

**School of Marketing**

**Social Influence Through Word-of-Mouth Communications in  
Social Networking**

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**This thesis is presented for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
of  
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**DECLARATION**

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To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgment has been made. This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university

The research presented and reported in this thesis was conducted in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007) – updated March 2014. The proposed research study received human research ethics approval from the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (EC00262), Approval Numbers SOM2014005 (Phase One) and RDBS-20-16 (Phase Two).

Signed:  \_\_\_\_\_

Delane Julia Osborne

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To Ben

*Ben Linden*

*15/01/1988 - 14/07/2012*

**ABSTRACT**

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Word-of-mouth and social media have been areas of significant research interest during the past decade however in reviewing extant research there appears a lack of consistency in exploring its operation and measurement. Furthermore, the majority of social media research has focused on the platforms of emails, reviews, and blogs, with little research focusing on social networking sites. As such, there remains a need for development of a holistic model of the operation of word-of-mouth communications and their outcomes. Given how influential word-of-mouth communications are on the consumption behaviours of individuals, it is pertinent for brands to understand the operation of this influence. As such, the purpose of this study is to examine how individuals are influenced by word-of-mouth communications on social networking sites.

This study utilises a mixed-methods research design comprising two sequential phases; an exploratory qualitative study and an explanatory quantitative study. Phase one of the study consists of 15 one-to-one in-depth interviews enabling exploration of how and why influence operates with results formulating the stimuli to be tested in phase two. Phase two of the study is operationalized through a survey questionnaire administered to 708 respondents. Results from these two studies demonstrate that word-of-mouth communications posted on social networking sites in the form of photos, shares, and check-ins are all influential, as are both positively and negatively framed communications. Communications regarding high involvement products were also found to be more influential than communications regarding low involvement products. The sender characteristics of expertise, trustworthiness, homophily, and tie strength were found to be equally as important regardless of product involvement or product classification. In exception to this, trustworthiness was found to be of greater importance for high involvement products than low involvement products and homophily was found to be of greater importance for hedonic products than for utilitarian products. Lastly, influence from word-of-mouth

communications was found to be positively related to both purchase intention and share intention.

As the first of its kind, this study adds to the existing body of knowledge by filling a knowledge gap with regard to the operation of word-of-mouth on social networking sites, providing empirical evidence of the existence of consumer-consumer influence. Results from this study also prove significant from a managerial perspective for marketers and social media managers by providing an understanding of how consumers are influenced by one another on social networking sites and in particular, which types of communications and content are most influential.

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## **1. CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION**

---

### **1.1 Introduction**

The following chapter presents a summary of the dissertation, beginning with a brief background of the research area and outline of gaps in the existing literature. Following this, the research objectives of the study are outlined along with the methodology for each phase of the study. Results for each of the hypotheses are provided and the significant contributions of the study highlighted. The chapter concludes with limitations of the study and possible future research directions.

### **1.2 Background**

Social learning has long been an area of interest for social psychologists in understanding how individuals are influenced by one another (Allport, 1968; Bandura, 1977). Once restricted to physical interactions and observations, with advancements in technology and the advent of the internet, social influence now occurs through many mediums. Of particular interest to marketing researchers are interpersonal communications involving brands, products, and services, termed 'word-of-mouth' (Lee & Youn, 2009; Wu & Wang, 2011). These word-of-mouth communications engender substantial influence on the consumption behaviours of individuals and thus are now one of the most influential sources of marketplace information (Lee & Youn, 2009; Subramani & Rajagopalan, 2003).

With the rapid growth of social media and the introduction of platforms such as review sites, blogs, and social networking sites, word-of-mouth communications are becoming even more influential. According to recent statistics, 62% of Australians use social media each day, with 23% using such sites for the purpose of retail research (Yellow, 2018). Consumers are increasingly tending to content posted on social media before making purchases with Chitty, Hughes, and D'Alessandro (2012, p. 177) quantifying that "86% of Australian internet users contact other internet users seeking

their opinions and information about products, services and brands”. Subsequently, interactions that take place on such sites can have a powerful influence on consumption behaviour and thus, understanding this consumer engagement on social media is paramount for marketing practitioners (Masterson & Pickton, 2014; Yellow, 2018).

In terms of social media, social networking site Facebook is by far the most popular platform with 91% of social media users accessing the site and for an average of 10 hours a week (Yellow, 2018). According to recent data, 59% of respondents indicated that the last time they used social media for the purpose of researching a product or service it resulted in a purchase (Yellow, 2018). As such, social networks are “increasingly being recognized as an important source of information influencing the adoption and use of products and services” (Subramani & Rajagopalan, 2003, p. 300).

Whilst the effects of traditional word-of-mouth communications have been researched for over half a century and electronic word-of-mouth communications for over a decade, little research has explored the impact of word-of-mouth communications when posted on social networking sites.

### **1.3 Research Gaps**

Upon review of past studies in the research areas of word-of-mouth and social media, it is evident there exist a number of gaps in the literature that support the need for further research.

Numerous word-of-mouth studies have acknowledged the importance of various sender, message, receiver, and product characteristics (e.g. Cheung, Luo, Sia, & Chen, 2009; Chu & Kamal, 2008; Park & Kim, 2008; Podnar & Javernik, 2012; Smith, Menon, & Sivakumar, 2005; Sweeney, Soutar, & Mazzarol, 2012; Wu & Wang, 2011) however as literature reviews such as Chan and Ngai (2011) and Cheung and Thadani (2012) highlight, no previous studies have tested all of these characteristics in combination. Whilst sender characteristics are often included in word-of-mouth research,

despite being acknowledged as significant moderators of influence from word-of-mouth communications, receiver characteristics such as prior knowledge, personal involvement, and personal expertise are often neglected (Bettman & Park, 1980; Bian & Moutinho, 2011; Koufaris, 2002). As such, this area remains largely under researched with researchers calling for their inclusion in future studies (Park, Lee, & Han, 2007; Skourtis, Pollalis, Assiouras, & Koniordos, 2012). Furthermore, Subramani and Rajagopalan (2003) highlight the additional need for further research into product characteristics. As such, there is a need for studies incorporating each of these characteristics.

Whilst outcomes such as perceived influence, purchase intention, and share intention have been explored in past studies, they have typically only been measured by a single item (e.g. Ashill & Sinha, 2004; Brown & Reingen, 1987; Floh, Koller, & Zauner, 2013; Huang & Chen, 2006; Lee & Youn, 2009; Park & Kim, 2008; Park et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2005; Wang & Yang, 2008; Wang & Yang, 2010) and / or measured in conjunction with other behavioural intentions (e.g. Ekinci & Riley, 2003; Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012; Sparks & Browning, 2011). As single item measures have low reliability and may not capture the total concept of the variable, further studies should engage in more rigorous testing of these variables, utilising separate multi-item constructs to measure each unique outcome (Park et al., 2007; Zaichkowsky, 1985)

Whilst numerous studies have examined the effects of positive word-of-mouth versus negative word-of-mouth, results have varied with some studies finding negative word-of-mouth to be more influential (e.g. Cheung & Lee, 2008; Park & Lee, 2009) and others finding positive word-of-mouth to be more influential (e.g. Ahluwalia, 2002; East, Hammond, & Lomax, 2008; Floh, Koller, & Zauner, 2012). Given the variation in results from past studies, further research into message framing of word-of-mouth communications is required in order to determine which framing is the most influential.

Lastly, whilst social media and electronic word-of-mouth studies have explored the effectiveness of various platforms such as emails (e.g. Shabsogh, Liao, & Reynolds, 2012), reviews (e.g. Cheung & Lee, 2012; Park & Kim, 2008; Park & Lee, 2009), and blogs (e.g. Chu & Kamal, 2008), no previous studies have examined the effectiveness of social networking sites as a platform for word-of-mouth communications. Thus, as per Sweeney et al.'s (2012) recommendation, research into social networking sites and the various forms of communications within them is required.

#### **1.4 Research Question & Research Objectives**

Drawn from gaps in the existing literature, this study aims to answer the following research question:

“How are individuals influenced by word-of-mouth communications on social networking sites?”

This research question is explored through a number of more specific research objectives as follows;

**RO1: (a)** To identify the different types of word-of-mouth communications on social networking sites.

**(b)** To compare the level of influence of different types of word-of-mouth communications on social networking sites.

**RO2: (a)** To identify and profile the different message framings of word-of-mouth communications on social networking sites.

**(b)** To compare the level of influence of different message framings of word-of-mouth communications on social networking sites.

**RO3:** To empirically test the influence of different types of word-of-mouth communications posted on social networking sites.

**RO4:** To empirically test the influence of differently framed word-of-mouth communications posted on social networking sites.

**RO5:** To test whether the influence of word-of-mouth communications posted on social networking sites varies depending upon the involvement of the product.

**RO6:** To test whether the influence of word-of-mouth communications posted on social networking sites varies depending upon the classification of the product.

**RO7:** To examine the moderating effect of product characteristics on the relationship between sender characteristics and influence of word-of-mouth communications in a social networking site context.

**RO8: (a)** To test whether greater influence from word-of-mouth communications posted on social networking sites results in an increased purchase intention.

**(b)** To test whether greater influence from word-of-mouth communications posted on social networking sites results in an increased share intention.

## **1.5 Key Underpinnings and Definitions**

Outlined below are the key theoretical underpinnings from which this study is formulated. Also defined are the measures utilised within the study.

### **1.5.1 Key Underpinnings**

**Social learning:** “A process of continuous reciprocal interaction between cognitive, behavioural, and environmental determinants” (Bandura, 1977, p. 1).

**Socialisation:** “The process by which an individual develops, through transaction with other people, his specific patterns of socially relevant behaviours and experience” (Ward, 1974, p. 2).

**Consumer socialisation:** “The processes by which young people acquire skills, knowledge, and attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers in the marketplace” (Ward, 1974, p. 2).

**Reference group:** “A person or group of people that significantly influences an individual’s behaviour” (Bearden & Etzel, 1982, P. 184)

**Social influence:** “The process whereby one person’s behaviour is affected by the words or actions of others” (Bernstein, Penner, Clarke-Stewart, & Roy, 2008, p. 722).

**Word-of-mouth:** “Person-to-person communication between a receiver and a sender, which involves a product, service, or brand” (Wu & Wang, 2011, p. 450).

**Social media:** “A group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (Belch, Belch, Kerr, & Powell, 2014, p. 82)

**Social networking sites:** “Applications that enable users to connect by creating personal information profiles, inviting friends and colleagues to have access to those profiles, and sending e-mails and instant messages between each other” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 63).

### **1.5.2 Definitions of Measures**

**Personal Involvement:** “A person's perceived relevance of the object based on inherent needs, values, and interests” (Zaichkowsky 1985, p. 342).

**Personal Expertise:** “The extent to which an individual perceives him / herself to be knowledgeable, competent, trained, and experienced in a particular domain” (Adjei, Noble, & Noble, 2010, p. 638).

**Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence:** “The need to identify or enhance one’s image with significant others through the acquisition and use of products and brands, the willingness to conform to the expectations of others regarding purchase decisions, and / or the tendency to learn about products and services by observing others and / or seeking information from others” (Bearden, Netemeyer, & Teel, 1989, p. 474).

**Expertise:** “The perceived ability of the source to make valid assertions” (McCracken, 1989, p. 311).

**Trustworthiness:** “The perceived willingness of the source to make valid assertions” (McCracken, 1989, p. 311).

**Homophily:** “The degree to which pairs of individuals who interact are similar with respect to certain attributes, such as beliefs, values, education, social status, etc.” (Rogers & Bhowmik, 1970, p. 526).

**Tie Strength:** “The strength of the dyadic interpersonal relationships in the context of social networks” (Money, Gilly, & Graham, 1998, p. 79).

**Perceived Influence:** “A consumer’s subjective feeling of being influenced by the recommender” (Smith et al., 2005, p. 18).

**Purchase Intention:** “The possibility that consumers will plan or be willing to purchase a certain product or service in the future” (Wu, Yeh, & Hsiao, 2011, p. 32).

**Forwarding Intention:** “The level of intention of receivers to forward to others after receiving it from someone else” (Lin, Wu, Liao, & Liu, 2006, p. 88).

## **1.6 Methodology**

This study utilises a mixed-methods research design consisting of two sequential phases; an exploratory qualitative study and an explanatory quantitative study (Levens, 2012; Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009). Whilst inclusion of a quantitative component is necessary due to its ability to facilitate the collection of large sample sizes and testing of large volumes of data, content analysis is considered integral in providing a fuller understanding of behaviour and when integrated with quantitative methods can achieve description, prediction, control, and explanation of phenomena (Neuendorf, 2002; Palinkas, 2014).

Beginning with the qualitative study was necessary in order to determine how the message characteristics of communication type and message framing impact a communication's level of influence as results garnered from this study formulated the stimuli to be tested in the quantitative study. Inclusion of a content analytic study also enabled exploration of phenomena and development of an enriched conceptualisation of exactly how and why influence operates. This is necessary for businesses and brands to develop an understanding of the nature in which consumers are influenced, especially given this is a fairly new area requiring further research still.

Phase one of the study is operationalized through one-to-one semi-structured in-depth interviews with participants during which their Facebook communications are examined and discussed (Davis, 2012; Daymon & Holloway, 2002; Wells, Moriarty, & Burnett, 2006). A total of 15 interviews were conducted with Facebook users aged 18-30 living in Perth, Western Australia. Upon completion of which, audio recordings were transcribed and their content analysed for emergence of common themes relative to the influence of communications.

Phase two of the study is operationalized utilising two one-way experimental designs and a two-way factorial experimental design (Black, 2004; Davis, 2012; Mook, 2001; Rosnow & Rosenthal, 2008; Stangor, 2015). The

research instrument for this phase of the study is a survey questionnaire in which respondents are presented with word-of-mouth communications. After viewing the stimuli, respondents are asked to rate their level of agreement with several statements pertaining to the variables of expertise (Netemeyer & Bearden, 1992), trustworthiness (Ohanian, 1990), homophily (De Bruyn & Lilien, 2008), tie strength (Frenzen & Davis, 1990), perceived influence (Gilly, Graham, Wolfinger, & Yale, 1998), purchase intention (Lepkowska-White, Brashear, & Weinberger, 2003), and share intention (Lin et al., 2006). Participants are additionally asked to rate themselves against the personal variables of susceptibility to interpersonal influence (Bearden et al., 1989), personal involvement (Chandrashekar, 2004), and personal expertise (Netemeyer & Bearden, 1992). A total of 708 survey questionnaires were obtained from Facebook users aged 18-30 living in Australia through an online survey panel. A sequential monadic design was employed with participants randomly allocated 2 of the 11 treatments in order to achieve approximately 100 responses for each of the communications represented in the treatments (Hibberts, Johnson, & Hudson, 2012; Komanska, 1990; Robson, 2002; Welch & Swift, 1992). A combination of Independent Samples T-tests, Linear Regressions, and One-Way ANOVA analyses were utilised to test the hypotheses.

## **1.7 Results**

During phase one of the study, participants identified 'photos', 'check-ins', 'status updates', 'shares', and 'likes' as ways in which their friends could communicate with them. Of the various types of communications, photos were the most influential, followed by shares and check-ins respectively. Status updates and likes were comparatively less influential. Participants also identified three message framings; 'positive', 'negative', and 'neutral', with over half indicating positively framed communications to be the most influential.

Phase two of the study confirmed that photos, shares, and check-ins are influential (H1) however, that they are equal in their level of influence (H2).

Likewise, positively and negatively framed communications are both influential (H3), but equally as such (H4). Communications regarding high involvement products were found to be more influential than communications regarding low involvement products (H5). Whilst communications regarding hedonic and utilitarian products were found to be equally as influential (H6). As for sender characteristics, expertise (H7a), homophily (H7c), and tie strength (H7d) were found to be equally as important in evaluating communications for both high and low involvement products. Whilst trustworthiness (H7b) was found to be of greater importance for high involvement products than for low involvement products, this was only for hedonic products (for utilitarian products, trustworthiness was equally as important for high and low involvement products). Expertise (H8a), trustworthiness (H8b), and tie strength (H8d) were also found to be equally as important in evaluating communications for both hedonic and utilitarian products with only Homophily (H8c) found to be of greater importance for hedonic products than for utilitarian products. Lastly, influence from communications was found to be positively related to both purchase intention (H9a) and share intention (H9b).

## **1.8 Significance**

Findings of this study prove theoretically, methodologically, and practically significant as outlined below.

### **1.8.1 Conceptual / Theoretical**

The first major theoretical contribution of this study is the conceptualisation of a holistic model of social networking site word-of-mouth. This is a significant contribution as no previous studies have developed a comprehensive model of word-of-mouth inclusive of outcomes and sender, message, receiver, and product characteristics. Furthermore, no previous studies have tested these variables on word-of-mouth communications exchanged on social networking sites.

As the first of its kind, this study adds to the existing body of knowledge by filling a knowledge gap with regard to the operation of word-of-mouth on social networking sites, providing empirical evidence of the existence of consumer-consumer influence. The qualitative component of the study also garners an in depth understanding of specifically how and why consumers are influenced, extracting a number of common themes among participants.

Lastly, providing empirical evidence of the influence of word-of-mouth communications on social networking sites among Australian consumers demonstrates applicability of the social networking site word-of-mouth framework in an Australian context. As per Cheung et al. (2009), this presents a foundation for further studies to replicate this study in other regions in order to conduct cross-cultural comparisons.

### **1.8.2 Methodological**

This study contributes methodologically by demonstrating the applicability of a mixed method approach in exploring the operation of word-of-mouth on social networking sites. As per section 1.6, this approach was necessary in order to collect and test large volumes of data whilst also developing an enriched conceptualisation of how and why influence operates.

As this study utilises previously developed constructs, another methodological contribution of the study is further validation of the following established scales and confirmation of their applicability to be utilised in a social networking site word-of-mouth context;

- Consumption Occasion (Hedonic / Utilitarian) (Wakefield & Inman, 2003)
- Involvement (Ratchford, 1987)
- Involvement With The Product (Chandrashekar, 2004)
- Susceptibility To Interpersonal Influence (Bearden et al., 1989)
- Expertise (Netemeyer & Bearden, 1992)
- Trustworthiness (Ohanian, 1990)

- Homophily (De Bruyn & Lilien, 2008)
- Tie Strength (Frenzen & Davis, 1990)
- Purchase Intention (Lepkowska-White et al., 2003)
- Forwarding Intention (Lin et al., 2006)

### **1.8.3 Practical / Managerial**

Arguably the most significant contributions of the present study are the practical / managerial contributions relevant to marketers and social media managers. From a managerial perspective, findings of this study have practical implications for marketers utilising social media as a marketing tool by providing an understanding of how consumers are influenced by one another on social networking sites and in particular, which types of communications and content are most influential. Furthermore, this study proves that not only are these communications influential, but that this influence impacts consumer purchase intentions.

As this study was conducted on the social networking site Facebook, findings provide information pertinent to the 79% of marketers wanting to learn more about Facebook (Stelzner, 2018). However, findings from this study can also be applied across other social networking platforms that share similar operations such as Twitter and Instagram. As such, this study proves useful for marketers utilising social networking platforms in general and the 90% who want to know what social tactics are most effective (Stelzner, 2018).

During in depth interviews, all but one participant ranked posts with photos either the most or second most influential type of communication, indicating marketers should direct the greatest focus towards photos. As such, marketers could, where practical, encourage consumers to post photos of their interactions with products and brands and to add photos to status updates to enhance their visual appeal. Check-ins and shares were also found to be influential which has implications for marketers given recent statistics indicate 70% of links users interact with come from family and friends (Medoff & Kaye, 2017). Considering the potential influence of photos,

shares, and check-ins, marketers should look to leverage social media interactions by encouraging consumers to post these types of positive communications. Similarly, consumers should be dissuaded from posting negatively framed communications.

### **1.9 Limitations and Future Research**

Though significant contributions have been made to the existing body of knowledge as outlined above, this study is not without limitations. The first of which is the perceived influence scale utilised. Whilst the scale was adapted to suit the purposes of this study, future studies should undertake scale development to develop a scale suited specifically to measuring influence from word-of-mouth communications on social networking sites. Due to the research design being experimental, it was unfeasible to test the direct effect of the four sender characteristics on perceived influence within the present study and as such, future studies should incorporate testing of the direct effect of these four variables. Additionally, due to the scope of the study, the variables of message quality, valence intensity, and prior knowledge weren't tested, only controlled and as such, future research could look to provide empirical evidence of these relationships on social networking sites.

Whilst results from the qualitative phase of the study indicate photos are the most influential communication type and positively framed communications the most influential framing, results from the quantitative phase of the study found no significant difference in influence between the communication types and framings. As such, future studies should explore this further in order to confirm which communication type and framing are unequivocally the most influential.

Regarding products, it would also be of interest to explore the level of influence of different types of products / services to confirm if results are replicable across other product categories. Additionally, as the majority of the treatments for this study were positively framed, it would not be appropriate to generalize these findings for negative word-of-mouth

communications on social networking sites without first testing this model with negatively framed treatments. Similarly, caution should be exercised in extending findings beyond Australia without successful replication in other geographical regions / cultures.

Future studies could also explore other possible meaningful relationships within the social networking site word-of-mouth framework untested in the present study. Lastly, building on from this study, it would be beneficial for future studies to explore influence through actual consumption decisions made subsequent to receiving word-of-mouth on social networking sites.

### **1.10 Conclusion**

The structure of this dissertation is as follows; Chapter 2 contains an in depth review of existing literature relevant to the concepts of social influence, word-of-mouth communications, and social media. Following identification of existent gaps in research, Chapter 3 outlines the conceptual framework underpinning the study. The main study is then split into two chapters; Chapter 4 detailing the first qualitative phase, and Chapter 5 detailing the second quantitative phase, each covering the respective research objectives, methodology, data analysis, and results. Chapter 6 concludes by discussing the results, research contributions, limitations, and proposed future research directions.

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## **2. CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW**

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### **2.1 Introduction**

In order to develop a comprehensive understanding of the operation of social influence through word-of-mouth communications on social networking sites, it is first necessary to examine the theoretical underpinnings. As such, this chapter will first explore the roots of social influence in social psychology literature. Following this, consumer interactions will be explored including word-of-mouth and online word-of-mouth communications. Lastly, this chapter will examine the context of social networking sites as a platform for the exchange of word-of-mouth communications.

### **2.2 Foundations of Social Learning in Social Psychology**

Social psychology is defined as the study of how the thoughts, feelings, and behaviours of individuals are influenced by the presence (actual, imagined, or implied) of others (Allport, 1968; Bernstein et al., 2008). Social learning is described by Bandura (1977, p. 1) as a process of “continuous reciprocal interaction between cognitive, behavioural, and environmental determinants”. Social learning relates to the acquisition of attitudes and behaviours through situations of interaction with others and can explain how the consumption behaviours of individuals are influenced by one another through the processes of observation and imitation e.g. mimicry of other consumers such as parents and peers (Baron & Byrne, 1994; de la Ville & Tartas, 2010; Lamb, Hair, & McDaniel, 2011). Learning particular behaviours can occur through direct experience or vicariously through observational learning and the subsequent imitation of the behaviour of others, termed ‘modelling’ (Baron & Byrne, 1994; Burger, 2000; Myers, 2001; Penner, 1986; Schiffman & Kanuk, 2004). This process of imitation is especially common in young children as they observe the behaviour of models such as parents (Stanton, 1975). Whilst children readily imitate the behaviour of models, the degree to which behaviours are imitated depends upon the responses to the model’s behaviour i.e. whether it is met with reward or punishment (Stanton, 1975).

The actions of others and their subsequent consequences can be observed and internalised without the need for personal action, eliminating the need for learning through lengthy personal trial and error processes (Bandura, 1977; Vaughan & Hogg, 2005). Instead, an approximation of the behaviour can be established and then refined through self-adjustments and feedback (Bandura, 1977). The use of rewards is not necessitated in observational learning as the majority of social learning occurs through observing the behaviour of others in casual everyday situations and thus individuals are unlikely to consciously observe more or less based on the potential for reward (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, Grusec, & Menlove, 1966; Rosenthal & Zimmerman, 1977).

The people that an individual associates with either through choice (such as friends and spouses) or by necessity (such as parents and colleagues) determine the types of behaviours that are most frequently observed and thus most likely to be learnt (Bandura, 1977). These 'models' not only demonstrate appropriate courses of action in various situations, but can also strengthen or weaken an individual's tendency toward a behaviour already learnt through a previous observation (Bandura, 1977). If the behaviour of others is no longer observed (e.g. after moving out of parents' home) then it must be remembered in order for it to remain influential (Bandura, 1977). In circumstances where the original behaviour is no longer observed, reminders can be provided through the use of stimuli – commonly viewed in advertising through the use of colours, logos, and brand mascots (Bandura, 1977). This continued influence over values and attitudes despite a discontinuance of interaction is referred to as 'family orientation influence' (Masterson & Pickton, 2014).

Relationships with family members can significantly influence aspects of an individual's behaviour (Masterson & Pickton, 2014; Quester, McGuiggan, Perreault, & McCarthy, 2001). Research by Olsen (1993) indicates that family settings in which disharmony or strong differences of opinions occur are more likely to lead to rejection of parental values termed 'rebellion'. Comparatively, family structures in which members display great respect and

admiration for one and other typically lead to greater acceptance of parents' values and behavioural patterns (Olsen 1993; Webster & Wright 1999). This continued loyalty is perceived as affirming an affiliation with one's parents through reinforcing familial bonds (Moore, Wilkie, & Alder 2001; Moore-Shay & Berchmans 1996).

As individuals age and go through various stages in their lives, they experience socialisation (Ward, 1974). Socialisation is defined by Zigler and Child (1969, p. 474) as the "process by which an individual develops, through transaction with other people, his specific patterns of socially relevant behaviours and experience". It is through this socialisation process that individuals inherit and develop skills, knowledge, norms, values, and attitudes consistent with the culture in which they are raised (Childers & Rao, 1992; Heckler, Childers, & Arunachalam, 1989; Schiffman & Kanuk, 2004; Summers, Gardiner, Lamb, Hair & McDaniel, 2003).

Norms are defined as rules of accepted and expected behaviour determined by a group, governing how individuals ought to behave (Baron & Byrne, 1994; Myers, 2001; Robbins, Bergman, Stagg, & Coulter, 2001; Vaughan & Hogg, 2005). If an individual is unsure of the appropriate behaviour in a situation, then they will look to the behaviour of others and subsequently follow their behaviour, especially when they view the individuals as similar to themselves, a principle termed 'social proof' (Chitty, Barker, Valos, & Shimp, 2012; Cialdini, 2007; Eunson, 2008). However, as Vaughan and Hogg (2005, p. 166) explain, "if you are already confident and certain about what is appropriate and correct, then others' behaviour will be largely irrelevant and thus socially not influential".

### **2.3 Consumer Socialisation**

Drawn from socialisation is the narrower theory of consumer socialisation which is defined as the process through which adolescents form, through interactions with socialisation agents, skills, knowledge, and attitudes which will be relevant to them in the marketplace as consumers (Carlson, Walsh,

Laczniak, & Grossbart, 1994; Moschis & Moore, 1979; Shah & Mittal, 1997; Viswanathan, Childers, & Moore, 2000). Consumer socialisation theory identifies parents, peers, and mass media as the three main socialisation agents influencing the consumption decisions of individuals (Carlson & Grossbart, 1988; Keller, 2008; Moore & Moschis, 1978; Moschis & Moore, 1984; Source, Loomis, & Tyler, 1989; Soyeon, 1996).

The majority of consumer behaviour is learned during childhood with consumer socialisation taking place mainly within family environments (Blackwell, D'Souza, Taghian, Miniard, & Engel, 2007; Olsen, 1993). Moore et al. (2002, p. 17) agree stating family is "the first and typically the most powerful socialization agent", expressing that children have the opportunity to observe the beliefs, attitudes, and values held by their parents which are then instinctively accepted by them as the 'norm' (Blackwell, Miniard, & Engel, 2006; de la Ville & Tartas, 2010; Elliott, Rundle-Thiele, & Waller, 2014; Moriarty, Mitchell, & Wells, 2009). According to Mandrik, Fern, and Bao (2005, p. 817), family communication "may directly influence a child's acquisition of consumption-related information, beliefs, and values from other family members, and indirectly influence a child's learning of patterns of interaction with other sources of consumer information". As such, family members can strongly influence an individual's consumption behaviour (Armstrong, Adam, Denize, & Kotler, 2012; Kotler & Armstrong, 2014; Stanton, Miller, Layton, & Rix, 1995). Children observe the consumption behaviours and brand preferences of their parents and other family members and as they grow older, retain some of these preferences, utilising them well into adulthood and the establishment of their own households and families (Pride, Ferrell, Lukas, Schembri, & Niininen, 2015). This transmission and retention of consumption practices and preferences of parents and family members is termed intergenerational influence (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2007; Moore, Wilkie, & Lutz 2002; Pride & Ferrell, 2010; Schiffman & Kanuk, 2004).

Peers are also recognised as one of the most significant socialisation agents (Francis & Burns, 1992; Giskevicius, Cialdini, & Goldstein, 2008; Moschis & Churchill, 1978; Moschis, Moore, & Stanley, 1984). Childers and Rao (1992,

p. 198) explain, “Individuals appear to act in a manner that is consistent with the social group with which they identify” and “products and brands that individuals select can be influenced by their reference groups”. Griskevicius et al. (2008) add that consumers who display greater uncertainty towards a brand or product due to inexperience, are as a result, especially receptive to peer influence.

Peer influence is described as a rival to familial influence with new influencers such as spouses, cohabitants, and peers introducing new opinions and experiences which can impact the effects of intergenerational influence (Moore & Bowman, 2006). As Moore et al. (2002, p. 30) discuss, influencers “can unintentionally become a disrupting source for the existing intergenerational preferences of another”. An example of this rivalry of influence would be a peer expressing disapproval towards a brand purchased resultant of familial influences (Moore & Bowman, 2006). In a similar scenario, spouses may disagree when it comes to brand preferences, especially if one holds strong personal preferences, however these may be altered depending on the priorities of the other spouse (Perreault, Cannon, & McCarthy, 2011; Quester et al., 2001). Such differences in brand preference present offspring with the consideration that their parents’ brand choices with which they have been raised may not be the ‘norm’ and they may be pressured to conform to the behavioural patterns of others (Moore & Bowman, 2006). Research by Mandrik et al. (2005) indicates that parental influence on purchases decreases, and peer influence increases as children age. This increased likelihood to conform to opinions expressed by peers occurs as adolescents seek acceptance from social groups. Whilst intergenerational influences are enduring and persist well into adulthood, their effects weaken over time, due in part to the introduction of new influencers (Francis & Burns, 1992; Hoyer & MacInnis, 2007; Moore et al., 2002).

### **2.3 Social Influence**

Social influence is the influence exerted by others on an individual's behaviour (Baron & Byrne, 1994; Bernstein et al., 2008; Pride et al., 2015). Social influence has great power on individuals' attitudes, beliefs, decisions, and actions (Myers, 2001). According to Bearden et al. (1989), the influence of others is one of the most important determinants of the behaviour of an individual. This interpersonal influence impacts the norms, values, attitudes, and behaviours of individuals and is an important factor in consumer decision making (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Bearden, Netemeyer, & Teel, 1990; Gatignon & Robertson, 1985; Stafford & Cocanougher, 1977). For example, the use of a particular brand may stem from a desire to be admired by peers or to identify with or gain acceptance from a particular group (Khan & Khan, 2008; Kotler, Adam, Denize, & Armstrong, 2009; Lamb, Hair, McDaniel, Summers, & Gardiner, 2013).

A 'reference group' consists of people who significantly influence (both positively or negatively) the behaviour of an individual who looks to them when forming values, attitudes, judgements, or opinions (Bearden & Etzel, 1982; Grewal et al., 2018; Kotler, Burton, Deans, Brown, & Armstrong, 2013; Peter & Donnelly, 2001). The majority of individuals assess themselves through comparison with peers or other reference group members (Bernstein et al., 2008; Blackwell et al., 2007). As well as gaining information from reference groups, individuals also utilise reference groups as benchmarks upon which to measure their own behaviours (Bernstein et al., 2008; Blackwell et al., 2007). Each reference group develops standards of behaviour that serve as guides for members as they share these values and are expected to conform to the behavioural standards (Stanton, 1975; Stanton et al., 1995).

Reference groups are typically those who one associates with on a regular basis such as family, friends, colleagues, sporting teams, etc. (Grewal, Levy, Mathews, Harrigan, & Bucic, 2015; Khan & Khan, 2008; Peter & Olson, 1999; Stanton, 1975). These types of reference groups are referred to as direct (or

normative) reference groups whereas inspirational groups that influence without direct contact such as celebrities are referred to as indirect (or comparative) reference groups (Bristol & Mangleburg, 2005; Makgosa & Mohube, 2007; Schiffman & Kanuk, 1994; Subramanian & Subramanian, 1995).

Past research (e.g. Bearden et al., 1989; Brinberg & Plimpton, 1986; Childers & Rao, 1992; Lachance, Beaudion, & Robitaille, 2003; Martin & Bush, 2000; Mascarenhas & Higby, 1993) has noted the significant role reference group influence has on the purchase decisions and consumption patterns of individuals. Advice from friends (or even their presence or perceived presence alone) is more effective as a behavioural determinant than advertising communications through mass media (Stanton, 1975; Stanton et al., 1995).

According to social psychologists there are two main types of interpersonal influence; informational and normative (Bachmann, John, & Rao, 1993; Deutsch & Gerard, 1955; Grimm, Agrawal, & Richardson, 1999; Kelley, 1952; Lessig & Park, 1978).

Informational influence is described as the tendency to accept information from others as evidence about reality (Bearden et al., 1990; Deutsch & Gerard, 1955; Grimm et al., 1999; Khan & Khan, 2008; Myers, 2001). This type of influence operates in two ways; individuals may seek out information from others who they perceive to be knowledgeable, or may make inferences from observing the behaviour of others (Kelman, 1961; Lessig & Park, 1978; Makgosa & Mohube, 2007; Park & Lessig, 1977). Following the process of information search or observation, individuals may internalise information gathered if they feel it enhances their knowledge and / or ability to cope with a situation and are more likely to internalize if they perceive the source to be credible (Kelman, 1961; Jones & Gerard, 1967; Jahoda, 1972; Lessig & Park, 1978; Makgosa & Mohube, 2007). Through this process, informational influence has been found to affect consumers' decision making processes by altering the way in which they select and evaluate products and brands

(Bearden & Etzel, 1982; Burnkrant & Cousineau, 1975; Cohen & Golden, 1972; Pincus & Water, 1977).

Normative influence is described as the tendency to conform to the expectations of others, resulting from an individual's desire to gain approval or avoid disapproval, and can be further classified as either utilitarian influence or value expressive influence (Burnkrant & Cousineau, 1975; East, Wright, & Vanhuele, 2008; Kelman, 1961; Makgosa & Mohube, 2007; Price, Feick, & Higie, 1987). Behaviour resultant from normative influence is often discontinued once the behaviours of the individuals being influenced are no longer observable by those to which they were conforming (Subramani & Rajagopalan, 2003). Behaviours resultant from informational influence however are typically sustained and incorporated into existing habitual behavioural heuristics (Subramani & Rajagopalan, 2003).

Utilitarian influence is observed when individuals conform to the expectations of others in order to achieve rewards or avoid negative outcomes such as punishments (Brinberg & Plimpton, 1986; Burnkrant & Cousineau, 1975; Lessig & Park, 1978; Makgosa & Mohube, 2007; Park & Lessig, 1977). Value expressive influence occurs when an individual attempts to enhance their self-image through association with a particular reference group (Babin & Harris, 2012; Brinberg & Plimpton, 1986; Lessig & Park, 1978; Makgosa & Mohube, 2007; Park & Lessig, 1977). Resultant from value expressive influence, individuals adopt opinions or behaviours consistent with the group with which they wish to associate in order to define themselves as a member of that particular group (Brinberg & Plimpton, 1986; Park & Lessig, 1977; Price et al., 1987). This type of influence has been found to vary by product dependent upon the conspicuousness of consumption (Babin & Harris, 2012; Bearden et al., 1989).

Social influence can engender a number of behavioural outcomes including compliance, conformity, and obedience (Vaughan & Hogg, 2005). Such outcomes depend upon the type of influence applied and the perceived power of the influencer (Baron & Byrne, 1994; Vaughan & Hogg, 2005).

Social power refers to the power held by an individual or group to alter the behaviour of others (Babin & Harris, 2012). Social power can be further categorised into reward power, coercive power, referent power, and expert power (Babin & Harris, 2012).

When individuals adapt their behaviours to seek rewards or avoid punishments which are mediated by others this is described as 'compliance' (Bearden et al., 1989; Belch & Belch, 2009; Burnkrant & Cousineau, 1975; Kelman, 1958). Compliance is observed through normative (specifically utilitarian) influence in the pursuit of rewards and avoidance of punishments and it is not reflected through internal change, typically only existing whilst behaviour is being observed by others (Subramani & Rajagopalan, 2003; Vaughan & Hogg, 2005). An example of this is the behaviour of children or adolescents in the presence of their parents; whilst living at home they tend to behave in a manner that is accepted by their parents but once they move out of home they are free to behave as they please as their behaviour is no longer observed by their parents. In order for individuals to demonstrate compliance, they must perceive those observing their behaviour to possess some form of power (Belch & Belch, 2009; Moscovici, 1976; Vaughan & Hogg, 2005).

Power that generates compliance stems from a person's position as it is based upon their ability to reward, referred to as reward power, or their ability to punish, referred to as coercive power (Eunson, 2008; French & Raven, 1968; Raven, 1965; Samson & Daft, 2009; Vaughan & Hogg, 2005). Coercive power is generated by fear of negative results that may occur if individuals do not comply (Robbins et al., 2001). These negative results may be in the form of expressions such as disappointment and disapproval or could be more physical such as rejection from a group. Conversely, reward power operates when individuals comply in order to produce positive benefits such as praise and inclusion (Robbins et al., 2001).

As individuals desire acceptance from certain groups, they are susceptible to pressures of conformity from members within those groups (Robbins et al.,

2001). Conformity is described as 'going along with the crowd' in adjusting one's behaviour to follow the values, attitudes, and actions of others and is generated through normative influence (Baron & Byrne, 1994; Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Eunson, 2008; Hoyer & MacInnis, 2007; Myers, 2001). Power that engenders conformity is known as referent power as it stems from the characteristics of the individual that command admiration from others such that they wish to emulate their behaviour (Babin & Harris, 2012; Eunson 2008; French & Raven, 1968; Samson & Daft, 2009; Vaughan & Hogg, 2005). In contrast to compliance, conformity does not require the perceived presence of power but rather operates in validation of social norms (Festinger, 1950; Vaughan & Hogg, 2005). Through the process of conformity, norms are internalised as accepted standards of behaviour and as opposed to compliance, it is not necessitated that behaviour be observed by others (Vaughan & Hogg, 2005). However, according to Subramani and Rajagopalan (2003, p. 305), "willingness to conform is stronger when behaviour is observable to the influencer and to others in the social network".

Individuals perceived to be knowledgeable influence others through what is referred to as expert power as it stems from special knowledge, skills, or expertise they possess (Babin & Harris, 2012; Eunson, 2008; French & Raven, 1968; Samson & Daft, 2009; Vaughan & Hogg, 2005).

## **2.4 Word-of-Mouth Communications**

Word-of-mouth (WOM) communications are consumer driven communications about products, services, brands, and companies where product information and opinions are shared (McColl-Kennedy, 2003; Schindler & Bickart, 2012; Solomon, Marshall, & Stuart, 2012; Wu & Wang, 2011). In layman's terms, telling an acquaintance, friend, or family member about a good or bad experience with a product (Richins, 1983; Skourtis et al., 2012). Congruent with interpersonal influence and socialization agency theory, family, friends, and those in close proximity or frequent contact are the most influential sources of word-of-mouth communications and this influence is particularly strong when consumers have little or no experience

with products or services being discussed (Brooks, 1957; Cheong & Morrison, 2008; Engel et al., 1969; Reingen, Foster, Brown, & Seidman, 1984).

Although for marketers and brand managers the relationship between the brand and the consumer is perceived to be the most important, relationships between consumers can also influence the consumer-brand relationship and therefore must be taken into consideration (Keller, 2009). Consumer-consumer relationships facilitate interaction and the sharing of attitudes and opinions, including expressions of personal loyalty and observations of the loyalty of others (Armstrong & Kotler, 2013; Keller, 2009; Solomon, Hughes, Chitty, Marshall, & Stuart, 2014). These exchanges have implications for marketers as they have the power to influence consumers without any intervention from the brand and therefore must be managed appropriately (Kotler & Armstrong, 2012; Solomon et al., 2014).

Senders of such communications are typically independent from the market with no ulterior interest in the company or brand other than their own attitudes and experiences (Arndt, 1968; Brown, Broderick, & Lee, 2007; Lee & Youn, 2009; Schindler & Bickart, 2012). In contrast to firm initiated communications, consumers provide honest product evaluations from a user's perspective (Park et al., 2007). Due to this, word-of-mouth communications are perceived by consumers to be more credible and trustworthy than marketing communications initiated by firms with 90% of people trusting recommendations from people they know (Bickart & Schindler, 2001; Brooks, 1957; Derbaix & Vanhamme, 2003; Pride & Ferrell, 2011; Silverman, 2001). Subsequently, word-of-mouth communications are more persuasive than traditional firm initiated advertising, with word-of-mouth deemed one of the most powerful methods of transmitting a message (Cheong & Morrison, 2008; Goldsmith & Horowitz, 2006; Herr, Kardes, & Kim, 1991; Masterson & Pickton, 2014; Sen & Lerman, 2007).

Word-of-mouth plays a vital role in shaping the behaviours and attitudes of consumers with consumption orientations such as price, quality, and value

noted as common discussion points in word-of-mouth communications (Cheong & Morrison, 2008; Cox, 1963; Fong & Burton, 2006; Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Mangold, Miller, & Brockway, 1999; Silverman, 2001). Information imparted through word-of-mouth has also been found to have a substantial impact on consumers purchase intentions and product evaluations with positive word-of-mouth positively influencing brand perceptions and purchase intentions and negative word-of-mouth negatively affecting brand perceptions and purchase intentions (Arndt, 1967; Cheung, Lee, & Rabjohn, 2008; Engel, Blackwell, & Kegerreis, 1969; Katona & Mueller, 1955; Katz & Lazarfeld, 1955; Lee & Youn, 2009; Lin & Lu, 2010; Richins, 1983; Richins & Root-Shaffer, 1988; Weinberger & Dillon, 1980). To quantify, approximately 50% of people seek advice from others prior to making a purchase decision with consumers participating in an average of 121 word-of-mouth conversations a week during which brand names are mentioned on average 92 times (Cheong & Morrison, 2008; Keller, 2007; Walker, 1995).

Whyte's (1954) investigation of air conditioner purchases within a particular suburb concluded that the ownership pattern could only be explained through the communications that had taken place between neighbours. Through encounters with other residents in situations such as chatting in the front yard, individuals were able to exchange information regarding the products and make recommendations based on their experiences (Whyte, 1954). Word-of-mouth has also been found to be influential for household goods and fast moving consumer goods with Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) finding a markedly higher impact than print and radio advertising and personal selling. Additionally, Engel et al. (1969) found word-of-mouth the most influential source of information for car service centres, Feldman and Spencer (1965) found word-of-mouth an important determinant for selecting a doctor when moving into a new suburb, and Arndt (1967) demonstrated that word-of-mouth significantly influenced consumer purchase intention of new food products. According to Walker (1995), over 40% of people seek advice from family and friends when looking for service providers such as doctors,

lawyers, and mechanics with word-of-mouth also important for other services such as restaurants, entertainment, and banking.

Online word-of-mouth, also referred to as electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) or word-of-mouse is the term used to describe word-of-mouth communication exchanges which take place via the internet on social media sites utilising tools such as email, blogs, and chat (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004; Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Pride & Ferrell, 2010).

The term 'user generated content' (UGC) is sometimes used interchangeably to refer to online word-of-mouth however the two terms differ "depending on whether the content is *generated* by users or *conveyed* by users" (Belch et al., 2014, p. 96). User generated content is content which demonstrates creative effort, is created outside the realm of professional practice, and is published on a public site (Cheong & Morrison, 2008; Daugherty, Eastin, & Bright, 2008; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Medoff & Kaye, 2017). This content typically includes recollection of experiences, advice, opinions, and general commentary regarding products, services, brands, and companies in the form of text, photos, videos, and other media, posted on social media forums such as blogs, discussion boards, etc. (Belch et al., 2014). Whereas online word-of-mouth refers to any content exchanged between consumers via social media (Cheong & Morrison, 2008; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). For example, a video created and posted by a user on the video sharing site YouTube is user generated content however other users sharing a link to that YouTube video is electronic word-of-mouth (Belch et al., 2014). As this information originates from the consumer rather than corporations, user generated content is considered to be more trustworthy and credible than communications delivered via traditional promotional tools and media (Barker, Barker, Bormann, & Neher, 2013; Chen & Xie, 2008; Cheong & Morrison, 2008; Johnson & Kaye, 2004; Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

Consumers are increasingly tending to the internet as a vehicle for sharing their thoughts and opinions about goods, services, and companies, and for gathering information prior to purchase (Adjei et al., 2010; Chen & Xie, 2008;

Pride et al., 2015). Like offline (spoken) word-of-mouth, electronic word-of-mouth is powerful due to its perceived trustworthiness in originating from consumers rather than advertisers (Belch et al., 2014). However, the internet is considered more powerful in the transmission of word-of-mouth communications due to its speed, convenience, and ability to reach large audiences (Sun, Youn, Wu, & Kuntaraporn, 2006).

Whilst past research asserts that dissatisfied customers will tell an average of ten people of their unsatisfactory experience, Gillin (2007) suggests this is out of date, stating that dissatisfied customers now possess the tools to tell 10 million other consumers in just a few minutes (Grewal & Levy, 2014; Mangold & Faulds, 2009). This greatly magnifies the impact of product related consumer-to-consumer communication and as such, internet based communications are now recognized as a major influence on stages in the consumer adoption and consumer decision making processes such as awareness, acquisition of information, formation of attitudes and opinions, and purchase behaviour (Graham & Havlena, 2007; Lempert, 2006; Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Vollmer & Precourt, 2008).

As such, word-of-mouth communications are recognised as a vehicle for exhibiting social influence (Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Bone, 1995; Cohen & Golden, 1972; Wangenheim & Bayon, 2004). The strength of this influence is dependent upon a number of factors such as the characteristics of the sender, message, receiver, and product/s the communication relates to (Wangenheim & Bayon, 2004).

## **2.5 Word-of-Mouth Communication Framework**

The word-of-mouth and subsequently electronic word-of-mouth framework is derived from the traditional communication model which incorporates a sender, a message, and a receiver (Elmhorst, 2002; Grewal et al., 2018; McColl-Kennedy, 2003; Summers et al, 2003; Wells et al., 2006; Williams, 2008). Communication is the process of transmitting information from one person (the sender) to another (the receiver), sometimes with the intent to

influence behaviour (Perreault et al., 2011; Schiffman & Kanuk, 2004; Stanton et al., 1995; Summers et al, 2003; Williams, 2008). As defined by Hovland (1948, p. 317), social communication is “the process by which an individual transmits stimuli (usually verbal symbols) to modify the behavior of other individuals”.

In line with communication theory, a number of past studies have highlighted the importance of the characteristics of the sender (e.g. Brown & Reingen, 1987; Dholakia & Sternthal, 1977; Sussman & Siegal, 2003), message (e.g. Arndt, 1967; Park & Lee, 2009), and receiver (e.g. Sundaram & Webster, 1999) in the influence of word-of-mouth communications. As word-of-mouth communications are related to products and brands, the word-of-mouth communication framework builds on the traditional communication model through the inclusion two additional factors; product characteristics, and outcomes (how the behavior of the receiver is modified after receiving the communication) (Hovland, 1948). Each of these groups of characteristics and the pertinent variables within them are discussed below.

### **2.5.1 Sender Characteristics**

In examining sender characteristics, past research has identified four key characteristics that affect the influence of word-of-mouth communications; trustworthiness, expertise, homophily, and tie strength (Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Chu & Kamal, 2008; Gilly et al., 1998; Harmon & Coney, 1982; McGinnies & Ward, 1980; Shabsogh et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2005; Wu & Shaffer, 1987; Vaughan & Hogg, 2005).

#### **2.5.1.1 Source Credibility (Expertise & Trustworthiness)**

Source credibility is defined as the extent to which a source is perceived by a receiver as having relevant knowledge, skill, or experience and whether they can be trusted to provide unbiased, objective information (Belch et al., 2014). Research on source credibility (e.g. Chu & Kamal, 2008; Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Shabsogh et al., 2012) has found that sources are more persuasive in

their communications and engender more behavioural compliance if they are perceived by the receiver to be credible. Additionally, information originating from a source that is perceived as being knowledgeable and credible is perceived by the receiver to be of greater value than information originating from less knowledgeable and credible sources (Archer-Brown, Piercy, & Joinson, 2012; Brown et al., 2007). If a source is perceived as being biased and / or having underlying motives, their influence is substantially lessened (Belch & Belch, 2009). According to Harmon and Coney (1982), a source's credibility mediates influence by affecting the activation of the receiver's own thoughts. Subsequently, receivers are less likely to consider their own existing thoughts regarding a brand or product if the source is highly credible, rendering them more easily persuaded (Harmon & Coney, 1982).

Expertise is defined as "the perceived ability of the source to make valid assertions" (McCracken, 1989, p. 311) and relates to whether or not the source is knowledgeable in the particular subject and thus qualified to provide accurate information (Adjei et al., 2010; Babin & Harris, 2012; Chu & Kamal, 2008; Hovland, Janis, & Kelly, 1953). A source may be considered as having expertise due to "his or her occupation, social training, or experience" (Schiffman & Kanuk, 1997, p. 335).

Trustworthiness is defined as "the perceived willingness of the source to make valid assertions" (McCracken, 1989, p. 311) and refers to whether the receiver believes that the source is being honest and sincere in imparting the information (Babin & Harris, 2012; Chu & Kamal, 2008; Ohanian, 1991).

Research (e.g. Adjei et al, 2010; Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Chu & Kamal, 2010; Crosby, Evans, & Cowles, 1990; McGinnies & Ward, 1980; Shabsogh et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2005) has shown that the degree of perceived expertise and trustworthiness of sources impacts their level of influence on consumer attitudes and purchase intentions. According to Chu & Kamal (2008, p. 8), when a receiver perceives the source to be trustworthy and have expertise in the subject, "he or she may relinquish the thoughtful process of scrutinizing the message and instead unthinkingly accept the position as valid".

Conversely, information communicated by a source perceived as untrustworthy will likely be rejected by the receiver (Chu & Kamal, 2008; Ohanian, 1991). Similarly, if a sender's expertise is perceived to be high, receivers will more actively seek information from them and be less inclined to seek information from those perceived to possess a low level of expertise (Bansal & Voyer, 2000).

### **2.5.1.2 Homophily**

Homophily, initially coined by Lazarsfeld and Merton (1978, p. 23) as "a tendency for friendships to form between those who are alike in some designated respect", describes the degree to which individuals exhibit similarities to others in attributes and characteristics such as age, gender, education, occupation, interests, attitudes, and values (McCroskey, Hamilton, & Weiner, 1974; Rogers, 1983; Rogers & Bhowmik, 1970; Wangenheim & Bayon, 2004). For methodological and measurement purposes, homophily can be categorized into three dimensions; attitude, demographic, and background (Archer-Brown et al., 2012; McCroskey et al., 1974).

Individuals with greater similarity are inclined to display a greater level of attraction and trust towards one another than towards those less similar to themselves (Brown et al., 2007; Ruef, Aldrich, & Carter, 2003; Vaughan & Hogg, 2005). As such, individuals tend to associate and interact with those whom they consider to be like themselves; referred to as the 'like me' principle (Ackland, 2013; Laumann, 1966; Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Schacter, 1959). Furthermore, individuals tend to communicate more with those who hold similar attitudes and beliefs to them on the assumption that they are likely to have similar needs and preferences (Feldman & Spencer, 1965; Gilly et al., 1998; Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1978; Shabsogh et al., 2012). Consequently, information disseminated from more homophilous sources is considered more relevant and of greater value and thus will exert more influence than information disseminated from heterophilous sources (Brown

& Reingen, 1987; Gilly et al., 1998; Hoyer & MacInnis, 2007; Vaughan & Hogg, 2005).

In an early study of homophily, Feldman and Spencer (1965) explored the information search behaviour of new residents of an area seeking a new doctor. Results of which demonstrated that only 15% of respondents consulted a source with medical expertise with the majority of respondents opting to seek advice from friends (Feldman & Spencer, 1965). In further confirmation of the operation of homophily, couples with children tended to rely on information provided by other couples with children and likewise, childless couples tended to rely on information provided by other childless couples (Feldman & Spencer, 1965). This theory that the more homophilous a tie between two individuals, the more likely that tie will be utilised for referral behaviour than other more heterophilous ties was later confirmed by Brown and Reingen (1987).

### **2.5.1.3 Tie Strength**

All word-of-mouth communication exchanges occur within social relationships which can be categorized by the closeness of the relationship between the sender and the receiver (Bristor, 1990; Duhan, Johnson, Wilcox, & Harrel, 1997; Granovetter, 1973; Marsden & Campbell, 1984; Sun et al., 2006). Tie strength refers to “the strength of the dyadic interpersonal relationships in the context of social networks” (Money et al., 1998, p. 79).

Strong ties are characterized by voluntary interactions of greater frequency and intimacy such as those between partners, family, and close friends whereas weak ties refer to relationships with those who are more distant such as acquaintances and colleagues (Brown et al., 2007; Hoyer & MacInnis, 2007; Misner, 1994; Sun et al., 2006; Walker, Wasserman, & Wellman, 1994). Strong ties are more influential through word-of-mouth communications than weaker ties due to the frequency of interaction between individuals in strong tie relationships, presenting more opportunities to exchange information (Archer-Brown et al., 2012; Bansal & Voyer, 2000;

Brown et al., 2007; Brown & Reingen, 1987; Charlesworth, 2015). Measures of tie strength include length of time the individuals have known each other, frequency of interaction between the individuals, and how important the individual receiving the communication considers the sender to be (Brown & Reingen, 1987; Frenzen & Nakamoto, 1993; Granovetter, 1973; Ward & Reingen, 1990).

## **2.5.2 Message Characteristics**

Message characteristics refer to aspects of the actual message being communicated, independent of the characteristics of the sender and receiver. Four key characteristics of messages are acknowledged as impacting the level of influence of communications; communication type, message framing, valence intensity, and message quality.

### **2.5.2.1 Communication Type**

Communication type refers to the means by which a message is communicated from a sender to a receiver and can include spoken conversations and platforms such as emails, reviews, blogs, online forums, and social networking sites (Cheung & Thadani, 2012; Riegner, 2007).

Early word-of-mouth studies explored the effectiveness of spoken conversations between neighbours and friends, finding significant influence on choice of products and services such as food (Arndt, 1967), piano teachers (Brown & Reingen, 1987), doctors (Feldman & Spencer, 1965), and air conditioners (Whyte, 1954). With the advent of the internet and social media as a means for communicating about products, more recent studies have explored the effectiveness of platforms such as emails (e.g. Shabsogh et al., 2012), reviews (e.g. Cheung & Lee, 2012; Park & Kim, 2008; Park & Lee, 2009), and blogs (e.g. Chu & Kamal, 2008). However few studies (e.g. Steffes & Burgee, 2009) have actually compared the level of influence of different communication types and none have explored the effectiveness of

social networking sites as a platform for word-of-mouth communications, let alone the various forms of communications within social networking sites.

### **2.5.2.2 Message Framing**

In recent years, word-of-mouth communications have been sub-categorised into positive word-of-mouth (PWOM) and negative word-of-mouth (NWOM) with positive word-of-mouth based on satisfaction and negative word-of-mouth stemming from dissatisfaction (East, Wright, & Vanhuele, 2008; Goldenberg, Libai, Moldovan, & Muller, 2007; Luo, 2009; Richins, 1983). Research suggests that people tend to communicate more about negative experiences than positive ones and as such, negative reviews are more sought after than positive reviews with negative information considered more diagnostic and informative in nature than positive information (Folkes, 1984; Herr et al., 1991; Hoyer & MacInnis, 2007; Shabsogh et al., 2012; Sparks & Browning, 2011). Floh et al. (2012) further explain that negative information is typically rarer, making it more powerful and attention grabbing. Due to this, the effect of positive recommendations is weakened when negative information appears on a page with the harmful effects of the negative information outweighing the valuable impact of the positive information, termed the negativity effect (Floh et al., 2012; Tsang & Prendergast, 2009).

The extent to which online recommendations (electronic word-of-mouth) influence consumers purchase decisions is referred to as the 'eWOM effect' (Floh et al., 2012). Research (e.g. Bone, 1995; Skourtis et al., 2012) demonstrates that negative word-of-mouth has negative impacts on consumers' perceptions of brands and subsequent purchase intention. However results from studies examining the effects of positive versus negative message framing have varied suggesting that further research is required. Whilst Cheung and Lee (2008) and Park and Lee (2009) found the eWOM effect to be greater for negative word-of-mouth communications, Ahluwalia (2002), East, Hammond, and Lomax (2008) and Floh et al. (2012) found the eWOM effect to be greater for positive word-of-mouth communications. Also noteworthy is that in examining the differences in

influence between positive and negative word-of-mouth communications, Shabsogh et al. (2012) found that homophily was an important factor for positive word-of-mouth however trustworthiness was a more important for negative word-of-mouth.

### **2.5.2.3 Valence Intensity**

Valence intensity, also referred to as argument quality or argument strength, refers to the persuasive strength of arguments contained within word-of-mouth communications (Bhattacharjee & Sanford, 2006; Cheung et al., 2008; Cheung & Thadani, 2012). The strength of an argument contained within a communication is an important factor receivers consider when evaluating communications (Cheung et al., 2009). According to Cheung et al. (2009), if a communication is perceived to contain valid arguments, then receivers are more likely to consider the communication credible. Conversely, arguments perceived as invalid render communications unconvincing (Cheung et al., 2009).

Valence intensity has been found to play a significant role in the level of influence of word-of-mouth communications (Cacioppo, Petty, & Morris, 1983; Cheung et al., 2009). However the majority of studies (e.g. Cacioppo et al., 1983; Petty & Cacioppo, 1979; Petty & Cacioppo, 1983; Petty, Harkins, & Williams, 1980; Petty, Wells, & Brock, 1976) that have examined the impacts of strong versus weak arguments have typically manipulated argument strength concomitant with other variables making it difficult to isolate the effect of argument strength independent of other factors.

In a recent more comprehensive study of valence intensity based on the theoretical underpinnings of the Hull-Spence Behavior Theory (Hull, 1943; Hull, 1958; Hull et al., 1940; Spence, 1956; Spence, 1960), Floh et al. (2013) hypothesize a positive relationship between valence intensity and purchase intention. This hypothesis is founded on stimulus intensity dynamism theory which states that “a stronger stimulus will produce a stronger response, holding all other variables constant” (Floh et al., 2013, p. 652). Floh et al.

(2013) explain the assumption that strong positive or strong negative (high valence intensity) arguments have a stronger impact on purchase intentions than mixed or neutral (low valence intensity) communications. Thus, strong positive communications will lead to increased purchase intention, strong negative communications will lead to reduced purchase intention, and weak or neutral communications will have little effect on purchase intention (Floh et al., 2013). This hypothesis was supported with stronger messages bearing greater influence than weaker messages resulting in stronger responses (Floh et al., 2013).

#### **2.5.2.4 Message Quality**

Message quality refers to the content of a communication (the information it provides) and the style in which it is written (Schindler & Bickart, 2012). Communications can vary in length and nature (objective / subjective, evaluative / descriptive) and are subsequently classified as either high or low quality (Chatterjee, 2001; Lee et al., 2008; Park et al., 2007; Petty & Cacioppo, 1984).

Schindler and Bickart (2012) introduce a typology of communications based on whether the communication contains evaluative or descriptive information. Communications that contain evaluative words such as like, dislike, best, and worst are considered to be evaluative with communications not containing product evaluative information considered to be descriptive (Schindler & Bickart, 2012). Evaluative communications are theorized to be more useful than descriptive communications as they contain information that cannot be obtained elsewhere (e.g. from advertising, product packaging, retailers, etc.) (Schindler & Bickart, 2012). However research by Schindler and Bickart (2012) found both evaluative and descriptive communications to be useful suggesting receivers find factual information contained within descriptive communications helpful in their decision making process.

The length of a communication and the style in which it is written has been found to affect its perceived usefulness. Whilst longer communications

provide greater detail and more information, they may be overwhelming and confusing if too much information is included (Schindler & Bickart, 2012). Whilst Mudambi and Schuff (2010) found longer communications were found to be more helpful, Schindler and Bickart (2012) found that this positive relationship only lasted up to a point, past which communications were considered too long.

Communications written in an entertaining style incorporating slang and humor are found to be of greater value to receivers (Schindler & Bickart, 2012). A possible explanation for this is that this type of language makes the communication more engaging and informal and may make the receiver feel a connection with the sender (Fraley & Aron, 2004; Schindler & Bickart, 2012). Conversely, communications that contain stylistic elements that impair comprehension and clarity such as spelling errors, poor grammar, qualifications, and repetition are of less value to receivers (Schindler & Bickart, 2012). Schindler and Bickart's (2012) findings are consistent with Jessmer and Anderson (2001) who found that senders whose communications were grammatically correct were perceived as more likeable and competent.

High quality communications are logical, understandable, and support product evaluations with sufficient reasoning (Lee et al., 2008; Park et al., 2007; Petty & Cacioppo, 1984). Communications that are subjective and emotional tend to be less relevant and reliable and are considered low quality (Lee et al., 2008; Park et al., 2007; Petty & Cacioppo, 1984). Past research (e.g. Lee et al., 2008; Park et al., 2007; Petty & Cacioppo, 1984; Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1983) has found a positive relationship between communication quality and influence with high quality communications found to have a greater impact on consumers purchase intentions.

### **2.5.3 Receiver Characteristics**

Following the communication of a message from a sender, there are four personal characteristics of receivers considered to moderate the level of

influence of the communication; susceptibility to interpersonal influence, prior knowledge, personal involvement, and personal expertise.

### **2.5.3.1 Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence**

Susceptibility to interpersonal influence is defined as “the need to identify with or enhance one’s image in the opinion of significant others through the acquisition and use of products and brands, the willingness to conform to the expectations of others regarding purchase decisions, and / or the tendency to learn about products and services by observing others or seeking information from others” (Bearden et al., 1989, p. 473).

The susceptibility to interpersonal influence construct is derived from influenceability theory which purports that individuals respond differently from one another in the presence of social influence (Allen, 1965; Asch, 1958; Cox & Bauer, 1964; Janis, 1954; Kelman, 1961; McGuire, 1968). Janis (1954) cites early studies that suggest some individuals are highly amenable to social influence whilst others are predisposed to be resistant. Reasons for variations in influenceability vary with past studies finding personality traits and demographic variables to impact individuals’ susceptibility to influence (Berkowitz & Lundy, 1957; Churchill & Moschis, 1979; Cox & Bauer, 1964; Janis, 1954; Khan & Khan, 2008; Park & Lessig, 1977; Rose, Boush, & Friestad, 1998).

Gender has been found to affect susceptibility to influence with Churchill and Moschis (1979) and Hovland and Janis (1959) suggesting that females are generally more susceptible to influence than males. Rose et al. (1998) also found gender differences in susceptibility to influence depend on the type of influence with females more susceptible to value expressive influence and males more susceptible to utilitarian influence. Park and Lessig (1977) explored occupation as a determinant of influenceability finding that students are consistently more susceptible to reference group influence than housewives.

Numerous studies have additionally explored personality traits in explanation of variations in susceptibility to influence (Berkowitz & Lundy, 1957; Cox & Bauer, 1964; Janis, 1954; Janis, 1955). Research on self-esteem (e.g. Janis, 1954; Janis, 1955) has found that individuals with low self-esteem comply with the suggestions of others in order to avoid social disapproval and thus are more readily influenced than individuals with high self-esteem. Similarly, research (e.g. Berkowitz & Lundy, 1957) on self-confidence has found that individuals with low self-confidence are more susceptible to influence.

Based on this theory of differences in response to social influence, it is possible that two individuals could receive the same message however be influenced differently dependent upon their susceptibility to interpersonal influence rendering it an important factor to control for when measuring influence from word-of-mouth communications. Whilst Bone (1995) found no significant moderating effect of susceptibility to interpersonal influence, Floh et al. (2013) suggest that this construct should be further explored in electronic word-of-mouth contexts. This suggestion is supported by Podnar and Javernik (2012) who posit that susceptibility to interpersonal influence may be more significant in cases where the receiver personally knows the sender, such as in a social networking site context.

### **2.5.3.2 Prior Knowledge**

Prior knowledge refers to a receiver's prior knowledge of or familiarity with a product or brand and is based on consumers' memories or known knowledge (Brucks, 1985; Marks & Olsen, 1981; Shirin & Kambiz, 2011). Product knowledge is more formally defined as "the product-related information that is stored in the customers' memory, such as information on brands, products, attributes, evaluations, decision heuristics and usage situations" (Skourtis et al., 2012, p. 2). This knowledge can be derived from direct experiences such as personal use or from indirect experiences such as advertising or word-of-mouth (Marks & Olson, 1981).

A lack of knowledge of a particular product or brand may cause consumers to doubt their ability to make adequate choices which may result in opinion seeking from others (Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Furse, Punj, & Stewart, 1984; Gilly et al., 1998). When receivers have no prior knowledge of a product, they are more likely to be receptive of information regarding the product (Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Skourtis et al., 2012). However, if they are familiar with the product and hold existing attitudes towards the product then they will be less affected by word-of-mouth communications (Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Herr et al., 1991). Additionally, if new information received contradicts prior beliefs then it is likely to be more heavily scrutinized and subsequently more likely to be rejected in favour of existing beliefs, termed disconfirmation bias (Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Cheung et al., 2009; Skourtis et al., 2012; Vaughan & Hogg, 2005). Conversely, if the information received is consistent with prior knowledge then the receiver will have more confidence in the information received and will be more likely to rely on it for future purchase decisions (Alloy & Tabachnik, 1984; Cheung et al., 2009; Crocker, 1981; Peterson & Wilson, 1985; Zeithaml, 1988; Zhang & Watts, 2003).

Whilst prior knowledge has been recognized as affecting consumers' behaviour in terms of decision processes, few studies (e.g. Bettman & Park, 1980; Bian & Moutinho, 2011; Doh & Hwang, 2009; Park et al., 2007; Skourtis et al., 2012) have acknowledged its influence. As such prior knowledge has been generally overlooked in word-of-mouth research with studies (e.g. Bettman & Park, 1980; Park et al., 2007) calling for further research in this area. Thus it is recommended that future studies on the influence of word-of-mouth communications take into account the moderating effect of product knowledge.

### **2.5.3.3 Personal Involvement**

Receiver's personal involvement refers to the importance an individual places on a product and describes the feelings of interest and enthusiasm consumers hold toward product categories (Antil, 1984; Goldsmith & Emmert, 1991; Lee et al., 2008; McQuarrie & Munson, 1992; Wu & Wang, 2011). As

such, personal involvement is a measure of the self-relevance of certain products and purchasing activities based on the individual's needs, interests, and values (Celuch & Evans, 1989; Day, Stafford, & Camacho, 1995; De Wulf, Odekerken-Schroder, & Iacobucci, 2001; Slama & Tashchian, 1985; Zaichkowsky, 1985).

Involvement ranges from low to high, determined by how important a consumer perceives a product or service to be (Blackwell et al., 2007). Whilst similar involvement levels are typically observed across the majority of consumers, this is not always the case as involvement can differ depending on personal characteristics, meaning that products that are typically high involvement for some consumers might not be for others and vice versa (Brennan & Mavondo, 2000; Grewal et al., 2015; Park et al., 2007; Quester et al., 2001). For example, whilst typically low involvement purchases like shampoo or body wash may be simple for most consumers, they would be high involvement purchases for consumers with skin conditions or allergies (Brennan & Mavondo, 2000; Park et al., 2007).

Past studies have noted a relationship between involvement and information processing (Bian & Moutinho, 2011; Celsi & Olson, 1988; Doh & Hwang, 2009; Lee et al., 2008; Park et al., 2007; Petty & Cacioppo, 1984; Petty et al., 1983). If a product is considered by a receiver to be personally relevant and important, they will be more motivated to process information about it and will evaluate information received more carefully (Bian & Moutinho, 2011; Celsi & Olson, 1988; Chitty, Barker et al., 2012; Grewal & Levy, 2014; Lee et al., 2008; Park et al., 2007; Skourtis et al., 2012). As such, high-involvement consumers may be more influenced by word-of-mouth than low-involvement consumers who may be less attentive if they do not consider the product to be important (Bian & Moutinho, 2011; Grewal & Levy, 2014; Skourtis et al., 2012). Additionally, high-involvement consumers actively seek out product information whereas low-involvement consumers may not (Brooker, 1981; Roberson, 1976; Wu & Wang, 2011).

Due to this, personal involvement is recognised as a significant moderator of the influence of word-of-mouth communications (Cheung et al., 2009; Hass, 1981; Lee et al., 2008; Park et al., 2007; Skourtis et al., 2012; Wu & Wang, 2011). However, despite research (e.g. McDougall, 1987; Skourtis et al., 2012) finding personal involvement has a significant impact on consumer behaviour such as product evaluations, brand attitude, and purchase intention, this variable is often neglected in word-of-mouth research.

#### **2.5.3.4 Personal Expertise**

Personal expertise refers to the extent to which an individual perceives themselves to be knowledgeable, competent, trained, and experienced in relation to a particular subject (Adjei et al., 2010). Consumers who consider themselves as having greater expertise are likely to place less value on information provided by others and thus be less influenced by information received (Adjei et al., 2010; Gilly et al., 1998). Conversely, consumers who consider themselves less informed regarding a product acknowledge the need for additional information and thus are more likely to be influenced by information received (Adjei et al., 2010; Gilly et al., 1998; Lovelock & Wirtz, 2007; Stanton, 1975). Consistent with this theory, Punj and Staelin (1983) observe that when consumers believe there is a need to learn more, their information search activity increases. Similarly, Bloch, Sherrell, and Ridgway (1986) found that consumers with high product expertise conducted little external information search prior to purchase. Whilst a number of studies (e.g. Bloch et al., 1986; Gilly et al., 1998; Kiel & Layton, 1981; Punj & Staelin, 1983) have found a negative relationship between expertise and information search and word-of-mouth influence, Johnson and Russo (1984) observe a positive relationship between expertise and word-of-mouth influence. On account of the inconsistency in past findings, personal expertise remains under researched.

## **2.5.4 Product Characteristics**

An additional important factor to consider when exploring the influence of word-of-mouth communications is the moderating effect of the type of purchase decision the communication relates to (Christiansen & Tax, 2000; Smith et al., 2005). Purchase decisions can be classified according to the level of product involvement (high or low) and whether the products being purchased are considered to be hedonic or utilitarian (Batra & Ahtola, 1990; Childers, Carr, Peck, & Carson, 2001; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Mano & Oliver, 1993; Stafford, Stafford, & Day, 2002; Vaughn, 1980).

### **2.5.4.1 Product Involvement**

Product involvement refers to the effort consumers exert in the decision making process prior to purchasing a product (Lamb et al., 2013; Solomon et al., 2014). The level of product involvement of a purchase decision typically revolves around the perceived risk associated with purchase and / or consumption such as physical risk, financial risk, social risk, and psychological risk (Lamb et al., 2013; Masterson & Pickton, 2014; Quester et al., 2001; Solomon et al., 2014).

High involvement purchase situations are those that are considered high risk by consumers, usually partly due to high costs, and involve complex decision making such as the purchase of a car or major household appliance such as a washing machine or refrigerator (Bloch & Bruce, 1984; Hoyer & MacInnis, 2007; Kotler & Armstrong, 2014; Ratchford, 1987; Taylor, 1981). Low involvement purchase situations are typically lower cost and subsequently lower risk, involving little thought such as everyday consumables (Lamb et al., 2013; Perreault et al., 2011; Pride et al., 2015; Ratchford, 1987; Taylor, 1981).

Due to the increased risk and more complex nature of the decision making process for high involvement products, consumers typically seek out more information before purchasing these types of products than they do for low

involvement products (Beatty & Smith, 1987; Kotler, Armstrong, Brown, Adam, & Chandler, 1998; Lovelock & Wirtz, 2007; Quester et al., 2001). This information is usually acquired from retailers, salespeople, websites, reviews, and through word-of-mouth from family, friends, and associates (Elliott, Rundle-Thiele, & Waller, 2012). As explained by Adjei et al. (2010, p. 639), “when dealing with complex products, consumers require greater decision effort to evaluate the product” and as such, “will seek to minimize or simplify the decision effort by relying more heavily on the information provided by other customers”.

#### **2.5.4.2 Product Classification**

Products can be classified by as being either utilitarian or hedonic in nature (Batra & Ahtola, 1990; Botti & McGill, 2011; Childers et al., 2001; Havlena & Holbrook, 1986; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Ratchford, 1987). Utilitarian products are sought through cognitively driven motives to meet functional needs and are characteristically sensible or useful products such as insurance and health services (Botti & McGill, 2011; Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000; Havlena & Holbrook, 1986; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Shiv & Fedorikhin, 1999). Hedonic products are sought through affectively driven motives for emotional benefits of fun and pleasure such as getting a massage or going to the cinema (Botti & McGill, 2011; Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000; Havlena & Holbrook, 1986; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Shiv & Fedorikhin, 1999).

Past research (e.g. Sen & Lerman, 2007) has found that the influence of word-of-mouth communications differs dependent upon whether the product being reviewed is of a utilitarian or hedonic nature. Additionally, multiple studies (e.g. Feick & Higie, 1992; Smith et al., 2005; Stafford et al., 2002) have found that the influence of the sender of a communication is dependent upon whether the product being communicated about is a utilitarian or hedonic purchase. Utilitarian products are influenced by senders who are perceived as possessing experience and expertise whereas hedonic products are influenced by senders who are perceived as being similar to

receivers in their preferences (Feick & Higie, 1992; Friedman & Friedman, 1979; Gershoff, Broniarczyk, & West, 2001; Gershoff, Mukherjee, & Mukhopadhyay, 2003; Smith et al., 2005; Stafford et al., 2002).

### **2.5.5 Outcomes of Word-of-Mouth Communications**

The outcomes of a communication are described by Hovland (1948) as how the behaviour of the receiver is modified following the communication.

#### **2.5.5.1 Influence**

Drawn from the extant literature is the notion that a receiver must first be influenced by a communication for it to lead to behavioural change (Archer-Brown et al., 2012; Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Brown & Reingen, 1987; Gilly et al., 1998; Smith et al., 2005). Once a communication has been acknowledged as having an influence on the receiver, the resultant behavioural outcomes can be explored. If a receiver doesn't pay attention to a communication or receives a communication but ignores it, no behavioural changes will be effected.

Whilst past studies have tested perceived influence, it has commonly only been measured by a single item (e.g. Brown & Reingen, 1987; Smith et al., 2005) rather than a multi-item construct as per Bansal and Voyer (2000) and Gilly et al. (1998). As highlighted by Zaichkowsky (1985), single item measures have low reliability and may not capture the total concept of the variable. Thus, more rigorous testing of perceived influence utilising multi-item constructs is required.

#### **2.5.5.2 Purchase Intention**

Purchase intention is defined as an individual's willingness to purchase and perceived likelihood of purchasing a particular brand, product, or service, encompassing decisions to act as well as psychological states (Chang & Liu, 2009; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Lin & Lu, 2010;

Rezvani et al., 2012; Spears & Singh, 2004). Purchase intention is a significant construct as it is widely utilised in consumer behavior research as a predictor of subsequent purchase behavior (Grewal, Krishnan, Baker, & Borin, 1998). Thus, whilst actual purchase statistics can be difficult and costly to obtain, purchase intention statistics are deemed appropriate due to the significant positive relationship between purchase intention and purchase. As Wu et al. (2011, p. 32) explain, “when consumers have a positive purchase intention, this forms a positive brand commitment which propels consumers to take an actual purchase action”. Subsequently, as Cheung and Thadani (2012) assert, purchase intention is one of the most commonly researched and validated outcomes of word-of-mouth communications.

Past studies (e.g. Huang & Chen, 2006; Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012; Park & Lee, 2009; Skourtis et al., 2012; Sparks & Browning, 2011; Weinberger & Dillon, 1980) have generally found a positive relationship between word-of-mouth communications and purchase intention e.g. positive word-of-mouth has a positive impact on purchase intention and negative word-of-mouth has a negative impact on purchase intention. Other findings on purchase intention include; valence intensity and credibility of word-of-mouth messages have a significant effect on purchase intention (Floh et al., 2013), greater similarity and source expertise result in greater influence on purchase intention (Shabsogh et al., 2012), and the quality and quantity of reviews affect purchase intention (Park et al., 2007).

Whilst many past studies have measured purchase intention as an outcome, it has often only been measured by a single item (e.g. Ashill & Sinha, 2004; Floh et al., 2013; Huang & Chen, 2006; Sparks & Browning, 2011; Wang & Yang, 2008, Wang & Yang, 2010). Some studies have utilised multiple measures however some of the items included have focused on other aspects such as price, continued use (repurchase), or willingness to recommend, rather than more broadly on purchase intention (e.g. Dodds, Monroe, & Grewal, 1991; Grewal et al., 1998; Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012; Knight & Kim, 2007; Lee & Youn, 2009; Maxham, 2001; Park & Kim, 2008;

Park et al., 2007; Wu et al., 2011). As per Park et al.'s (2007) recommendation, future research into the effects of word-of-mouth on purchase intention should utilise purchase intention constructs with multiple items (e.g. Xia & Bechwati, 2008).

### **2.5.5.3 Share Intention**

Whilst many word-of-mouth studies have examined purchase intention as an outcome, few studies (e.g. Floh et al., 2013; Lee & Youn, 2009; Skourtis et al., 2012) have focused on share intention or willingness to recommend. Furthermore, whilst some studies have measured willingness to recommend, it has typically only been measured by a single item in conjunction with other behavioural intentions such as purchase intention (e.g. Ekinici & Riley, 2003; Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012; Lee & Youn, 2009; Park & Kim, 2008; Park et al., 2007). With very few studies attempting to conceptualise share intention through more than one item (e.g. Eckler & Bolls, 2011; Lin et al., 2006).

Share intention is an important outcome to include in word-of-mouth research as whilst receivers' purchase intentions may not be influenced, they may share the communication with others who in turn may be influenced, termed amplification (Lipsman, Mudd, Aquin, & Kemp, 2012). As such, future word-of-mouth research should not only include share intention, but should measure it utilising a multi item construct.

Past research has identified message content (hedonic versus utilitarian), message tone, brand involvement, and receiver's interest as factors affecting users' forwarding intention (Belch et al., 2014; Eckler & Bolls, 2011). Whilst Belch et al. (2014) acknowledge altruism and tie strength as significant predictors of users' willingness to share content on Facebook, there is limited research relating to the exchange of word-of-mouth communications on social networking sites. As such, further research is required in the social networking context e.g. with respect to 'sharing' content on Facebook, 're-tweeting' Tweets on Twitter, 'Regram-ing' content on Instagram, etc.

## **2.6 Platforms for Word-of-Mouth Communications**

Early studies of word-of-mouth communications were inherently 'offline', focused on the diffusion of information through spoken conversations e.g. between neighbours during physical interactions in yards (e.g. Feldman & Spencer, 1965; Whyte, 1954). As technology progressed, it became imperative that word-of-mouth studies adapted to capture the ever expanding methods of dissemination available to consumers such as mobile technology, emails, and most recently, social media.

The term 'social media' refers to online platforms that facilitate the creation and exchange of user generated content by consumers regarding products, brands, services, personalities, and issues (Blackshaw & Nazzaro, 2004; Charlesworth, 2009; Pride & Ferrell, 2011; Scott, 2011). These sites have become reflections of real life with users going online to find out what's happening offline (Medoff & Kaye, 2017). According to recent data, a staggering 2.078 billion people – nearly 30% of the world's population – have an active social media account with social media accounting for over 30% of time spent online (Barker, Barker, Bormann, Roberts, & Zahay, 2017; Medoff & Kaye, 2017; Underwood, 2017).

These social media sites facilitate the exchange of electronic word-of-mouth communications not just from one person to another, but from one person to thousands of others (Cheong & Morrison, 2008; Lyons & Henderson, 2005; Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Pride, Ferrell, Lukas, Schembri, & Niininen, 2012). These 'one-to-many' communications can take many forms including 'Tweets' and replies on Twitter, posts and comments on Facebook, comments on blogs, etc. (Dann & Dann, 2011). With the expanding capabilities of social media sites, interpersonal influence now has the potential of occurring without written communication even taking place. For example when Facebook users acknowledge a positive association with a brand or company by 'liking' their page, when Twitter users 'retweet' a communication by another user, or when Instagram users post photos of

products (Ackland, 2013; Charlesworth, 2015; Grewal et al., 2015; Scott, 2011; Wolny & Mueller, 2012).

According to Chitty, Hughes, and D'Alessandro (2012, p. 177), "86% of Australian internet users contact other internet users seeking their opinions and information about products, services and brands". The way in which consumers behave post-purchase or post-consumption has also greatly changed with the emergence of social media with consumers now publicly rating and evaluating their experiences with products and services (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Due to this change it is increasingly imperative that the nature in which consumers are communicating is understood (Brown et al., 2007; Sun et al., 2006).

Social media is characterized by its three major components; content, media, and social interaction (Dann & Dann, 2011). Content refers to what is actually being posted and shared such as photos, videos, comments, reviews, etc., media refers to the platform being utilised to share the content, and social interaction is the ability for users to interact with one another, sharing content and commenting on each other's content (Dann & Dann, 2011). Due to the rapid growth of social media, sites are now subcategorised into groups reflecting their main purpose and functionalities such as blogs, content sharing sites, review sites, and social networking sites (Barker et al., 2017; Cheung & Lee, 2012; Cheung & Thadani, 2012; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Lee & Youn, 2009; Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

### **2.6.1 Review Sites**

Online consumer reviews are "positive and negative statements about products made by potential, actual, or former customers, which are available to a multitude of people via the internet" (Park & Kim, 2008, p. 401). Consumer reviews are typically posted on designated review sites such as Urbanspoon / Zomato (restaurant reviews) and TripAdvisor (hotel reviews) and often contain a written comment and photos as well as a numerical or descriptive rating e.g. '5 stars' or 'excellent' (Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2003;

Lee & Ma, 2012; Solomon et al., 2014; Sridhar & Srinivasan, 2012). In these reviews, consumers share their experiences with products, services, brands, and companies, offering advice to other consumers as well as providing information and sharing opinions (Belch et al., 2014). Whilst traditional word-of-mouth is limited to those within an individual's personal social network, consumer reviews can be accessed by anyone, at any time, anywhere in the world, making them extremely powerful (Chen & Xie, 2008; Park et al., 2007).

It is increasingly common for consumers to search for online reviews when forming attitudes about and purchase intentions towards products, brands, and services (Adjei et al., 2010; Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012; Zhang & Tran, 2009). Pride et al. (2012) quantify that up to 77% of consumers consult online reviews prior to purchasing a product or service. These reviews are subsequently conformed to and relied upon and thus play an important role in consumers purchasing decisions (Chen & Xie, 2008; Lee, Park, & Han, 2008). Research has found that improvements in product reviews lead to increases in sales with some consumers willing to pay at least 20% more for services with 'excellent' ratings (Cheung & Lee, 2008; Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Park & Kim, 2008). Conversely, as the proportion of negative reviews increases, consumers develop unfavourable attitudes towards the product (Lee et al., 2008).

Online consumer reviews are an important source of information for consumers, often substituting other forms of information such as those originating from businesses (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012; Zhu & Zhang, 2010). Reviews from fellow consumers are considered highly credible and have been found to be more influential in consumers' purchase decisions than recommendations from experts due to their greater perceived trustworthiness (Dellarocas, 2003; Huang & Chen, 2006; Lee & Ma, 2012; Lee & Youn, 2009; Park & Kim, 2008; Sher & Lee, 2009). Despite this, consumers are sometimes sceptical of online consumer reviews due to the anonymity of contributors and the ease with which companies can falsify

positive reviews in order to encourage sales of their products (Charlesworth, 2015; Lee & Ma, 2012; Sher & Lee, 2009; Zhu & Zhang, 2010).

### **2.6.2 Blogs**

Web logs, more commonly referred to as 'blogs' are one of the earliest forms of social media and represent the social media equivalent of a personal web page (Chitty, Barker, & Shimp, 2008; de Mooij, 2010; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Lovelock & Wirtz, 2007; Schneider, 2009). Blogs can be personal or community / content based (Belch et al., 2014; Boone & Kurtz, 2011; de Mooij, 2010; Grewal & Levy, 2014). Personal blogs are managed by one person and can take the form of personal diary entries of the author's life or can revolve around a particular topic such as food, travel, parenting, etc. (Barker et al., 2017; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Lovelock & Wirtz, 2007; Medoff & Kaye, 2017; Scott, 2011). Community blogs are focused on content rather than the author and are contributed to by multiple users such as 'mummy blogs' like 'Stay at Home Mum' (Stay at Home Mum, n.d.) and contain various content areas such as recipes and parenting information (Grewal & Levy, 2014). As blogs allow 'comments' to be added to threads posted by the author/s, the result is a continuing discussion with a potentially large number of contributors (Schneider, 2009).

Blogs are an increasingly popular form of user generated content with millions of users, termed 'bloggers', creating and reading blogs every day (Barker et al., 2017; Boone & Kurtz, 2011; Chu & Kamal, 2008; Lovelock & Wirtz, 2007). Blogs facilitate word-of-mouth exchanges and subsequently have the ability to quickly shape public opinion (Barker et al., 2017; Boone & Kurtz, 2011; Lee & Youn, 2009). As such, blogs are acknowledged as a significant source of influence in consumers' purchase decisions (Boone & Kurtz, 2011; Lee & Youn, 2009). According to Bulik (2007), over half of respondents surveyed indicated they purchased a product after reading a positive review on a blog while a third decided not to purchase a product after reading a negative review on a blog.

According to Chu & Kamal (2008, p. 3), “half of all bloggers provide brand-related information at least once a week, and 77% get insights into the brand from other blogs and consider blogs a useful way to gain brand-related information for their own purchases” (Armstrong, 2006). This brand related information is perceived by bloggers to be highly credible due to its origination from fellow consumers rather than corporations (Chu & Kamal, 2008; Hope, 2002; Johnson & Kaye, 2004; Lee & Youn, 2009). Subsequently, information on blogs is perceived as being more trustworthy than information from business initiated sources such as advertising (Bulik, 2007; Lee & Youn, 2009).

### **2.6.3 Social Networking Sites**

Social networking sites are sites which host personalised individual user profiles consisting of content such as personal information, photos, videos, and interests such as music, movies, and brands (Ackland, 2013; Chitty et al., 2008; Kotler et al., 2013; Pride & Ferrell, 2011; Trusov, Bucklin, & Pauwels, 2009). Such sites enable users to establish and connect with a network of friends by interacting through posting content and replying to content posted by others (Barker et al., 2017; Belch et al., 2014; de Mooij, 2010; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Trusov et al., 2009). Social networking sites such as Facebook are becoming increasingly popular among teenagers and young adults who utilise the sites to communicate with others and express themselves through sharing content such as photos and music and comments about products and brands (Cheong & Morrison, 2008; Sun et al., 2006).

Whilst the primary motive for using social networking sites is to keep in touch with family and friends, some interesting consumption related motives have also emerged (Yellow, 2018). According to a recent survey, 28% of users cited ‘to follow or find particular brands or businesses’, 22% of users cited ‘to research products / services you might want to buy’, and 10% of users cited ‘to provide reviews / blogs about products you have bought’ as reasons for use (Yellow, 2018). The 22% of people who cited ‘to research products /

services you might want to buy' as a main motive for use were asked to list the types of products they typically search for with results showing popular items include clothing and fashion, appliances and electronic equipment, furniture / homewares, trade services, cosmetics and beauty products, health and medical services, and computer hardware and software (Yellow, 2018). Additionally, 59% of respondents indicated that the last time they used social media for the purpose of researching a product or service it resulted in a purchase (Yellow, 2018).

When analysing click through rates on the social networking site Facebook, Redsicker (2013) explains, "when a Facebook user sees that her friend has checked into a particular store, she'll be curious to learn more about that location and will probably click through for more information". Subsequently, interactions that take place on social networking sites can have a powerful influence on consumption behaviour (Masterson & Pickton, 2014). As such, social networking sites are now cited as a major factor in the continuingly increasing influence of online word-of-mouth (Brown et al., 2007; Cheong & Morrison, 2008; Sun et al., 2006).

Social networking sites have grown dramatically over the past ten years, beginning with sites such as MySpace, and continue to grow with the advent of newer sites such as Instagram (Boone & Kurtz, 2011). Of internet users, 62% report using social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn (Belch et al., 2014). Facebook is the most popular social networking site in the world and the second most visited website (after Google) in both the United States and Australia, commanding 70% of all social network traffic, with half of its users logging in daily and spending an average of 55 minutes per day on the site (Barker et al., 2017; Dann & Dann, 2011; Grewal et al., 2015; Kotler & Armstrong, 2012; Medoff & Kaye, 2017; Pride et al., 2015; Sharp, 2013; Solomon et al., 2014). As such, social networks are "increasingly being recognized as an important source of information influencing the adoption and use of products and services" (Subramani & Rajagopalan, 2003).

## **2.7 Conclusion**

This chapter has examined the theoretical underpinnings of the study, beginning with its foundations in social influence. The word-of-mouth communication framework has been outlined with each component discussed in detail and gaps in the existing literature identified. In Chapter 3, these theoretical foundations are utilised to develop a conceptual framework for the study from which the research objectives are developed.

### **3. CHAPTER 3 – DEVELOPMENT OF RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

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#### **3.1 Introduction**

Drawn from examination of the literature in Chapter 2 and identification of gaps in the research, this chapter details the derivation of research objectives upon which this study is based.

Whilst past research (e.g. Brinberg & Plimpton, 1986; Childers & Rao, 1992; Khan & Khan, 2008; Lachance et al., 2003; Makgosa & Mohube, 2007; Martin & Bush, 2000; Mascarenhas & Higby, 1993) has explored social influence in detail, less research has been conducted examining the operation of social influence online and specifically on social networking sites. As such, this study aims to answer the following research question;

“How are individuals influenced by word-of-mouth communications on social networking sites?”

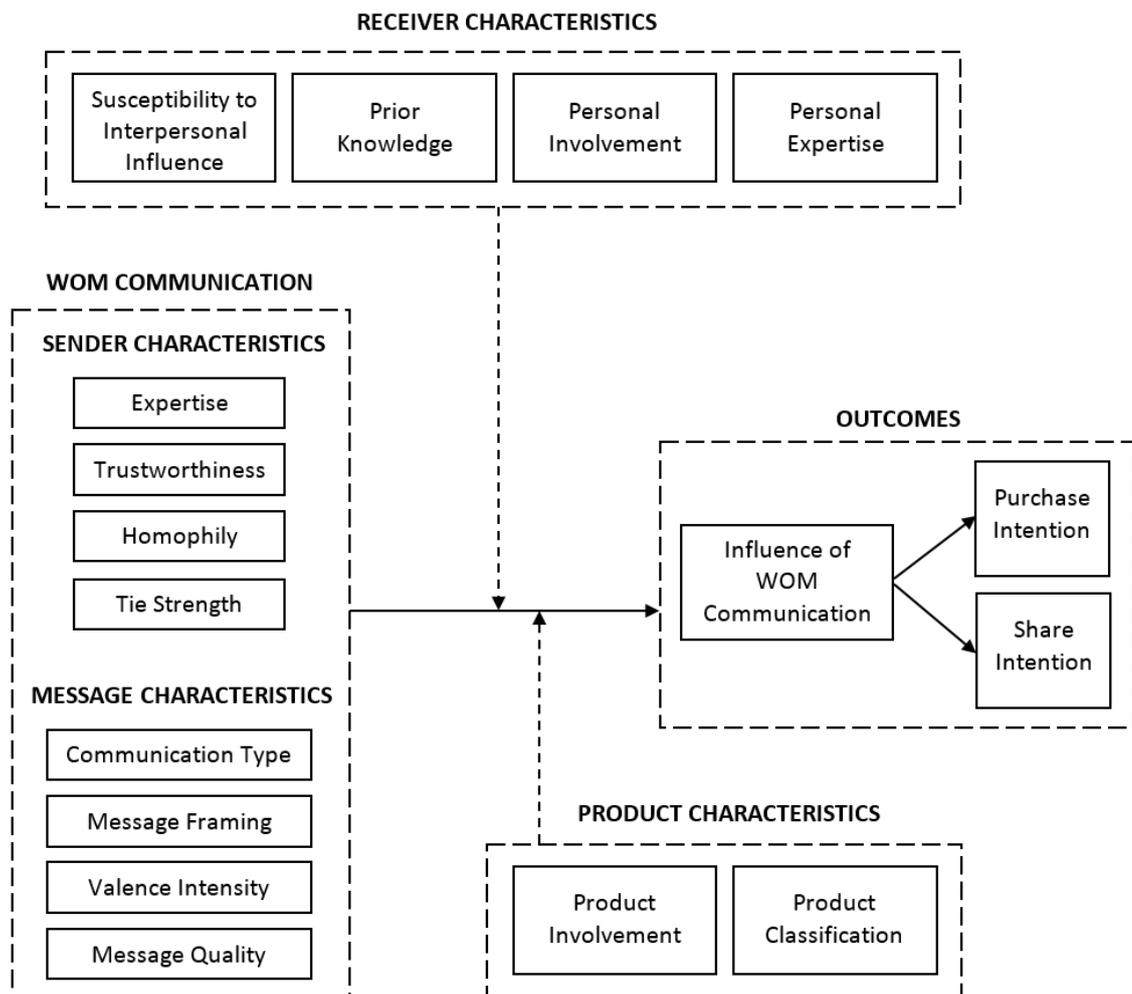
#### **3.2 Conceptual Framework**

As established in the previous chapter (see section 2.5), a number of sender, message, receiver, and product characteristics have been identified as affecting the influence of word-of-mouth communications. This field is not without research, with a number of studies acknowledging the interaction of combinations of these characteristics, such as sender and receiver characteristics (e.g. Bone 1995; Fan & Miao, 2012), sender and message characteristics (e.g. Jalilvand, Esfahani, & Samiei, 2011; Lee & Koo, 2012; Li & Zhan, 2011; Schindler & Bickart, 2012), receiver and message characteristics (e.g. Floh et al., 2013), sender and product characteristics (e.g. Smith et al., 2005), and sender, message, and product characteristics (Adjei et al., 2010). What is lacking however, is research incorporating all of these factors and the numerous variables within them. The necessity of such exploration is echoed by Subramani and Rajagopalan (2003) who outline the need for a greater understanding of the operation of word-of-mouth including

the contexts in which it operates and the characteristics of products and services it effects. Based on their review of past studies, Cheung and Thadani (2012) propose a more integrative framework of word-of-mouth communications however this is yet to be tested empirically.

From a managerial perspective, it is important to understand how word-of-mouth operates as when utilised effectively, it can create both favourable and unfavourable attitudes towards brands and products (Subramani & Rajagopalan, 2003). As such, drawn from the review of past research on the operation of word-of-mouth and the subsequent research gaps identified, *Figure 1* proposes a holistic conceptual framework of the operation of word-of-mouth communications upon which this study is founded.

**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Word-of-Mouth Communications**



### **3.3 Research Objectives**

This study utilises a mixed-methods research design consisting of two sequential phases (Saunders et al., 2009). A mixed-methods research design is considered optimal for this study due to its ability to generate and test theory and advance understanding (Campbell, 1999; Palinkas, 2014). Whilst content analysis is considered integral in providing a fuller understanding of behaviour, when integrated with quantitative methods, it can achieve description, prediction, control, and explanation of phenomena (Neuendorf, 2002; Palinkas, 2014).

#### **3.3.1 Study 1**

Study 1 is an exploratory content analytic study aiming to develop an enriched conceptualisation of how the message characteristics of communication type and message framing impact a communication's level of influence (Burns & Bush, 2010; Churchill, 2001; Levens, 2012). The research objectives for Study 1 are outlined below.

##### **3.3.1.1 Research Objective 1 – Communication Type**

With the expanding capabilities of social networking sites, interpersonal influence now has the potential of occurring without written communication even taking place. For example when Facebook users acknowledge a positive association with a brand or company by 'liking' their page, when Twitter users 'retweet' a communication by another user, or when Instagram users post photos of products (Ackland, 2013; Charlesworth, 2015; Grewal & Levy, 2014; Wolny & Mueller, 2012).

Whilst some literature and past studies (e.g. Barker et al., 2017; Carter & Levy, 2012; Grewal & Levy, 2014; Gummerus, Liljander, Weman, & Pihlstrom, 2012; Salesforce, 2013; Wolny & Mueller, 2012) have acknowledged some of these non-verbal communications, none have

actually identified nor compared the full range of communication types that users can utilise.

During a preliminary exploration of the social networking site Facebook, five main types of communications were identified; 'likes' where users can indicate that they hold a favourable attitude towards a brand, 'shares' where users can disseminate information originating from external sources such as news articles or YouTube videos, 'check-ins' where users can indicate that they are at a specific place such as a shop or café, 'photos' where users post a photo of a product or service being consumed, and 'comments' where users mention a brand. In order to examine variances in the level of influence between the different types of communications, these categories must first be identified and as no previous research has formally identified the different types of communications on social networking sites, research objective 1(a) is;

**RO1: (a)** To identify the different types of word-of-mouth communications on social networking sites.

Past research as well as a preliminary examination of various social networking sites suggests there are multiple factors that determine the level of influence of different types of communications. The first factor is the effort required by users to engage in the communication (Gummerus et al., 2012). Whilst 'liking' a page only requires users to click the 'like' button, posting a photo requires users to take the photo and then upload it to the site which is more onerous and thus interpreted as more active (Grewal et al., 2015). The second factor is the credibility of the communication based on its original source e.g. whether the content is user generated or created professionally (Chan & Ngai, 2011; Cheong & Morrison, 2008; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). As comments, photos, and check-ins are user generated content, they are likely to be considered more trustworthy and credible than 'shares' of externally created content such as news articles and YouTube videos (Cheong & Morrison, 2008; Johnson & Kaye, 2004; Mangold & Faulds, 2009). The third factor is the visibility of the communication i.e. how

observable it is to other users. Whilst some types of communications such as comments, photos, and check-ins appear in users' news feeds, 'likes' appear less frequently and thus have a lower visibility and opportunity to influence. As no previous studies have compared the level of influence of different types of communications, research objective 1(b) is;

**RO1: (b)** To compare the level of influence of different types of word-of-mouth communications on social networking sites.

### **3.3.1.2 Research Objective 2 – Message Framing**

A preliminary exploration of communications on various social media sites revealed that users tend to communicate about brands with one of three different message framings – positive, negative, or neutral. Positive communications were identified as those where users positively endorsed brands by posting comments such as “love it” and “great piece of equipment to have”. Negative communications were identified as those where users expressed their dissatisfaction with a brand by posting comments such as “just another nail in the coffin of good service”. The third group of communications were those where users posted a photo of a product or checked-in to a business but didn't accompany these communications with any positive or negative comments and as such, these communications are considered 'neutral'. Whilst numerous past studies (e.g. Bone 1995; Cheung & Lee, 2008; East, Hammond, & Lomax, 2008; Goldenberg et al., 2007; Luo, 2009; Maxham, 2001; Richins, 1983; Scott & Tybout, 1981; Shabsogh et al., 2012; Skourtis et al., 2012; Sparks & Browning, 2011) have acknowledged the categories of positive word-of-mouth and negative word-of-mouth few (e.g. Cheung & Thadani, 2012; Floh et al., 2013) have acknowledged the existence of a 'neutral' category. In order to examine variances in the level of influence between different message framings, these framings must first be identified and profiled in a social networking site context. Thus, research objective 2(a) is;

**RO2: (a)** To identify and profile the different message framings of word-of-mouth communications on social networking sites.

Results from past studies examining the effects of positive vs. negative message framing have varied with some studies finding positive word-of-mouth communications to be more influential (e.g. Adjei et al., 2010; Ahluwalia, 2002; East, Hammond, & Lomax, 2008; Floh et al., 2012) and others finding negative word-of-mouth communications to be more influential (e.g. Cheung & Lee, 2008; Park & Lee, 2009). Due to the varied results of these past studies and the lack of research comparing the level of influence of different message framings on social networking sites, research objective 2(b) is;

**RO2: (b)** To compare the level of influence of different message framings of word-of-mouth communications on social networking sites.

### **3.3.2 Study 2**

Study 2 is an explanatory study focusing on confirmatory testing of the communication types and framings identified in phase one of the study as well as a number of relationships identified within the conceptual framework (Levens, 2012). The research objectives for Study 2 are outlined below.

#### **3.3.2.1 Research Objective 3 – Communication Type**

Once exploratory qualitative research has been conducted, in order to strengthen and support results, findings should be confirmed quantitatively. As such, and as no previous studies have empirically tested the influence of different types of word-of-mouth communications on social networking sites, research objective 3 is;

**RO3:** To empirically test the influence of different types of word-of-mouth communications posted on social networking sites.

### **3.3.2.2 Research Objective 4 – Message Framing**

As no previous studies have empirically tested the level of influence of different framings of communications on social networking sites, research objective 4 is;

**RO4:** To empirically test the influence of differently framed word-of-mouth communications posted on social networking sites.

### **3.3.2.3 Research Objective 5 – Product Involvement**

According to consumer behaviour theory (e.g. Elliott et al., 2012; Kotler et al., 1998; Masterson & Pickton, 2014; Quester et al., 2001), consumers engage in far greater information search efforts for high involvement purchase decisions than for low involvement purchase decisions. Whilst some studies have verified this (e.g. Beatty & Smith, 1987) and others have explored the moderating relationship between involvement and word-of-mouth communications (e.g. Adjei et al., 2010), there is a need for greater empirical evidence of these relationships. As such, and as the moderating effect of product involvement is yet to be tested on word-of-mouth communications exchanged on social networking sites, research objective 5 is;

**RO5:** To test whether the influence of word-of-mouth communications posted on social networking sites varies depending upon the involvement of the product.

### **3.3.2.4 Research Objective 6 – Product Classification (Hedonic / Utilitarian)**

Product classification – whether a product is considered to be hedonic (sought for emotional benefits) or utilitarian (sought to meet functional needs) has been a topic of consumer behaviour research for decades (e.g. Batra & Ahtola, 1990; Botti & McGill, 2011; Childers et al., 2001; Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000; Havlena & Holbrook, 1986; Holbrook & Hirschman,

1982; Mano & Oliver, 1993; Ratchford, 1987; Sen & Lerman, 2007; Shiv & Fedorikhin, 1999; Smith et al., 2005; Stafford et al., 2002). Less research however, has focused on the moderating effect of product classification on the influence of brand and product related communications. As such, and as the moderating effect of product classification is yet to be tested on word-of-mouth communications exchanged on social networking sites, research objective 6 is;

**RO6:** To test whether the influence of word-of-mouth communications posted on social networking sites varies depending upon the classification of the product.

### **3.3.2.5 Research Objective 7 – Sender Characteristics**

Whilst previous studies have identified the sender characteristics of expertise, trustworthiness, homophily, and tie strength as antecedents to influence from word-of-mouth communications, they have typically only tested combinations of one or two characteristics e.g. expertise and homophily (Gilly et al., 1998), expertise and tie strength (Bansal & Voyer, 2000), and homophily, expertise, and trustworthiness (Shabsogh et al., 2012), and not all four characteristics. Additionally, whilst the four sender characteristics have been found to be positively related to influence for traditional word-of-mouth communications (e.g. Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Brown & Reingen, 1987; Gilly et al., 1998), electronic word-of-mouth studies haven't always confirmed this with Airs and Ang (2012) finding no significant relationship for homophily and Steffes and Burgee (2009) finding no significant relationship for tie strength. As traditional word-of-mouth originates from a sender known to the receiver, their credibility can be evaluated however due to the nature of electronic word-of-mouth, the anonymity of senders doesn't facilitate this evaluation given the weak tie strength of strangers (Chatterjee, 2001; Lee & Youn, 2009; Steffes & Burgee, 2009). As communication exchanges on social networking sites are more representative of traditional word-of-mouth than electronic word-of-mouth due to receiver's existing friendship with the sender, it is anticipated that as

with traditional word-of-mouth, all four sender characteristics will be positively related to influence for communications exchanged on social networking sites. However, as per research objectives 5 and 6, it is anticipated that the product characteristics of product involvement and product classification (hedonic / utilitarian) will moderate this relationship. As such, and as no previous studies have explored the impact of the four sender characteristics on influence from communications posted on social networking sites, research objective 7 is;

**RO7:** To examine the moderating effect of product characteristics on the relationship between sender characteristics and influence of word-of-mouth communications in a social networking site context.

### **3.3.2.6 Research Objective 8 – Outcomes**

As past research (e.g. Brown & Reingen, 1987; Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012; Katona & Mueller, 1955; Skourtis et al., 2012; Weinberger & Dillon, 1980) has found information imparted through word-of-mouth communications to have a substantial impact on consumers' purchase intentions and product evaluations and as no previous studies have explored the effect of influence from word-of-mouth communications on purchase intention in a social networking site context, research objective 8(a) is;

**RO8(a):** To test whether greater influence from word-of-mouth communications posted on social networking sites results in an increased purchase intention.

Whilst receivers' purchase intentions may not be affected by viewing word-of-mouth communications, they may still share the communication with others who in turn may be influenced. As such, and as no previous research has explored the effect of influence from word-of-mouth communications on share intention in a social networking sites context, research objective 8(b) is;

**RO8(b):** To test whether greater influence from word-of-mouth communications posted on social networking sites results in an increased share intention.

### **3.4 Conclusion**

This chapter presented the conceptual framework upon which this study is based, highlighting gaps in the existing literature upon which the research objectives for the study are developed. The following chapters present the two studies conducted for this dissertation with Chapter 4 detailing the first, qualitative phase of the study and Chapter 5 detailing the second, quantitative phase of the study.

## **4. CHAPTER 4 – STUDY 1**

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### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter covers phase one of the study beginning with an outline of the methodology including the research instrumentation, data collection, and sampling procedures. Data analysis processes are discussed including sample characteristics and reliability. Following which, the chapter concludes with results derived through content analysis.

### **4.2 Methodology**

#### **4.2.1 Sampling Frame**

The social media platform chosen for this study is the social networking site Facebook. Whilst motives for using other social media forums such as review sites or blogs are more obviously consumption related and thus expected to be heavily product / brand oriented, social networking sites present as a truer representation of online interpersonal interaction for the primary purpose of socialisation. In terms of social networking sites, Facebook dominates by far with 91% of social media users indicating they use Facebook, far ahead of Instagram with 39% and Twitter with 19% (Yellow, 2018). Participants for this study are between the ages of 18 to 30 as individuals in this age bracket are typically heavy users of social media and are in a life cycle stage where they have less financial commitments and thus are active consumers. Facebook users in this age group reported an average of 49 log-ins per week indicating heavy usage and an average of 394 Facebook ‘friends’ indicating a large number of potential influencers (Yellow, 2018). Furthermore, research has found that 68% of 18-34 year old social media users were at least ‘somewhat likely’ to purchase a product after viewing a friend’s social media post about it (Charlesworth, 2015).

### **4.2.2 Data Collection**

Participants for phase one of the study were recruited via posts on the social networking sites Facebook (see *Appendix 1*) and Twitter (see *Appendix 2*) and via posters (see *Appendix 3*) placed on community noticeboards and at supermarkets and stores in various suburbs around Perth, Western Australia. These locations were selected due to their frequency of visitation by people within the demographic desired for the study. The social networking posts and posters contained information regarding the study as well as the researcher's contact details in order for respondents to self-select into the study by contacting the researcher. A total of 54 respondents made contact indicating willingness to participate the study of which 4 were omitted due to not meeting the screening requirements regarding age and location, resulting in a total of 50 potential participants.

### **4.2.3 Instrumentation**

Phase one of the study is operationalized through one-to-one semi-structured in-depth interviews with participants (Davis, 2012; Daymon & Holloway, 2002; Wells et al., 2006). Participants were provided with an information sheet detailing the purpose and nature of the study (see *Appendix 4*) following which they completed a consent form (see *Appendix 5*) indicating their willingness to participate in the interview. During interviews, participants' Facebook accounts were examined and participants asked to recall and show (where possible), instances in which they were influenced by word-of-mouth communications. Following this, participants' Facebook news feeds were examined during which the interviewer initiated discussion on any communication types and framings yet to be identified.

Interviews were recorded using an audio recording device to facilitate transcription whilst the content viewed on the computer screen during interviews was recorded using the screen recording software program Echo360. Additional static screen shots were captured during interviews of any specific communications discussed at length with participants. Adopting

a multimodal approach to data collection ensured alignment of audio and visual elements to facilitate thorough data analysis and exemplify phenomena. All interviews were conducted by the same interviewer to ensure consistency however whilst the interviews were semi-structured and followed an interview guide, the exact nature of each interview varied dependent upon participants' responses (Daymon & Holloway, 2002).

#### **4.2.4 Sample Size & Selection**

In selecting participants for this phase of the study, a combination of judgement sampling and quota sampling techniques was utilised (Kotler, Keller, & Burton, 2009; Pride & Ferrell, 2006; Saunders et al., 2009; Solomon, Saupin et al., 2012). This combination of sampling methods ensured that participants' Facebook accounts contained a sufficient amount of data to analyse and that both genders were evenly represented to enhance generalizability of results.

In consulting the literature on qualitative methodology, it was determined that a sample size of approximately 15 in-depth interviews would be required given the nature of the study and the data sought (Bertaux, 1981; Creswell, 1998; Davis, 2012; Guest et al., 2006; Johnson, 1998; Kuzel, 1992; Morse, 1994). At the completion of 15 interviews, examination of the data revealed the anticipated communications and framings had been repeatedly identified by participants and clear rankings as to level of influence had emerged. As such, saturation had been reached and no further interviews were conducted (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

### **4.3 Data Analysis**

#### **4.3.1 Description of Sample**

In accordance with the restrictions imposed through the use of screening questions, all participants were between 18 – 30 years of age, were living in Perth, Western Australia at the time of the interview, and were frequent users

of Facebook, averaging at least 3 log-ins per week. Of the 15 participants selected, 8 were female and 7 were male, representing an even gender spread. As outlined in *Table 1*, a number of varying occupations were also represented in the sample.

**Table 1: Participant Demographics & Facebook Usage**

Participant Identifier	Gender	Age	Occupation	Number of Facebook Friends	Ave log-ins per week	Ave time spent per log-in
A	Female	20	Hospitality	484	20-30	5 mins
B	Female	21	Student	183	30	1-2 mins
C	Female	19	Receptionist	182	105	5 mins
D	Male	22	Hospitality	529	28-30	30 mins
E	Male	25	Skipper	906	210	2 mins
F	Male	19	Retail Assistant	962	140	5 mins
G	Male	23	Post Officer	513	140	2 mins
H	Male	25	Engineer	393	14	15 mins
I	Female	29	Mother	217	47	10 mins
J	Female	18	Student	711	30	60 mins
K	Female	30	Finance Consultant	480	28	2 mins
L	Male	26	Electrician	428	7-14	5 mins
M	Female	23	Student	686	28	5 mins
N	Male	27	Hospitality	41	21	2 mins
O	Female	27	Veterinary Nurse	627	21	30 mins

#### **4.3.2 Data Coding & Inter-rater Reliability**

Upon completion of the interviews, de-identified audio recordings were sent to a transcription service. Once the completed transcriptions were received, each audio file was listened to whilst the transcriptions were read in order to clean the data and correct any transcription errors (Saunders et al., 2009). The cleaned data was then imported into the qualitative data analysis program NVivo for categorization, coding, and analysis (Saunders et al., 2009). An inductive approach was adopted during the coding process and

content analysis with new nodes created as common themes emerged (Damon & Holloway, 2002; Patton, 1990; Saunders et al., 2009). The identification of themes is an important component in qualitative data analysis (Davis, 1997). A 'theme' is defined as "the expression of a consistent and recurring idea found either explicitly or implicitly in the data" (Davis, 2012, p. 179).

As outlined by Neuendorf (2002, p. 141), "given that a goal of content analysis is to identify and record relatively objective (or at least intersubjective) characteristics of messages, reliability is paramount". In order to assess whether the classification of content is reliable, it is necessary for the content to be classified more than once, that is, by more than one rater (Fleiss, Levin, & Paik, 2003; Neuendorf, 2002). Inter-rater agreement measures the extent to which independent judges make the same coding decisions when evaluating content (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Bracken, 2002; Neuendorf, 2002; Stangor, 2015; Tinsley & Weiss, 1975; Tinsley & Weiss, 2000). If the inter-rater agreement is good, then it is taken that the ratings reflect the dimension they are purported to reflect (Fleiss et al., 2003; Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999).

In assessing inter-rater reliability, it is recommended that two or more indices of agreement are reported as some measures are considered to be too liberal whilst others are considered too conservative (Lombard et al., 2002; Perreault & Leigh, 1989). The percentage of agreement is the most commonly utilised measure in marketing research literature however is considered to be too liberal as it assesses agreement by simply calculating the percentage of the source's content where both users agree that the content either should or shouldn't be coded to a particular node (Lombard et al., 2002; Perreault & Leigh, 1989; Stangor, 2015; Wimmer & Dominick, 2000). The Kappa coefficient is conversely perceived as being quite conservative as it accounts for the likelihood of agreement between the users occurring merely by chance (Bakeman, 2000; Banerjee, Capozzoli, McSweeney, & Sinha, 1999; Fleiss et al., 2003; Lombard et al., 2002; Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999). The Kappa coefficient is "the most widely used

measure of interjudge reliability across the behavioural science literature” (Perreault & Leigh, 1989, p. 137) and is preferred by many researchers due to its rigour (Bakeman, 2000; Dewey, 1983; Lombard et al., 2002; Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999; Zwick, 1988). For liberal indices such as the percentage of agreement, coefficients of .90 or greater are sought however for the more conservative Kappa coefficient, values greater than .75 indicate excellent agreement, values between .40 and .75 indicate fair to good agreement, and values below .40 indicate poor agreement (Banerjee et al., 1999; Fleiss et al., 2003; Lombard et al., 2002; Neuendorf, 2002; Wimmer & Dominick, 2000).

All data collected within the study was coded by the researcher, following which, 25% of the data was additionally coded separately by a second coder familiar with the study in order to assess inter-rater reliability. This sample size of 25% is considered sufficient given the nature of the study (Lombard et al., 2002; Neuendorf, 2002; Wimmer & Dominick, 1997). Inter-rater reliability was assessed utilising both the percentage of agreement and the Kappa coefficient (Cohen, 1960). The reliabilities are reported by node for a truer representation of the reliability of each variable as the averaging of reliability coefficients across variables can result in the obscuring of low reliabilities that do not meet the recommended acceptable levels (Neuendorf, 2002). The inter-rater reliability aggregated for each node is detailed in *Table 2*. The percentages of agreement for all nodes is greater than .95 indicating excellent agreement. At the more conservative Kappa coefficient, 9 nodes are classified as having excellent agreement, with 12 nodes considered good, 1 node considered fair, and 5 nodes considered poor.

For each of the nodes where inter-rater agreement was classified as either fair or poor, the content coded into each node was compared and discussed between the coders. During which, it was ascertained that the instances of discrepancy were due to misinterpretation of the node description and upon clarification by the researcher of each of the nodes, agreement was subsequently reached. Additionally, one coder adopted a broader context approach when coding, including more of the surrounding content. As such,

whilst both coders identified the same main quotes from the sources, the agreement figures are conservative given the differing approach to coding employed by the two coders.

**Table 2: Inter-Rater Reliability**

<b>Node Group</b>	<b>Node</b>	<b>Agreement</b>	<b>Kappa</b>	<b>Classification</b>
Sender Characteristics	Sender Expertise	99.60%	0.67	Good
	Trustworthiness	97.95%	0.67	Good
	Homophily	98.79%	0.73	Good
	Tie Strength	99.10%	0.33	Poor
Message Characteristics	Message Quality	99.25%	0.67	Good
	Length Of Communication	100.00%	1.00	Excellent
	Effort Expended	99.01%	0.77	Excellent
	Visibility Of communication	98.77%	0.00	Poor
	Visual elements	97.81%	0.43	Fair
Receiver Characteristics	Personal Expertise	100.00%	1.00	Excellent
	Personal Involvement	98.21%	0.33	Poor
	Prior Knowledge	99.73%	0.67	Good
Other	Exposure	98.59%	0.89	Excellent
	Rarity	98.72%	0.33	Poor
	Proximity	99.81%	0.67	Good
	Real Time	100.00%	1.00	Excellent
	Boredom	99.51%	0.65	Good
	Annoyance	99.02%	0.67	Good
	Whinging	100.00%	1.00	Excellent
Outcomes	Creates Awareness	98.70%	0.74	Good
	Reminds	99.20%	0.85	Excellent
	Generates Interest To Research	95.54%	0.59	Good
	Change In Attitude Or Opinion	99.54%	0.85	Excellent
	Reduces Risk	97.77%	0.08	Poor
	Reduces Social Risk	100.00%	1.00	Excellent
	Share Intention	99.29%	0.67	Good
	Purchase Intention / Purchase	97.09%	0.64	Good

### **4.3.3 Content Analysis**

Upon analysis, the emergent themes appear to fall within two broad categories; determinants of influence, and outcomes of influence. The antecedent 'determinants of influence' refer to reasons cited by participants as to what makes communications influential or not. Whilst 'outcomes of influence' refer to the behavioural changes identified by participants as occurring subsequent to viewing communications. These themes are defined and exemplified below.

#### **4.3.3.1 Determinants of Influence**

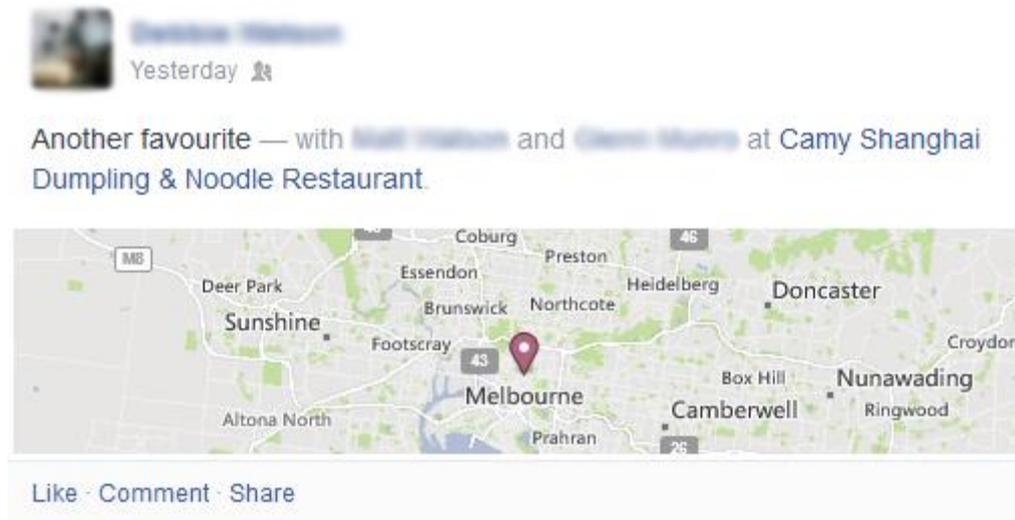
In analysing the nodes classified as 'determinants of influence', it is evident the majority of these can be categorised as either sender, message, or receiver characteristics as per the conceptual framework (see *Figure 1*).

##### **4.3.3.1.1 Sender Characteristics**

Four determinants of influence relating to the sender of the communication were identified; sender expertise, trustworthiness, homophily, and tie strength.

###### **4.3.3.1.1.1 Sender Expertise**

Sender expertise refers to the perceived knowledge and expertise of the person posting the communication. Participants were observed judging their friends' communications based on their friends' expertise in particular fields. Participants noted they were happy to rely on those perceived to be knowledgeable with the inference being that if a friend is perceived as possessing little expertise in the subject area their communication pertains to, participants are less inclined to pay attention to it (see *Figure 2*);

**Figure 2: Example of Sender Expertise**

(📷: Screen capture taken during interview with Participant M, 19<sup>th</sup> August, 2014)

*“Just my knowledge of this person, for her to say ‘another favourite’ it must be good because she’s pretty big into food.”*

Participant M (Female, 23)

*“Some people I would trust to know good restaurants and good food and that kind of stuff, some people I would trust to know good music.”*

Participant A (Female, 20)

#### **4.3.3.1.1.2 Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness refers to whether participants believe communications to be trustworthy. Participants cited Facebook communications to be more trustworthy, and thus more influential, than traditional advertising as they are user generated rather than originating from companies;

*“Friends are more truthful, they say what they think, like if they go to McDonald’s they will tell the truth about the taste, about what it looked like, but advertisements from McDonald’s, they might not really be true 100% so I prefer my friends’ advice.”*

Participant N (Male, 27)

Of the various user generated content forums such as blogs and review sites, participants cited Facebook communications to be the most trustworthy, and subsequently, the most influential due to their personal knowledge of the users posting;

*“For a friend to say something is either good or bad you’re going to take more stock in it than if you go onto something like Urbanspoon. I don’t rate Urbanspoon at all because people whinge a lot whereas I know what my friends’ opinions actually are so I tend to believe them a bit more.”*

Participant K (Female, 30)

Participants also cited trusting certain friends in particular;

*“She’s really trustworthy that I can just go okay, well if she likes that or if she says that’s good or that’s not any good...”*

Participant I (Female, 29)

#### **4.3.3.1.1.3 Homophily**

Homophily refers to whether or not participants’ share common interests with the sender of the communication. Participants cited an increased likelihood to view and / or like content if they have common interests with the person posting the communication;

*“I find her influential because she’s into the same things as what I am.”*

Participant I (Female, 29)

*“If that friend, if I’ve got a lot in common with them I’m going to find it interesting probably too.”*

Participant E (Male, 25)

*“[Likes are influential] because your friends, you have common interests, so if they like something then maybe, you know, you should like that as well.”*

Participant D (Male, 22)

#### **4.3.3.1.1.4 Tie Strength**

Tie Strength refers to the relationship between the participant and the sender of the communication. The strength of relationships was noted as a determinant of influence with participants sighting friends with whom they have long standing friendships to be more influential than those they've known for shorter periods of time;

*“If I've got a long relationship with someone, a really long friendship, compared to someone I met on the weekend and added them on Facebook, if they popped up I wouldn't take as much notice or as much interest in them compared to the longer relationships with friends.”*

Participant G (Male, 23)

Participants also noted however, that long standing friendships weren't influential if they were no longer in regular contact, as is often the case with friends from previous schools or jobs. In such instances, friends the participant has known for a shorter period of time were considered more influential due to their ongoing friendship and continued closeness;

*“If it's more like an old school friend I've just got on here for the sake of having them on here then I'd probably go nah, not really look at it, whereas compare that to like [names friends] then I might go okay, yeah I might look at that.”*

Participant I (Female, 29)

#### **4.3.3.1.2 Message Characteristics**

Five determinants of influence relating to characteristics of the message were identified; message quality, length of communication, effort expended, visibility of communication, and visual elements.

##### **4.3.3.1.2.1 Message Quality**

Message quality refers to the information contained within a communication and the style in which it is written. Participants cited a number of elements of message quality that affect the level of influence of a communication. These include the style in which the communication is written, with well written communications bearing greater influence than poorly written, emotional communications;

*“If something is phrased in a more sophisticated, less abusive or angry way, presenting information rather eloquently, it makes it a lot more influential.”*

Participant F (Male, 19)

As well as a preference for objective evaluative information rather than subjective descriptive information;

*“I would look more at the facts; the food was good, the service was good...I have absolutely no interest in the fact that it made you feel all warm and fuzzy inside. I want to know that the food came on time, it was good, it was reasonably priced, and that you would go back.”*

Participant K (Female, 30)

##### **4.3.3.1.2.2 Length Of Communication**

A subset of message quality, length of communication refers to the length of status updates or the written component of shares, check-ins, and photos. A third of participants interviewed raised the issue of length of communication,

all citing that written communications are more likely to garner their attention and subsequently influence them if they are shorter;

*“Maybe even if it was shorter, it would just depend on the size. If I saw someone putting a massive paragraph and I was flicking through my news feed I don’t know if I’d particularly read the whole thing.”*

Participant G (Male, 23)

*“The one before was like almost a whole paragraph...and in that case I probably would not read it.”*

Participant H (Male, 25)

*“The smaller the update, the more likely I am to read it.”*

Participant M (Female, 23)

Participants did however note requiring a certain amount of information within the communication for it to be influential;

*“It kind of depends how much information they’ve put into the status...if it had just the name of the place that they’re going to it probably wouldn’t mean very much but if they explained a bit more like maybe even just one sentence saying what it was.”*

Participant J (Female, 18)

#### **4.3.3.1.2.3 Effort Expended**

Effort expended refers to the effort required by users in order to post the various types of communications. Participants indicated that communications requiring users to exert effort by taking and uploading photos or videos and writing descriptions are more influential than less onerous communications;

*“Say for example you bought a pair of shoes and then you posted it on Facebook and then you put a description on it, there is like a greater degree that you exerted effort to share it to everyone.”*

Participant D (Male, 22)

*“Videos I definitely think there’s a point where you say oh someone’s taking time to post that video specifically, I should probably pay more attention to that.”*

Participant G (Male, 23)

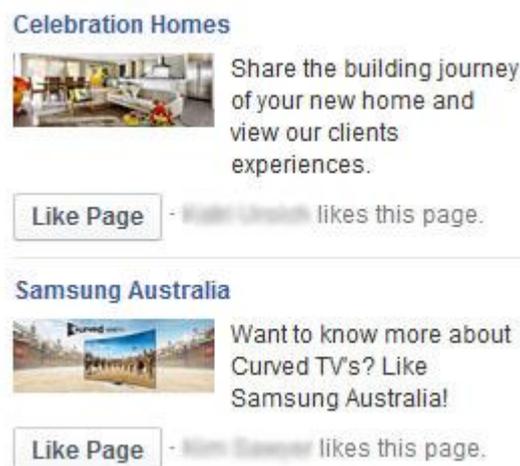
*“They’ve gone the effort to specifically write that...rather than seeing it and just clicking ‘like’.”*

Participant K (Female, 30)

#### **4.3.3.1.2.4 Visibility Of Communication**

Visibility of communication refers to how observable communications are to users on their news feed. Participants noted less visible communications (such as likes and short status updates) to be less influential due to their reduced likelihood of being noticed (see *Figure 3* and *Figure 4*);

**Figure 3: Example of Visibility of Page Likes**



 Screen capture taken during interview with Participant G, 19<sup>th</sup> June, 2014)

*“The fact that my friends like those is still not particularly noticeable.”*

Participant G (Male, 23)

**Figure 4: Example of Visibility of Status Update**



 Screen capture taken during interview with Participant M, 19<sup>th</sup> August, 2014)

*“You don’t even really see it, you can scroll straight past it really.”*

Participant M (Female, 23)

**4.3.3.1.2.5 Visual Elements**

Visual elements refers to the appealing graphic elements contained within communications. Participants noted communications containing visual elements more likely to gain their attention than communications without;

*“I’d probably pay more attention to it purely because of the photo just because it’s something to look at, it’s not just the words on a page...I mean, you’re drawn to it, rather than just having the words there.”*

Participant A (Female, 20)

*“Visual posts are definitely more distinctive than big blocks of text.”*

Participant H (Male, 25)

*“Things with pictures, I think they’re more bold, they’re out there, they’re more eye catching.”*

Participant I (Female, 29)

Participants also noted communications containing visual elements to be more influential due to ease of comprehension;

*“Images are easier to comprehend, compared to when somebody posts, say for example, three sentences, you wouldn’t have time to read all of that.”*

Participant D (Male, 22)

*“I need to be able to see something, I’m not one of those people that can visualise what it might look like, I have to know and see it.”*

Participant I (Female, 29)

*“I prefer photos...I like to see things as opposed to read it because they can be interpreted so many different ways...you can see if it’s good food or not as opposed to just saying it’s good...I want to see it.”*

Participant M (Female, 23)

#### **4.3.3.1.3 Receiver Characteristics**

Two main determinants of influence related to the receiver were identified; prior knowledge, and personal involvement. Whilst a third receiver characteristic ‘personal expertise’ was also identified, only two participants highlighted this theme and only in relation to contributing their knowledge to posts rather than their expertise moderating the level of influence of communications.

##### **4.3.3.1.3.1 Prior Knowledge**

Prior knowledge refers to participants’ knowledge of the brand / product / service a communication pertains to. Participants noted their prior knowledge to be a determinant of influence stating that if they are unaware of a brand / product / service or possess little knowledge regarding it, communications are more likely to garner their interest;

*“If I’ve never heard of it before then I might go okay, what’s that, then look into it a little bit more to see if it’s something that I’d be interested in or not.”*

Participant I (Female, 29)

*“Few things are brand new instances and those are the most interesting.”*

Participant H (Male, 25)

Conversely, if they possess knowledge prior to viewing a communication, they are less likely to be influenced by the communication having likely already formed an opinion of the brand / product / service;

*“If people are talking about things that I know about or I’ve already seen, it doesn’t have much effect.”*

Participant H (Male, 25)

*“If I’ve been to the restaurant before I’ve obviously got my own opinion already.”*

Participant K (Female, 30)

#### **4.3.3.1.3.2 Personal Involvement**

Personal involvement refers to whether the content of a communication is relevant to participants. Personal involvement was noted by participants as a determinant of influence with participants indicating an increased likelihood to pay attention to and be influenced by communications considered personally relevant;

*“I’d take a bit more notice of that...if it was something that was relevant to me.”*

Participant L (Male, 26)

Conversely, participants also noted communications not considered personally relevant to be uninfluential;

*“If it’s not really related to me specifically I wouldn’t find it that influential...it’s definitely all about the relevance to what’s currently going on with me.”*

Participant G (Male, 23)

#### **4.3.3.1.4 Other Determinants Of Influence**

Whilst the majority of themes identified as determinants of influence mirror those outlined in the conceptual model (see *Figure 1*), there emerged a few themes that weren’t classifiable as sender, message, or receiver characteristics.

##### **4.3.3.1.4.1 Exposure**

Exposure refers to the frequency with which a participant is exposed to communications regarding a particular brand / product / service. Participants noted that greater exposure leads to greater influence and subsequent outcomes such as awareness, interest, intention to purchase, etc.;

*“I’ve never heard of it and then a lot of people are posting it. Most of my friends are posting it.”*

Participant D (Male, 22)

*“A bunch of different people kept posting, it was a recurring thing where a bunch of people kept posting photos at the same business location.”*

Participant F (Male, 19)

*“Especially if most of your friends have checked in...if you can see that within the week they’ve been checking-in there, like most of your friends have been there, but you haven’t been there...the more [of my friends that] check-in, the more influential it is.”*

Participant D (Male, 22)

Similarly, participants noted greater engagement by their friends resulted in an increased likelihood of engaging with the communications themselves;

*“It could be influential, especially if a lot of people like it...if people share a video but not a lot of people like it then maybe it’s not interesting, if there is more likes on it then maybe it is a good video and that would make me press the play button and then watch it.”*

Participant D (Male, 22)

With observing their friends having ‘liked’ business’s Facebook pages a driver of their own search behaviours;

*“If more people liked it I’d be more inclined to visit the page, look over the products.”*

Participant G (Male, 23)

#### **4.3.3.1.4.2 Rarity**

Rarity refers to communications capturing participants’ attention due to the infrequency of posts of their particular nature / content;

*“They are influential to a certain degree because I don’t see them very often, and that makes it different, because sometimes if you see the same stuff on your Facebook page all the time, then you kind of ignore them.”*

Participant D (Male, 22)

In exemplification of this, a positive communication may stand out if users are accustomed to seeing mostly negative communications;

*“The positive ones I think would be the most [influential] just because it’s kind of refreshing as well to have that positive vibe, especially on social media.”*

Participant M (Female, 23)

Whilst a negative communication may stand out if users are accustomed to seeing mostly positive communications;

*“Because I get more positive check-ins or statuses or whatever, they’re not as influential as the occasional negative one that I get.”*

Participant C (Female, 19)

#### **4.3.3.1.4.3 Other**

Whilst there were a few other themes identified (see *Table 2*) as reasons why communications were influential, these were less widely cited than the aforementioned themes.

These include ‘proximity’ – that a post is more likely to exert influence if the establishment in the post is nearby to the participant;

*“It is especially if someone’s close...if I see a status update that ‘such and such is at the Camel Bar’...I’m more likely to go down there because I’m like it’s only ten minutes away.”*

Participant E (Male, 25)

‘Real time’ – that the communications are engaged with in real time, providing users with up to date information;

*“Because they said they were there and they said it wasn’t that busy, I decided to make an appearance...because it was sort of like I’m here now, this is how it is, who would want to join me?”*

Participant G (Male, 23)

And ‘boredom’ – that participants are more likely to engage with communications and / or be influenced during idle times;

*“[It’s influential] because I might be bored or something, it’ll give me an idea of what I can do.”*

Participant E (Male, 25)

Participants also noted reasons why communications didn’t engender influence including ‘annoyance’ – that communications were perceived as annoying;

*“I find it really quite annoying and stupid that people do that.”*

Participant L (Male, 26)

And ‘whinging’ – that the sender of the communication is perceived to be ‘whinging’ rather than providing objective information;

*“Because quite often when people have that sort of whinge about something, it’s not actually the product’s fault...people just love to complain about stuff.”*

Participant L (Male, 26)

#### **4.3.3.2 Outcomes Of Influence**

A number of outcomes of influence were identified by participants with posts serving an array of functions including creating awareness, providing reminders, generating interest, causing changes in attitude / opinion, reducing purchase risk, and prompting purchase.

#### **4.3.3.2.1 Creates Awareness**

The first outcome of communications noted by participants is a communication's ability to create awareness of a brand / product / service. This creation of awareness occurs as both a standalone outcome;

*"It made me sort of aware of the overall brand...because I had never heard of Myofusion before."*

Participant F (Male, 29)

*"It creates awareness. There was a restaurant in Osborne Park. I didn't know there were restaurants in Osborne Park so now I've looked up the area to see what other restaurants are there as well."*

Participant C (Female, 19)

As well as a precursor to intention to purchase and purchase;

*"It also kind of lets me know of a new place. If someone checks-in somewhere that I haven't been before and they say it's really good then I'm more likely to go there next time rather than go somewhere I've already been."*

Participant C (Female, 19)

*"I would never have known about those but now I'm interested and I want to go to those kinds of places."*

Participant I (Female, 29)

#### **4.3.3.2.2 Reminds**

The second outcome noted by participants is a communication's ability to remind the receiver of a brand / product / service, keeping it top of mind for recall. These reminders can occur both for a particular product or service;

*“I made sure we went to this place, just because I’m constantly reminded of how good it is. So it’s not something that I can just forget. I guess it’s those popular ones that constantly come up and are in your face all the time because of things like Facebook that I would definitely go to them more because I’m reminded of them.”*

Participant M (Female, 23)

And additionally as a general reminder or call to action;

*“If I’ve been thinking about needing something for a while it’s like that constant reminder of yeah I should do something about that.”*

Participant M (Female, 23)

#### **4.3.3.2.3 Generates Interest to Research**

The third outcome discernible is the ability of communications to generate interest within the receiver, resulting in the receiver conducting research into the brand / product / service. This research can take many forms including communicating with friends about the brand / product / service either online by participating in the communication;

*“Then because of that photo I started asking about what does it do.”*

Participant I (Female, 29)

Or offline by talking to friends face-to-face;

*“Next time I see him now I will definitely ask him about what this was and what he did at this course and what he got out of it.”*

Participant H (Male, 25)

Participants also noted looking up websites;

*“One of my friends checked in at the Little Bird Café in Northbridge and they posted a picture of the food they ordered. The food just looked really good and then we went on to the website of the Little Bird Café and we looked at the rest of their menu.”*

Participant J (Female, 18)

*“My friend went to a place like a farmer’s restaurant in the city that I’d never heard of or seen of before and because of his post I went onto their website, had a look at it to see what it was all about.”*

Participant K (Female, 30)

As well as looking up and liking social media accounts and looking at additional content such as reviews and blogs;

*“I’d consider liking that and maybe even find out a little bit more about the company.”*

Participant G (Male, 23)

*“And then as a direct result of seeing this I then went and actually Googled Myofusion to see sort of what the protein was like and sort of compare it to what I was currently taking...but I wouldn’t have Googled it in the first place if he hadn’t put me onto it.”*

Participant F (Male, 19)

#### **4.3.3.2.4 Change In Attitude or Opinion**

The fourth outcome discussed by participants is a communication’s ability to change the receiver’s attitude or opinion towards a brand / product / service. This can occur as a standalone outcome;

*“The fact that my friend and a whole lot of people have shared and put the blame on Vodafone saying it’s a common problem definitely makes me think negatively of them.”*

Participant G (Male, 23)

However is typically observed concomitantly with intention to purchase or not to purchase;

*“It kind of just changes your opinion...If you go through and read the comments sometimes a lot of people will say they agree and it just gives you the idea that if it’s common for them to act in a negative way, it kind of turns you away from that brand or you’ll try and find alternatives to that instead.”*

Participant J (Female, 18)

*“And this sort of said to me maybe I should reconsider future purchasing decisions in terms of resubscribing to the network.”*

Participant F (Male, 19)

#### **4.3.3.2.5 Share Intention**

The outcome of share intention refers to viewing of a communication resulting in the participant expressing their intention to recommend or recommend against the brand, product, or service to others. Participants expressed their intention both to recommend establishments;

*“I’d probably even recommend it to another place, just based on hearing that it’s positive, without going there myself.”*

Participant M (Female, 23)

And also to recommend against establishments (see *Figure 5*);

**Figure 5: Example of Intending to Recommend Against**

(📷: Screen capture taken during interview with Participant M, 19<sup>th</sup> August, 2014)

“It would then influence me to not recommend getting pizza from that place, either not getting pizza from there at all or at least not getting it delivered.”

Participant M (Female, 23)

**4.3.3.2.6 Reduces Risk**

A precursor to purchase intention, reduces risk refers to communications reducing participants' perceived risk in utilising a brand / product / service.

Participants noted greater security in utilising brands, products, or services after viewing positively framed communications regarding them;

*“It’s like it takes the hassle out of my life...it kind of saves your time and your money.”*

Participant I (Female, 29)

As well as trusting negatively framed communications in preventing negative experiences with brands, products, or services;

*“It stops you from making a bad decision...they’ve kind of already done the research for you to know if it’s good or bad...so then you kind of go okay, I’ll stay away from that.”*

Participant I (Female, 29)

#### **4.3.3.2.7 Reduces Social Risk**

A subset of ‘reduces risk’, reduces social risk refers to brands, products, or services being approved or affirmed by senders through communications. Whilst ‘reduces risk’ deals more with physical, financial, and time risks relative to product performance, approval of friends is linked to the social risk of utilising brands, products, or services. Participants noted communications were influential when interpreted as a ‘seal of approval’ from friends;

*“We take a lot of information from our friends...it links us in to more of a communal validation of what your friend is saying...an affirmation of support for a particular thing”*

Participant F (Male, 19)

*“It comes down to that personal endorsement...whether someone I regarded highly endorsed something”*

Participant G (Male, 23)

In such instances, there exists a lessened social risk of utilising a brand / product / service as the friend's post serves as a form of pre-approval.

#### **4.3.3.2.8 Purchase Intention / Purchase**

The outcome of purchase intention / purchase refers to viewing of a communication resulting in the participant expressing their intention to purchase the product or indicating they have already purchased the product. A number of participants expressed their intention to frequent restaurants and cafés after viewing communications;

“Some friends checked in to another restaurant and they loved it so I'm going there next week.”

Participant C (Female, 19)

“My partner and I actually have a running list of restaurants that we have seen or seen photos of or heard reviews about that we slowly check off the list.”

Participant M (Female, 23)

With one participant highlighting intention to *not* purchase after viewing a negatively framed communication;

“A friend checked-in to a restaurant the other day saying how bad the service was and that kind of deterred me from going there. I've never been there but now I'm probably not likely to.”

Participant C (Female, 19)

Numerous participants also discussed their purchases resultant from viewing Facebook communications;

“I got my nutritionist from a post that my friend did on Facebook...that's how I got to use him because I saw him there.”

Participant H (Male, 25)

“I guess cooking stuff like the Vitamix. I know I found out about that through my friend with her writing about her Vitamix then putting up pictures and yeah...I have not turned back, love that machine.”

Participant I (Female, 29)

“People checked-in at the casino...because they said they were there and they said it wasn't that busy I decided to make an appearance.”

Participant G (Male, 23)

“It's called Max Brenner's Chocolate Café and she posted a photo of herself...it really enticed me because it looked really good...I ended up going there.”

Participant D (Male, 22)

#### **4.4 Results**

The following section applies results derived through content analysis conducted in section 4.3.3 in addressing each of the research objectives outlined in section 4.1.

##### **4.4.1 Research Objective 1(a)**

When asked to identify the ways in which their friends could communicate with them regarding brands, at least half of the participants identified 'status updates', 'photos', and 'check-ins' without prompting, just less than half identified 'likes', and a third identified 'shares'. For these five main communication types, the majority of participants utilised the terminology expected with only minor variations e.g. 'status' instead of 'status update' and 'picture' instead of 'photo'. In exception to this, a few participants utilised the term 'post', most commonly for status updates and shares, whilst some indicated that they don't categorise communications by type, merely terming all communications 'posts'.

In addition to the five main communication types identified during preliminary research, two participants identified 'videos', where users upload a video of themselves interacting with a brand / product / service and three participants identified being personally 'tagged' in a post. Additionally, five participants utilised the term 'comment' for written content accompanying a photo post and / or to distinguish when users write on content posted by others e.g. to 'comment' on someone's 'share' or 'status update'.

#### **4.4.2 Research Objective 1(b)**

When asked which of the communication types was the most influential, photos were the overwhelmingly popular selection with all but one participant ranking posts with photos either most or second most influential. As to why photo posts were the most influential communication type, participants cited their visual nature as well as ease of comprehension and credibility;

*"You can actually see what it is, what the product is."*

Participant C (Female, 19)

*"You get to see more of the actual offering of the brand or business. Instead of just posting a status, if you see a photo of it, it makes you actually go in there and buy that product because it's more visual. You get evidence that it might be good. Also because images are easier to comprehend."*

Participant D (Male, 22)

*"You can tell a lot from the photo...I'm not really the smartest when it comes to looking at things in the sense of written so for me viewing things is a lot easier than reading about them."*

Participant E (Male, 25)

*"I need to be able to see something. I'm not one of those people that can visualise what it might look like."*

Participant I (Female, 29)

*“I prefer photos...I like to see things as opposed to read it because they can be interpreted so many different ways...you can see if it's good food or not as opposed to just saying it's good.”*

Participant M (Female, 23)

Further analysis of the communication type rankings revealed the second and third most influential communication types to be shares and check-ins respectively with status updates and likes bearing less influence. The determinants of influence for shares included their virality and the effort expended by the poster;

*“If someone shares something it's more important than just writing a status about it. It means they've actually gone to the effort to share something.”*

Participant C (Female, 19)

With regards to check-ins, participants noted the usefulness of the link to the business's page and accompanying details such as the business's location, rating, and how many friends have checked in there (see *Figure 6*);

**Figure 6: Example of Check-in with Information**



(📷: Screen capture taken during interview with Participant A, 15<sup>th</sup> April, 2014)

*“It shows people are there and whether they’re enjoying themselves or not and then either way you get a feeling about the place, especially with photos as well. And usually there’s a bit of information and you can click through the page if you want to find out more.”*

Participant A (Female, 20)

*“Especially if four of your friends went there, it means that’s a good place. So it’s more influential in a sense that a lot of people have been there. So if less people have been there, then it would be less influential”*

Participant D (Male, 22)

Status updates ranked equally as low as likes in terms of their level of influence with reasons for this including lack of appeal due to not containing visual and interactive aspects such as photos and links, and lack of credibility due to only being able to read about a brand, product, or service, rather than seeing tangible evidence through photos;

*“It’s plain when it’s just text. It’s boring.”*

Participant D (Male, 22)

*“They’re [status updates] probably the least kind of things I actually look at on Facebook now. I go on there and I look at photos and I look at check-ins and other pages for information as opposed to going on there and reading what everyone is up to. It just gets a little bit repetitive whereas I find photos are different all the time.”*

Participant M (Female, 23)

*“They [status updates] are [influential] but not as much without the photo because I think the photo is just the tangible side of things. Like if someone is complaining about the quality of food at a restaurant and they had an accompanying picture to go with it then it becomes a lot more tangible and a lot more credible.”*

Participant F (Male, 19)

*"It's [status updates] just something they've said whereas I think with a photo it's more tangible, you can see yourself going there or you can see what it's like and you can see people enjoying themselves. Whereas just a status without any photos is just words on a page basically...I think anything with a photo is going to grab your attention more than just words especially on Facebook when it's just words after words after words."*

Participant A (Female, 20)

Likes were ranked by participants as the least influential communication type. Reasons for their low level of influence included the lack of effort required by friends to share the communication;

*"It's just a click of a button."*

Participant F (Male, 19)

*"I'd say it's almost non-influential [when people 'like' pages], people like pages on Facebook all the time, serious pages, stupid pages."*

Participant H (Male, 25)

As well as lower visibility on users news feeds;

*"The fact that my friends like those [pages] is still not particularly noticeable compared to there being nothing there."*

Participant G (Male, 23)

*"It's kind of really small at the top so you don't really get drawn to see if your friends have liked it. It's kind of one of the last things you'd see."*

Participant J (Female, 18)

#### **4.4.3 Research Objective 2(a)**

When asked to identify the different message framings observed when their friends communicate about brands, at least 80% of participants identified both positive and negative message framings without prompting. Comparatively, only just over half of participants identified a 'neutral' message framing without prompting. All participants utilised the terms 'positive' and 'negative' as per their definitions formulated through prior studies however not all (12 out of 15) utilised the term 'neutral' to describe communications not accompanied by overtly positive or negative content. One participant termed these communications 'information shares' or 'fact shares';

*"I wouldn't call it neutral because it's not really an opinion."*

Participant A (Female, 20)

Whilst two participants discussed these communications as being 'a bit positive' rather than 'neutral';

*"He must be a little bit positive about it, he's there and he wants everyone to know he's there. He's obviously gotten there and he's having a good time and he wants to show everyone how good it is...because if he wasn't having a good time he wouldn't be posting about it. He's probably happy with what he's received for the money he's paid and everything like that so he's put something up."*

Participant E (Male, 25)

#### **4.4.4 Research Objective 2(b)**

When asked which of the message framings was the most influential, eight participants indicated positive message framings, with five selecting negative, and two neutral. As to why positively framed communications were influential, participants cited their rarity;

*“The positive ones I think would be the most [influential] just because it’s kind of refreshing as well to have that positive vibe, especially on social media.”*

Participant M (Female, 23)

*“There’s just so much negative content out there, it’s nice to see some positive things.”*

Participant O (Female, 27)

Additionally cited as reasons behind the influence of positively framed communications were the effort expended by the poster;

*“If something is positive I’m more likely to pay more attention to it because they’ve gone out of their way to share a positive experience.”*

Participant A (Female, 20)

And the reduction of risk once a brand / product / service has been given a ‘seal of approval’ from a friend;

*“It’s like it takes the hassle out of my life...it kind of saves your time and your money.”*

Participant I (Female, 29)

Whilst those who indicated negatively framed communications to be influential provided similar reasons citing rarity;

*“They [negatively framed communications] are influential to a certain degree because I don’t see them very often and that makes it different because sometimes if you see the same stuff on your Facebook page all the time then you kind of ignore them...in my case, because I see more positive stuff, it would be the negative that is more influential.”*

Participant D (Male, 22)

*“Because I get more positive check-ins or statuses or whatever, they’re not as influential as the occasional negative one that I get.”*

Participant C (Female, 19)

As well as valuing the opinion of friends concomitant with reduction of risk and avoidance of bad experiences;

*“I value their opinions on things and they generally have the same outlook on something as I do and if they think something’s not worth doing, seeing, or being a part of then I’ll probably agree with them.”*

Participant E (Male, 25)

*“Because it stops you from making a bad decision...they’ve kind of already done the research for you to know if it’s good or bad...so then you kind of go okay, I’ll stay away from that.”*

Participant I (Female, 29)

*“I’m more inclined to avoid negative experiences than to chase positive ones.”*

Participant F (Male, 19)

Whilst a couple of participants indicated that neutrality in communications rendered them more likely to engage in brand related conversations due to the lack of information provided within the post, the majority of participants ranked neutrally framed communications the least influential or non-influential citing disinterest;

*“It’s just boring. It’s just someone’s at lunch. It’s the same as saying I’m going to the toilet now. I don’t care.”*

Participant M (Female, 23)

## **4.5 Conclusion**

The research objectives of this qualitative phase of the study were to identify the different types (RO1a) and framings (RO2a) of word-of-mouth communications on social networking sites and compare their level of influence (RO1b & RO2b). These research objectives were achieved with 5 communication types and 3 message framings identified. In terms of influence, photos were identified as the most influential communication type, followed by shares, check-ins, status updates, and likes. Positively framed communications were identified as the most influential message framing, followed by negatively framed communications and neutral communications.

Identification of these communication types and framings through qualitative research was necessary in order to explore the previously unresearched phenomena prior to testing in the quantitative phase of the study. Furthermore, ranking their level of influence facilitates narrowing the scope of the quantitative phase of the study through exclusion of types / framings deemed less / non influential. The following chapter utilises these results in formulating and testing hypotheses of the relationships within the word-of-mouth communication framework.

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## 5. CHAPTER 5 – STUDY 2

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### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter covers phase two of the study beginning with the development of hypotheses based on the literature and findings from phase one of the study. Following this, the methodology is outlined including the research instrumentation, data collection, and sampling. Data analysis processes are discussed including sample characteristics and reliability. Following which, the chapter concludes with results derived from phase two of the study.

### 5.2 Development of Hypotheses

#### 5.2.1 Hypotheses 1 & 2 – Communication Type

Phase 1 of the study found that the most influential communication types were photos, shares, and check-ins. As such, when empirically tested, it is expected that viewers will perceive these communication types to be influential. Therefore it is hypothesized;

**H1(a):** Word-of-mouth communications posted on social networking sites in the form of 'photos' will have significantly higher perceived influence than the control.

**H1(b):** Word-of-mouth communications posted on social networking sites in the form of 'shares' will have significantly higher perceived influence than the control.

**H1(c):** Word-of-mouth communications posted on social networking sites in the form of 'check-ins' will have significantly higher perceived influence than the control.

Additionally, as the majority of participants in phase 1 of the study indicated photos to be the most influential communication type, it is hypothesized;

**H2(a):** Word-of-mouth communications posted on social networking sites in the form of 'photos' will have significantly higher perceived influence than those posted in the form of 'shares'.

**H2(b):** Word-of-mouth communications posted on social networking sites in the form of 'photos' will have significantly higher perceived influence than those posted in the form of 'check-ins'.

Testing these hypotheses enables confirmation that the three communication types are influential. Additionally, H2 enables comparison of the level of influence of the three types in order to determine which of the three is considered by viewers to be the most influential. Results of these hypotheses will provide insight for researchers as to which communication types are influential. Likewise, results will enable marketers to ascertain which communication types are effective for brand communications and thus which types of word-of-mouth should be encouraged.

### **5.2.2 Hypotheses 3 & 4 – Message Framing**

Consistent with the findings of phase 1 of the study, it is expected that both positively and negatively framed communications will be perceived by viewers as influential. Therefore it is hypothesized;

**H3(a):** Positively framed word-of-mouth communications posted on social networking sites will have significantly higher perceived influence than the control.

**H3(b):** Negatively framed word-of-mouth communications posted on social networking sites will have significantly higher perceived influence than the control.

Whilst findings from prior studies as to whether positively or negatively framed communications are more influential have varied, results from phase 1 of the study indicate that positively framed communications are more

influential, consistent with findings of Adjei et al. (2010), Ahluwalia (2002), East, Hammond, and Lomax (2008), and Floh et al. (2012). As such, it is hypothesized;

**H4:** Positively framed word-of-mouth communications posted on social networking sites will have significantly higher perceived influence than negatively framed communications.

These hypotheses enable confirmation that both positively and negatively framed communications are influential and provide further support as to which is the most influential framing out of the two. Results of these hypotheses will provide insight for researchers as to how positive and negative word-of-mouth operate on social networking sites which is of significance given the variation in results from prior word-of-mouth studies. Additionally, results will prove valuable for marketers in gauging the effect of such word-of-mouth communications on brands.

### **5.2.3 Hypothesis 5 – Product Involvement**

As consumers seek out more information for high involvement products prior to purchase than they do for low involvement products (Beatty & Smith, 1987) and as prior research has found a significant positive moderating relationship between product complexity and electronic word-of-mouth communications (Adjei et al., 2010), it is expected that communications regarding high involvement products will be of greater influence than communications regarding low involvement products. However, due to the variable of product involvement being operationalized in a 2 x 2 factorial design (see *Table 5*) along with the variable of product classification, the hypothesis requires testing in both utilitarian and hedonic contexts. As such, it is hypothesized that;

**H5(a):** Word-of-mouth communications posted on social networking sites regarding high involvement utilitarian products will have significantly higher perceived influence than communications regarding low involvement utilitarian products.

**H5(b):** Word-of-mouth communications posted on social networking sites regarding high involvement hedonic products will have significantly higher perceived influence than communications regarding low involvement hedonic products.

This hypothesis will fill a gap in the existing literature by providing empirical evidence of any moderating relationship between product involvement and social networking site word-of-mouth communications. Results from these hypotheses will also prove important to marketing practitioners in understanding the types of products that are susceptible to social networking site word-of-mouth influence.

#### **5.2.4 Hypothesis 6 – Product Classification (Hedonic / Utilitarian)**

Past research in both advertising (e.g. Feick & Higie, 1992; Stafford et al., 2002) and electronic word-of-mouth (e.g. Sen & Lerman, 2007; Smith et al., 2005) has found that influence of communications differs dependent upon whether the product in the communication is considered to be hedonic or utilitarian. If a product is considered to be hedonic in nature, consumers look to communications from sources perceived to share similar tastes and preferences to their own (Feick & Higie, 1992; Smith et al., 2005). As social networking sites are inherently a network of friends and thus senders of communications are easily evaluable in terms of similarity, it is expected that communications regarding hedonic products will be of greater influence than communications regarding utilitarian products. However, due to the variable of product classification being operationalized in a 2 x 2 factorial design (see *Table 5*) along with the variable of product involvement, the hypothesis requires testing in both high product involvement and low product involvement contexts. As such, it is hypothesized that;

**H6(a):** Word-of-mouth communications posted on social networking sites regarding hedonic high involvement products will have significantly higher perceived influence than communications regarding utilitarian high involvement products.

**H6(b):** Word-of-mouth communications posted on social networking sites regarding hedonic low involvement products will have significantly higher perceived influence than communications regarding utilitarian low involvement products.

Results from these hypotheses will add to the existing body of knowledge on consumer behaviour by providing empirical evidence of any moderating relationship between product classification and social networking site word-of-mouth communications. As per RO5, results from this hypothesis will also prove important to marketing practitioners in understanding the types of products that are susceptible to social networking site word-of-mouth influence.

### **5.2.5 Hypotheses 7 & 8 – Sender Characteristics**

As it is hypothesized (H5) that word-of-mouth communications regarding high involvement products are more influential than communications regarding low involvement products, it follows that viewers are likely to be more interested in communications regarding high involvement products than communications regarding low involvement products. As such it is hypothesized that the credibility of senders will be of greater importance for communications regarding high involvement products than low involvement products;

**H7(a):** Expertise of sender is of greater importance for word-of-mouth communications posted on social networking sites regarding high involvement products than for communications regarding low involvement products.

**H7(b):** Trustworthiness of sender is of greater importance for word-of-mouth communications posted on social networking sites regarding high involvement products than for communications regarding low involvement products.

**H7(c):** Degree of homophily with sender is of greater importance for word-of-mouth communications posted on social networking sites regarding high involvement products than for communications regarding low involvement products.

**H7(d):** Strength of tie with sender is of greater importance for word-of-mouth communications posted on social networking sites regarding high involvement products than for communications regarding low involvement products.

Extant research (e.g. Feick & Higie, 1992; Sen & Lerman, 2007; Smith et al., 2005) citing that decisions regarding utilitarian products are influenced by senders possessing expertise whereas decisions regarding hedonic products are influenced by senders possessing similarity is congruent with existing consumer behaviour theory. Findings suggest that if a product is considered to be utilitarian in nature, consumers seek communications from sources perceived to possess expertise in that product category, regardless of whether the source is known to them (e.g. this could be in the form of an online product review from an anonymous source) (Feick & Higie, 1992; Smith et al., 2005). Smith et al. (2005, p. 20) explain, "decisions about utilitarian purchases are guided by cognitive beliefs about functional attributes, and there is general agreement across consumers about the importance of these attributes and their preferred levels". For example, the use of a tradesperson for the purpose of installation or repair of an item would be fairly homogenous in its evaluation e.g. was the item successfully installed / repaired? Thus, the desire for sources possessing experience and expertise is logical in that these sources are able to provide credible product information and evaluate functional product attributes (Feick & Higie, 1992; Smith et al., 2005). Furthermore, any negative evaluations of utilitarian

products or services are perceived by receivers to be useful given the inference that senders were motivated by a desire to accurately inform other consumers (Sen & Lerman, 2007). Conversely, with regard to hedonic products, Sen and Lerman (2007, p. 79) explain, “the evaluation of a hedonic product and its relevance to a particular value is rather subjective and may not apply to another consumer” with experiences interpreted differently by different consumers (Feick & Higie, 1992). For example, the experience of viewing a film at a cinema might be perceived very differently by two different consumers depending upon their individual tastes and preferences in movie genres, actors, etc. This heterogeneity means that “for hedonic purchases, consumers are likely to consider whether an opinion source shares their own preferences as a means of judging the diagnosticity of the recommendation” (Smith et al., 2005, p. 20). As such, it is hypothesized;

**H8(a):** Expertise of sender is of greater importance for word-of-mouth communications posted on social networking sites regarding utilitarian products than for communications regarding hedonic products.

**H8(b):** Trustworthiness of sender is of greater importance for word-of-mouth communications posted on social networking sites regarding utilitarian products than for communications regarding hedonic products.

**H8(c):** Degree of homophily with sender is of greater importance for word-of-mouth communications posted on social networking sites regarding hedonic products than for communications regarding utilitarian products.

**H8(d):** Strength of tie with sender is of greater importance for word-of-mouth communications posted on social networking sites regarding hedonic products than for communications regarding utilitarian products.

These hypotheses enable testing of the moderating effect of product characteristics on the four sender characteristics in a social networking site word-of-mouth context. This is an important gap to fill in the existing

research given the varied results between the word-of-mouth and electronic word-of-mouth contexts and due to the aforementioned nature of social networking site word-of-mouth communications being theoretically more closely aligned to word-of-mouth rather than electronic word-of-mouth. As such, results from these hypotheses will provide knowledge of the operation of the four sender characteristics in the social networking site word-of-mouth context as well as further expanding on a useful heuristic for marketing practitioners in understanding how consumers are communicating and influencing one another on social networking sites.

### **5.2.6 Hypothesis 9 – Outcomes**

As past studies (e.g. Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012; Senecal & Nantel, 2004; Weinberger & Dillon, 1980) have found word-of-mouth communications to have a positive impact on subsequent purchase behaviours, it is hypothesized that;

**H9(a):** Perceived influence from word-of-mouth communications posted on social networking sites is positively related to purchase intention.

Previous studies that have explored share intention as a component of behavioural intention alongside purchase intention have typically found a strong positive effect from word-of-mouth communications (e.g. Floh et al., 2013; Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012; Lee & Youn, 2009; Park & Kim, 2008; Park et al., 2007; Skourtis et al., 2012). As such, it is hypothesized that;

**H9(b):** Perceived influence from word-of-mouth communications posted on social networking sites is positively related to share intention.

These hypotheses enable testing of the outcomes of word-of-mouth exchanges on social networking sites – the effects on consumers' purchase intentions and share intentions. Purchase intention assesses the effect a word-of-mouth communication can have on future sales and thus is of utmost importance to marketers. Additionally of importance to marketers is

consumers' intention to share a communication on social networking sites as this action has the potential to influence hundreds of others, which in turn may influence *their* purchase intentions. This amplification of communications can be of great benefit to businesses if the communication being shared is of a positive nature as it can create awareness and generate an increase in sales. However, this process can also be detrimental to businesses if the communication being shared is of a negative nature as this has the potential to harm a business's reputation and negatively impact sales. Due to this, results of these hypotheses will prove useful to marketers in understanding the effects on consumers and subsequent impact on sales.

### **5.3 Methodology**

#### **5.3.1 Research Design**

Phase two of the study is an explanatory study utilising experimental design (Black, 2004; Burns & Bush, 2010; Mook, 2001; Robson, 2002; Rosnow & Rosenthal, 2008). In order to test the influence of the various communication types and framings as well as the moderating effect of product characteristics, three separate experimental designs are employed (Mook, 2001; Robson, 2002; Stangor, 2015). Two one-way experimental designs are utilised; one for research objective 3 and one for research objective 4 as well as a two-way factorial experimental design for research objectives 5, 6, and 7 (Mook, 2001; Robson, 2002; Stangor, 2015; Wimmer & Dominick, 2000). Research objective 8 is not included above as it is tested as an overall measure of influence on subsequent behaviours.

Due to the nature of the stimuli being tested, a 'post-test only with control' approach is deemed most appropriate for comparing groups for hypotheses 1 and 3 (Burns & Bush, 2000; Davis, 2012, Hair, Lukas, & Miller, 2012; Wimmer & Dominick, 2000; Zikmund, Ward, Lowe, & Winzar, 2007). Adopting a 'post-test only' approach without the use of a control group is considered only quasi-experimental design as it offers little to no control over threats to internal validity (see 5.3.4) (Davis, 2012, Zikmund et al., 2007).

True experimental designs such as the 'post-test only with control' are considered far more rigorous than quasi-experimental designs as they utilise control groups and additionally utilise random assignment of participants (Brase & Brase, 2004; Burns & Bush, 2000; Davis 2012; Hair et al., 2012; Saunders et al., 2009; Tharenou, Donohue, & Cooper, 2007).

As the qualitative phase of the study revealed photos, check-ins, and shares to be the most influential communication types with status updates and likes enjoying far less influence, the latter are excluded from testing. Instead, due to its lack of influence, the communication type of 'likes' is utilised as the control group for hypothesis 1, resulting in a four group experimental design as per *Table 3* (Brase & Brase, 2004; Burns & Bush, 2000; Hair et al., 2012; Saunders et al., 2009).

**Table 3: Experimental Design 1**

<b><u>Communication Type</u></b>
Photo
Check-in
Share
Control

As the qualitative phase of the study found positive and negative framings to be the most influential framings with neutral framing bearing little influence, it too is excluded from testing and instead, utilised as the control group for hypothesis 3, resulting in a three group experimental design as per *Table 4* (Brase & Brase, 2004; Burns & Bush, 2000; Hair et al., 2012; Saunders et al., 2009).

**Table 4: Experimental Design 2**

<b><u>Message Framing</u></b>
Positive
Negative
Control

The third experimental design utilises a 2 (high involvement / low involvement) x 2 (hedonic / utilitarian) factorial design (as per *Table 5*) to test the moderating effect of purchase decision.

**Table 5: Experimental Design 3**

<b><u>Product Involvement</u></b>	<b><u>Product Classification</u></b>	
	<b>Hedonic</b>	<b>Utilitarian</b>
<b>High Involvement</b>	High involvement hedonic	High involvement utilitarian
<b>Low involvement</b>	Low involvement hedonic	Low involvement utilitarian

### **5.3.2 Instrumentation**

The research instrument for this phase of the study is a survey questionnaire in which respondents are shown examples of word-of-mouth communications as stimuli and asked a series of questions in order to test the hypotheses. The four sender characteristics; sender expertise (Netemeyer & Bearden, 1992), trustworthiness (Ohanian, 1990), homophily (De Bruyn & Lilien, 2008), and tie strength (Frenzen & Davis, 1990), are tested as independent variables with perceived influence (Gilly et al., 1998), purchase intention (Lepkowska-White et al., 2003), and share intention (Lin et al., 2006) as the dependent variables (Davis, 1997). The receiver characteristics; susceptibility to interpersonal influence (Bearden et al., 1989), personal involvement (Chandrashekar, 2004), and personal expertise (Netemeyer &

Bearden, 1992), are utilised as control variables moderating the level of influence of the WOM communication.

### **5.3.3 Stimuli**

The stimuli for experimental designs one and two are word-of-mouth communications manipulated to represent each of the communication types and message framings presented in *Table 3* and *Table 4* respectively. The communications are all regarding the same product to ensure elements such as product involvement and product classification are held constant. For experimental design one testing the various communication types, the communications all contain the same positively framed comment so that the type (whether the comment is accompanied by a photo, check-in, or share) is the only variable being manipulated. For experimental design two testing the message framings, the communications are all presented in the form of a photo so that the framing of the message (whether it is positively or negatively worded) is the only variable being manipulated.

The stimuli for experimental design three are word-of-mouth communications in the form of positively framed photos which are manipulated to represent each of the four purchase decision scenarios presented in *Table 5*. Positively framed photos were selected as the communication type and framing to be utilised due their high level of influence observed in phase 1 of the study.

#### **5.3.3.1 Product Category Selection**

As per *Table 3*, *Table 4*, and *Table 5*, a total of 11 stimuli are required for testing in the survey questionnaire. For the first two experimental designs (*Table 3* and *Table 4*), the product category selected for the seven treatments is a restaurant. A restaurant was selected due to its versatility in being able to be represented through check-ins as well as photos and shares e.g. you can 'check-in' to a service provider but not to a product – only to its retailer.

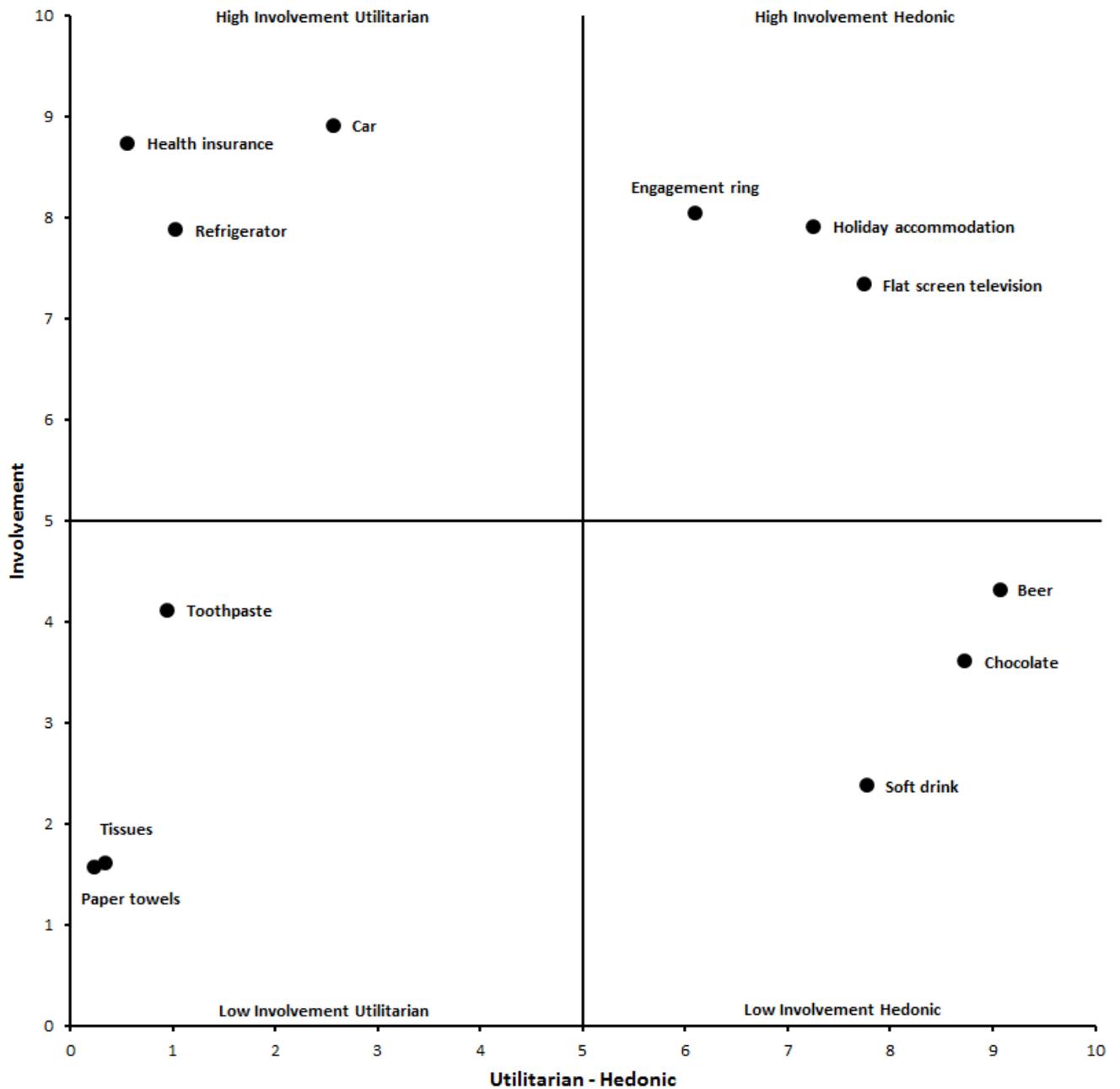
To determine which products will be utilised for the four treatments in the third experimental design (*Table 5*), a pool of 36 products was drawn from existing studies classifying products as either high or low involvement and hedonic or utilitarian products (Batra & Ahtola, 1990; Childers et al., 2001; Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000; Feick & Higie, 1992; Friedman & Friedman, 1979; Mano & Oliver, 1993; Smith et al., 2005; Stafford et al., 2002; Ratchford, 1987; Vaughn, 1986). This pool was then reduced to a more manageable final pool of 12 products with three products from each category; low involvement utilitarian, low involvement hedonic, high involvement utilitarian, and high involvement hedonic.

To ensure the 12 products selected were accurately categorized, their positions were assessed through a pretest. An online survey was made available via the social networking site Facebook to users aged 18-30 years old and living in Australia. A total of 34 completed surveys were received from a mixture of both males and females. This number of products tested and number of responses collected is considered acceptable as it is in line with Ratchford (1987) who tested 15 products with 30 respondents in one of his studies and additionally given the products have been previously classified and were being retested to confirm their position. The survey utilised Wakefield and Inman's (2003) three item consumption occasion (hedonic / utilitarian) scale ( $\alpha = .90$ ) and Ratchford's (1987) three item involvement scale ( $\alpha = .81$ ) (Bruner, 2009). The means of these scales were calculated and plotted as per *Figure 7*.

As expected, the products fell within each of their respective quadrants. Whilst most products' positions were in line with past studies (e.g. Ratchford, 1987), some products were found to be closer to the intersection of the axes than in past studies. These movements are easily explained due to the proliferation of some product categories such as toothpaste (whitening toothpaste, sensitive toothpaste, etc.) and beer (craft beer, low carb beer, etc.) making for more complex decision making processes, and the affordability of some products (e.g. televisions) compared with 20-30 years ago when some of the previous studies were conducted. Resultant from the

plot, the following products were selected for the third experimental design; paper towels / tissues (low involvement utilitarian), soft drink (low involvement hedonic), refrigerator (high involvement utilitarian), and holiday accommodation (high involvement hedonic).

**Figure 7: Plot of Products**



### **5.3.3.2 Creation of Stimuli**

In order to develop the 11 stimuli required, a fictional Facebook persona was created utilising a unisex name and a photo of a male and a female as the profile picture in order for it to appear ambiguous whether the profile belongs to the male or the female. Developing a gender ambiguous profile aids in avoiding gender biases from respondents when assessing the level of influence of the stimuli. To additionally avoid any sender or time based biases, each communication was posted by the same Facebook user utilising the same time stamp of 'just now' as if it has just been posted on the participant's news feed.

As per the conceptual framework (see *Figure 1*), message quality, prior knowledge, and valence intensity are important variables to account for in the assessing the operation of word-of-mouth. Due to the scope of this study and the focus on testing the influence of the communication types and message framings, the aforementioned variables aren't manipulated and thus, must be controlled.

To control for message quality, all comments accompanying posts were written utilising evaluative language e.g. "Good little restaurant - nice food and quick service!" as prior research as well as results from phase 1 of the study indicate posts containing factual information to be the most influential (Schindler & Bickart, 2012). The length of comment was also considered with comments long enough to incorporate sufficient information but not so long that participants might disengage (Schindler & Bickart, 2012). Additionally, posts containing weaker visual elements were supported by longer, more detailed comments to strengthen their influence. As per Jessmer and Anderson (2001) and Schindler and Bickart (2012), comments were written in an informal manner, containing slang and humour yet were free of spelling and grammatical errors in order for the communication to be more engaging and allow the respondent feel a connection with the poster (Fraley & Aron, 2004).

In order to control for prior knowledge, the seven treatments for the first two experimental designs were manipulated so that the restaurant name utilised was not that of an existing restaurant (Wu & Wang, 2011). Use of a fictional restaurant name is unlikely to affect the realism of the stimuli given the proliferation of restaurants along with the high failure rate making it conceivable for participants to be unaware of a restaurant whilst believing it exists. For the high involvement hedonic treatment, a fictional name was also utilised for the holiday accommodation. The option of utilising a fictional name was considered less appropriate for the low involvement hedonic treatment containing soft drink due to the need to consider the effect of new products. However, if established brands such as Coca-Cola or Pepsi were utilised, participants are certain to be aware of the brands and are likely to have trialled them subsequently holding existing opinions. As such, the soft drinks selected for the low involvement hedonic treatment were existing yet lesser known brands.

For both the low involvement and high involvement utilitarian treatments, the brand names utilised were well-known manufacturers which was considered appropriate in avoidance of new brand scepticism bias that could potentially interfere if a lesser known or fictional brand name was utilised. Whilst more interesting and attention generating brands of refrigerator exist e.g. Marshall amplifier fridges, Red Bull fridges, beer branded fridges, etc., the purchase decision for these novelty fridges is more hedonic. This is due to their visual appeal and typical utilisation in the storage of hedonic products such as energy drinks and beer rather than being functional in storing utilitarian products such as everyday groceries.

To control for valence intensity, comments accompanying posts were standardised for each of the communication type treatments in experimental design 1 (*Table 3*). For experimental designs 2 (*Table 4*) and 3 (*Table 5*) where standardizing comments wasn't feasible, treatments were subject to pretesting to ensure they were equal in their valence intensity (see 5.2.2.3 for discussion of pretest).

### **5.3.3.3 Pretest of Stimuli**

Conducting a pretest is an important step in the development of a survey as it facilitates identification of and feedback on any elements of the survey not performing as intended by the researcher (Davis, 2012; Saunders et al., 2009; Stangor, 2015; Zikmund, 1997). As such, a pretest of the survey was conducted with participants for the pretest recruited via an online survey panel. In order to ensure that the pretest participants were representative of the sample population that would be completing the final survey, they were subjected to the same screening parameters (see 5.3.1). To avoid fatiguing pretest participants in presenting them with every treatment, the treatments were split into four groups with pretest participants randomly allocated to a group upon qualifying for the survey. This ensured that pretest participants were only presented with 6-7 questions each, with the majority completing the pretest in under 10 minutes. A total of 93 usable responses were received from an even mixture of both males and females with varying Facebook usages and an average age in the middle of the required age bracket. This response number equates to approximately 23 responses per treatment which is sufficient given the final survey required 100 responses per treatment.

In order to test the strength of the stimuli prior to their inclusion in the final survey, multiple versions of the stimuli were created for pretesting. For the photo treatment, pretest participants were presented with three different photos and asked to select which was the most appealing, following which they were presented with treatments containing the photo selected. As check-ins are standardized (the thumbnail and accompanying information do not change), they cannot be manipulated like the other treatments so participants were presented with the same check-in with only the accompanying comment differing. To test the articles utilised in the shares and their accompanying comments in isolation without interference from other variables, a number of factors were held constant when developing the treatments. Treatments were manipulated so that each of the articles being shared appeared to originate from the same news source. This was to

eliminate any potential biases towards particular news sources e.g. a national newspaper may hold more perceived credibility than a local newspaper. Additionally, the treatments were manipulated to utilise the news source's logo in the thumbnail as opposed to a photo from the article being shared. This ensured that posts were evaluated for their written content rather than their photographic content. To present as realistic stimuli as possible, excerpts were drawn from real news articles regarding restaurants with only the name and location removed. To examine the impact of the subject matter of the article on the level of influence of the share, two different articles were selected; one relating to the actual food being produced in the restaurant, and the other relating to the restaurant's practises more removed from the food e.g. treatment of customers. This was to determine whether consumers are more interested in the actual food being served and less concerned with restaurants' external practises that may not affect their personal experience or whether the external practises also affect their purchase intention. For the positive and negative treatments, pretest participants were presented with three different photos and asked to select which was the most appealing (for the positive treatment) or least appealing (for the negative treatment), following which they were presented with treatments containing the photo selected.

For both the high involvement hedonic and low involvement hedonic stimuli, pretest participants were presented with three different photos and asked to select which was the most appealing, following which they were presented with a treatment containing that photo. For the high involvement utilitarian stimuli, pretest participants were presented with two different treatments relating to the same product. Being a utilitarian product, a refrigerator is inherently mundane in nature so was represented from two different views with comments tailored to each of the views highlighting different product features. For the low involvement utilitarian stimuli, pretest participants were presented with two different treatments; one relating to the product 'tissues' and one relating to the product 'paper towels'. Whilst the products / services in the previous treatments were able to be manipulated in a way that presented different product / brand experiences, the low involvement

utilitarian product categories selected experience far less differentiation, making this difficult to achieve. As such, two different product categories were tested as these were plotted almost identically in their positions in terms of level of involvement and utility. As per the high involvement utilitarian stimuli, comments were tailored to each of the products highlighting different product features to combat their banality.

For each of the treatments viewed, pretest participants were asked three questions in order to test the strength of the stimuli;

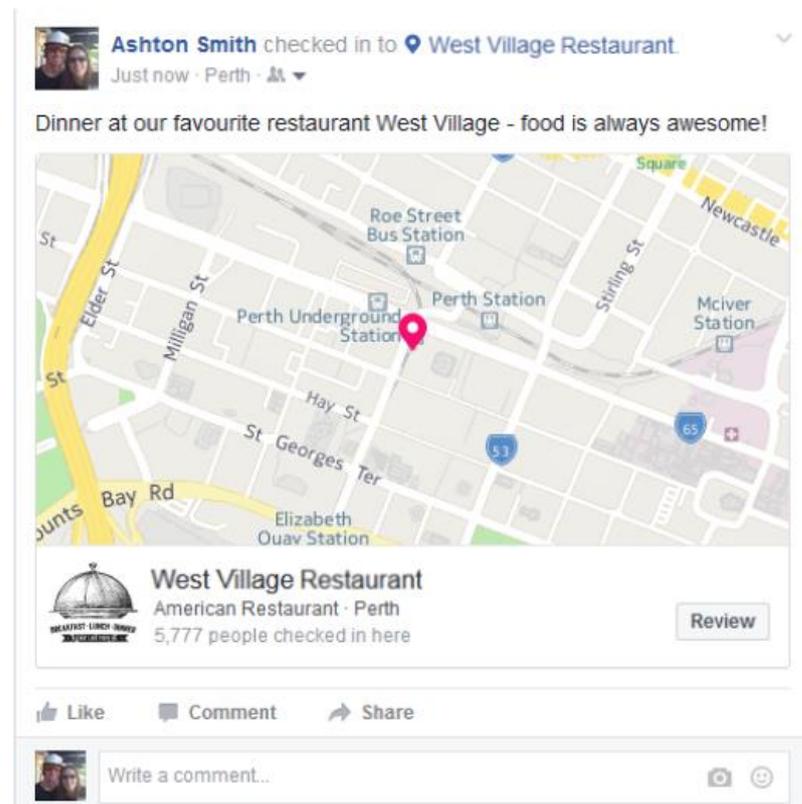
- To rate (from negative to positive) the experience described in the post
- Whether the post contained anything unusual compared to posts typically viewed on Facebook
- How much they would like to experience the product / brand featured in the post

Pretest participants recorded the posts in line with expectations in terms of their positivity / negativity / neutrality and desire to experience the product. Additionally, no major concerns were reported regarding the normality of posts in terms of them being typical of what is observed on Facebook. The only note regarding normality was that a few pretest participants indicated the low involvement utilitarian post regarding paper towels was too strongly worded for it to be a genuine (non sponsored) post. This feedback was taken on board and the comment for that post adjusted accordingly to appear less positive and more genuine / natural. In each of the treatments where pretest participants were required to select their most / least preferred photo, it was easily discernible which of the three photos the majority of pretest participants preferred and as such, the final treatments were comprised using these photos. Subsequent to the pretest, the 11 final treatments in *Figures 8-18* were selected.

**Figure 8: Treatment #1 – Photo**



**Figure 9: Treatment #2 – Check-in**



**Figure 10: Treatment #3 – Share**



**Figure 11: Treatment #4 – Like**



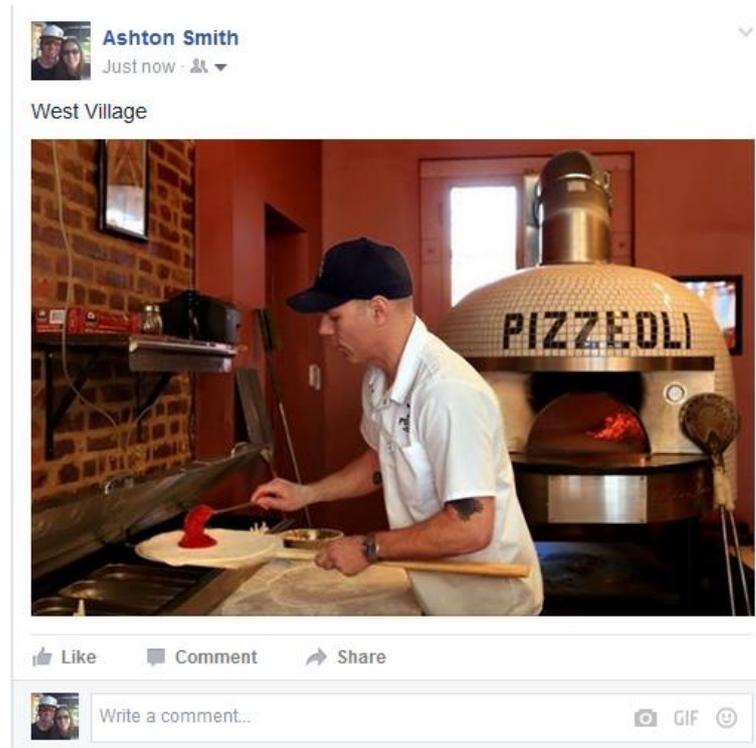
**Figure 12: Treatment #5 – Positive**



**Figure 13: Treatment #6 – Negative**



**Figure 14: Treatment #7 – Neutral**



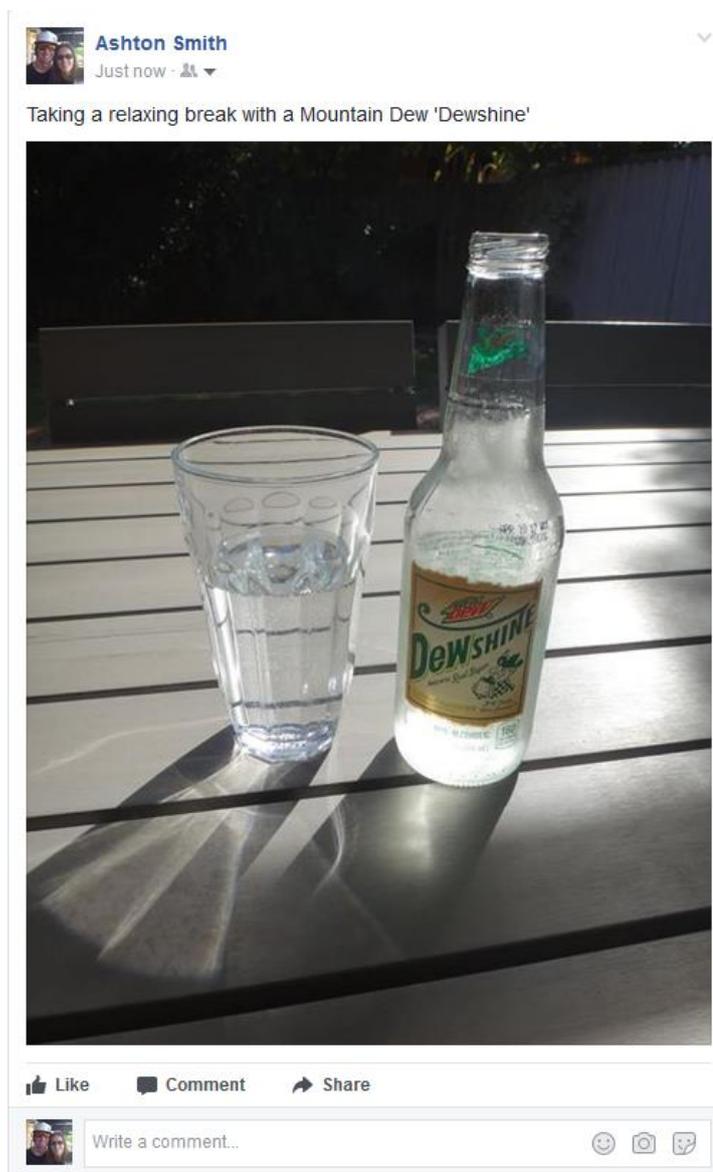
**Figure 15: Treatment #8 – High Involvement Hedonic**



**Figure 16: Treatment #9 – High Involvement Utilitarian**



**Figure 17: Treatment #10 – Low Involvement Hedonic**



**Figure 18: Treatment #11 – Low Involvement Utilitarian**

### 5.3.4 Sample Size & Data Collection

Data for this phase of the study was obtained through an online survey panel in order to facilitate a prompt data collection process (Albaum & Smith, 2012; Evans & Mathur, 2005; Miller, 2006; Sharp, 2013; Sue & Ritter, 2007). A perceived drawback of online survey panels is coverage error due to non-coverage of non-internet users and that respondents tend to be heavier internet users than the average consumer (de Vaus, 2015; Miller, 2006; Roberts, 2008; Shine & Dulisse, 2012; Sue & Ritter, 2007; Toepoel, 2012). This however is a positive point for this particular study as the respondents sought are moderate to heavy internet users. Fulgoni (2014, p. 134) explains, “there are many research applications for which an internet bias does not present a problem, such as gauging digital advertising effectiveness”. Roster, Rogers, Hozier, Baker, and Albaum (2007) concur

that online panels are no worse than other types of data collection methods. Furthermore, online panels can be an extremely effective means of data collection and can be used to measure precisely a wide range of consumer attitudes and sentiments (Fulgoni, 2014; Toepoel, 2012).

Approximately 100 responses were obtained for each of the 11 cells (represented by the 11 treatments) included in the research design. This sample size is necessitated in order to perform the required analyses with adequate power (Burns & Bush, 2010; Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998). Each participant was randomly presented a survey containing two of the 11 treatments; one from experimental design 1 or 2, and the other from experimental design 3.

A perceived problem with presenting respondents with more than one treatment each is the issue of order bias or sequence effect which holds that the respondent may approach the treatments differently due to effects such as rapport, practice, fatigue, and frame of reference (Aviram, 2012; Brace, 2013; Kornhauser & Sheatsley, 1959; Perreault, 1975; Schuman & Presser, 1981; Yang & Hinkle, 2012). To address the issue of order bias, it is recommended that multiple versions of a questionnaire are created, each containing treatments in alternate positions, or similarly, that treatments are randomized in their appearance within the questionnaire, termed counterbalancing (Aviram, 2012; Malhotra, 2009; Perreault, 1975; Robson, 2002; Rosnow & Rosenthal, 2008; Welch & Swift, 1992).

As such, this research adopts a sequential monadic design whereby respondents are randomly allocated a treatment and then, based upon their initial allocation, are randomly allocated a second treatment (Hibberts et al., 2012; Komanska, 1990; Robson, 2002; Welch & Swift, 1992). Adopting this approach ensures that each participant is assigned treatments purely by chance and has an equal probability of being served each of the combinations of treatments (Hibberts et al., 2012; Kershner & Federer, 1981; Komanska, 1990; Laska, Meisner, & Kushner, 1983; Mook, 2001; Robson, 2002; Rosnow & Rosenthal, 2008). Ensuring participants are randomly

assigned to treatments along with the measures taken outlined in 5.3.1, 5.3.3, and 5.3.3.2 are important steps in assuring internal and external validity (Hair et al., 2012; Saunders et al., 2009; Zikmund et al., 2007).

Internal validity examines the integrity of the data in the extent to which the findings can be attributed solely to the manipulation of the variables and not any other external factors (Davis, 1997; Malhotra, 2009; McDaniel & Gates, 2004; Tong & Taylor, 2004; Zikmund, 1997). According to Saunders et al. (2009), the use of control and experimental groups and random assignment of participants to each reduces threats to internal validity.

External validity examines for what other populations similar results can be expected, in other words, to what extent are the results generalizable beyond the study to other populations (Burns & Bush, 2010; Churchill, 2001; Malhotra, 2009; McDaniel & Gates, 2004; Saunders et al., 2009). According to Davis (2012, p. 386), “external validity is heightened when systematic, appropriate, and random sampling procedures are used to select individuals from the population and when experimentation is used, to assign selected individuals to specific treatment and control groups”.

## **5.4 Data Analysis**

### **5.4.1 Participant Recruitment, Response Rate, & Selection**

Participants for this phase of the study were invited to participate in the survey questionnaire through invitations sent from an online panel data company containing a link to the questionnaire. The front page of the questionnaire contained information detailing the purpose and nature of the research along with a statement of consent and a check box for participants to indicate their consent (see *Appendix 6*).

A total of 1479 participants indicated interest in the survey and completed the screener however only 720 qualified to complete the survey. In line with phase one of the study, restrictions imposed through the use of screening

questions required participants be between 18 to 30 years of age, living in Australia, and have a Facebook account that they log in to at least four times a week, indicating moderate usage. To avoid any potential bias from those with more intimate knowledge of the effects of marketing and the operation of Facebook, two participants who indicated they had previously worked in marketing, advertising, market research, or social media were excluded from participating in the study. Additionally, 10 participants who demonstrated consistent extremity or central tendency biases in their responses were omitted, resulting in a usable total of 708 responses (Baumgartner & Steenkamp, 2001; Field, 2009; Zikmund, 1997; Zikmund et al., 2007).

#### **5.4.2 Sample Characteristics / Description of Sample**

Approximately 100 responses per treatment were obtained for each of the treatments contained in experimental designs 1 and 2 with approximately 180 obtained for each of the treatments in experimental design 3 (see *Table 6* for number of respondents per treatment) (Burns & Bush, 2010; Hair et al., 1998).

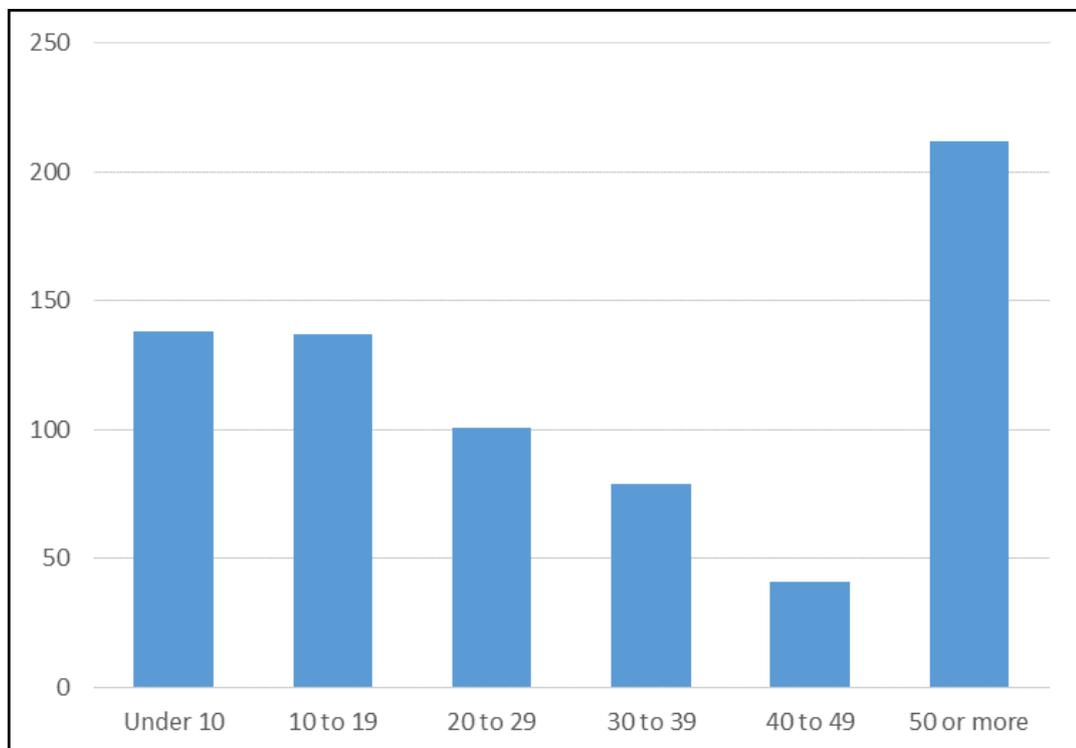
**Table 6: Number of Responses per Treatment**

<b>Treatment #</b>	<b>Number of Responses</b>
1 – Photo	100
2 – Check-in	101
3 – Share	102
4 – Like	98
5 – Positive	101
6 – Negative	100
7 – Neutral	106

8 – High Involvement / Hedonic	177
9 – High Involvement / Utilitarian	176
10 – Low Involvement / Hedonic	180
11 – Low Involvement / Utilitarian	175

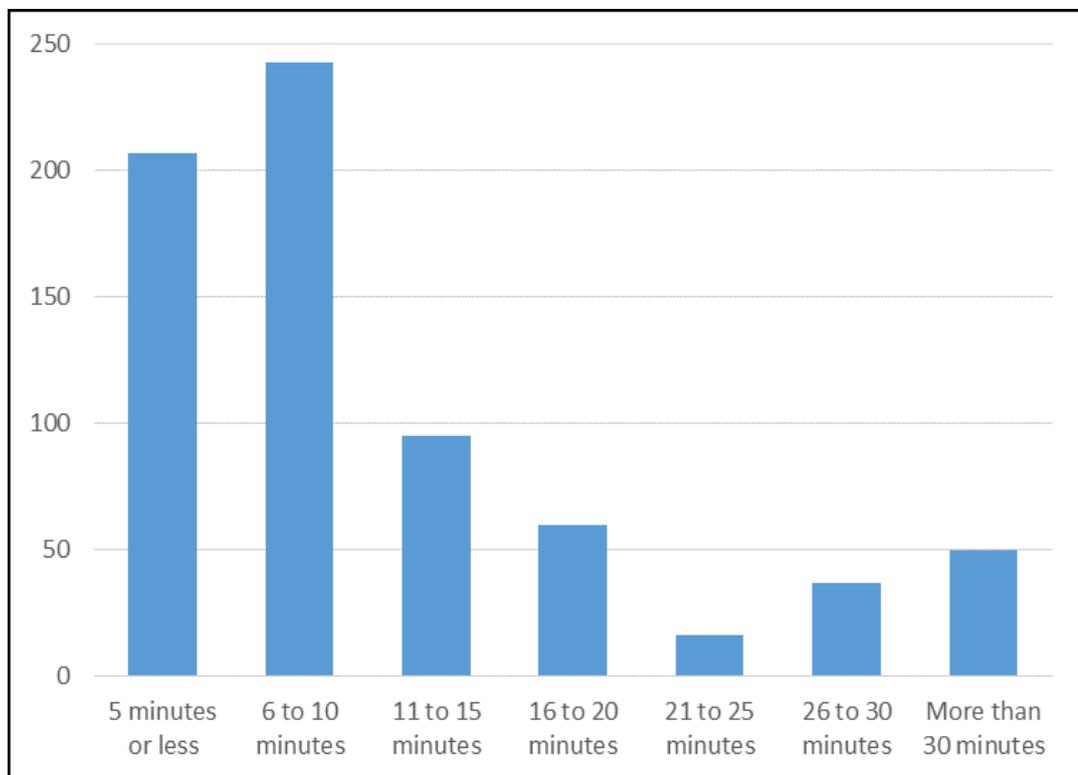
The age and gender of participants was reasonably evenly distributed with an average participant age of approximately 24 years old and a 30.5% (male) / 69.5% (female) gender split. Facebook usage statistics indicate moderate to high Facebook usage among participants with 90% of participants logging in on average at least once a day with 30% of participants logging in '50 or more' times per week – an average of 7 times each day (see *Figure 19*). These figures are in line with the latest Sensis figures that report users in the same age group logging in an average 49 times per week (Yellow, 2018).

**Figure 19: Number of Log-ins Per Week**



Regarding duration of use, 63.5% of participants indicated usage times of 10 minutes or less, while 30% indicated usage times of just 5 minutes or less per log-in (see *Figure 20*). Participants' usage time per log-in averaged just over 12 minutes which is slightly lower than previous studies where usage time per log-in averaged 16 minutes (Yellow, 2018). This reduction in usage time and increase in volume of log-ins is congruent with the advent of smart phones and advances in app technology, suggesting a usage preference shift towards shorter but more frequent interactions with the platform.

**Figure 20: Usage Time Per Log-in**



As some of the analyses will be conducted between treatment groups, it was necessary to also assess these demographics within each of the treatment groups to check for homogeneity (Field, 2009). The homogeneity of each treatment's group of respondents was evaluated by comparing sample characteristics such as age, gender, and Facebook usage statistics with all groups demonstrating homogeneity.

### 5.4.3 Factor Analysis & Scale Reliability

In order to check that the established scales utilised in the survey held together, exploratory factor analyses were performed on each of the constructs using Principal Components Analysis with Varimax rotation. Following which, Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ) tests of scale reliability were conducted on all scales with the results displayed in *Table 7*. In accordance with Kline's (1999) views on acceptable values, all but one scale produced Cronbach's alpha reliability scores greater than .70 with the majority of scales producing reliability scores greater than .80.

**Table 7: Scale Reliability (Cronbach's Alpha)**

Measure	Number of Items	$\alpha$
Sender Expertise	5	.90
Trustworthiness	5	.89
Homophily	4	.84
Tie Strength	3	.84
Personal Expertise	5	.93
Personal Involvement	3	.63
Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence		
Normative subscale	8	.92
Informational subscale	3	.85
Perceived Influence		
Part A	4	.77
Part B	4	.92
Purchase Intention	3	.87
Share Intention	3	.74

### 5.4.3.1 Sender Expertise

Sender expertise is measured utilising Netemeyer and Bearden's (1992) five item expertise scale. Netemeyer and Bearden (1992) utilised five, seven-point, semantic differential items (knowledgeable – not knowledgeable, competent – incompetent, expert – non expert, trained – not trained, experienced – not experienced) drawn from past studies such as Dholakia and Sternthal (1977), Harmon and Coney (1982), and Wiener and Mowen (1985) to evaluate expertise. The overall index of which, produced internal consistencies of .91 and .94 in their two models (Bruner, 2009; Netemeyer & Bearden, 1992). This scale has since been utilised with similarly strong alphas (e.g. Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Shabsogh et al., 2012).

In the present study, the scale extracted only one component with all factor loadings > .8 which is well above the minimum factor loading criterion of .5 (Field, 2009; Hair et al., 1998) (see *Table 8* for component matrix). This resulted in a 5 item scale with an alpha of .90 with any potential removal of items resulting in a less reliable scale.

**Table 8: Sender Expertise Component Matrix**

Item	Loading
Experienced	.87
Expert	.85
Knowledgeable	.84
Competent	.83
Trained	.83

### 5.4.3.2 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is measured utilising Ohanian's (1990) five item trustworthiness scale, a subscale of the tri-component scale for the measurement of source credibility. The creation of which began with 72

semantic differential items which were factor analysed using principal components analysis and varimax rotation, resulting in three factors (Ohanian, 1990). One of these factors was deemed by Ohanian (1990) to measure the trustworthiness dimension as it consisted of eight items previously utilised (e.g. by Bowers & Phillips, 1967; Whitehead, 1968) to measure trustworthiness such as 'honest', 'dependable', and 'reliable', and 'trustworthy'. The items with the highest loadings were then submitted to item-to-total correlation analysis with the items with the lowest item-to-total correlations deleted to produce a practically sized five item subscale (Ohanian, 1990). The final five item subscale (dependable – undependable, honest – dishonest, reliable – unreliable, sincere – insincere, trustworthy – untrustworthy) was then tested through confirmatory factor analysis with results indicating a highly reliable scale with a Cronbach's alpha of .90 (Ohanian, 1990).

In the present study, the scale extracted only one component with all factor loadings  $> .7$  which is well above the minimum factor loading criterion of .5 (Field, 2009; Hair et al., 1998) (see *Table 9* for component matrix). This resulted in a 5 item scale with an alpha of .89 with any potential removal of items resulting in a less reliable scale.

**Table 9: Trustworthiness Component Matrix**

Item	Loading
Reliable	.86
Trustworthy	.85
Honest	.85
Sincere	.84
Dependable	.79

### 5.4.3.3 Homophily

As per Brown and Reingen's (1987) recommendation, homophily is measured through the attitudinal measure of perceptual homophily as per De Bruyn and Lilien (2008). De Bruyn and Lilien (2008) utilised a 7 point, four item adaption of Gilly et al.'s (1998) perceptual homophily scale resulting in an alpha of .87. The items, anchored at 'not at all similar' and 'extremely similar', related to life outlook, likes and dislikes, values and experiences, and taste in products (De Bruyn & Lilien, 2008).

In the present study, the scale extracted only one component with all factor loadings > .8 which is well above the minimum factor loading criterion or .5 (Field, 2009; Hair et al., 1998) (see *Table 10* for component matrix). This resulted in a 4 item scale with an alpha of .84 with any potential removal of items resulting in a less reliable scale.

**Table 10: Homophily Component Matrix**

Item	Loading
Someone who shares similar likes and dislikes	.84
Someone who shares similar values and experiences	.83
Someone who shares similar tastes in products	.82
Someone who shares a similar outlook on life	.81

### 5.4.3.4 Tie Strength

Tie strength is measured utilising Frenzen and Davis's (1990) four item tie strength scale. Frenzen and Davis (1990) assessed tie strength through four indicators; closeness, intimacy, support, and association, resulting in a composite Cronbach's alpha of .93. Closeness was measured by asking the respondent to rate the strength of their relationship on a 10-point scale anchored from 'not close at all' to 'extraordinarily close' whilst the remaining indicators were measured utilising 6-point 'likelihood' scales, anchored from

'very unlikely' to 'very likely' (Frenzen & Davis, 1990). Intimacy was measured through the likelihood of sharing a personal confidence, support through the likelihood of extending everyday assistance, and association through the likelihood of spending a free afternoon (Frenzen & Davis, 1990). This scale has since been utilised by Bansal and Voyer (2000) with a similarly strong alpha of .86.

In the present study, the scale extracted only one component with all factor loadings > .8 which is well above the minimum factor loading criterion of .5 (Field, 2009; Hair et al., 1998) (see *Table 11* for component matrix). This resulted in a 4 item scale with an alpha of .84 with any potential removal of items resulting in a less reliable scale.

**Table 11: Tie Strength Component Matrix**

Item	Loading
Someone you would be likely to spend free time with	.85
Someone you would be likely to share a personal confidence with	.83
Someone you would be likely to extend an everyday assistance to	.82
Someone you are close to	.80

#### **5.4.3.5 Personal Expertise**

Personal expertise is measured utilising Netemeyer and Bearden's (1992) expertise scale as per Adjei et al. (2010). Whilst Netemeyer and Bearden's (1992) original expertise scale was designed to measure source expertise, Adjei et al. (2010) utilised a four item version (omitting trained – not trained) in the measurement of perceived personal expertise, returning a composite reliability of .98.

Rather than pre-emptively omitting the fifth item as per Adjei et al. (2010), the original five item scale was included in the present study to evaluate for potential elimination of weak items to render the most reliable version for the

personal expertise context. The scale extracted only one component with all factor loadings  $> .8$  which is well above the minimum factor loading criterion of  $.5$  (Field, 2009; Hair et al., 1998) (see *Table 12* for component matrix). This resulted in a 5 item scale with an alpha of  $.93$  with any potential removal of items resulting in a less reliable scale.

Whilst Netemeyer and Bearden's (1992) expertise scale was also utilised to measure the construct of Sender Expertise, it was adapted to suit the measurement of Personal Expertise ("when it comes to the type of product mentioned in this post, I would say that I am;"). Furthermore, an exploratory factor analysis was run with the items from both constructs which resulted in two distinct scales, demonstrating discriminant validity (Hari, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998).

**Table 12: Personal Expertise Component Matrix**

Item	Loading
Experienced	.91
Expert	.90
Knowledgeable	.90
Competent	.87
Trained	.84

#### **5.4.3.6 Personal Involvement**

Personal involvement is measured utilising Chandrashekar's (2004) three item 'involvement with the product' scale with each item measured on a five-point Likert scale anchored from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree' (Bruner, 2009). In development of the involvement with the product scale, Chandrashekar (2004) conducted two studies. Whilst the first study yielded a high scale reliability of  $.85$  following factor analysis, subsequent to reviewer suggestions, the construct was revised for the second study, resulting in a stronger scale with a reliability of  $.91$  (Chandrashekar, 2004).

In the present study, the scale, extracted only one component with all factor loadings  $> .8$  which is well above the minimum factor loading criterion of  $.5$  (Field, 2009; Hair et al., 1998) (see *Table 13* for component matrix). This resulted in a 3 item scale with an alpha of  $.63$  with any potential removal of items resulting in a less reliable scale. Although this alpha is considered to be on the low side of acceptable, alphas of  $.60$  are acceptable in studies of an exploratory nature (Hair et al., 1998).

**Table 13: Personal Involvement Component Matrix**

Item	Loading
I am particularly interested in the product mentioned in the post	.83
Overall, I am quite involved when I am purchasing this type of product	.74
Given my personal interests, this product is not very relevant to me	.69

#### **5.4.3.7 Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence**

Susceptibility to interpersonal influence is measured utilising Bearden et al.'s (1989) 12 item, two dimensional interpersonal influence scale with each item measured on a 7-point scale anchored from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. The susceptibility to interpersonal influence scale was developed through rigorous testing which began with a pool of 166 items drawn from a review of existing literature (Bearden et al., 1989). Following elimination of ambiguous or identical items, this pool was reduced to 135 items which were then exposed to two rounds of judging in assessment of their content validity (Bearden et al., 1989). Subsequently, a number of items that did not receive consistent classification were eliminated, reducing the number of items to 62 (Bearden et al., 1989). The remaining items were then analysed with items exhibiting low item-to-total correlations and those not exhibiting statistically significant correlations deleted (Bearden et al., 1989). A principal axis factor analysis with oblique rotation and subsequent confirmatory factor analysis excluded further weak items, resulting in a 15 item scale (Bearden et al., 1989). Whilst the intention was to develop a three dimensional scale of

influence with five items representing each; informational, utilitarian, and value-expressive, multiple administrations revealed a stronger scale with the utilitarian and value-expressive influences combined into a single 'normative' factor, resulting in a final 12 item scale comprised of four informational ( $\alpha=.82$ ) and eight normative items ( $\alpha=.88$ ) (Bearden et al., 1989).

In the present study, the scale extracted two components with all factor loadings exceeding the minimum factor loading criterion of .5 (Field, 2009; Hair et al., 1998). Whilst these components were in line with the existing 'Normative' and 'Informational' subscales established by Bearden et al. (1989), one item heavily cross loaded on both components and as such, was removed. Removal of this item resulted in an 8 item 'Normative' scale with an alpha of .92 and a 3 item 'Informational' scale with an alpha of .85 where any potential further removal of items from the scales resulted in either a less reliable scale or a negligible improvement (see *Table 14* for component matrix following removal of crossloaded item – loadings  $<.3$  suppressed).

**Table 14: Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence Component Matrix**

Item	Loading	
	Component 1	Component 2
When buying products, I generally purchase those brands that I think others will approve of	.88	
If other people can see me using a product, I often purchase the brand they expect me to buy	.87	
It is important that others like the products and brands I buy	.82	
I achieve a sense of belonging by purchasing the same products and brands that others purchase	.81	
If I want to be like someone, I often try to buy the same brands that they buy	.79	
I often identify with other people by purchasing the same products and brands they purchase	.76	

I like to know what brands and products make good impressions on others	.75	
I rarely purchase the latest fashion styles until I am sure my friends approve of them	.62	
I often consult other people to help choose the best alternative available from a product class		.87
If I have little experience with a product, I often ask my friends about the product		.85
I frequently gather information from friends or family about a product before I buy		.85

#### **5.4.3.8 Perceived Influence**

Perceived influence is measured utilising Gilly et al.'s (1998) 10 item perceived influence scale with each item measured on a 7-point scale with items 1-6 anchored from 'disagree' to 'agree' and items 7-10 anchored from 'very little influence' to 'complete influence' as per the original scale. Whilst Gilly et al. (1998) initially produced a 7 item influence scale, at the suggestion of a reviewer, a further three items were added, resulting in a final 10 item scale with a Cronbach's alpha score of .90. Gilly et al.'s (1998) influence scale has since been utilised by Bansal and Voyer (2000) who omitted two items due to their lack of application to the context, returning an alpha of .76. Given the context of this study and the lower alpha score of Bansal and Voyer's (2000) adaptation, the original 10 item scale was utilised to assess for potential item deletion.

Whilst Gilly et al.'s (1998) perceived influence scale was originally operationalized as a 10 item single factor scale, due to the poles differing between items 1-6 (strongly disagree-strongly agree) and items 7-10 (very little influence-complete influence), it was examined in the present study as two separate measures; 'Part A' referring to items 1-6 and 'Part B' referring to items 7-10. Part A extracted two components with all factor loadings > .7 which is well above the minimum factor loading criterion of .5 (Field, 2009; Hair et al., 1998) (see *Table 15* for component matrix – loadings < .35 suppressed).

**Table 15: Perceived Influence (Part A) Component Matrix**

Item	Loading	
	Component 1	Component 2
This post provided some different ideas than other sources	.79	
This post would influence my choice about dining at the restaurant	.77	
This post would help me make a decision about dining at the restaurant	.76	
This post mentioned some things I had not considered	.73	
This post really wouldn't change my mind about dining at the restaurant		.81
This post provided little new information		.69

Reliability testing on this measure supported factor analysis findings revealing an alpha of .67 with considerable improvement (.77) with the deletion of the two items from the second component. Upon analysis of the content of the items loading on to the second component, it is apparent that they are the two reverse coded items. These findings are in line with Bansal and Voyer (2000) who utilised Gilly et al.'s (1998) Perceived Influence scale and also found the same two reverse coded items loaded onto a second factor and that scale reliability improved following their removal. As Gilly et al. (1998, p. 173) explain, the lack of reliability of these items is "due to directionality of wording, because negatively worded items often produce confounding results in long questionnaires". As such, the two items were deleted resulting in a 4 item scale with an alpha of .77 with any potential further removal of items resulting in a less reliable scale (see *Table 16* for component matrix following removal of items).

**Table 16: Perceived Influence (Part A) Adjusted Component Matrix**

Item	Loading
This post would influence my choice about dining at the restaurant	.81
This post would help me make a decision about dining at the restaurant	.80
This post provided some different ideas than other sources	.76
This post mentioned some things I had not considered	.70

Part B extracted only one component with all factor loadings > .8 which is well above the minimum factor loading criterion of .5 (Field, 2009; Hair et al., 1998) (see *Table 17* for component matrix). This resulted in a 4 item scale with an alpha of .92 with any potential removal of items resulting in a less reliable scale.

**Table 17: Perceived Influence (Part B) Component Matrix**

Item	Loading
How much influence would this post have on the restaurant you actually dine at?	.91
How much influence would this post have on the brand (name) of the restaurant you dine at?	.90
How much influence would this post have on the features you look for in a restaurant?	.89
How much influence would this post have on whether or not you dine at a restaurant?	.89

As discussed above, Gilly et al.'s (1998) Perceived Influence scale was included in the present study in its final 10 item format in order to assess how the scale would operate in the social networking site word-of-mouth context. However upon analysis of the scale and comparison of the two parts, it is evident that the items didn't hold together under a common measure with respondents answering the two parts of the scale differently. Scores were inconsistent between the two parts of the scale with 'Part B' generating a larger mean, median, and standard deviation than 'Part A', indicating it did

not measure 'influence' in the same way as the first half of the scale or potentially that it measured a different component of 'influence' than what was intended. Whilst Gilly et al. (1998) had included one of the four items from the second half of the scale in their initial scale, it was only after the suggestion of a reviewer that the remaining three items were added. Further, when Bansal and Voyer (2000) utilised the scale, they omitted two of these additional items due to their lack of application to the service context. Upon viewing the content of the items included in 'Part B' of the scale, it is questionable whether, as per Bansal and Voyer's (2000) study, they can be applied to the social networking site word-of-mouth context. This is due to the nature of the stimuli ('posts' rather than people) being analysed and that the type of product / service varies across the stimuli. Due to the differences in inclusion of the items contained within 'Part B' of the scale in past studies and given how they performed in this study, it was determined that 'Part A' of the scale was the most appropriate measure of 'influence' in the social networking site word-of-mouth context and as such, 'Part B' was disregarded from any further analyses.

#### **5.4.3.9 Purchase Intention**

Purchase intention is measured utilising Lepkowska-White et al.'s (2003) three item purchase intention scale with each item measured on a five-point Likert scale anchored from 'disagree' to 'agree' (Bruner, 2009). Following their final pretest, Lepkowska-White et al. (2003) reported that factor analysis found highly significant loadings with a resultant alpha of .90 (Bruner, 2009).

In the present study, the scale extracted only one component with all factor loadings  $> .8$  which is well above the minimum factor loading criterion of .5 (Field, 2009; Hair et al., 1998) (see *Table 18* for component matrix). This resulted in a 3 item scale with an alpha of .87 with any potential removal of items resulting in a less reliable scale.

**Table 18: Purchase Intention Component Matrix**

Item	Loading
If I had to buy this type of product, my willingness to buy the product in the post would be high	.90
If I were to buy this type of product, the probability that I would consider buying the product in the post would be high	.89
If I were looking for this type of product, my likelihood of purchasing the product in the post would be high	.89

**5.4.3.10 Share Intention**

Share intention is measured utilising Lin et al.'s (2006) three item forwarding intention scale with each item measured on a five-point scale anchored from 'disagree' to 'agree'. Lin et al. (2006) reported significant factor loadings with a Cronbach's alpha of .82.

In the present study, the scale extracted only one component with all factor loadings exceeding the minimum factor loading criterion of .5 (Field, 2009; Hair et al., 1998) (see *Table 19* for component matrix) resulting in a 3 item scale with an alpha of .74. Whilst it was indicated that removing the reverse coded item would result in a higher alpha, this would reduce the construct to only 2 items, limiting analysis possibilities (Brown, 2015). As such, and as the scale is an existing scale that has been previously validated (Lin et al., 2006) and the alpha is still acceptable at .738, no items were removed.

**Table 19: Share Intention Component Matrix**

Item	Loading
This post is worthy of sharing	.87
I would share this post with others	.87
I would avoid sharing this post with others	.68

#### 5.4.4 Normality Tests

Once all constructs were determined to be reliable measures of the intended phenomena, the means of each scale were subjected to tests of normality to ensure normal distribution of data collected through the study. As some of the analyses will be conducted between treatment groups, normality tests were additionally conducted for each of the 11 treatment groups.

According to Field (2009), the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test and Shapiro-Wilk test are appropriate for assessing distribution of data. These tests compare scores in a sample with a set of normally distributed scores in order to determine whether data within the sample is normally distributed (Field 2009). If the tests are non-significant ( $p > .05$ ) then the sample is not significantly different from a normally distributed set of data (Field 2009). Additionally, the distribution curve of the data must be analysed for lack of symmetry termed 'skew', and pointyness termed 'kurtosis' (Black, 2004; Field 2009; Keller & Warrack, 2000; Wimmer & Dominick, 2000). According to Reimann, Filzmoser, Garrett, and Dutter (2008), skewness and kurtosis values  $\pm 2$  are acceptable with values outside of this range considered extreme.

From these normality tests, a number of the K-S values were significant ( $p < .05$ ). In order to test the significance of the skewness and kurtosis values for these significant scales, Field (2009) suggests converting these values to z-scores by dividing the values by their standard errors. If the resulting scores (ignoring any minus signs) are  $>1.96$  only then they are considered significant ( $p < .05$ ) (Field 2009). Whilst 1.96 is an appropriate figure for smallish samples, in large samples, this criterion should be increased to 2.58 and in very large samples, to 3.29, or potentially, no criterion should be applied (Field, 2009). Field (2009, p. 139) explains, "significance tests of skew and kurtosis should not be used in large samples (because they are likely to be significant even when skew and kurtosis are not too different from normal)...If you have a large sample (200 or more) it is more important to look at the shape of the distribution visually and to look at the value of the

skewness and kurtosis statistics rather than calculate their significance". As such, the normality curve histograms were inspected visually to check any skewness and kurtosis values exceeding the upper threshold of 3.29, with all deemed to be normally distributed.

#### **5.4.5 Manipulation Checks**

Manipulation checks are essential in assessing construct validity by ensuring stimuli are interpreted by participants as intended by the researcher (Khan, 2011; Perdue & Summers, 1986; Sternthal, Tybout, & Calder, 1987). As such, manipulation checks were conducted on treatments 5-11 with treatments 1-4 (communication types) excluded from this check due to their inability to be manipulated in any other way.

Participants who viewed treatments 5-8 were asked to rate the positivity of the post whereby -5 represented 'negative', 0 represented 'neutral', and 5 represented 'positive'. The results demonstrate a successful manipulation with the treatments equally as positive / negative as one another (see *Table 20* for results). Whilst the 'neutral' treatment was interpreted as being slightly positive, based on results from phase one of the study, this is to be expected.

**Table 20: Treatments 5-8 Manipulation Checks (Positivity)**

<b>Treatment #</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>S.D.</b>
5 – Positive	2.96	1.92
6 – Negative	-2.28	2.75
7 – Neutral	1.17	2.19

Participants who viewed treatments 9-11 were asked two different manipulation check questions relating to the posts they viewed; one regarding the level of involvement of the purchase decision, and one regarding the product classification. Participants were asked to rate the decision to purchase the product in the post from being a 'very unimportant

decision that requires little thought' (0) to a 'very important decision that requires a lot of thought' (10). The results demonstrate a successful manipulation with the treatments classified as 'low involvement' and 'high involvement' respectively (see *Table 21* for results).

**Table 21: Treatments 9-11 Manipulation Checks (Product Involvement)**

Treatment #	Mean	S.D.
8 – High Involvement / Hedonic	7.52	1.82
9 – High Involvement / Utilitarian	7.41	2.19
10 – Low Involvement / Hedonic	4.27	2.62
11 – Low Involvement / Utilitarian	4.02	2.68

Participants were also asked to rate the decision to purchase the product in the post from being one that is purchased 'for practical / functional purposes' (0) to one that is purchased 'just for fun / enjoyment' (10). The results demonstrate a successful manipulation with the treatments classified as 'utilitarian' and 'hedonic' respectively (see *Table 22* for results).

**Table 22: Treatments 9-11 Manipulation Checks (Product Classification)**

Treatment #	Mean	S.D.
8 – High Involvement / Hedonic	5.94	2.05
9 – High Involvement / Utilitarian	2.90	3.05
10 – Low Involvement / Hedonic	7.28	2.14
11 – Low Involvement / Utilitarian	2.51	2.71

#### 5.4.6 Control Variables

In order to examine the impact of the control variables, participants were split by the median into two groups according to whether they reported 'high' or 'low' scores on the variables (Skourtis et al., 2012). Independent Samples T-

Tests were then conducted to compare the mean level of influence of the 'high' groups versus the 'low' groups. Results for each of the variables are subsequently discussed below.

#### **5.4.6.1 Personal Expertise**

The Independent Samples T-Test indicates a significant ( $t(1414) = -10.24, p < .05$ ) difference in means exists between those with 'low' Personal Expertise ( $M = 2.83, SD = .84, SE = .03$ ) and those with 'high' Personal Expertise ( $M = 3.27, SD = .78, SE = .03$ ) for the Influence scale. This indicates a positive relationship between Perceived Influence and Personal Expertise.

#### **5.4.6.2 Personal Involvement**

The Independent Samples T-Test indicates a significant ( $t(907) = -18.97, p < .05$ ) difference in means exists between those with 'low' Personal Involvement ( $M = 2.52, SD = .84, SE = .04$ ) and those with 'high' Personal Involvement ( $M = 3.43, SD = .72, SE = .03$ ) for the Influence scale. This indicates a positive relationship between Perceived Influence and Personal Involvement.

#### **5.4.6.3 Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence**

The Independent Samples T-Test indicates a significant ( $t(675) = -5.89, p < .05$ ) difference in means exists between those with 'low' Susceptibility to Normative Interpersonal Influence ( $M = 2.95, SD = .85, SE = .05$ ) and those with 'high' Susceptibility to Normative Interpersonal Influence ( $M = 3.30, SD = .73, SE = .04$ ) for the Influence scale. The Independent Samples T-Test also indicates a significant ( $t(643) = -5.47, p < .05$ ) difference in means exists between those with 'low' Susceptibility to Informational Interpersonal Influence ( $M = 2.95, SD = .76, SE = .04$ ) and those with 'high' Susceptibility to Informational Interpersonal Influence ( $M = 3.29, SD = .83, SE = .05$ ) for the Influence scale. This indicates a positive relationship between Perceived

Influence and both Normative and Informational Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence.

## 5.5 Results

### 5.5.1 Hypothesis 1

Hypothesis 1 predicts that word-of-mouth communications posted on social networking sites in the form of photos (H1a), shares (H1b), and check-ins (H1c) will be perceived by viewers as influential. To test this hypothesis, Independent Samples T-Tests were conducted to compare the mean level of influence of the various communication types against the control group of 'likes' (results summarised in *Table 23*).

**Table 23: Hypothesis 1 Results**

Hypothesis		Result
H1(a)	Photos more influential than control	Supported
H1(b)	Shares more influential than control	Supported
H1(c)	Check-ins more influential than control	Supported

#### 5.5.1.1 H1(a) Photos

The Independent Samples T-Test indicates a significant ( $t(196) = 2.01, p < .05$ ) difference in means exists between the communication type of 'photos' ( $M = 3.12, SD = .76, SE = .08$ ) and the control group of 'likes' ( $M = 2.91, SD = .74, SE = .07$ ) for the Influence scale. Thus, H1(a) is supported as photos are significantly more influential than the control group of 'likes'.

#### 5.5.1.2 H1(b) Shares

The Independent Samples T-Test indicates a significant ( $t(197) = 3.11, p < .05$ ) difference in means exists between the communication type of 'shares'

( $M = 3.24$ ,  $SD = .76$ ,  $SE = .08$ ) and the control group of 'likes' ( $M = 2.91$ ,  $SD = .74$ ,  $SE = .07$ ) for the Influence scale. Thus, H1(b) is supported as shares are significantly more influential than the control group of 'likes'.

### 5.5.1.3 H1(c) Check-ins

The Independent Samples T-Test indicates a significant ( $t(198) = 2.94$ ,  $p < .05$ ) difference in means exists between the communication type of 'check-ins' ( $M = 3.23$ ,  $SD = .77$ ,  $SE = .08$ ) and the control group of 'likes' ( $M = 2.91$ ,  $SD = .74$ ,  $SE = .07$ ) for the Influence scale. Thus, H1(c) is supported as check-ins are significantly more influential than the control group of 'likes'.

## 5.5.2 Hypothesis 2

Hypothesis 2 predicts that word-of-mouth communications posted on social networking sites in the form of photos are more influential than those posted in the form of shares (H2a) and check-ins (H2b). To test this hypothesis, a One-Way ANOVA test was conducted to compare the mean level of influence between the various communication types (results summarised in *Table 24*).

**Table 24: Hypothesis 2 Results**

Hypothesis		Result
H2(a)	Photos more influential than shares	Not supported
H2(b)	Photos more influential than check-ins	Not supported

The Levene's statistic was calculated to test for homogeneity of variances and is not significant ( $F(2, 300) = .00$ ,  $p > .05$ ), indicating no significant difference in the variances between the groups and thus, the assumption of homogeneity of variance is met. The ANOVA test indicates no significant ( $F(2, 300) = .68$ ,  $p > .05$ ) difference in means exists between the three

groups. Thus, neither H2(a) or H2(b) are supported as photos are no more influential than shares or check-ins.

### 5.5.3 Hypothesis 3

Hypothesis 3 predicts that word-of-mouth communications posted on social networking sites with positive (H3a) or negative (H3b) framing will be perceived by viewers as influential. To test this hypothesis, Independent Samples T-Tests were conducted to compare the mean level of influence of the different framings against the control group of 'neutral' communications (results summarised in *Table 25*).

**Table 25: Hypothesis 3 Results**

Hypothesis		Result
H3(a)	Positive framing more influential than control	Supported
H3(b)	Negative framing more influential than control	Supported

#### 5.5.3.1 H3(a) Positively Framed Communications

The Independent Samples T-Test indicates a significant ( $t(197) = 5.22, p < .05$ ) difference in means exists between positively framed communications ( $M = 3.31, SD = .71, SE = .07$ ) and the control group of neutrally framed communications ( $M = 2.71, SD = .92, SE = .09$ ) for the Influence scale. Thus, H3(a) is supported as positively framed communications are significantly more influential than the control group of neutrally framed communications.

#### 5.5.3.2 H3(b) Negatively Framed Communications

The Independent Samples T-Test indicates a significant ( $t(200) = 6.03, p < .05$ ) difference in means exists between negatively framed communications ( $M = 3.42, SD = .75, SE = .07$ ) and the control group of neutrally framed

communications ( $M = 2.71$ ,  $SD = .92$ ,  $SE = .09$ ) for the Influence scale. Thus, H3(b) is supported as negatively framed communications are significantly more influential than the control group of neutrally framed communications.

#### 5.5.4 Hypothesis 4

Hypothesis 4 predicts that positively framed word-of-mouth communications posted on social networking sites are more influential than negatively framed communications. To test this hypothesis, an Independent Samples T-Tests was conducted to compare the mean level of influence of the different framings (results summarised in *Table 26*).

**Table 26: Hypothesis 4 Results**

Hypothesis		Result
H4	Positive framing more influential than negative framing	Not supported

The Independent Samples T-Test indicates no significant ( $t(199) = -1.05$ ,  $p > .05$ ) difference in means exists between positively framed communications ( $M = 3.31$ ,  $SD = .71$ ,  $SE = .07$ ) and negatively framed communications ( $M = 3.42$ ,  $SD = .75$ ,  $SE = .07$ ). Thus, H4 isn't supported as positively framed communications are no more influential than negatively framed communications.

#### 5.5.5 Hypothesis 5

Hypothesis 5 predicts that word-of-mouth communications posted on social networking sites regarding high involvement products will be more influential than communications regarding low involvement products in both a utilitarian context (H5a) and a hedonic context (H5b). To test this hypothesis, Independent Samples T-Tests were conducted to compare the mean level of

influence of the communications regarding the different types of products (results summarised in *Table 27*).

**Table 27: Hypothesis 5 Results**

Hypothesis		Result
H5(a)	High involvement products more influential than low involvement products (Utilitarian condition)	Supported
H5(b)	High involvement products more influential than low involvement products (Hedonic condition)	Supported

#### **5.5.5.1 H5(a) Involvement (Utilitarian Condition)**

The Independent Samples T-Test indicates a significant ( $t(349) = 2.28, p < .05$ ) difference in means exists between communications regarding high involvement products ( $M = 3.06, SD = .85, SE = .06$ ) and communications regarding low involvement products ( $M = 2.85, SD = .86, SE = .06$ ) for the Influence scale. Thus, H5(a) is supported as communications regarding high involvement utilitarian products are significantly more influential than communications regarding low involvement utilitarian products.

#### **5.5.5.2 H5(b) Involvement (Hedonic Condition)**

The Independent Samples T-Test indicates a significant ( $t(342) = 5.00, p < .05$ ) difference in means exists between communications regarding high involvement products ( $M = 3.22, SD = .75, SE = .06$ ) and communications regarding low involvement products ( $M = 2.77, SD = .92, SE = .07$ ) for the Influence scale. Thus, H5(b) is supported as communications regarding high involvement hedonic products are significantly more influential than communications regarding low involvement hedonic products.

### 5.5.6 Hypothesis 6

Hypothesis 6 predicts that word-of-mouth communications posted on social networking sites regarding hedonic products will be more influential than communications regarding utilitarian products in both a high involvement context (H5a) and a low involvement context (H5b). To test this hypothesis, Independent Samples T-Tests were conducted to compare the mean level of influence of the communications regarding the different types of products (results summarised in *Table 28*)

**Table 28: Hypothesis 6 Results**

Hypothesis		Result
H6(a)	Hedonic products more influential than utilitarian products (High Involvement condition)	Not supported
H6(b)	Hedonic products more influential than utilitarian products (Low Involvement condition)	Not supported

#### 5.5.6.1 H6(a) Hedonic vs Utilitarian (High Involvement Condition)

The Independent Samples T-Test indicates no significant ( $t(351) = 1.85, p > .05$ ) difference in means exists between communications regarding hedonic products ( $M = 3.22, SD = .75, SE = .06$ ) and communications regarding utilitarian products ( $M = 3.06, SD = .85, SE = .06$ ). Thus, H6(a) is not supported as communications regarding high involvement hedonic products are no more influential than communications regarding high involvement utilitarian products.

#### 5.5.6.2 H6(b) Hedonic vs Utilitarian (Low Involvement Condition)

The Independent Samples T-Test indicates no significant ( $t(353) = -.84, p > .05$ ) difference in means exists between communications regarding hedonic products ( $M = 2.77, SD = .92, SE = .07$ ) and communications regarding

utilitarian products ( $M = 2.85$ ,  $SD = .86$ ,  $SE = .06$ ). Thus, H6(b) is not supported as communications regarding low involvement hedonic products are no more influential than communications regarding low involvement utilitarian products.

### 5.5.7 Hypothesis 7

Hypothesis 7 predicts that the characteristics a sender of a communication possesses such as their Expertise (H7a), Trustworthiness (H7b), Homophily (H7c), and Tie Strength (H7d) will be of greater importance to receivers in evaluating word-of-mouth communications posted on social networking sites regarding high involvement products than communications regarding low involvement products. To test this hypothesis, Independent Samples T-Tests were conducted to compare the mean level of importance of the sender characteristics between the different types of products. Due to the nature of the stimuli utilised in the study and in order to hold other variables constant, this was examined in both a utilitarian context and a hedonic context (results summarised in *Table 29*).

**Table 29: Hypothesis 7 Results**

Hypothesis		Result
H7(a)	Sender expertise of greater importance for high involvement products than low involvement products	Not supported
H7(b)	Trustworthiness of greater importance for high involvement products than low involvement products	Partially supported
H7(c)	Homophily of greater importance for high involvement products than low involvement products	Not supported
H7(d)	Tie Strength of greater importance for high involvement products than low involvement products	Not supported

### **5.5.7.1 H7(a) Importance of Sender Expertise Depending on Product Involvement**

The Independent Samples T-Test indicates no significant ( $t(355) = -.16, p > .05$ ) difference in means exists between communications regarding high involvement products ( $M = 2.76, SD = 1.06, SE = .08$ ) and communications regarding low involvement products ( $M = 2.78, SD = 1.03, SE = .08$ ) in a hedonic context. The Independent Samples T-Test also indicates no significant ( $t(349) = 1.18, p > .05$ ) difference in means exists between communications regarding high involvement products ( $M = 2.94, SD = 1.03, SE = .08$ ) and communications regarding low involvement products ( $M = 2.81, SD = 1.03, SE = .08$ ) in a utilitarian context. Thus, H7(a) is not supported as Sender Expertise is no more important in evaluating communications regarding high involvement products than communications regarding low involvement products in both hedonic and utilitarian contexts.

### **5.5.7.2 H7(b) Importance of Trustworthiness Depending on Product Involvement**

The Independent Samples T-Test indicates a significant ( $t(355) = 2.72, p < .05$ ) difference in means exists between communications regarding high involvement products ( $M = 3.43, SD = .99, SE = .07$ ) and communications regarding low involvement products ( $M = 3.14, SD = 1.01, SE = .08$ ) in a hedonic context. The Independent Samples T-Test indicates however that no significant ( $t(349) = .68, p > .05$ ) difference in means exists between communications regarding high involvement products ( $M = 3.39, SD = 1.04, SE = .08$ ) and communications regarding low involvement products ( $M = 3.31, SD = 1.00, SE = .08$ ) in a utilitarian context. Thus, H7(b) is partially supported as Trustworthiness is more important in evaluating communications regarding high involvement products than communications regarding low involvement products in a hedonic context only.

### **5.5.7.3 H7(c) Importance of Homophily Depending on Product Involvement**

The Independent Samples T-Test indicates no significant ( $t(355) = .44, p > .05$ ) difference in means exists between communications regarding high involvement products ( $M = 3.09, SD = .97, SE = .07$ ) and communications regarding low involvement products ( $M = 3.04, SD = .98, SE = .07$ ) in a hedonic context. The Independent Samples T-Test also indicates no significant ( $t(349) = -.32, p > .05$ ) difference in means exists between communications regarding high involvement products ( $M = 2.73, SD = 1.07, SE = .08$ ) and communications regarding low involvement products ( $M = 2.77, SD = .98, SE = .07$ ) in a utilitarian context. Thus, H7(c) is not supported as Homophily is no more important in evaluating communications regarding high involvement products than communications regarding low involvement products in both hedonic and utilitarian contexts.

### **5.5.7.4 H7(d) Importance of Tie Strength Expertise Depending on Product Involvement**

The Independent Samples T-Test indicates no significant ( $t(355) = -.51, p > .05$ ) difference in means exists between communications regarding high involvement products ( $M = 2.72, SD = 1.01, SE = .08$ ) and communications regarding low involvement products ( $M = 2.78, SD = 1.06, SE = .08$ ) in a hedonic context. The Independent Samples T-Test also indicates no significant ( $t(349) = -.20, p > .05$ ) difference in means exists between communications regarding high involvement products ( $M = 2.57, SD = 1.04, SE = .08$ ) and communications regarding low involvement products ( $M = 2.59, SD = 1.01, SE = .08$ ) in a utilitarian context. Thus, H7(d) is not supported as Tie Strength is no more important in evaluating communications regarding high involvement products than communications regarding low involvement products in both hedonic and utilitarian contexts.

### 5.5.8 Hypothesis 8

Hypothesis 8 predicts that the characteristics a sender of a communication possesses such as their Expertise (H8a), Trustworthiness (H8b), Homophily (H8c), and Tie Strength (H8d) will differ in importance to receivers in evaluating word-of-mouth communications posted on social networking sites depending on whether the communication is regarding a hedonic product or a utilitarian product. To test this hypothesis, Independent Samples T-Tests were conducted to compare the mean level of importance of the sender characteristics between the different types of products. Due to the nature of the stimuli utilised in the study and in order to hold other variables constant, this was examined in both a high involvement context and a low context (results summarised in *Table 30*).

**Table 30: Hypothesis 8 Results**

Hypothesis		Result
H8(a)	Sender expertise of greater importance for utilitarian products than hedonic products	Not supported
H8(b)	Trustworthiness of greater importance for utilitarian products than hedonic products	Not supported
H8(c)	Homophily of greater importance for hedonic products than for utilitarian products	Supported
H8(d)	Tie Strength of greater importance for hedonic products than for utilitarian products	Not supported

#### 5.5.8.1 H8(a) Importance of Sender Expertise Depending on Product Classification (Hedonic / Utilitarian)

The Independent Samples T-Test indicates no significant ( $t(351) = -1.68, p > .05$ ) difference in means exists between communications regarding utilitarian products ( $M = 2.95, SD = 1.03, SE = .08$ ) and communications regarding hedonic products ( $M = 2.76, SD = 1.06, SE = .08$ ) in a high involvement context. The Independent Samples T-Test also indicates no significant

( $t(353) = -.37, p > .05$ ) difference in means exists between communications regarding utilitarian products ( $M = 2.82, SD = 1.03, SE = .08$ ) and communications regarding hedonic products ( $M = 2.78, SD = 1.03, SE = .08$ ) in a low involvement context. Thus, H8(a) is not supported as Sender Expertise is no more important in evaluating communications regarding utilitarian products than communications regarding hedonic products in both high and low involvement contexts.

#### **5.5.8.2 H8(b) Importance of Trustworthiness Depending on Product Classification (Hedonic / Utilitarian)**

The Independent Samples T-Test indicates no significant ( $t(351) = .36, p > .05$ ) difference in means exists between communications regarding utilitarian products ( $M = 3.39, SD = 1.04, SE = .08$ ) and communications regarding hedonic products ( $M = 3.43, SD = .99, SE = .07$ ) in a high involvement context. The Independent Samples T-Test also indicates no significant ( $t(353) = -1.64, p > .05$ ) difference in means exists between communications regarding utilitarian products ( $M = 3.31, SD = 1.00, SE = .08$ ) and communications regarding hedonic products ( $M = 3.14, SD = 1.01, SE = .08$ ) in a low involvement context. Thus, H8(b) is not supported as Trustworthiness is no more important in evaluating communications regarding utilitarian products than communications regarding hedonic products in both high and low involvement contexts.

#### **5.5.8.3 H8(c) Importance of Homophily Depending on Product Classification (Hedonic / Utilitarian)**

The Independent Samples T-Test indicates a significant ( $t(351) = 3.24, p < .05$ ) difference in means exists between communications regarding hedonic products ( $M = 3.09, SD = 1.07, SE = .07$ ) and communications regarding utilitarian products ( $M = 2.73, SD = 1.07, SE = .08$ ) in a high involvement context. The Independent Samples T-Test also indicates a significant ( $t(353) = 2.61, p < .05$ ) difference in means exists between communications regarding hedonic products ( $M = 3.04, SD = .98, SE = .07$ ) and

communications regarding utilitarian products ( $M = 2.77$ ,  $SD = .98$ ,  $SE = .07$ ) in a low involvement context. Thus, H8(c) is supported as Homophily is more important in evaluating communications regarding hedonic products than communications regarding utilitarian products in both high involvement and low involvement contexts.

#### **5.5.8.4 H8(d) Importance of Tie Strength Depending on Product Classification (Hedonic / Utilitarian)**

The Independent Samples T-Test indicates no significant ( $t(351) = 1.41$ ,  $p > .05$ ) difference in means exists between communications regarding hedonic products ( $M = 2.72$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ,  $SE = .08$ ) and communications regarding utilitarian products ( $M = 2.57$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ,  $SE = .08$ ) in a high involvement context. The Independent Samples T-Test also indicates no significant ( $t(353) = 1.70$ ,  $p > .05$ ) difference in means exists between communications regarding hedonic products ( $M = 2.78$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ,  $SE = .08$ ) and communications regarding utilitarian products ( $M = 2.59$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ,  $SE = .08$ ) in a low involvement context. Thus, H8(d) is not supported as Tie Strength is no more important in evaluating communications regarding hedonic products than communications regarding utilitarian products in both high and low involvement contexts.

#### **5.5.9 Hypothesis 9**

Hypothesis 9 predicts that influence from word-of-mouth communications posted on social networking sites is positively related to Purchase Intention (H9a) and Share Intention (H9b). To test this hypothesis, Linear Regressions were conducted with Perceived Influence as the independent variable and Purchase Intention and Share Intention as the dependent variables (results summarised in *Table 31*).

**Table 31: Hypothesis 9 Results**

Hypothesis		Result
H9(a)	Perceived Influence is positively related to Purchase Intention	Supported
H9(b)	Perceived Influence is positively related to Share Intention	Supported

**5.5.9.1 H9(a) Relationship Between Influence and Purchase Intention**

Linear regression analysis revealed that perceived influence is a significant predictor of purchase intention ( $\beta = .71$ ,  $p = .00$ ), accounting for 36.6% of the variance (see *Table 32*), thus, H9(a) is supported.

**Table 32: Results from H9(a) Regression Analysis**

R	R <sup>2</sup>	S.E.	F-ratio	Sig.	B	S.E.	Sig.
.61	.37	.78	816.65	.00	.71	.02	.00

**5.5.9.2 H9(b) Relationship Between Influence and Share Intention**

Linear regression analysis revealed that perceived influence is a significant predictor of share intention ( $\beta = .67$ ,  $p = .00$ ), accounting for 33.2% of the variance (see *Table 33*), thus, H9(b) is supported.

**Table 33: Results from H9(b) Regression Analysis**

R	R <sup>2</sup>	S.E.	F-ratio	Sig.	B	S.E.	Sig.
.58	.33	.80	702.70	.00	.67	.02	.00

## **5.6 Conclusion**

The research objectives of this quantitative phase of the study were to test the influence of the different types (RO3) and framings (RO4) of word-of-mouth communications on social networking sites, to test whether the influence of these communications varies depending upon product involvement (RO5) and product classification (RO6), to examine the moderating effect of these product characteristics on the relationship between the sender characteristics and influence (RO7), and to test whether greater influence results in increased purchase and share intention (RO8).

These research objectives were achieved with all communication types and framings tested found to be influential however one not more so than the others. Product involvement was found to moderate influence whilst communications were equally as influential regardless of product classification. Sender characteristics proved largely unaffected by variations in product characteristics with product involvement only affecting trustworthiness and product classification only affecting homophily. Lastly, influence was found to be positively related to both purchase and share intention. The following chapter discusses these findings along with their implications, contributions, limitations, and future research directions.

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## **6. CHAPTER 6 – CONCLUSION**

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### **6.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this thesis is to address the research question of how individuals are influenced by word-of-mouth communications on social networking sites. In answer to this, the following chapter begins with a discussion of results derived from both the qualitative and quantitative phases of the study. The lack of extant research surrounding word-of-mouth communications on social networking sites renders these findings important and thus, the conceptual, methodological, and practical significance of the study is detailed. Despite these contributions, the study is not without limitations and these are identified alongside possible avenues for future research.

### **6.2 Discussion of Results**

Discussed below are the results derived from data analysis conducted in sections 4.3.3 and 4.4 (Study 1) and 5.4.6 and 5.5 (Study 2) including the implications of the acceptance or rejection of each of the hypotheses tested in Study 2.

#### **6.2.1 Study 1**

##### **6.2.1.1 Themes**

As per section 4.3.3, a number of the themes extracted through content analysis conducted in Study 1 are paralleled with variables identified in the conceptual framework (see *Figure 1*), substantiating their inclusion in the framework.

### **6.2.1.1.1 Sender Characteristics**

Analysis of the sender related themes revealed communications are of greater influence if posted by friends with whom participants have close or long standing relationships or with whom they share common interests. These findings are congruent with prior research on tie strength and homophily (Archer-Brown et al., 2012; Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Brown et al., 2007; Brown & Reingen, 1987; Gilly et al., 1998; Shabsogh et al., 2012). Regarding tie strength, participants noted long standing friendships to be more influential than friendships with people they've met recently however this is contingent upon continued contact with the older acquaintance, in the absence of which, participants indicated the more recently acquired friendships would be of greater influence. This finding is congruent with the measures of tie strength of 'length of time the individuals have known each other' and 'frequency of interaction between the individuals' respectively (Brown & Reingen, 1987; Frenzen & Nakamoto, 1993; Ward & Reingen, 1990).

Additionally, participants preferred communications from friends considered knowledgeable and trustworthy, congruent with prior research on source credibility (Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Chu & Kamal, 2008; Harmon & Coney, 1982; McGinnies & Ward, 1980; Shabsogh et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2005; Wu & Shaffer, 1987). Participants also cited Facebook communications posted by friends to be generally more trustworthy than communications originating from companies which is in line with existing research on the credibility of user generated content (Cheong & Morrison, 2008; Johnson & Kaye, 2004; Mangold & Faulds, 2009). This finding also supports the proposition that communications on social networking sites are influential due to the receiver's knowledge of the sender and the existing friendship between them compared to the anonymity of other user generated content such as blogs and reviews.

### **6.2.1.1.2 Message Characteristics**

Consistent with the findings of Jessmer and Anderson (2001) and Schindler and Bickart (2012), participants indicated that well written communications were of greater influence than poorly written, emotional communications. As theorized by Schindler and Bickart (2012), participants also noted a preference for objective, evaluative information rather than subjective, descriptive information. This finding is consistent with research on high versus low quality communications and their subsequent levels of influence (Lee et al., 2008; Park et al., 2007; Petty & Cacioppo, 1984; Petty et al., 1983).

With regard to length of communication, participants noted requiring a certain amount of information in order for communications to be influential however it was also noted that greater attention is afforded to shorter communications with longer communications more likely to be ignored. These findings are similar to Schindler and Bickart (2012) who determined an optimal length past which communications were considered too long. Although there is an absence of data on the ideal length of consumer posted Facebook communications, social media reports on brand posted communications have found similar results measuring the length of posts against consumer engagement (BlitzMetrics, 2013; Lee, 2014; Simply Measured, 2013). These reports found longer posts received less engagement with one indicating an optimal status update length of 50-99 characters with engagement waning every 50 characters thereafter (BlitzMetrics, 2013; Lee, 2014; Simply Measured, 2013).

Participants also noted communications containing visual elements more likely to gain their attention and subsequently influence them than those without. This finding echoes social media reports (e.g. Corliss, 2012; Simply Measured, 2013) on engagement levels of brand posted communications. According to Simply Measured (2013), “visual content is the primary driver of engagement on Facebook” with photos ranked by far the most engaging communication type. With past research comparing engagement on photo

posts versus non-photo posts finding photo posts receive 53% more likes and 104% more comments (Corliss, 2012).

As anticipated, both visibility of communications and effort expended by the sender impact the level of influence of communications. In terms of visibility, participants noted less visible communications (such as 'likes' and short status updates) to be less influential, indicating that communications are more influential if they are more observable. Regarding effort, participants indicated that communications requiring senders to exert effort by taking and uploading photos or videos and writing descriptions are more influential than less onerous communications such as just clicking 'like' on a page.

Whilst effort expended, visual elements, and visibility aren't paralleled with variables in the conceptual framework, they are inherent elements of the variable 'communication type' (e.g. some communication types require more effort to post, are more observable, or contain more visual elements than others) and as such, are captured under this variable.

#### **6.2.1.1.3 Receiver Characteristics**

Consistent with Bansal and Voyer (2002), Herr et al. (1991), and Skourtis et al. (2012), participants noted communications regarding products they are unaware of or possess little prior knowledge of to generate more interest and subsequently bear greater influence than communications regarding familiar products. Participants also noted an increased likelihood to pay attention to and be influenced by communications perceived to be personally relevant with communications not personally relevant deemed uninfluential. This finding is consistent with existing research which recognises involvement / relevance as a moderator of influence (Cheung et al., 2009; Hass, 1981; Park et al., 2007; Skourtis et al., 2012; Wu & Wang, 2011).

#### **6.2.1.1.4 Other**

As outlined in section 4.3.3.1.4, whilst there were other additional themes identified as reasons why communications were or weren't influential, these were highlighted by fewer participants and present a challenge in terms of classification due to the variation in content viewed by participants. These themes are more subjective and are dependent upon the 'friends' participants have on their social networking account, the type of content posted by their friends, and their knowledge / perception of their friends. In exemplification of this, regarding the theme of 'rarity', one person might be accustomed to seeing positive content posted by their friends and thus, when negative content is posted, this may stand out. Conversely, another person may be accustomed to seeing negative content posted by their friends and thus, when positive content is posted, that may be the content that captures their attention.

#### **6.2.1.1.5 Outcomes Of Influence**

The themes of creates awareness, reminds, generates interest to research further, changes attitude or opinion, reduces risk, share intention, and purchase intention / purchase are identified as outcomes of influence, referring to the behavioural changes in participants engendered subsequent to viewing communications.

Notably, a number of these outcomes are paralleled with traditional advertising in terms of the functions of advertising and responses such as the hierarchy of effects model and the innovation adoption model, occurring as both standalone outcomes as well as a precursors to purchase (Armstrong & Kotler, 2011; Chitty et al., 2008; Masterson & Pickton, 2014; Pride et al., 2012; Solomon et al., 2014). Similar to outcomes of advertising such as awareness, interest, and preference, outcomes of word-of-mouth communications included creating awareness, reminding, generating interest, and changing attitude or opinion of a brand, product, or service.

The finding that participants noted communications to be influential when interpreted as a 'seal of approval' from friends is consistent with theories of social proof and social risk. The principle of social proof states that individuals determine appropriate behaviour based on the behaviour of others (Cialdini, 1993; Cialdini, Wosinska, Barrett, Butner, & Gornik-Durose, 1999; Goethals & Darley, 1977; Miller, 1984). As it is through social comparison with others that individuals validate their opinions and decisions (Cialdini et al., 1999; Festinger, 1954). Social risk refers to the concern that consumption decisions may affect others' opinions of the individual (Friedman & Friedman, 1979; Quintal & Phau, 2013; Roehl & Fesenmaier, 1992). Thus approval from friends reduces individuals' social risk of utilising particular brands, products, or services.

Similarly, greater security in utilising brands, products, or services after viewing positively framed communications as well as trusting negatively framed communications in preventing negative experiences is congruent with avoidance of other risks such as financial risk; that the purchase will not provide value for money or will result in further costs, performance risk; that the purchase will not perform as expected, and time risk; that the purchase will take up too much time or be a waste of time (Forsythe, Liu, Shannon, & Gardner, 2006; Friedman & Friedman, 1979; Fuchs & Reichel, 2011; Horton, 1976; Mitchell, 1998; Quintal & Phau, 2013; Roehl & Fesenmaier, 1992).

Subsequently, participants highlighted instances where they purchased or intended to purchase products or frequent restaurants subsequent to viewing positively framed communications as well as avoiding establishments after viewing negatively framed communications. This is congruent with past word-of-mouth studies that have found a positive relationship between word-of-mouth communications and purchase intention (Huang & Chen, 2006; Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012; Park & Lee, 2009; Skourtis et al., 2012; Sparks & Browning, 2011; Weinberger & Dillon, 1980).

A positive relationship was also observed between word-of-mouth communications and share intention with participants expressing their

intention to recommend establishments after viewing positively framed communications as well as recommend against establishments after viewing negatively framed communications. Whilst past research on intention to recommend / share has typically only measured share intention in conjunction with other behavioural intentions such as purchase intention, these studies have found a positive relationship between word-of-mouth communications and share intention, congruent with findings of the present study (Floh et al., 2013; Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012; Lee & Youn, 2006; Park et al., 2007; Skourtis et al., 2012).

### **6.2.1.2 Research Objectives**

Discussed below are the results for each of the research objectives derived from data analysis conducted in sections 4.3.3 and 4.4.

#### **6.2.1.2.1 Research Objective 1**

As proposed based on an initial preliminary exploration of Facebook, the five main communication types of 'photos', 'check-ins', 'shares', 'status updates', and 'likes' were all identified by participants. Additional communication types of 'videos' and 'tags' were also identified however these were only discussed by a few participants, indicating these communication types are less common.

In development of Research Objective 1, it was anticipated that the communication types identified may bear differing levels of influence dependent upon factors such as the effort required by users to post the communication, the credibility of the communication based on its original source, and the visibility of the communication. Both the effort expended by users and the visibility of the communication were noted as significant determinants of influence, in particular as to why shares were influential and why likes were less influential. The supposition, based upon a review of literature on the influence of user generated content versus professionally created content, was that shared content would bear less influence than

other communication types due to its external origin (Cheong & Morrison, 2008; Johnson & Kaye, 2004; Mangold & Faulds, 2009). However the origin of the content didn't affect its level of influence as much as anticipated with participants indicating shares to still be quite influential.

Whilst participants indicated all five types of communications to be somewhat influential, photos, shares, and check-ins, respectively, were the most influential with status updates and likes bearing less influence. Whilst there is an absence of data on user posted communications for comparison, the finding that photos are the most influential communication type is congruent with recent social media reports (e.g. Barker et al., 2017; Corliss, 2012) on brand posted communications. These reports suggest users prefer viewing visual content over reading blocks of text, typically liking and commenting more on posts containing images, with photos achieving the highest engagement per post (Barker et al., 2017; Corliss, 2012).

#### **6.2.1.2.2 Research Objective 2**

As proposed based on an initial preliminary exploration of Facebook, the three message framings; positive, negative, and neutral, were identified by participants. Whilst no other message framings were identified, two participants did indicate the neutral message framing to be more indicative of a 'weak positive' framing, with the rationale that if someone posts, they must be 'a little bit positive', otherwise they wouldn't bother posting.

In terms of level of influence, the majority of participants (8 out of 15) indicated positive message framings were of the greatest influence with 5 selecting negative and 2 selecting neutral. The finding that positively framed messages are the most influential is congruent with prior research by Ahluwalia (2002), East, Hammond, and Lomax (2008), and Floh et al. (2012) on positive word-of-mouth.

Despite this finding, it is worth noting the rationale provided by participants for their ranking of influence of the message framings. Irrespective of

whether participants indicated positively or negatively framed messages to be the most influential, one of the main reasons cited for their influence was rarity. As discussed in 6.2.1.1.4, this presents a challenge in terms of consistency and prediction as this explanation is subjective, varying from person to person dependent on an individual's friends and the type of content they typically post. Some individuals might have friends who utilise social networking sites to vent frustrations with products, in which case, seeing positive content might cut through the negativity. Conversely, if an individual has friends who rarely post negative content, then negatively framed communications are likely to gain their attention.

## **6.2.2 Study 2**

### **6.2.2.1 Research Objectives**

Discussed below are the results for each of the research objectives derived from data analysis conducted in sections 5.4.6 and 5.5.

#### **6.2.2.1.1 Research Objective 3 – Communication Type**

Hypothesis 1 was supported with results confirming all three communication types; photos, shares, and check-ins, posted on social networking sites are influential. Furthermore, as the least influential (but still somewhat influential) communication type was utilised as the control, the observed level of influence is considered conservative. As no previous studies have confirmed this influence, it was an important first step to establish its existence. The implication of which is the knowledge that brand related communications posted by consumers on social networking sites influence other consumers. Hypothesis 2 predicted that photos would be the most influential communication type. However this hypothesis was not supported, indicating that whilst all three communication types are influential, no one type is more influential than the others. These results assert that shares and check-ins should not be disregarded as these communication types influence consumers just as much as photos. This finding cannot be compared with

past research as no prior studies have compared the level of influence of communication types on social networking sites.

#### **6.2.2.1.2 Research Objective 4 – Message Framing**

Hypothesis 3 was supported with results confirming that both positively and negatively framed communications posted on social networking sites are influential. Furthermore, as the least influential (but still somewhat influential) message framing was utilised as the control, the observed level of influence is considered conservative. As no previous studies have examined the influence of positively and negatively framed communications on social networking sites, it was an important first step to establish that both message framings are influential.

Hypothesis 4 predicted that positively framed communications would be more influential than negatively framed communications however this hypothesis was not supported. When comparing the means it is evident that whilst both message framings are influential, one is not significantly more influential than the other. The implication of which is that both positive and negative sentiments posted by consumers about brands on social networking sites influence other consumers. This finding isn't unusual given past studies comparing the effects of positive vs. negative message framings have failed to reach a consensus with some studies finding positive word-of-mouth communications to be more influential (e.g. Adjei et al., 2010; Ahluwalia, 2002; East, Hammond, & Lomax, 2008; Floh et al., 2012) and others finding negative word-of-mouth communications to be more influential (e.g. Cheung & Lee, 2008; Park & Lee, 2009).

#### **6.2.2.1.3 Research Objective 5 – Product Involvement**

Hypothesis 5 was supported with results confirming that word-of-mouth communications posted on social networking sites regarding high involvement products are more influential than communications regarding low involvement products. As the variable of product involvement was

operationalized in a 2 x 2 factorial design along with the variable of product classification, this hypothesis required testing in both utilitarian and hedonic contexts and was accepted in both. These results are consistent with findings of Beatty and Smith (1987) that consumers engage in greater information search for high involvement products than for low involvement products and thus are more receptive to information regarding high involvement products. These results suggest that communications posted by consumers on social networking sites regarding complex or high risk products and services such cars, electronics, whitegoods, insurance, etc. are likely to influence other consumers whereas communications regarding low involvement products such as everyday consumables are less likely to influence other consumers.

#### **6.2.2.1.4 Research Objective 6 – Product Classification (Hedonic / Utilitarian)**

Hypothesis 6 predicted that word-of-mouth communications posted on social networking sites regarding hedonic products would be more influential than communications regarding utilitarian products. As the variable of product classification was operationalized in a 2 x 2 factorial design along with the variable of product involvement, this hypothesis required testing in both high product involvement and low product involvement contexts however wasn't supported in either. Whilst the mean was higher for hedonic products than utilitarian products in the high involvement context, this was only significant at .065. Whilst this exact relationship hasn't previously been tested, past electronic word-of-mouth studies (e.g. Sen & Lerman, 2007; Smith et al., 2005) have found product classification to moderate word-of-mouth communications. As such, findings from the present study differ from past research, indicating that the classification of a product; whether the product is hedonic or utilitarian, is not a determinant of the level of influence of word-of-mouth communications on social networking sites. This means that communications regarding products and services utilised for fun or enjoyment are equally as influential as communications regarding products and services utilised for practical / functional purposes.

### **6.2.2.1.5 Research Objective 7 – Sender Characteristics**

Hypothesis 7 predicted that the characteristics a sender of a communication possesses; their Expertise (H7a), Trustworthiness (H7b), Homophily (H7c), and Tie Strength (H7d), would be of greater importance to receivers in evaluating communications regarding high involvement products than communications regarding low involvement products. As the variable of product involvement was operationalized in a 2 x 2 factorial design along with the variable of product classification, this hypothesis required testing in both hedonic and utilitarian contexts and was for the most part unsupported with only Trustworthiness (H7b) supported in the hedonic context. This indicates that the characteristics of senders are equally as important in evaluating communications for both high involvement and low involvement products.

The exception to which is the support of H7b in the hedonic context, indicating that trustworthiness is the one sender characteristic that is of greater importance for high involvement products than for low involvement products. This means that receivers are more concerned with whether the sender is trustworthy when products are more complex and their purchases involve greater risk. This result is congruent with past studies (e.g. Adjei et al., 2010) which assert that consumers require greater decision effort and seek out more information before purchasing complex or high risk products and thus rely more heavily on information provided by others. As such, it stands to reason that when purchasing such high risk products, consumers are cautious to ensure the sources they are relying on are trustworthy.

Hypothesis 8 predicted that the characteristics a sender of a communication possesses would differ in importance to receivers depending on whether the communication is regarding a hedonic product or a utilitarian product. Expertise (H8a) and Trustworthiness (H8b) were hypothesized to be more important for utilitarian products whilst Homophily (H8c) and Tie Strength (H8d) were hypothesized to be more important for hedonic products. As the variable of product classification was operationalized in a 2 x 2 factorial

design along with the variable of product involvement, this hypothesis required testing in both high involvement and low involvement contexts.

H8a and H8b were unsupported in both contexts, indicating that the sender characteristics of Expertise and Trustworthiness are equally as important in evaluating communications regardless of the classification of the product. Previous studies (e.g. Feick & Higie, 1992; Friedman & Friedman, 1979; Stafford et al., 2002) have found that for utilitarian products, consumers prefer sources with experience / expertise, with Smith et al. (2005) finding the more utilitarian the product, the stronger the impact of expertise on perceived influence. However this didn't hold true for the present study when tested in a social networking site context.

H8c was supported in both contexts, indicating Homophily is of greater importance when evaluating communications regarding hedonic products than communications regarding utilitarian products. This finding is consistent with Sen and Lerman's (2007) theory that due to the subjectivity of the evaluation of hedonic products, consumers will look to sources perceived as being alike. Smith et al. (2005, p. 27) explain, "consumers may infer similarity in product tastes from similarity in profile" with their study finding that for hedonic products, consumers prefer peer sources perceived to share personal characteristics, tastes, values, and / or beliefs. This means that when it comes to products and services utilised for fun or enjoyment, it is important to consumers that sources are similar to themselves whereas for products and services utilised for practical / functional purposes this is less important.

H8d was unsupported in both contexts, indicating that the sender characteristic of Tie Strength is equally as important in evaluating communications regardless of the classification of the product. Whilst Feick and Higie (1992) found that decisions regarding hedonic products were more influenced by those with whom consumers shared strong ties, Smith et al. (2005) were unable replicate this, finding rapport was equally as important for both hedonic and utilitarian purchases. As such, results from the present

study are congruent with Smith et al.'s (2005) more recent finding, with tie strength found to be equally as important for both hedonic and utilitarian products in a social networking site context.

#### **6.2.2.1.6 Research Objective 8 – Outcomes**

Hypothesis 9 was supported with results indicating that influence from word-of-mouth communications posted on social networking sites is positively related to both Purchase Intention (H9a) and Share Intention (H9b). Thus, receivers who view and are influenced by word-of-mouth communications posted on social networking sites have an increased likelihood of subsequently purchasing the brand / product / service and sharing the communication regarding the brand / product / service.

These results are consistent with previous electronic word-of-mouth studies that have found a positive relationship between electronic word-of-mouth (typically in the form of reviews) and purchase intention, with positive word-of-mouth resulting in an increased likelihood of purchasing, and negative word-of-mouth resulting in a decreased likelihood of purchasing (Floh et al., 2013; Huang & Chen, 2006; Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012; Park & Lee, 2009; Skourtis et al., 2012; Sparks & Browning, 2011). Whilst little research exists surrounding share intention, past studies (e.g. Floh et al., 2013; Lee & Youn, 2009; Skourtis et al., 2012) have found a positive relationship between electronic word-of-mouth (typically in the form of reviews) and intention to recommend which is congruent with results from this study.

#### **6.2.2.1.7 Control Variables**

Testing of the control variables revealed a positive relationship between the receiver characteristics of Personal Expertise, Personal Involvement, and Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence and the dependent variable of Perceived Influence.

The positive relationship between Personal Involvement and Perceived Influence indicates that communications are of greater influence on those with high Personal Involvement in a product / service than those with low Personal Involvement. This means that consumers are more likely to be influenced by communications regarding products that are personally relevant to them and conversely, seemingly persuasive communications may do little to affect consumers if they are not interested in the product the communication pertains to. This finding is consistent with previous studies that have found a moderating effect of personal involvement, with high involvement consumers more influenced by word-of-mouth communications than low involvement consumers (Lee et al., 2008; Park et al., 2007; Skourtis et al., 2012; Wu & Wang, 2011).

As a number of studies (e.g. Bloch et al., 1986; Kiel & Layton, 1981; Punj & Staelin, 1983) have found a negative relationship between expertise and information search, the relationship between Personal Expertise and Perceived Influence was posited to be negative. However the present study observed a positive relationship between Personal Expertise and Perceived Influence, indicating that communications are of greater influence on those with high Personal Expertise in a product / service than those with low Personal Expertise. Whilst this finding wasn't expected, it isn't unusual given the varied findings of Gilly et al.'s (1998) studies and the findings of positive relationships of Adjei et al. (2010) and Johnson and Russo (1984). In the present study this could potentially be explained by the significant ( $p < .01$ ) correlation between Personal Expertise and Personal Involvement ( $r = .393$ ). The implication of which is that consumers who possess expertise might be more influenced because they are personally very highly involved in the product category, however further research is required to clarify the operation of this variable.

The positive relationship between Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence and Perceived Influence indicates that communications are of greater influence on those with high Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence than those with low Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence. Whilst past studies

(e.g. Bone, 1995; Podnar & Javernik, 2012) found Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence did not moderate the influence of word-of-mouth communications, recent studies such as Podnar and Javernik (2012) and Floh et al. (2013) note the need for further testing of this variable, positing a relationship may be found in electronic word-of-mouth contexts such as social networking sites, as was confirmed in the present study.

### **6.3 Contributions of Research**

The significant conceptual, methodological, and practical contributions from both phases of the study are outlined below.

#### **6.3.1 Conceptual / Theoretical**

The first major theoretical contribution of this study is the conceptualisation of a holistic model of the operation of word-of-mouth on social networking sites. Whilst previous studies have acknowledged and tested varying combinations of outcomes and sender, message, receiver, and product characteristics, none have expanded on this to develop a holistic model encompassing all of these variables. Furthermore, these outcomes and characteristics were yet to be tested in a social networking site context and thus, there was a need for determination of the operation of word-of-mouth on social networking sites.

The second major theoretical contribution of this study is the provision of empirical evidence of the existence of influence from word-of-mouth communications exchanged on social networking sites. As the first of its kind, this study adds to the existing body of knowledge on social influence, word-of-mouth, and social media by filling a knowledge gap with regard to the operation of word-of-mouth on social networking sites, revealing the following;

- Word-of-mouth communications in the form of photos, shares, and check-ins are *all* influential. Qualitative results suggest status updates

and likes are also mildly influential however this was not tested quantitatively due to the scope of this phase of the study.

- Positively framed and negatively framed social networking site word-of-mouth communications are *both* influential.
- Social networking site word-of-mouth communications regarding high involvement products are more influential than communications regarding low involvement products.
- Trustworthiness of senders is of greater importance for high involvement products than for low involvement products.
- Homophily between senders and receivers is more important for hedonic products than for utilitarian products.
- Influence from social networking site word-of-mouth communications is positively related to both purchase intention and share intention.
- Personal expertise, personal involvement, and susceptibility to interpersonal influence all moderate the level of influence word-of-mouth communications have on receivers.

Further adding to the existing body of knowledge, the qualitative component of the study garnered an in depth understanding of specifically how and why consumers are influenced, extracting a number of common themes among participants. In addition to themes mirroring the sender, message, and receiver characteristics outlined in the conceptual model, participants also noted other aspects of communications as determinants of their influence. These were aspects such as the visual elements contained within communications, visibility of communications, rarity of viewing certain communications, repeated exposure to the same communications, and the effort exerted by the sender. As well as the outcomes of purchase and share

intention, participants indicated communications have additional effects such as creating awareness, providing reminders of products, generating interest to research into products, changing attitudes or opinions, and reduction of risk when communications are relied on in the purchase decision making process.

Lastly, as the first study of its kind in Australia, this research demonstrates the applicability of the social networking site word-of-mouth framework in an Australian context. Furthermore, results from the study provide empirical evidence of the influence of word-of-mouth communications on social networking sites among Australian consumers. As per Cheung et al. (2009), this provides a foundation for further studies to replicate this study in other regions in order to conduct cross-cultural comparisons.

### **6.3.2 Methodological**

The first methodological contribution of this study is that it demonstrates the applicability of a mixed method approach in exploring the operation of word-of-mouth on social networking sites. A sequential research design was necessary in this study due to the initial exploratory nature of the study however parallel designs could also be utilised in future studies (Saunders et al., 2009). Whilst a quantitative component is necessary due to its ability to facilitate the collection of large sample sizes and testing of large volumes of data, qualitative studies enable exploration of exactly how and why this influence operates. This is necessary for businesses and brands to develop an understanding of the nature in which consumers are influenced, especially given this is a fairly new area requiring further research still.

Additionally, as this study utilises previously developed constructs, another methodological contribution of the study is further validation of the following established scales and confirmation of their applicability to be utilised in a social networking site word-of-mouth context;

- Consumption Occasion (Hedonic / Utilitarian) (Wakefield & Inman, 2003)

- Involvement (Ratchford, 1987)
- Involvement With The Product (Chandrashekar, 2004)
- Susceptibility To Interpersonal Influence (Bearden et al., 1989)
- Expertise (Netemeyer & Bearden, 1992)
- Trustworthiness (Ohanian, 1990)
- Homophily (De Bruyn & Lilien, 2008)
- Tie Strength (Frenzen & Davis, 1990)
- Purchase Intention (Lepkowska-White et al., 2003)
- Forwarding Intention (Lin et al., 2006)

### **6.3.3 Practical / Managerial**

From a managerial perspective, findings of this study will have practical implications for marketers utilising social media as a marketing tool. According to the latest Social Media Marketing Industry Report (Stelzner, 2018), 94% of marketers are using Facebook as a marketing tool with 62% planning on increasing their Facebook activities. Furthermore, 90% of marketers want to know what social tactics are most effective with 79% wanting to learn more about Facebook specifically (Stelzner, 2018). As such, findings from this study address these questions and will assist marketers in understanding how consumers are influenced by one another on social networking sites. Whilst the characteristics senders and receivers possess are important in understanding the operation of influence, businesses have far less control over these personal attributes than the nature and style of content exchanged between consumers. As such, more pertinent to practitioners is which types of communications and content are most influential as these aspects have the potential to be manipulated.

During in depth interviews, all but one participant ranked posts with photos either the most or second most influential type of communication, indicating marketers should direct the greatest focus towards photos. As to why photos were the most influential, participants cited their visual nature with photos offering consumers far greater information about products than they could

extract from posts containing only words. Visibility was also cited as a key factor with participants indicating posts containing photos stand out more and thus more successfully attract their attention. As such, marketers should, where practical, encourage consumers to post photos of their interactions with products and brands and to add photos to status updates to enhance their visual appeal. As Barker et al. (2017, p. 159) echo, “good, compelling content is important for engagement but can be boosted by powerful images”. Whilst some businesses are already experimenting with this notion, it is clear there remains a lack of understanding of exactly how and why brand interactions will benefit brands in terms of subsequent social influence. An illustrative example is *Figure 21* which depicts an outdoor advertisement by fast food chain Salsa’s encouraging consumers to photograph themselves (termed a ‘selfie’) with the billboard in order to receive a free food. Whilst the act of taking the ‘selfie’ may attract the attention of passing commuters, the consumer isn’t further encouraged to contribute this photo to social media, limiting its potential reach / influence.

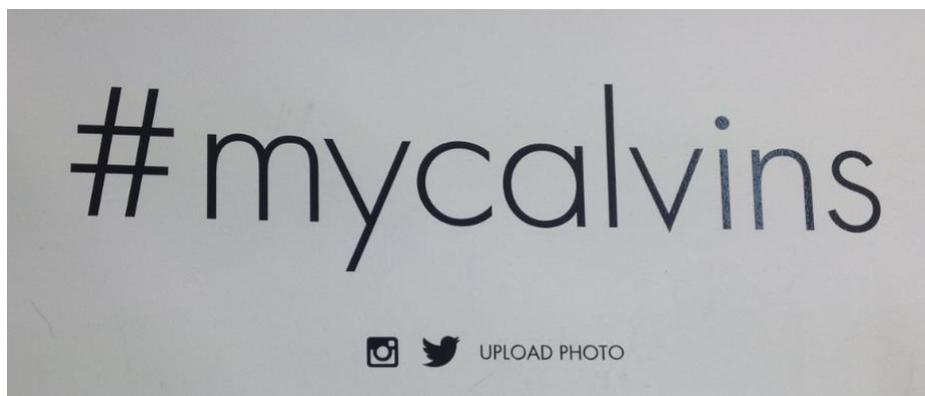
**Figure 21: Outdoor Advertising on Car Park Wall – Perth, WA**



(📷: Delane Osborne, 5<sup>th</sup> December 2014)

Figure 22 depicts a different approach adopted by Calvin Klein whereby consumers are encouraged to upload photos to social media platforms of themselves in Calvin Klein garments accompanied by the hashtag #mycalvins. This approach is considered more organic in that consumers are not incentivised with free products but rather, are uploading photos due to a natural affinity with the brand and its products, given they receive no immediate tangible reward for this action.

**Figure 22: Wall Decal in Change Room – Calvin Klein Burnside, SA**



(📷: Delane Osborne, 18<sup>th</sup> November 2014)

The second most influential communication type indicated by participants is shares – a result that bears implications for marketers given recent statistics indicate “Facebook users receive 70% of news links from family and friends and only 13% from news organizations and journalists” (Medoff & Kaye, 2017, p. 218). Participants noted the effort expended by the poster as the main reason for the influence of shares, explaining that if someone has gone to the effort of intentionally sharing content, they must feel it pertinent that their friends see it. As such, marketers should encourage consumers to share positive content about their brand e.g. new products, awards, events, new articles, etc. Whilst it is difficult for marketers to dissuade consumers from sharing negative content, brand managers should ensure they monitor social media channels for any negative content being posted and address it immediately.

The third communication type bearing influence is check-ins with participants citing the usefulness of accompanying details along with the inherent safety in the knowledge that friends have trialled the establishment with positive experiences as reasons for their influence. As with photos, some businesses are already experimenting with encouraging consumers to check-in in order to reap the benefits of the positive social influence discussed above. *Figure 23* and *Figure 24* are two such examples of restaurants incentivising diners to check-in through the provision of free food.

**Figure 23: On Table Display – Hog’s Breath Café Northbridge, WA**



(📷: Delane Osborne, 6<sup>th</sup> August 2015)

**Figure 24: Sponsored Ad on Facebook**

(📷: Delane Osborne, 28<sup>th</sup> June, 2014)

Considering the potential influence of photos, shares, and check-ins, marketers should look to leverage social media interactions by encouraging consumers to post these types of positive communications. Similarly, consumers should be dissuaded from posting negatively framed communications through encouraging direct contact with businesses so that any dissatisfaction can be resolved prior to any posts that could prove detrimental to the brand. The effect of these communications must not be understated as this study proves that not only are these communications influential, but that influence impacts consumer purchase intentions.

Whilst opportunities exist for businesses to manipulate these consumer-to-consumer interactions, it is prudent to be mindful of authenticity and saturation. At present, social networking site word-of-mouth communications are interpreted by receivers as genuine with senders only motivated to post through a desire to share experiences and inform friends. However promotions incentivising posting such as those depicted in *Figure 23* and

*Figure 24* run the risk of prompting consumers to post when they otherwise wouldn't, motivated solely by the incentive offered. Receivers may in turn pick up on the insincerity of these posts and subsequently discount them. As such, it is important for marketing practitioners to strike a balance between encouraging consumers to post but in a manner that retains authenticity. Furthermore, if numerous businesses were to undertake such manipulations, users news feeds would fast become inundated with such posts to the point of saturation, rendering the communications less influential. Thus, early adoption of such tactics is paramount to successful implementation.

Whilst this study was conducted on the social networking site Facebook, findings can be applied across other social networking platforms that share similar operations such as Twitter and Instagram. Like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram users can also upload photos, 'like' posts, tag locations (equivalent to check-ins), and share content, termed 'retweets' and 'regrams' respectively (Charlesworth, 2015). As such, this study proves useful not just for marketers utilising Facebook as a marketing tool, but social networking platforms in general.

#### **6.4 Limitations and Future Research Directions**

Whilst results from this study prove significant in filling research gaps and contributing to the existing body of knowledge on social influence and word-of-mouth communications exchanged on social networking sites, this study is not without limitations. The first of which is methodological, regarding the perceived influence scale utilised. As with Bansal and Voyer's (2000) study, Gilly et al.'s (1998) scale required adaptation in order to be utilised in the social networking site word-of-mouth context. As such, there is a need for future studies to undertake scale development to develop a scale suited specifically to the purposes of measuring influence from word-of-mouth communications on social networking sites.

Due to the quantitative research design for this study being experimental, it was unfeasible to test the direct effect of the four sender characteristics on

perceived influence within the study. Whilst these variables were tested, it was in respect to the effect of their moderators and thus, future studies should incorporate testing of the direct effect of these four variables. Additionally, due to the scope of the study and the focus on testing the influence of the communication types and message framings, the variables of message quality, valence intensity, and prior knowledge weren't tested, only controlled. As such, future research could look to provide empirical evidence of these relationships on social networking sites.

Whilst results from the qualitative phase of the study indicate photos are the most influential communication type followed by shares and check-ins respectively, results from the quantitative phase of the study found no significant difference in influence between the three types. As such, it is recommended that future studies explore this further in order to confirm which communication type is unequivocally the most influential. Likewise, results from the qualitative phase of the study indicate positively framed communications are more influential than negatively framed communications however quantitative results found no significant difference in influence between the framings. This is not abnormal given results from past research is divided as to whether positive or negative word-of-mouth is more influential however further exploration is recommended in order to determine which framing is the most influential for word-of-mouth communications exchanged on social networking sites. Also noteworthy is the positive relationship found between personal expertise and perceived influence which is contrary to prior research. As such, further research is required in order to clarify this relationship.

Although additional determinants of influence such as exposure and rarity and outcomes of influence such as reduction of risk were identified through content analysis in phase one of the study, further exploration of these themes is required prior to positing their fit within the word-of-mouth framework. Consequently, these themes weren't subjected to testing in the quantitative phase of the study and as such, future studies should look to conceptualise these phenomena in order to determine their operation within

the word-of-mouth framework. Furthermore, whilst additional relationships may exist between the variables within the social networking site word-of-mouth framework, the relationships explored in the present study were only those affecting influence. As such, further studies could explore other possible relationships within the social networking site word-of-mouth model such as those explored by past electronic word-of-mouth studies e.g. the effect of consumers' Personal Involvement and Personal Expertise on their Intention To Share (Skourtis et al., 2012), the effect of Valence Intensity on Purchase Intention and Intention To Share (Floh et al., 2013), the relationship between Message Framing and Product Classification (Sen & Lerman, 2007), and the moderating effect of Personal Involvement on the relationship between Message Quality and Intention To Share (Park et al., 2007).

Regarding products, it would also be of interest to explore the level of influence of different types of products / services to confirm if results are replicable across other product categories. Furthermore, the lack of significance in some tests of moderation by product involvement and product classification could potentially be due to variability in influence by product category and as such, replication with different products could determine whether this is the case. Additionally, as the majority of the treatments for this study were positively framed, it would not be appropriate to generalize these findings for negative word-of-mouth communications on social networking sites without first testing this model with negatively framed treatments.

Similarly, as this study was conducted among Australian Facebook users, caution should be exercised in extending findings beyond this demographic. As per Cheung et al. (2009), further studies should look to replicate this study in other regions in order to assess the operation of social networking site word-of-mouth in other geographical regions / cultures.

Finally, as Smith et al. (2005, p. 33) note, findings of this study "may be limited by fact that subjects simulated decision making...there were no physical or psychological benefits and / or costs associated". So although

perceived influence was positively related to purchase intention and share intention, it would be beneficial for future studies to explore influence through actual consumption decisions made subsequent to receiving word-of-mouth on social networking sites.

## **6.5 Conclusion**

This dissertation contributes to the existing body of knowledge by filling a research gap regarding the operation of social influence through word-of-mouth communications on social media. With the rapid growth of social media and the advent of platforms such as social networking sites, communications exchanged on these sites are becoming increasingly influential. Given this influence affects the consumption behaviours of individuals, this is an important area of research for marketing practitioners in particular who seek to understand the behaviour of their consumers.

This study sought to address the specific research question of how individuals are influenced by word-of-mouth communications on social networking sites. This was achieved through conceptualisation of a holistic model of the operation of word-of-mouth communications on social networking sites. A combination of in-depth interviews and survey questionnaires were employed to explore and test a number of relationships within this model, subsequently providing empirical evidence of the existence of social influence through word-of-mouth communications exchanged on social networking sites.

Results from this study prove significant from a managerial perspective for marketers and social media managers by providing an understanding of how consumers are influenced by one another on social networking sites and in particular, which types of communications and content are most influential. As the first study of its kind, this study presents a platform for a myriad of potential future studies to expand on this area of research and continue to build upon knowledge in the field.

## 7. APPENDICES

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### 7.1 Appendix 1 – Recruitment Post on Facebook



**Deejay Osborne**

April 3, 2014 · 🌐 ▼



As some of you may know I'm currently completing my PhD and am seeking some assistance from anyone (this post is public so it need not be just my Facebook friends) who can help me out. I'm seeking participants for 30-45min interviews discussing brand related content viewed on Facebook. As a thank you, I will be offering \$30 Coles/Myer gift cards as remuneration for your time. The interviews will just be with me and will be coded to ensure your anonymity. To participate, you must be aged 18-30, be a frequent user of Facebook (e.g. log-in a few times per week), and be currently living in Perth & surrounds. Interviews will be conducted at day / time / location convenient to participants. If you are interested, please comment below and I will get in touch with further information. Thanks! 😊

### 7.2 Appendix 2 – Recruitment Post on Twitter



**Deejay Osborne**

@DeejayOsborne



Seeking Facebook users age 18-30 for 30-45min interviews, participants will receive \$30 Coles/Myer gift card. Interested? Msg me for details

5:04 PM - 18 Mar 2014

### 7.3 Appendix 3 – Recruitment Poster

# Do you use **facebook** ?

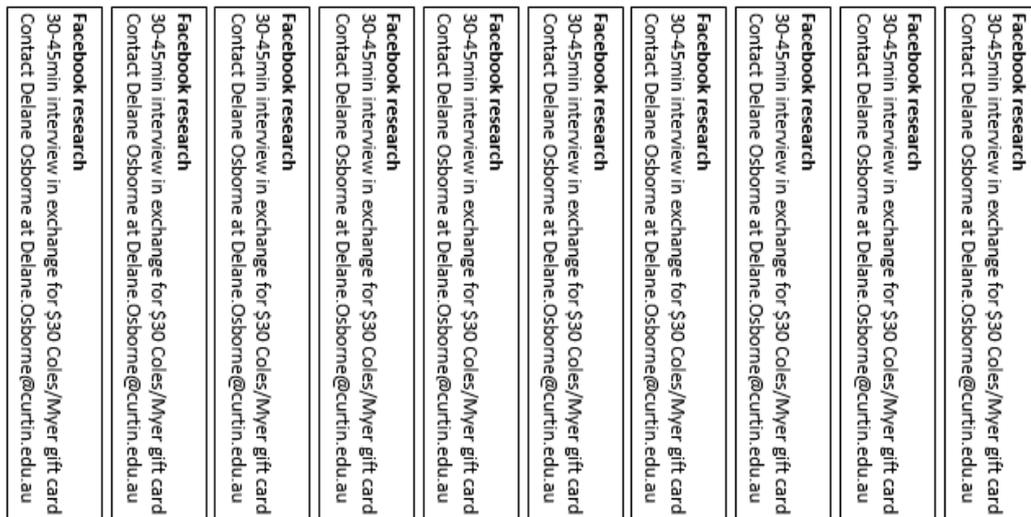
## Want to receive a **\$30 Coles/Myer** **gift card** for participating in world leading research?

Individuals are sought to take part in a study by participating in an interview discussing brand related content viewed on the social networking site Facebook. To participate in this study, individuals must be between the ages of 18 to 30 years old and be frequent users of the site Facebook, averaging at least 3 log-ins per week.

The interview will take approximately 30-45 minutes and will be conducted at a day and time suitable to the participant. **At the completion of the interview, participants will receive a \$30 Coles / Myer gift card for their participation.**

The interview procedure for this study has been approved (approval number: SOM2014005) by Curtin University’s Human Research Ethics Committee in line with Curtin University’s policy on low risk research involving human participants.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact Delane Osborne at [Delane.Osborne@curtin.edu.au](mailto:Delane.Osborne@curtin.edu.au) for further information.



## 7.4 Appendix 4 – Interview Information Sheet



### Social Influence through Brand Related Word-of-Mouth Communications in Social Networking

My name is Delane Osborne and I am a PhD student from the School of Marketing at Curtin University. I am conducting research into the influence of brand related word-of-mouth communications in social networking under the supervision of Dr. Graham Ferguson and Associate Professor Sonia Dickinson in partial completion of my Doctor of Philosophy in marketing.

I am seeking individuals to take part in this study by participating in an interview discussing brand related content viewed on the social networking site Facebook. To participate in this study, individuals must be between the ages of 18 to 30 years old and be frequent users of the site Facebook, averaging at least 3 log-ins per week.

The interview will take approximately 30-45 minutes and will be conducted at a day and time suitable to the participant. During the interview, participants will be required to log-in to their Facebook account and discuss the brand related content visible on their news feed. The interview will be recorded using an audio recording device and screen capture software for ease of post-interview transcription and analysis. Participation is completely voluntary and participants can withdraw from the interview at any time without prejudice. At the completion of the interview, participants will receive a \$30 Coles / Myer gift card for their participation. To protect participants' privacy and the privacy of participants' Facebook friends, all information collected during the interview including names and photos will be de-identified and coded to ensure anonymity in subsequent analysis and publication. During the study, only the researcher and supervisors will have access to recordings collected during interviews.

The interview procedure for this study has been approved (approval number: SOM2014005) by the Human Research Ethics Committee in line with Curtin University's policy on low risk research involving human participants. If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact the researcher or supervisor at the undersigned details. You may also contact the Human Research Ethics Committee at Curtin University on (08) 9266 2784 or by email to [hrec@curtin.edu.au](mailto:hrec@curtin.edu.au).

Thank you for your participation.

**Researcher**

Delane Osborne  
School of Marketing  
Curtin University  
E-mail: [Delane.Osborne@curtin.edu.au](mailto:Delane.Osborne@curtin.edu.au)

**Supervisor**

Graham Ferguson  
School of Marketing  
Curtin University  
E-mail: [Graham.Ferguson@cbs.curtin.edu.au](mailto:Graham.Ferguson@cbs.curtin.edu.au)

**7.5 Appendix 5 – Interview Consent Form**



**Social Influence through Brand Related Word-of-Mouth Communications in Social Networking**

**Consent Form**

- I agree to take part in the above study by participating in an interview discussing brand related content on my Facebook account.
- I am aware that this interview will be recorded using an audio recording device and screen capture software.
- I have been informed that all information collected during the interview will be de-identified and coded to protect my privacy and the privacy of my Facebook friends.
- I consent to the information collected during the interview being utilised in subsequent analysis and publication.
- I understand that my participation in this study is completely voluntary and I may withdraw from the interview at any time without prejudice.
- I have been provided with an information sheet detailing the purposes of the study and the implications of my participation in it
- I have been given an opportunity to ask questions.

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

SIGNATURE: \_\_\_\_\_

CONTACT NUMBER / EMAIL: \_\_\_\_\_

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for your time and effort in participating in this study.

## 7.6 Appendix 6 – Questionnaire Information Sheet



The following research exploring social influence through brand-related word-of-mouth communications on social networking sites is being conducted through the School of Marketing at Curtin University.

Participants are sought to assist in this research by completing a survey regarding posts viewed on Facebook. Participants will be presented with posts regarding brands and products and asked a series of questions regarding those posts.

Participation in this survey is completely voluntary and participants can withdraw from the survey at any time. Please note that the information collected will be transferred to office computers at Curtin University and held in strict confidence with only the researcher having access to the data. All responses remain anonymous and cannot be traced to individual participants.

The Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee in compliance with their policy on research (including compliance with the national statement on ethical conduct in research involving humans) has approved this study with low risk involving human participants (RDBS-20-16). If required, the Human Research Ethics Committee at Curtin University can be contacted on (08) 9266 9223 or by email to [hrec@curtin.edu.au](mailto:hrec@curtin.edu.au). If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact the researcher at the undersigned details.

Researcher:  
Delane Osborne  
School of Marketing  
Curtin University  
Email: [Delane.Osborne@cbs.curtin.edu.au](mailto:Delane.Osborne@cbs.curtin.edu.au)

Researcher:  
Graham Ferguson  
School of Marketing  
Curtin University  
Email: [Graham.Ferguson@cbs.curtin.edu.au](mailto:Graham.Ferguson@cbs.curtin.edu.au)

**Please tick the following to confirm your consent to participate in this study**

- I have received information regarding this research and I believe I understand the purpose, extent, and possible risks of my involvement in this project and I voluntarily consent to participate.

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