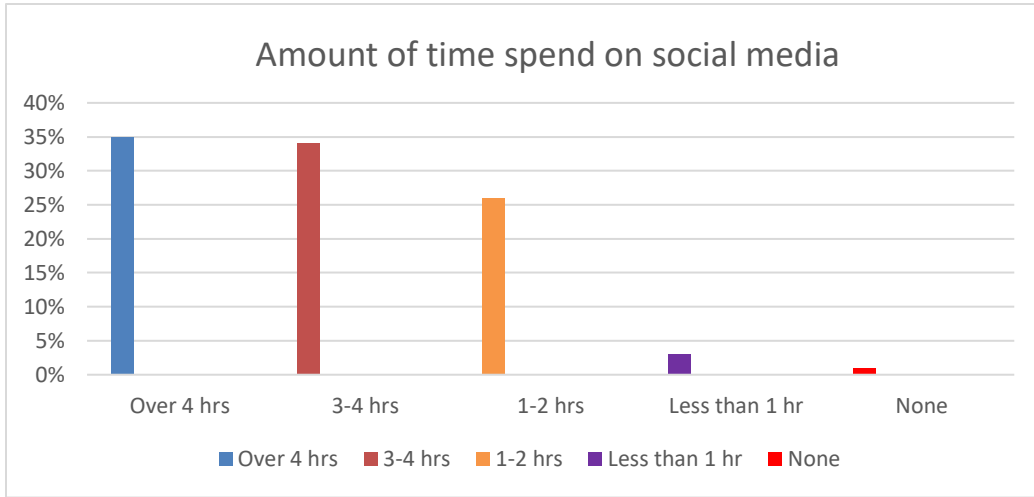

Figure 3 Respondents social media usage

Knowing the amount of time spend on social media can help in determining the level of impact and influence. It was also necessary to determine what social media platforms respondents use the most as that could help with message tailoring and targeting.
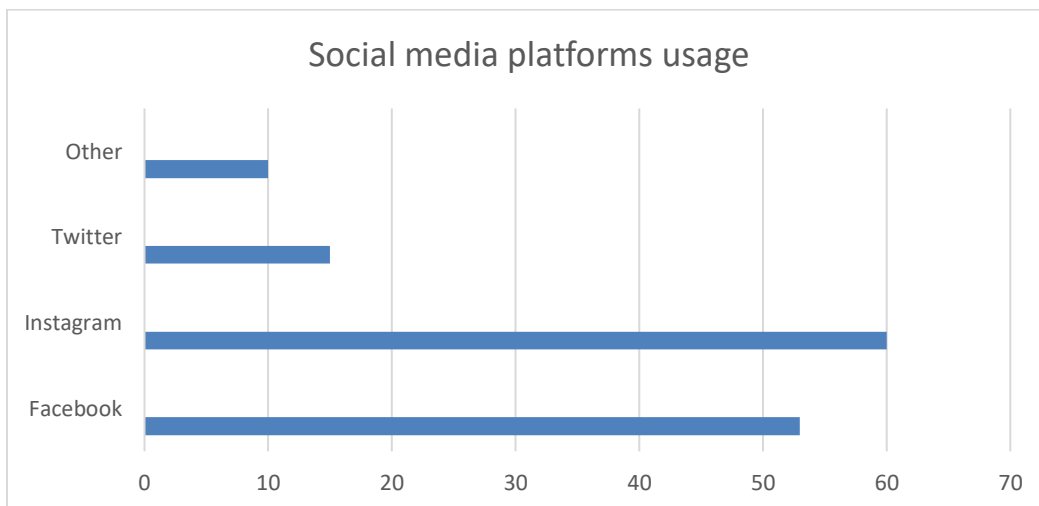

Figure 4. Social media platform usage among respondents

4.1.3 Data analysis of questionnaire

The following data findings consists of findings that sought to figure out how influential social media is in the respondents' lives. It also sought to find whether respondents understood the concept of social media influence. Firstly, respondents had to indicate or rate how influential social media was in their lives. For this, an ordinary rating was used that would enable respondents to rate social media influence in their lives from not at all to a great deal.
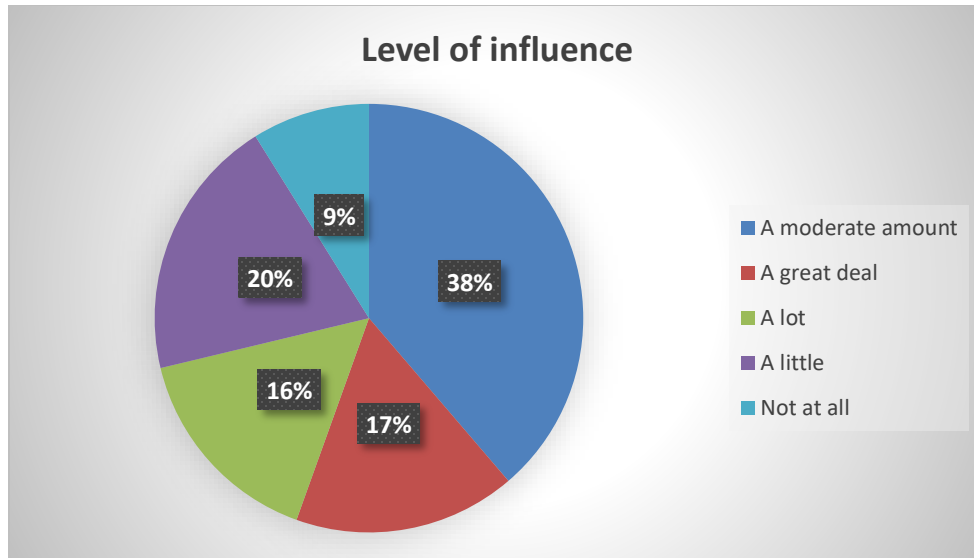

Figure 5. How influential social media is in respondent's lives

Figure 5 shows that 38 respondents reported that they deem social media influential a moderate amount in their lives. 19 people recorded social media being a little influential while 16 people considered that influence to be a great deal. 15 respondents recorded being influenced by social media a lot whereas 8 respondents said that that they were not at all influenced by social media. Respondents were also asked if they know what a social media influencer is. This was a very important question to ask as it will aid in determining whether respondents were familiar with what a social media influencer is.

Figure 6. below shows that 88% of responds at the time of question knew what a social media influencer is, 8% people recorded maybe and 4 people recorded not knowing what a social media influencer is. From these findings the researcher could therefore deduce that majority of respondents knew what social media influencers are and believed they influence them to a certain extend.
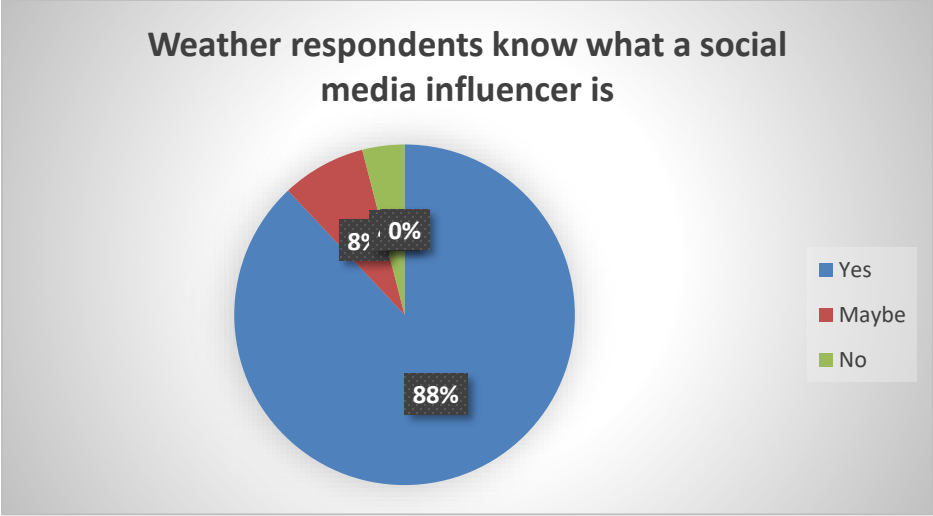
Weather respondents know what a social media influencer is

8% 0%

88%

Legend:
- Yes
- Maybe
- No

Figure 6. Respondents' knowledge of what a social media influencer is

Next, respondents were asked whether they thought social media influencers played an important role during the Covid-19 pandemic. This question was followed up with a subsequent elaboration for respondents whose answer was yes. Figure 7 shows the opinions of respondents on whether they thought social media influencers played an important role during the Covid-19 pandemic.
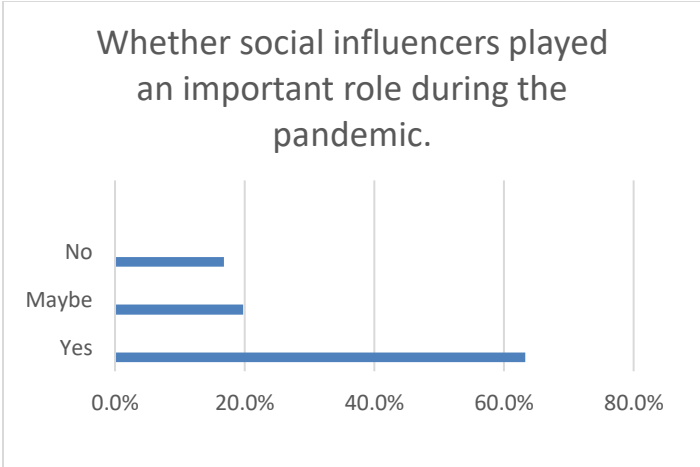

Whether social influencers played an important role during the pandemic.

No
Maybe
Yes

0.0%   20.0%   40.0%   60.0%   80.0%

Figure 7. Respondents' opinions on weather social influencers played an important role during the Covid-19 pandemic

Figure 7 shows that 63 respondents thought that social media played an important role during the Covid-19 pandemic. 20 respondents recorded maybe and 17 recorded no's to weather social media influencers played an important role during the Covid 19 pandemic. The subsequent question implored on respondents to elaborate on how they thought social media influencers played an important role during the Covid-19 pandemic. This required

respondents to give their structured responses. 68 respondents gave their responses which were then reviewed by the researcher using the theme and explore approach. The figure below shows the respondents responses grouped by similar themes.
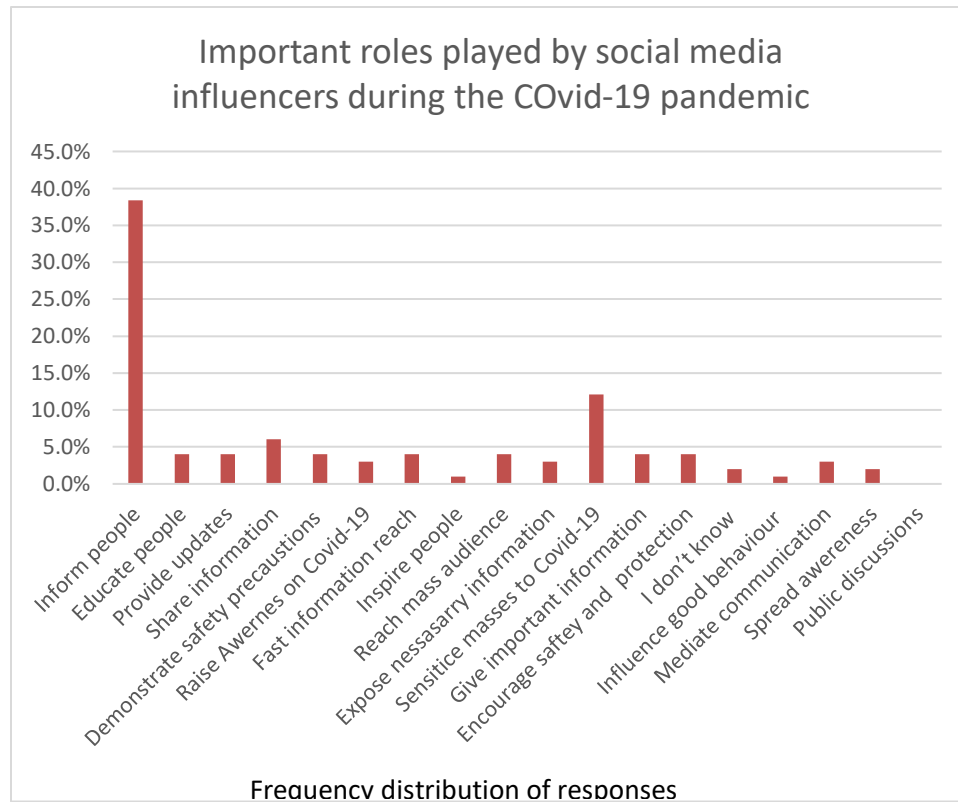

Figure 8. Important roles played by social media influencers during the pandemic

The subsequent question implored on respondents to explain how they thought social media influencers played an important role during the Covid-19 pandemic. This being a structured question, respondents gave their responses which were then reviewed by the researcher using the theme and explore approach. Figure 8. Shows that the data from respondents was grouped in 17 major themes in which respondents' responses were grouped. A total of 99 responses were submitted. It can be seen that a majority of respondents (38) recorded that the role played by influencers was 'informing and spreading awareness about Covid-19.' Six respondents recorded that social media influencers made their followers 'sensitive to Covid-19.' Four respondents said that 'they provided updates' while four others recorded that 'social media influencers themselves demonstrated and

provided safety precautions' which their followers would pick up and start doing as well. of respondents logged that influencers 'mediate communication and start talking about something' that their followers would them weigh and comment on. 4% of respondents said that influencers reach mass audiences which in turn means more people are informed through them. 3% of respondents said that 'influencers shared and exposed necessary information such as precautions and guidelines including quarantine procedures.' Figure 8 also shows that four respondents recorded that influencers "give important information while four other respondents logged that influencers 'encouraged safety and precautions among their followers.' Only one respondent recorded that influencers 'influence good behaviour' while 2 respondents entered that the 'did not know' what role influencers played.

For the researcher to find influence and impact, it was important to determine whether respondents keep up with the posts of social media influencers on social medial platforms; Facebook and Instagram. Figure 9 below shows the data presentation of the responses. 54% of the respondents recorded that they sometimes keep up and 18% or respondents often kept up with influencers posts. 15% of respondents rarely see or watch influencers post or tune into their videos. The other respondents recorded always 9% and never 4%.
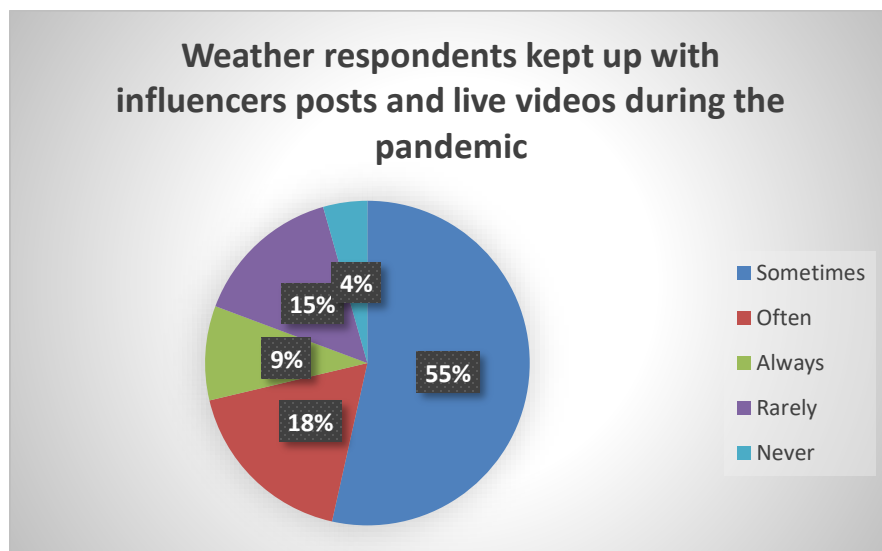

Figure 9. How respondents kept up with influencers posts during the pandemic

Respondents were asked whether posts shared by influencers encouraging their followers to take Covid-19 precautions were useful. Figure 10 below shows their responses.
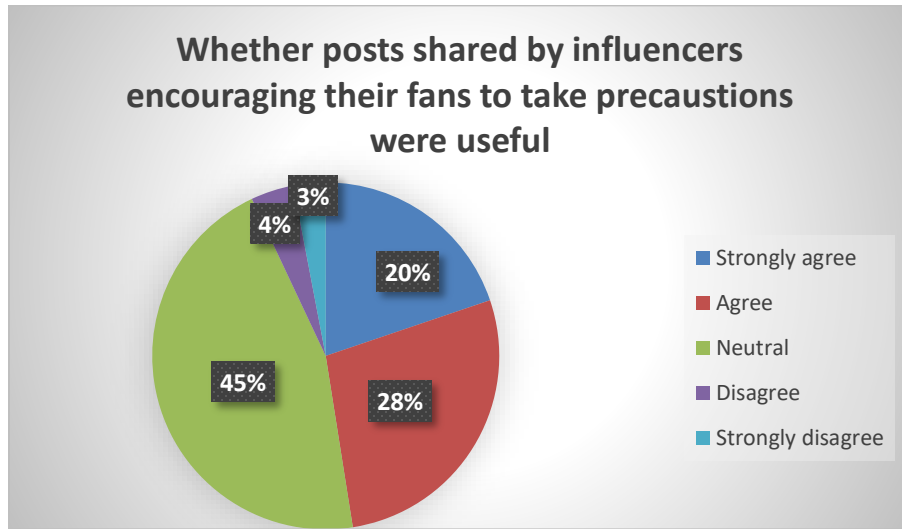
Figure 10. Respondent's responses as to whether posts shared by influencers encouraging their followers to take Covid-19 precautions were useful

The figure shows that 45% respondents were neutral while 28% recorded that they agreed. 20% of the respondents logged that they strongly agree while 3% strongly disagree. 4% of respondents recorded that they disagree with the statement in question.

Respondents were then asked what the benefits of influencers sharing Covid-19 messages with their followers were. Figure 11 below represents that data.

Figure 11. Respondents' answers on the benefits of sharing Covid-19 messages with their followers
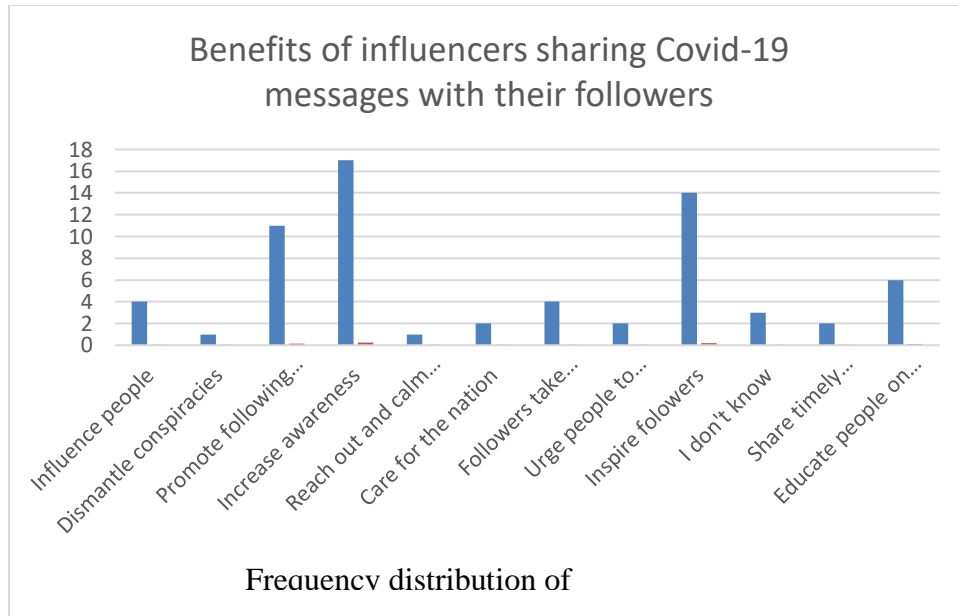
Figure 11 shows that 25.4% of respondents answered that the benefits of influencers sharing Covid-19 messages with their followers is that they 'increase awareness' while 20.0% respondents recorded that they 'inspire followers. 16.4% of respondents said that influencers 'promoted following Covid-19 regulations' while 9% of respondents recorded that influencers 'educate people on Covid 19. Additionally, 6.0% of respondents logged that influencers' 'followers take messages seriously' while 4.5% logged that they 'did not know' of the benefits. 3.0% of respondents said that influencers 'share timely information' while another 3.0% of respondents logged that influencers 'care for the nation.' 1.5% of respondents answered that social media influencers 'dismantled conspiracies.'

After that, respondents were then asked what safety precautions they started following during the pandemic because social media influencers they follow said to or because the influencers themselves were doing it. The data in the Figure below shows their responses.
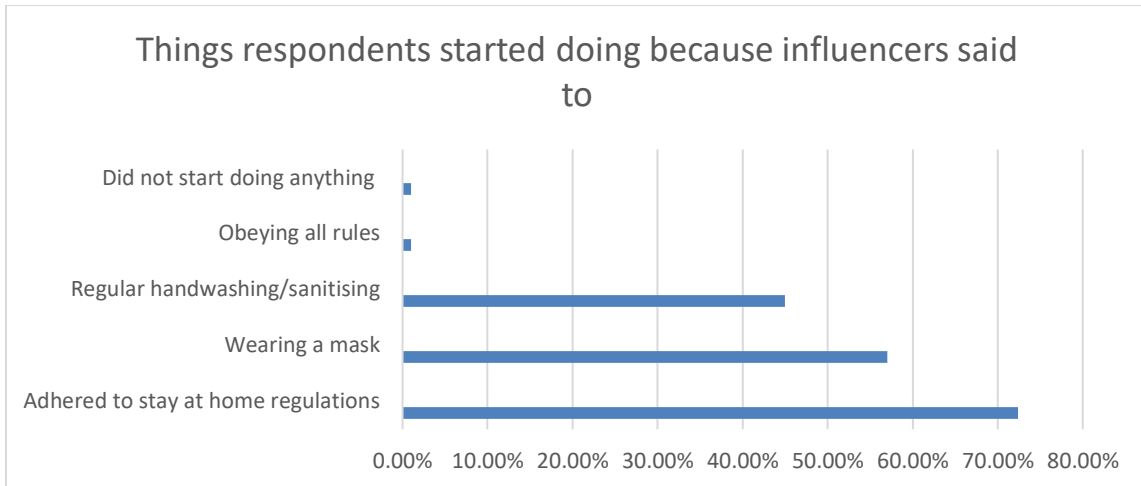
43

Figure 12. Thing's respondents started doing differently because influencers said to or they were doing it themselves

Figure 12 shows that 72.4 respondents started adhering to stay at home regulations while 57.1% more were wearing their masks. 44.9% of respondents logged that they regularly washed or sanitised their hands while 1% of respondents started obeying all the rules and regulations. 1% of respondents logged that they did not start anything differently because influencers said to.
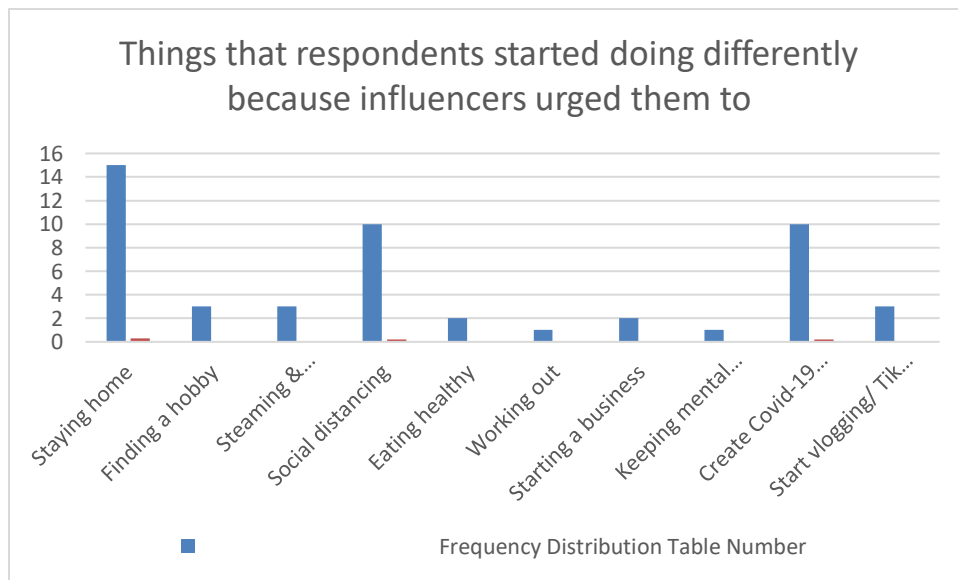

Figure 13. Other things respondents started doing because of influencers

Figure 12 shows that 30 of respondents started 'staying home' while 6 started a hobby. The figure also shows that 6 respondents logged that they started 'steaming and drinking lemon water' while 20 respondents recorded that they started 'social distancing. 2 respondents

44

entered that they started 'eating healthy, 2 others 'started a business' while 10 respondents wrote that they started 'creating Covid-19 awareness' with others they know. 3 respondents logged that they 'started vlogging, Tik Tok or YouTube' meanwhile 1 responded recorded that 'keeping their mental health in check' is something they started doing because an influencer said to and 1 responded recorded that they 'started working out.

Part 2

4.2 Data analysis of Interviews

This section consists of the interviews that the researcher conducted with four local influencers; Maria Nepembe, TopCheri, Pombili Shilongo and Gazza. The interviews were conducted telephonically via WhatsApp or Instagram direct messaging. The influencers were all asked the same questions in quest for the researcher to find out what strategies they used when posting Covid-19 related content as well as what their aims and motivations were for posting those messages. However, during the first telephone interview with Maria Nepembe, she advised that most of them do not actually have strategies in place for how they post on their social media pages. So, the researcher made the decision to place the strong emphasis on influencers motivations and aims for posting Covid-19 related content.

4.2.1 Maria Nepembe

The interviewee was asked what her motivation and aim was for posting Covid-19 messages with her followers.

She responded that what motivated her to share messages that informed and advised her followers about Covid-19 was the severity of the virus and how serious she took if from the beginning. Because of that Maria said that she shared those messages or posted such content to ensure that her followers were well informed and well equipped with all the necessary information to keep themselves safe from Covid-19.

Maria said that she too like the rest of the country was feeling the effects of the pandemic and that she shared those messages or hosted live videos to interact with her followers and just to let each other know that we are all in this together.

The interviewee was asked social media platform she mostly used to communicate with her followers.

She responded that she mostly used Instagram and she would often go live almost every day and that her fans were would be so responsive. "*It just used to be like a public discussion with my Instagram community.*"

4.2.2 TopCheri

When asked what her personal motivations were for sharing messages and participating in campaigns or movements that informed / warned her audience about Covid-19.

She responded that she did not have any strategies for posting. "*We do not post things with actual strategies. When I post messages that are related to Covid-19, I am simply sharing with my followers and hoping someone takes something away. I just post what I think would be helpful to someone and hopefully that changes their mind and makes them take the virus seriously.*"

4.2.3 Pombili Shilongo

The interviewee was asked what her personal motivation and what her personal expectations were for sharing messages that inform / warm her audience about Covid-19.

"*The reason I posted the Covid-19 content is because I value my followers and I value them enough to share those types of posts with them. Also, having the platform that I have and the audience that I have and most importantly, the followers that I have; I wanted to just be on the look out for them and during the pandemic that came in the form of posting messages with helpful information.*" Pombili explained that that was why she used to post such messages. "*I did it because it was necessary and fan love too, I wanted my followers to stay as safe as they could and if I had any part in ensuring that they adhered to the rules and regulations of the pandemic then I would do it in a heartbeat.*"

4.2.4 Gazza

"*If anything, it was necessary for us to share those messages because then what are we influencers for? So, part of the motivation was that we have to post and share Covid-19 information with our followers so that they are informed. I just post and hope that the person on the other end takes something away and that they would take precautions seriously and stay safe during the pandemic.*"

4.3 Summary

In this chapter data gathered by the study was analyzed. This chapter consisted of the study's findings from both qualitative and quantitative data. Data collected from

questionnaires was converted into pie charts and bar graphs to clearly and best represent the data. SPSS data analysis was carried out for the quantitative data while content analysis was carried out by the researcher for the qualitative data.

4.4 Examples of influencer's posts

This section consists of a few Covid-19 related content that were posted by influencers. They were analysed by observation by the researcher focusing especially on viewer engagement; likes, comments, shares and reposts to find out how the audience reacted to the content. As it can be seen in the figures below, there was significant viewer engagement to Covid-19 posts by influencers with posts having an average of over 3,500 likes each.

Figure 14. Top Cheri's post of a collaboration on an informative campaign on Instagram
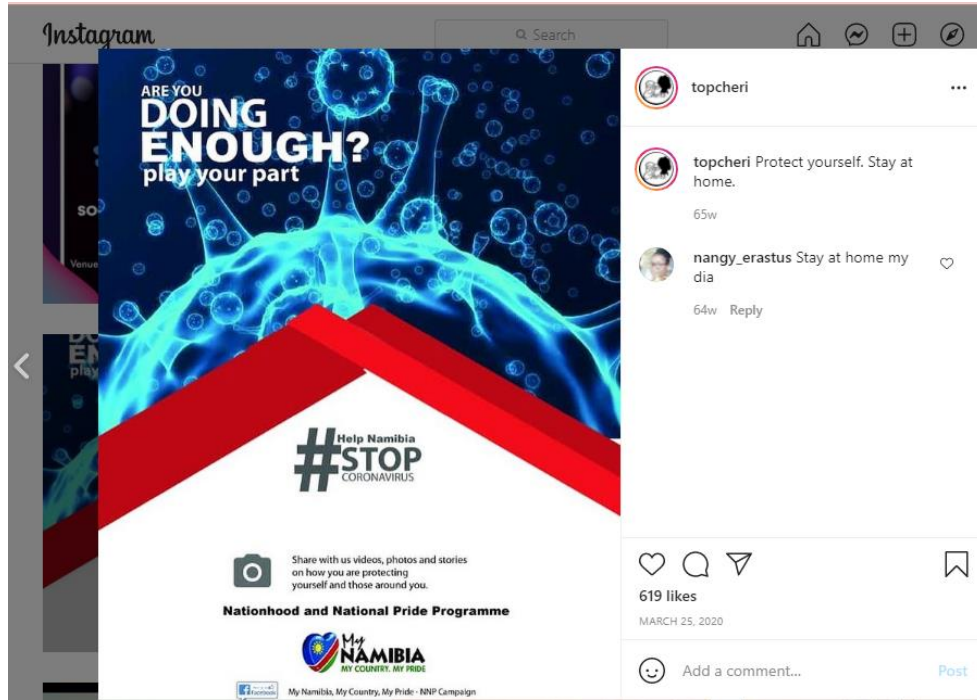
Figure 15. Covid-19 related message posted by TopCheri on Instagram

Figure 16. A post by Gazza about a live video that's Covid-19 informative
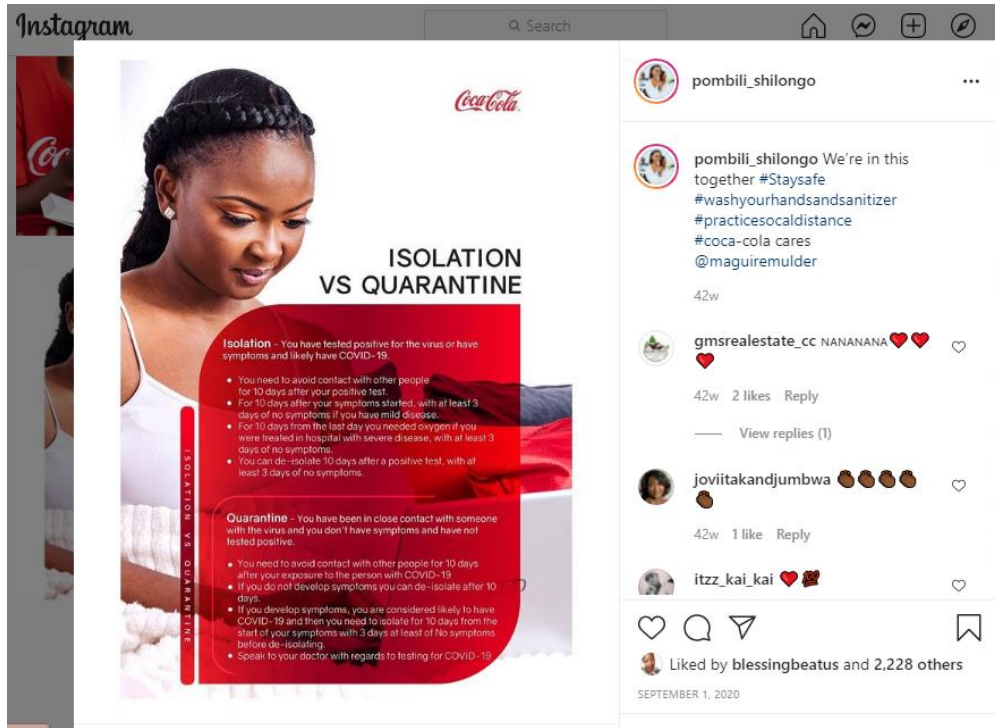
Figure 17. A Covid-19 informative post by Pombili Shilongo

Chapter 5
Discussion of Findings, Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations
Introduction

This chapter consists of discussion of findings and conclusions. It also consists of the overall summary of the study's summary and recommendations for the issues researched as well as for future research. The study sought to find out the impact that Covid-19 messages posted by social media influencers yielded among their followers. Responses from 100 respondents from Windhoek were studied as well as from four social media influencers who were very active in sharing Covid-19 messages during the Covid-19 pandemic. All responses were evaluated to answer the research questions asked at the beginning of this study. Where possible, data was tabulated and displayed through tables in order to find any patterns that provide the best interpretation of the study's results. This chapter concludes the study by evaluating whether the study's research question as well as objectives were met.

5.1 Discussion of findings

The first objective of this study was to determine the age group that uses social media as they were most likely to be influenced by the social media influencers in question. Data analysis and interpretation revealed the following findings. Firstly, the study found that most respondents spend over three hours on social media daily. Nearly 70 respondents indicated as using over four hours on social every day.

The study also sought to determine what social media platforms respondents mostly used. This was important because the influencers are mostly active on Instagram and that is where they would usually post Covid-19 related messages as well as have host live videos where they would engage with their followers. Findings show that the platform mostly used by respondents is Instagram, followed by Facebook. Twitter and others are the least used platforms according to respondents.

When respondents were asked how influential social media was in their lives. 38 respondents out of the 100 respondents answered that they are influenced by social media a moderate amount while 16 respondents answered being influenced by social media a great deal and 15 respondents indicated that social media influences them a little. Overall, results showed that a majority of respondents which represent 72% indicated that they are not at all influenced by social media. 37 respondents indicated that they were influenced a

little or not at all influenced by social media. This was an important finding as it helps in the understanding of respondents' social media behaviour.

This study confirmed the findings about the influence that social media has on individuals. A further novel finding is that these findings are in line with Roesler (2015), whose study found that social media works well with most groups but especially with millennials. Roesler (2015) found that 47 percent of millennials are influenced in their decision making by social media compared to 19 percent of all other groups. This study's results found clear support of this as over 50 percent of respondents belong to the millennial age group and hence the large number of responses reporting of influence from social media as indicated by respondents in their answers.

These findings also support social media influencer's role in online communities and is similar to Katz & Lazersfeld's classic two-step flow model (Freberg, et al., 2013), which states that ideas flow from mass media to opinion leaders who further develop and disseminate that information to their peers as was done by local influencers. Moreover, these opinion leaders use social media sites like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter to share their thoughts with the world thereby spreading and scaling up the information dissemination process.

5.1.1 Respondents knowledge of social media influencers

To meet the objectives of this study, it was important to find out whether respondents knew what a social media influencer is. It was necessary to establish this because if respondents did not know what a social media influencer was then they would not be able to determine whether they are influenced by them. The findings showed that 86% of respondents knew what a social media influencer is. Eight respondents indicated maybe while six did not know what a social media influencer is.

5.1.2 The importance of the roles played by local social media influencers

Next, respondents were asked if in their opinions they thought social media influencers played an import role during the Covid-19 pandemic. The study found that 80 respondents stated that they think or may think that social media influencers played an important role during the pandemic. Respondents were then asked to give an elaborate answer as to what role was played by local social media influencers during the pandemic. Only 68 respondents gave their answers which were then reviewed using the theme and explore

approach. Respondents' answers varied from informing people with 40 respondents stating that influencers spread awareness and informed people to stay safe. Some responses stated that social media influencers provided updates on the Covid-19 virus while other responses were based around social media influencers providing useful information to their followers. Findings shows that a small number of respondents indicated that influencers reach a massive audience/ a lot of people which means that a lot of people are informed through them. A small number of respondents indicated that social media influencers shared and exposed necessary information such a precautions, guidelines as well as quarantine procedures to their followers. Some responses where centred around the fact that social media influencers encouraged safety and precautions among their followers whereas a small number of respondents answered that they did not know what role influencers played. Some respondents answered that social media influencers mediated communication and acted as conversation staters because they would talk about Covid-19 with their followers who would then engage in the conversation which would lead to behaviour change regarding that subject. These findings are to be in accordance with a study by Freberg et al., (2013) which stated that social influencers act as opinion leaders who use social media sites like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter to share their thoughts with the world thereby spreading and scaling up the information dissemination process. Respondents' responses to this question also confirms Lutkenhaus et al., (2019) study which stipulates that social media influencers can make important contributions to setting and shifting the public agenda of online communities by always inviting their followers to leave their thoughts in the comments or reacting by liking posts.

To answer one of the study's objectives of finding impact and influence it was important to find out whether respondents keep up with the posts of social media influencers on the social media platforms selected for this study. Over 60 percent of respondents indicated that they always or sometimes keep up with the posts of influencers on social media while 18 said that they often keep up with the influences post. 19 respondents answered that they rarely or never keep up with influencers posts. It was important to establish this because one of the theories applied in this study suggests that people learn by observing others and that individuals are motivated to behave in a certain way based on direct or indirect social interactions – even those forged through social media (Yasra et al., 2020). So, then it was

important for the researcher to find out weather there was some sort of social interaction between the social media influencers and the respondents. The results show that a large number of respondents keep up with posts and live videos of social influencers which according to the social learning theory might lead to behavioural change.

5.1.3 Whether posts shared by influencers encouraging their followers to take precautions were useful

When respondents were asked whether posts shared by influencers encouraging their followers to take Covid-19 precautions were useful, 47 respondents indicated that they agreed. While a majority of respondents were neutral as to whether post shared by influencers telling their followers to be cautious. Only a few indicated that they were in disagreement or that they strongly agreed. A few respondents indicated that they disagreed. This proves that there is quite a considerable number of people who thought that Covid-19 related messages shared by local influencers were useful. It can be deduced that if respondents answered that these posts were useful because perhaps, they were effective in persuading people to take precautions seriously.

5.1.4 The benefits of social media influencers sharing Covid-19 related messages

The researcher gave respondents a chance to view their opinions on what they thought were the benefits of social media influencers sharing Covid-19 related messages with their followers. Most respondents answered that the benefits of influencers sharing Covid-19 messages with their followers is that they 'increase awareness' while some other respondents indicated that social media influencers 'inspire their followers. Here are some of the respondents' responses that seem to suggest that posts by influencers reach masses, *"the messages reach a lot of people so a lot of people would be warned or advised through their posts." "They share messages with their mass audience and that way, more people know about Covid 19."* Some respondents answered that social media influencers were helpful by educating people. *"Yes, they teach each others how to handle the situation and share different precautions through social media."* Some respondents answered that social influencers shared important and factual information. *"I think they had a calming effect on the masses. Especially the influencers who shared factual preventative methods."* Some respondents answered that the importance of sharing those messages *"helped people to*

follow the Covid-19 precautions. It helped to give the followers a better perception and understanding of Covid-19"

Other respondents talked about the fact that local social media influencers gave helpful tips to their fans, hence some respondents answered that "*they give helpful tips on what people can do to keep themselves safe."* Some respondents answered that the benefit of local social media influencers sharing Covid-19 related message was that they were "*making their followers aware of the severity of the virus and warning them to stay safe."* Other respondents added that social media were persistent in their Covid-19 messaging and that they were "*alerting those with stubborn mindsets the importance of precautions."*

Findings show that a large number of respondents emphasised the fact that social media influencers have a lot of followers and thus have a wide reach with their messages thereby making a lot people stay safe. These result ties well with previous studies wherein Abidin et al., (2020) observed that in light of Covid-19, some governments have formally enlisted the help of influencers to manage the information landscape. The Finnish government enlisted the use of social media influencers alongside doctors, bus drivers and grocery workers to help disseminate information on social media to make up for the fact that government communication does not reach everyone (Abidin et al., 2020). Likewise, a similar pattern of results was obtained from some respondents who answered that social media influencers disseminate information to a large number of people and thereby informs a lot of people.

5.1.5 Things respondents started doing differently because the influencers they follow said to.

Next, respondents were asked what Covid-19 safety precautions they started adhering to during the pandemic because social media influencers they follow said to or because the influencers themselves were doing it. Survey findings showed that some respondents started adhering to stay home regulations while some showed that they started wearing a mask because the social media influencers they follow advised it. Some respondents indicated that they began regularly sanitising or washing their hands while some respondents indicated that they did not start doing anything because an influencer said so. One limitation of this method of questioning is that there is no evidence to support that the respondents were not already doing this prior to influencers encouraging it. Therefore, the

researcher cannot say for sure that respondents only started taking these precautions due to influence from the social media influencers. This presents some limitations in that better impact evaluation questions should have been asked to guarantee impact. According to Peersman (2015), an impact evaluation provides information produced by an intervention; positive, negative, intended or unintended and it can also be direct or indirect. This means that an impact evaluation needs to establish what has been the cause of observed changes with regard to causal attribution. Therefore, one concern about the findings of this study is that it lacks definite questions that would have provided definite and sure answers that would without doubt answer the main objective of this study which was finding (definite) answers that respondents were in fact impacted by social media influencers with regard to Covid-19.

However, to be a bit more specific and definite in questioning, respondents were asked once again asked to give their opinions on what other things they started doing differently because social media influencers urged them as followers to do.

A large number of respondents answered that they started staying home while some other respondents answered that they started a hobby because the influencers they follow recommended it.

Findings further showed that a number of respondents indicated that they started steaming and drinking lemon water. A popular explanation of this is that during the pandemic, some people were into the practise of steaming as it is believed to prevent Covid-19. Some respondents indicated that they started social distancing. Some respondents entered indicated that they started eating healthy, while some others started a business while some of them indicated that they themselves started creating Covid-19 awareness with their immediate friends and family or with those that they know. This specific finding seems to be in huge support of Bandura's social learning which promotes the idea that individuals are motivated to behave in a certain way based on direct or indirect social interactions – even those forged through social media (Yasra et al., 2020).

Similarly, that can be observed in this study's findings whereby some respondents indicated that they started doing something because the influencers they follow where doing it too. Other respondents specified that they started vlogging on YouTube, Tik Tok or began taking better social media pictures as inspired by the social media influencers that

they follow. Meanwhile, some responses noted that some respondents started keeping their mental health in check while some others indicated that said they started working out as influenced by the social media influencers they follow on social media.

5.1.6 Influencers aim for posting Covid-19 related content.

The four influencers used in this study were asked what motivated them to share the Covid-19 messages that they were sharing with their audience and what their aims were when sharing such messages.

Findings showed that most influencers were aware of their big platforms on social media and that they wanted to use those platforms to ensure that the people they interact with on there are well updated and provided with important information that may use in keeping themselves safe. Findings also showed that influencers felt that they had a social responsibility and hence they wanted to use the influence that they have to do well in the fight against Covid-19.

One influencer specifically indicated that because of the love she has for her followers, she felt the need to play a part in making sure they are taking care of themselves by taking the necessary precautions and adhering to rules that were set in place for people to protect themselves.

5.2 Summary of findings

The findings showed that respondents spend a lot of time on social media, especially those below the age of 35. Studies suggest that this can be a good breeding ground for influencers to influence those who are tuned in and viewing their content.

Findings also revealed that most respondents know what a social media influencer is. Similarly, a large number of respondents indicated that social media influences them to some degree; to some a great and to others, a lot. However, there were some respondents who indicated that social media does not influence them at all.

Overall, findings showed that the Covid-19 messages or content that local influencers were posting or sharing with their audiences were impactful in making them aware, providing useful information as well as getting them to take the necessary measures to some. This seems to indicate that local social media influencers were impactful in reaching out to the masses and influencing behaviour as well as changing public perceptions with regard to

Covid-19. Study findings also revealed that there were some other things that respondents started doing because the social media influencers they following were doing them.

5.3 Recommendations

Health organisations in Namibia need to look to influencer marketing to promote health messages as influencers followers are very receptive to whatever messages they share. Health organisations seeking to disseminate information to the masses should collaborate with different social media influencers that cater to different audiences within Namibia's diverse cultural sphere.

Also, the researcher recommends that future studies on the issues focus on a broader investigation on the impact that social media influencers have on their audiences. They can look into other areas such as how local social media influencers impact of their audience buying patterns, lifestyle decisions etc.

References

Abidin, C., Lee, J., Barbetta, T. & Miao, W. (2020). *Influencers and COVID-19: Reviewing key issues in press coverage across Australia, China, Japan and South Korea*. Media International Australia. Retrieved from https://journals.sagepub.com

Andrew, N., Narcum, N. & Mason, N. (2021). *Social media marketing gains importance after Covid-19*. Cogent Business & Management

Angula N. & Dlodlo, N. (2015). *Mobile Technology for Healthcare Information Dissemination to Low Resource Areas of Namibia.* International Journal of Science and Research. Retrieved from https://www.ijsr.net/archive

Anwar, A., Malik, M., Raees, V. & Anwar, A. (2019). *Role of Mass Media and Public Health Communications in the COVID-19 Pandemic*. Cereus 12 (9). Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication

Biaudet, S. (2017). *Influencer Marketing as a Marketing Tool: The process of creating an Influencer Marketing Campaign on Instagram*. Retrieved from https://www.theseus.fi/handle

Byrne, E., Kearney, J. & MacEvilly, C. *The Role of Influencer Marketing and Social Influencers in Public Health*. Volume 76. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publications

Cherry, K. (2020*). What the Bobo doll experiment reveals about kids and aggression*. Very Well Mind. https://www.verywellmind.com/bobo-doll-experiment-2794993

Fox, S. & Duggan, M. (2013). *Health Online 2013*. Pew Research Centre. Retrieved from https://www.pewresearch.org

Doody, O. & Noonan, M. (2013). *Preparing and conducting interviews to collect data*. ResearchGate. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/236922140

Elrod, J. & Fortenberry, J. (2020). *Advertising in health and medicine: using mass media to communicate with patients*. BMC Health Services Research. Retrieved from https://bmchealthservres.biomedcentral.com

Fertik, M. (2020*). Why is influencer marketing such a big deal right now?* Forbes. Retrieved from https://www.forbes.com/sites/michaelfertik/2020/07/02

Formost, K. (2019). *Why influencer marketing is more effective than traditional advertising.* Retrieved from https://www.festivalofmarketing.com/festival-blog

Freberg, K., Graham, K., McGaughey, K. & Freberg, L. (2010). Who are the social media influencers? A study of public perceptions of personality. Public Relations Review. Science Direct. https://www.sciencedirect.com

Freberg, K., Graham, K., McGaughey, K. & Freberg, L. (2010). Who are the social media influencers? A study of public perceptions of personality. Public Relations Review. Retrieved from https://www.sciencedirect.com

Gabriel, D. (2013). *Inductive and deductive approaches to research*. Dr Deborah Gabriel. https://deborahgabriel.com/2013/03/17/inductive-and-deductive-approaches-to-research/

Gough A, Hunter R, Ajao O, Jurek A, McKeown G, Hong J, Barrett E, Ferguson M, McElwee G, McCarthy M, Kee F. *Tweet for Behaviour Change: Using Social Media for the Dissemination of Public Health Messages*. Retrieved from https://publichealth.jmir.org/2017/1/e14

Heldman, A., Schindelar, J. & Weaver, J. (2013). *Social Media Engagement and Public Health Communication: Implications for Public Health Organizations Being Truly*

"Social". Public Health Reviews. Retrieved from https://publichealthreviews.biomedcentral.com

Hollis, N. (2020). *Market research is more important than ever in the age of COVID-19.* Kantar. Retrieved from https://www.kantar.com/inspiration

Hootsuite & We Are Social (2021). *Digital around the world*. Datareportal. https://datareportal.com/global-digital-overview

Kapadia, A. (2020). *How Effective is Influencer Marketing? Business 2 Community*. Retrieved from https://www.business2community.com/marketing

Kemp, S. (2020). *Digital 2020: Namibia*. Datareportal. Retrieved from https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2020-namibia?rq=namibia

Kumar, V., Bhaskaran, V., Mirchandani, R. & Shah, M. (2013). *Creating a Measurable Social Media Marketing Strategy: Increasing the Value and ROI of Intangibles and Tangibles for Hokey Pokey.* Vol. 32 No.2. Informs. Retrieved from https://www.jstor.org/stable/24544940

Langkos, S. (2014). *Athens as an international tourism destination: An empirical investigation to the city's imagery and the role of local DMO's.* ResearchGate. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/270956555

Macfarlan, A. (2014). *Internet Questionnaire.* Better Evaluation. https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/evaluation-options/internet_questionnaires

Mcleod, A. (2016). Bandura – Social learning theory. Simply Psychology. https://www.simplypsychology.org/bandura.html

Moshi, Q. (2020). The Impact of Influencers on Young People's buying decisions. Business Information Technology. Retrieved from https://www.theseus.fi/bitstream

Nabavi, R. (2012). *Bandura's Social Learning Theory & Social Cognitive Learning Theory*. Research Gate. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/267750204_

Noble, H. & Smith, J. (2015). *Issues of validity and reliability in qualitative research*. BMJ Journals. https://ebn.bmj.com/content/18/2/34

Paquette, H. (2013). *Social Media as a Marketing Tool: A Literature Review*. University of Rhode Island. Retrieved from https://digitalcommons.uri.edu

Peersman, G. (2015) *Impact evaluation.* BetterEvaluation. http://www.betterevaluation.org/themes/impact_evaluation.

Pilgrim, K. & Bohnet-Joschko, S. (2019). *Selling health and happiness how influencers communicate on Instagram about dieting and exercise: mixed methods research*. BMC Public Health. Retrieved from https://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/track

Pritchard, T. (2020). *The UK Government's enlisted influencers to try and tackle coronavirus misinformation.* Gizmodo. Retrieved from https://www.gizmodo.com.au

Ray, A. (2013). *Brief Introduction to Technological Determinism*. CreateSpace. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net

Roesler, P. (2015). *How social media influences consumer buying decisions*. The Business Journal. https://www.bizjournals.com/bizjournals/how-to/marketing/2015/05/how-social-media-influences-consumer-buying

Trusov, M., Bucklin, R., & Pauwels, K. (2009). *Effects of Word-of-Mouth versus Traditional Marketing: Findings from an Internet Social Networking Site*. Journal of Marketing. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable

Wielki, J. (2020). *Analysis of the Role of Digital Influencers and Their Impact on the Functioning of the Contemporary On-Line Promotional System and Its Sustainable Development*. Opole University of Technology: Poland

Willis, E. (2018). *The Power of Peers: Applying User-Generated Content to Health Behaviors "Off-Line"*. Sage Journals. Retrieved from https://journals.sagepub.com

Wisdom, J. & Creswell, J. (2013). *Mixed Methods: Integrating Quantitative and Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis While Studying Patient-Centered Medical Home Models*. PCMH. https://pcmh.ahrq.gov/page

Yasra, J., Olalekan, A. & Adewunmi, A. (2020). *Effectiveness of influencer marketing vs social media sponsored advertising*. Universidad del Zulia. Redalyc. https://www.redalyc.org/jatsRepo

Appendices

Copy of appendix 1 Questionnaire

RESEARCH QUESTIONNAIRE

My name is Lydia Sageus. I am a 4ᵗʰ year media studies student at the University of Namibia (UNAM). This research project is part of a mandatory coursework as per Unam's requirements for the purpose of completing my degree program. The research is titled **"Investigating the impact of Namibian social media influencers in changing public health opinion: A Covid-19 case study"** and intents to look into the impact that local influencers have on their online audience/followers regarding the corona virus. The purpose of the study is to understand the effectiveness of local influencers in promoting health messages.

I am imploring you to assist me in the completion of this survey for the purpose of my final year research project which is part of a mandatory coursework as per UNAM requirements for the   purpose of completing my degree.

If you agree to participate in this research, please note that your response will be kept confidential. Kindly discontinue the survey if you do not follow the following people on social media (Instagram, Twitter, Facebook):

1. Maria Nepembe   3. TopCheri
2. Gazza   4. Pombili Shilongo

Do you agree to participate in this questionnaire?

Yes

No

Thank you for your agreed consent in the participation of this research. As a respondent, you are urged to HONESTLY & TRUTHFULLY answer the questions contained in this questionnaire for the recording of accurate findings. Kindly indicate your gender below.

Female

Male

Other

Indicate your age group.

18-25   26-35

36-45   46-50

1. How many hours a day do you use social media (Instagram, Twitter, Facebook)?

Less than an hour   3-4 hours

1-2 hours   Over 4 hours

2. Which social media platform do you use often?

Facebook   Instagram

Twitter   Other

3. How influential is social media in your life?

A great deal ☐   A lot ☐

A moderate amount ☐   A little ☐

Not at all ☐

4. Do you know what a 'social media influencer' is?

Yes ☐

No ☐

Maybe ☐

5. In your opinion, do you think social media influencers played an important role in limiting the spread of Covid-19, during the Covid-19 pandemic?

Yes ☐

No ☐

I don't know ☐

If yes, please explain how. If no, proceed to question 6.

_____

6. Since the beginning of Covid-19, have you been keeping up with these influencer's posts or live videos on Instagram or Facebook?

Never ☐   Rarely ☐

Sometimes ☐   Often ☐

Always ☐

7. Are posts shared by influencers encouraging their followers to take Covid-19 precautions useful?

Strongly agree ☐   Agree ☐

Neutral ☐   Disagree ☐

Strongly disagree ☐

8. What do you think were the benefits of social media influencers sharing Covid-19 related messages with their followers?

_____

_____

9. During the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic have you done any of the following things because the influencers you follow said to? Or because they themselves were doing it? (You can check more than one box if applicable)

Wearing a mask ☐

Adhere to stay at home guidelines ☐

Regular washing/sanitation of hands

10. What are things you started doing differently because social media influencers urged you/ their followers to do?

_____

_____