

# **SOCIAL COMPARISON OF YOUNG MEN: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS**

by

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“I can do all things through Christ which strengthens me.” – Philippians 4:13

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# SOCIAL COMPARISON OF YOUNG MEN: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS

## ABSTRACT

This study aims to highlight social media influencers' (SMIs) role in social comparison, having young men as the target audience. Existing research published on SMIs and its impact are mainly focused on women. Studies focused on men and SMIs cover the topics of bodybuilding and body idealisation. This study's main objective is to highlight SMIs role in social comparison. The researcher's main goal was to thoroughly analyse both the positive and negative effects to conclude the overall impact SMIs have on young men. It has been determined that if current or known SMI trends persist in social media platforms, the impact may be more harmful than beneficial. This study attempts to carefully and appropriately evaluate the impact of SMIs and mitigate them to avoid adverse effects on society. The results of this research are essential and will be used to show the overall impact of SMIs on the day-to-day lives of many young men. For this study, the researcher opted for the social comparison theory as the study's theoretical framework. This theory points out that people use the comparison process to create an effective benchmark to develop accurate evaluations (Guyer & Vaughan-Johnston, 2018). This theory process begins when individuals decide to learn about themselves by evaluating their traits, beliefs, opinions, and attitudes to others. The social comparison theory points out that people use the comparison process to create an effective benchmark to develop accurate evaluations. The underlying motivations for social comparisons include maintaining positive self-evaluation (downward comparison) and self-enhancement (upward comparison). The researcher discussed the existing literature on social media, the effectiveness of social media, drawbacks of social media, SMIs, and types of social media influencers and introduced the correlation between social media and young men.

Regarding the research methodology for the current study, the philosophical paradigm followed was interpretivism. The approach to theory development chosen was the deducted approach. The study was conducted using a qualitative approach where 20 young men aged 18-26 years old, both from Mozambique and South Africa, were interviewed. For this research, the researcher opted for thematic analysis because it was the most flexible approach to generate mindful insights and concepts from the collected data. This study showed that young men with lower self-esteem are more likely to use strategies to boost their confidence and those with high self-esteem are likely to



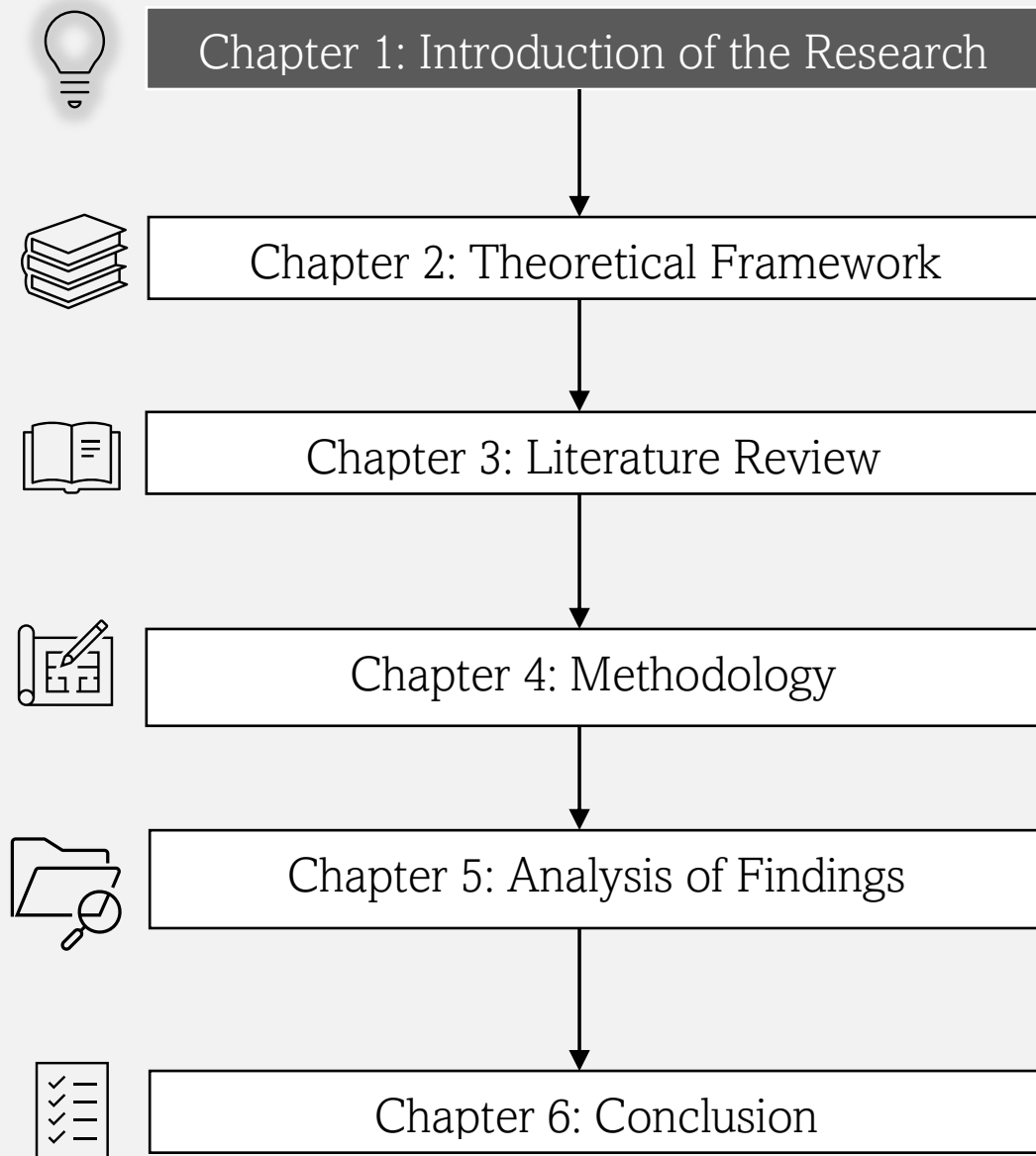
use strategies to maintain it. These results support previous studies that stated that people with high self-esteem are more likely to engage in self-enhancement as people with lower self-esteem avoid engaging in social comparison. The results also show that young men often used SMIs to push themselves to work harder.

Data analysis determined that social media influencers influence participants according to their personal development goals and interests. The in-depth analysis also determined that appearance, purchase behaviour, and motivation were the most common answers on how social media influencers influence young men. The data collected showed that all study participants were aware of possible risks associated with SMIs. The participants believe that young men in today's age can be easily influenced to promote or endorse dangerous political ideologies and beliefs. The study also determined that the unrealistic content created by SMIs might cause envy and depression due to exposure to desirable attributes. This is due to social pressure to follow the existing trends created by social media influencers. The findings of this research can lead to new lines of inquiry due to the limitations faced by the researcher. The researcher was also able to determine that future research should explore issues like how posts or images posted on social media platforms by SMIs may be less impactful to young men compared to women. Future research could compare their responses across all social media platforms and look at the possibility that young men are somewhat protected from any risks and effects of social media exposure regarding appearance. Future research should dive into these possibilities. Assessing the impact of social media influencers on young men's lives focus on broader age gaps. SMIs impact must be carefully and appropriately evaluated and mitigated to avoid adverse effects on society.

**Keywords:**

Social media influencers, social media, social comparison, upward comparison, downward comparison

# 1 INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH



## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

The number of people using social media platforms grows significantly every day. Statistics show that there are around 4.36 billion internet users globally as of January 2021, which is 59.5 percent of the world's population (*Internet Users in the World 2021*, 2021). Data also shows that 4.2 billion people of the 4.66 billion are active social media users (*Internet Users in the World 2021*, 2021). Studies show how the increase in internet and social media usage has completely changed the history of mass communication, pointing out how it transformed how people communicate and interact (Azucar et al., 2018; Zafar et al., 2019). Social media has been a trending topic among scholars and academics, covering the disciplines of business, communication, sociology, and psychology (Auxier & Anderson, 2021; Zhuravskaya et al., 2020). The increasing popularity of social media causes users who carry “power” on social media platforms to influence other users into making decisions. These users are referred to as social media influencers and are known on social media platforms for giving advice related to fashion and lifestyle (Casaló et al., 2018). Users gather all the information provided by social media influencers and decide based on the information (Casaló et al., 2018; Schröder, 2019). Social media influencers' weight on users' decision-making process allows the industry to target users' behaviour (Algharabat et al., 2020; Casaló et al., 2018; Diba et al., 2019). There is a common need to fully understand social media influencers' impact on users' lives. According to Lawlor et al. (2016), today's young adults spend most of their time online.

In today's world, one of the most prevalent activities among young adults is using social media platforms. Young adults use social media platforms to interact with each other, follow trends, build social skills and keep up to date with trending topics worldwide (Lawlor et al., 2016; Liljander et al., 2015). Statistics have shown that more women use social media platforms than men (*Internet Users in the World 2021*, 2021). A study done in Finland in 2020 showed that when the social media platform *WhatsApp* was the most popular site, 91 percent of the users were female, and 77 were male (*Internet Users in the World 2021*, 2021). Due to women being more exposed to social media platforms, there are more studies on the impact that the exposure has on them (Rounsefell et al., 2020; Tiggemann & Zinoviev, 2019). This has resulted in fewer studies considering the effect of the same social media platforms on the male audience. Due to exposure to social media, young men can start developing issues related to their image. This can be caused by personal experiences and interactions on social media platforms (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020a). Even though it is not often discussed, young men are becoming aware of social media platforms' impact on their lives

(Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020a). The impact that social media influencers have on users became a relevant topic on social media because companies started using the influence and power they have to make users believe that there is only one ideal look and that only they can provide (Diba et al., 2019; Zafar et al., 2019). In the following sections, the researcher will be going through the following elements of the study: the background information, the problem statement, the motivation as well of the purpose of the research, the assumptions and limitations, and the chapter layouts.

## **1.2 BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

Social media popularity has been on the rise over the past years. Social media changed the interaction process between users, making it easier for people to communicate and present themselves by simply creating a social media profile (Azucar et al., 2018). Social media platforms became the “place” where users share their thoughts, beliefs, and emotions, which became available for other users to view online (Azucar et al., 2018). The migration of humans to social media platforms has steered scholars and psychologists to study the existing relationships between social media and psychological characteristics (Kosinski et al., 2015). Social media influencers emerged due to the rapid growth of social media platforms. This level of progress has led people and public figures or celebrities who somehow carry social “power” or “weight” to influence a particular group of social media users. Social media influencers are users who create their social profile which is a representation of themselves and a narration of their everyday life. They use the information posted to attract the attention of other users to gain a large number of followers (Khamis et al., 2017). This group of people, known as social media influencers, provides advice and opinions for users, which can influence their final decisions regarding many aspects of their lives (Casaló et al., 2018). It is essential to acknowledge the possible impacts SMIs (social media influencers) have on users. Due to this excessive growth, SMIs and social media impact users’ lives in aspects such as purchase influence, decision-making, and self-esteem (Rounsefell et al., 2020).

Studies have shown all the positive effects social media platforms can have on users. These include feeling more connected to friends, receiving social support from social media through platforms, and ease of access to information (social media and young people's health, and more). Moreover, although there is much positive feedback to social media platforms, there are possible threats involved with social media usage. These include the negative impact on mental health, the impact

on user privacy, the increase of fraud, and the adverse effects on the self-esteem (Bell, 2016; Rounsefell et al., 2020).

Dissatisfaction rises among young men because they compare themselves to bodybuilders, models, and social media influencers on social media platforms (Grover et al., 2016; Rounsefell et al., 2020; Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020). Young men nowadays aspire to look like bodybuilders, celebrities, and health and fitness social media influencers, and during the process, they internalise the social media promoted muscled and buff ideal (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020). These young men negatively judge their current looks during internalisation, leading to possible self-esteem problems (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020). Young men tend to follow health and fitness social media influencers and ignore medical advice real experts offer in the area.

Additionally, young men following inaccurate advice offered by social media influencers can negatively affect their life (De Regt et al., 2019). It was observed that they have ignored factual, tested information presented by the body of scientific knowledge (De Regt et al., 2019). Social media influencers disregard any information that has been previously established throughout the years and label it as a conspiracy theory because of sponsorship deals with companies (De Regt et al., 2019; Jin & Ryu, 2019).

Young men follow the trends and advice to achieve their goals and look like the social media influencers responsible for the deceiving advertising of their products and lifestyle (Jin & Ryu, 2019). While social media and influencers can have many positive outcomes, they can expose young men to content that can cause a negative influence if not adequately controlled.

### **1.3 MOTIVATION OF THE STUDY**

With the advent of social media, users are more exposed due to the nature of the platform. Social media influencers have been on the rise in the last five years (Diba et al., 2019). The strong influence of SMIs on SM users can impact social comparison (Rounsefell et al., 2020). Research has been published on SMIs and its impact, but these studies focused primarily on women (Cohen et al., 2019; Tiggemann & Zinoviev, 2019). There are existing studies focused on men covering bodybuilding and body idealisation, but not many look at the impact that social media influencers have in terms of

social comparison (Soltani et al., 2017; Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020a). The topic of social media influencers has been rapidly evolving in the past five years, and it has shown its benefits and negative sides (Algharabat et al., 2020; Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; Diba et al., 2019). This study aims to highlight SMI's role in social comparison, having young men as the target audience. Previous studies focused on women have shown that SMIs can have both positive and negative impacts; therefore the researcher decided to explore if it applies to the male group as well. The positive and negative effects must be thoroughly analysed to conclude the overall impact social media influencers have on young men worldwide. If current or known SMIs trends persist in social media platforms, the results or impact may be more harmful than beneficial. Social media influencers' impact must be carefully, appropriately evaluated, and mitigated to avoid adverse effects on society. The results of this research are essential and will be used to show the overall impact of SMIs on the day-to-day lives of many young men. Recent studies have shown how social media platforms considerably affect users' perceptions and attitudes (Bell, 2016; Rounsefell et al., 2020).

However, a limited number of research papers have been published investigating whether SMIs influences young men. This paper's main objective is to address the existing gap by conducting surveys and expanding on the social comparison theory. The expansion of the theory will be focused on when men engage in both upward and downward social comparison.

#### **1.4 PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Several studies on how social media influences users have been conducted; however, all of these studies had women as the research subjects (Bell, 2016; Tiggemann & Zinoviev, 2019). Only a few studies have been published on how social media influencers impact young men in terms of body idealisation and bodybuilding (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020a). In addressing this gap, the current research study focuses on understanding how social media influencers affect young men based on social comparison. The study will look at both the benefits and drawbacks (negative aspects) that SMIs can bring young men. Furthermore, this study will identify possible impacts social media influencers have on users, specifically young men.

## **1.5 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND QUESTIONS**

Studies have shown different impacts social media have on active user life. Researchers such as Bell (2016), Grover (2016), Rounsefell (2020), and Tiggemann and Zinoviev (2019), have discussed and unfolded the different impacts that SMIs can have on the user's life. What remains unclear is social media influencers' impact on young men's lives. The researcher considered body social media platforms and social media influencers in this study. The researcher focused on these considerations, but it is not a claim that the consideration is limited to the ones mentioned. In this current study to underly the impact that social media influencers have on young men, the researcher proposed the following questions and objectives:

### **1.5.1 MAIN OBJECTIVE**

To determine social media influencers' role in the social comparison of young men.

### **1.5.2 RESEARCH QUESTION**

To what extent are young men affected by social media influencers?

### **1.5.3 SECONDARY RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

These are the following secondary research objective that the researcher formulated to achieve the main objective:

- a) To understand why social media influencers influence young men
- b) To determine how social media influencers easily influence young men on social media platforms
- c) To determine if young men are aware of the risks associated with using social media platforms

### **1.5.4 SUB-RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The secondary translated to the following sub-research questions:

- a) Why are young men influenced by social media influencers?
- b) How do social media influencers easily affect young men on social media platforms?
- c) Are young men aware of the risks associated with social media influencers?

## 1.6 ASSUMPTIONS

For this study, the researcher's assumptions were the following:

- The researcher assumed that all the South African or Mozambican participants had been exposed to a social media platform. If not, it was assumed that most participants would be aware of social media and social media influencers from either personal experience or the experience of other young men in their circle.
- South Africa and Mozambique are multilingual countries (Gadelii, 2001; Heugh, 1999), so it assumed that the researcher would find some official languages in a given situation. However, all the interviews and questionnaires were conducted in English. This assumed that all the participants in this study could communicate in English as they went to English-speaking schools.

## 1.7 LIMITATIONS

The following were the limitations identified by the researcher:

- Young men aged 18 to 26 were the target population for the current study. Therefore, this study was limited to young men in this age group. The interviewed participants are based in South Africa and Mozambique.
- The study was grouped according to age group and gender. The age group is from 18 to 26years, and the gender is male.
- The study focused on young men in South Africa and Mozambique. Due to the pandemic and shortened resources at this time, the group of people selected might not be considered a random sample.

## 1.8 BRIEF CHAPTER OVERVIEW

**Chapter 1 Introduction:** In this section, the study's background, problem statement, research objectives, questions, and motivation for the research question and the sub-research questions are explored. The limitations, as well as the researchers' assumptions, are also analysed.

**Chapter 2 Theoretical Framework:** The researcher defined and discussed the social comparison theory, its importance, and its relevance to the study. The theory's background, types of comparisons, and the drives of each type are discussed in detail.



**Chapter 3 Literature Review:** The researcher presents all the related literature associated with the research. The literature is discussed in a direction that links it to the study. These were the following themes addressed by the researcher:

- 1. Social Media:** The researcher defined social media, how the platform is used, and how active users use the platforms.
- 2. Social Media Influencers:** The researcher defined social media influencers, how they were created, and their impact on the active user's life. The researcher also discusses the different social media influencers that can exist on a social media platform.

**Chapter 4 Methodology:** The researcher discusses the research methodology followed in this research. The research onion model is discussed as well as each layer. The researcher included the methods and strategies observed in the current study.

**Chapter 5 Analysis of Findings:** The researcher analyses all the data that has been collected and makes meaning of it. A review and analysis are done on the collected data to answer the research question and the sub-questions of the study.

**Chapter 6 Conclusion:** The study's findings are discussed, and the researcher concludes. Contributions and recommendations for future studies to be done on the same topic are also presented in this chapter.

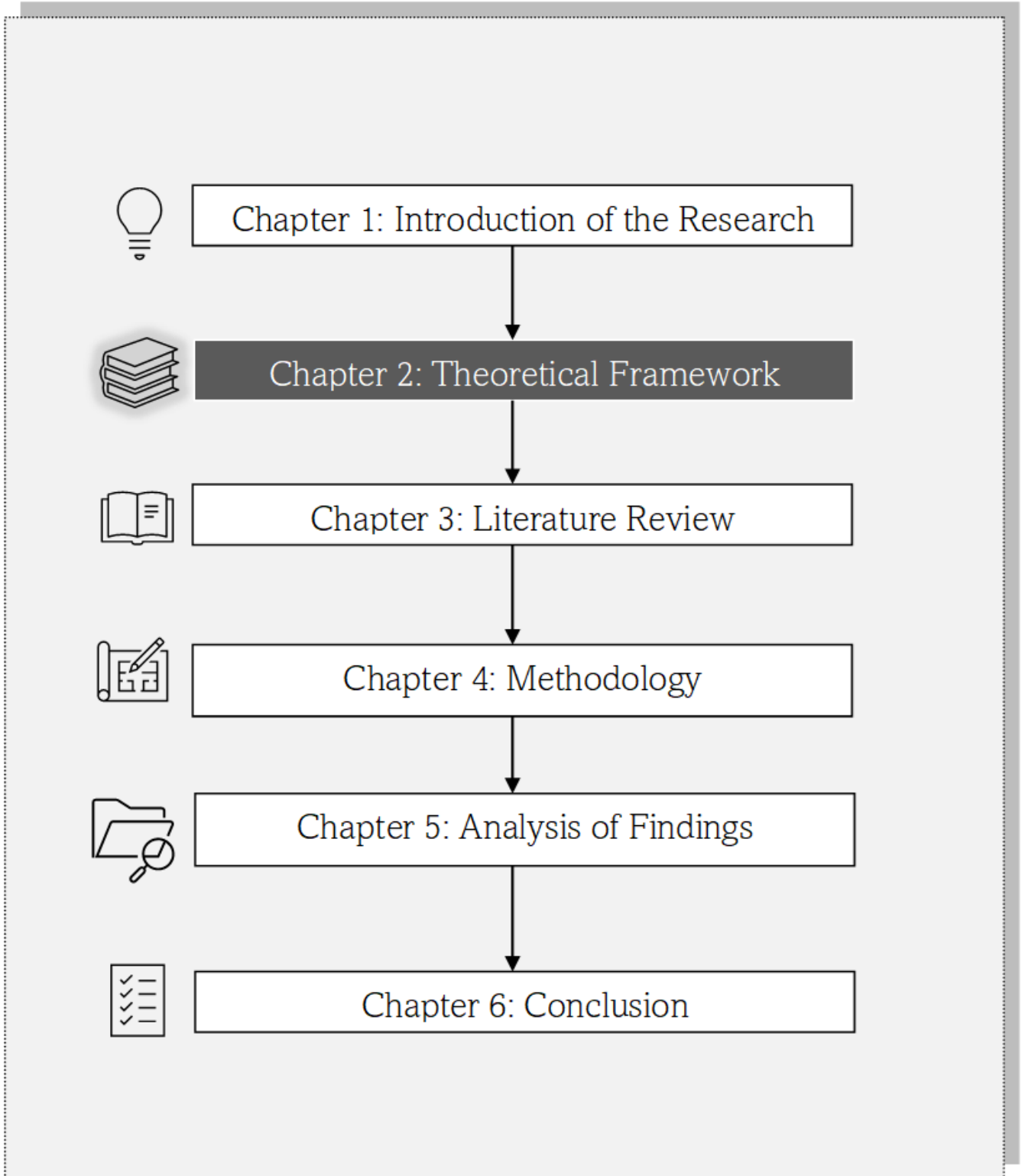
## **1.9 CONCLUSION**

The researcher outlines the study's background, problem statement, motivation, and primary objective in this chapter.

**Table 1: Chapter 1 Summary**

<b>CHAPTER 1 SUMMARY</b>	
The Motivation for the Study	This study aims to highlight how SMIs influence young men’s lives. The positive and negative effects must be thoroughly analysed to conclude the overall impact social media influencers have on young men worldwide. If current or known SMIs trends persist in social media platforms, the results/impact may be more harmful than beneficial. SMIs impact must be carefully, appropriately evaluated, and mitigated to avoid negative effects on society. The results of this research are essential and will be used to show the overall impact of SMIs on the day-to-day lives of many young men.
Problem Statement	A review of the literature indicated that several studies on how social media influences users have been conducted. However, all these studies had women as subjects of the research. Few studies have been published on how SMIs impact young men.
Main Objective	To determine the extent to which young men are affected by social media influencers.

## 2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK



## **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

This study aims to understand social media influencers impact on young men's lives. The study focuses on the topic of social media. This section focuses on the theoretical framework underpinning SMIs impacts on young men. For this study, the researcher opted for the social comparison theory. The layout of this section is the following: the importance of having a theoretical framework, the theory's background, its main concepts, and how it applies to the research.

## **2.2 IMPORTANCE OF A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Over the years, scholars have shared different definitions of the theory of information systems. According to Bacharach (1989), a theory refers to a description of relationships of concepts within a set of assumptions and constraints. Kerlinger (1966) defined theory as a related set of prepositions that express the relationship among different theories and constructs. Gregory & Anderson (2006) mentioned that science and philosophers regard the theory as being a way to provide predictions and explanations. The theory is significant to a study because it helps organise and communicate (Bacharach, 1989). The benefits of a theory include the following helps with the extensive explanation of decisions and actions to others, with the compelling predictions of the phenomenon and the ability to explain them, with the effective identification of gaps in the knowledge base and research, and fill in possible gaps that were previously identified (Aparicio et al., 2016; Kittler, 1998). The above benefits are why the current research is placed within a theoretical framework.

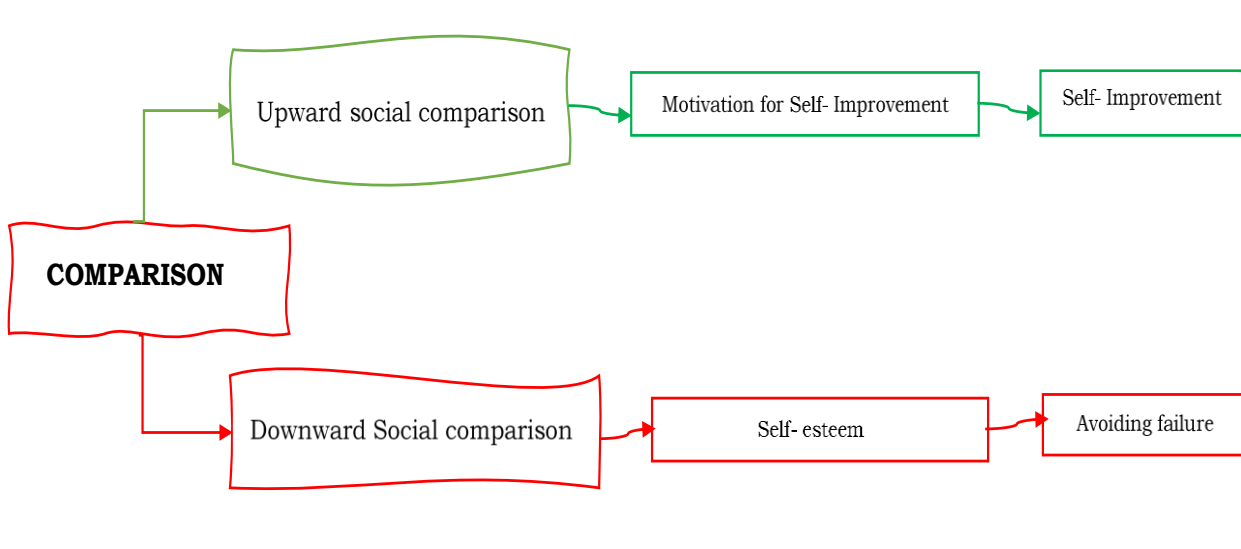
## **2.3 SOCIAL COMPARISON THEORY**

The theoretical framework chosen for this study is called "social comparison theory". In 1954 the psychologist Leon Festinger suggested the social comparison theory. Festinger insinuated that individuals often evaluate themselves by comparing themselves to others (Festinger, 1954). Festinger, in his study, laid out nine hypotheses in which people are likely to compare themselves to other individuals, as well as the impacts and outcomes of the comparison processes. The theory suggests that people judge themselves through social comparisons and analysing their traits and abilities to others (Festinger, 1954; Guyer & Vaughan-Johnston, 2018). The social comparison theory points out that people use the comparison process to create an effective benchmark to develop accurate evaluations (Guyer & Vaughan-Johnston, 2018). This theory process begins when individuals decide to learn about themselves by evaluating their traits, beliefs, opinions, and attitudes to others. Social comparison is part of self-socialisation, in which people compare their

limitations and abilities to others in their environment or group (Buunk & Schaufeli, 2018). Although comparisons of limitations and abilities start showing at an older age, appearance-based comparisons begin in the adolescence phase for both the male and female gender (Carey et al., 2014; Youn & Shin, 2019).

The underlying motivations for social comparisons include maintaining positive self-evaluation (downward comparison) and self-enhancement (upward comparison). Even though these are the underlying motivations, individuals may act towards downward and upward comparisons based on other motivations.

Ordinarily, we tend to compare ourselves to individuals in the same group or with similar traits. Festinger proposed that social comparison included two types, upward social comparison and downward social comparison, but since then, his theory has expanded and includes emotions (Buunk & Schaufeli, 2018; Guyer & Vaughan-Johnston, 2018; Krause & Weber, 2018). Gibbons & Buunk (1999) suggested that the social comparison theory is motivated by three drives: self-evaluation, self-improvement, and self-enhancement.



**Figure 1: Social Comparison Theory (Adapted from Leon Festinger 1954 and Goethals G.R. 1986)**

Figure 1 illustrates and presents the findings and constructs (upward social comparison and downward social comparison) of the social comparison theory and the outcomes from each type of

social comparison: for upward social comparison motivation for self-improvement and self-improvement and downward social comparison self-esteem and avoiding failure.

Psychologists have stated that humans start comparing themselves to others between the ages of seven and eight. The comparisons usually begin with task-related situations and not appearance-oriented ones (Festinger, 1954; Myers et al., 2012)

Researchers and theorists posited that another motivator for comparison is competition (Festinger, 1954; Garcia & Silva, 2017). Studies have shown how social media and influencers are one of the causes of social media comparison among young adults. There is evidence that this phenomenon of social comparison occurs across the lifespan, and it should be studied and researched across different stipulated contexts (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020b).

## **2.4 UPWARD SOCIAL COMPARISON VS DOWNWARD SOCIAL COMPARISON**

The social comparison theory includes two classifications of comparisons: upward social comparison and downward social comparison (Guyer & Vaughan-Johnston, 2018). Researchers have argued that the effects of these comparisons depend on individuals (Guyer & Vaughan-Johnston, 2018). This means that the social comparison direction will not guarantee only negative or positive results.

### **2.4.1 UPWARD SOCIAL COMPARISON**

An upward social comparison is a concept that refers to when an individual shows how good they are compared to another person who is considered to be better than them. The upward comparison includes motivation and self-improvement, while the downward comparison includes self-esteem and avoiding failure as their drives (Guyer & Vaughan-Johnston, 2018; Li, 2018). Upward comparison focuses on individuals trying to improve their current abilities and traits. Abilities are often manifested through performance which depends on the particular ability (Li, 2018). For example, a writer's evaluation of his writing ability will be compared to a better writer's writing ability to better his skills (Li, 2018). Thus, individuals compare themselves with someone better to acquire similar results (Guyer & Vaughan-Johnston, 2018). Upward comparison has positively impacted motivation and self-improvement (Buunk & Schaufeli, 2018). Studies have indicated that people tend to compare themselves with individuals whose abilities are either at the same level or slightly better

than theirs (Festinger, 1954; Guyer & Vaughan-Johnston, 2018; Li, 2018). The effect that upward social comparison has varies from individual to individual. The upward social comparison provides self-evaluative information and produces negative effects and decreased self-evaluations caused by comparison (Buunk et al., 2001). Studies have shown that upward comparison can be the source of inspiration in the initial stage. However, it can be highly detrimental as the person comparing themselves fails to achieve the unattainable goals and standards to which they aspire (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020b; Tiggemann & Zinoviev, 2019)

#### **2.4.2 DOWNWARD SOCIAL COMPARISON**

Downward social comparisons make individuals feel better about their abilities and traits. Downward social comparison can be seen as a coping mechanism that helps people feel better for a short period, and it is not seen as the best mechanism for the long term when dealing with a threat (Guyer & Vaughan-Johnston, 2018). Studies have shown that downward social comparisons increase optimism regarding the future, increase relationship satisfaction, and enhance self-esteem in individuals (Li, 2018). In the downward social comparison, a relevant category would be group affiliation (Guyer & Vaughan-Johnston, 2018). Being part of a social group can be the central part of an individual; therefore, people tend to seek points or information to favour their social groups compared to other groups. Data gathered in sociology psychology supports this category by pointing out that when a negative opinion is formed towards a group, people who belong to the other groups experience a performance boost because of the downward comparison (Guyer & Vaughan-Johnston, 2018; Krause & Weber, 2018). Studies have revealed that downward comparison increases success expectations with individuals with a lower self-esteem (Guyer & Vaughan-Johnston, 2018; Krause & Weber, 2018). Downward social comparison is used to increase self-esteem, create positive emotions, and reduce the anxiety of the individuals who perform it (Guyer & Vaughan-Johnston, 2018).

#### **2.5 DRIVES OF UPWARD SOCIAL COMPARISON AND DOWNWARD SOCIAL COMPARISON**

Research has shown that there are reasons behind both social comparisons (Krause & Weber, 2018). Individuals who often adopt upward comparison look to enhance their improvement (self-improvement) Li, 2018), which motivates them to attain or reach their personal goals. However,

individuals who often adopt downward social comparison tend to have a low self-esteem and avoid failure. In this section, the researcher discussed the drivers of each social comparison (Guyer & Vaughan-Johnston, 2018).

### **2.5.1 SELF IMPROVEMENT (UPWARD)**

Studies indicate that upward social comparison helps increase self-improvement as individuals strive to keep up with an individual with better skills and abilities (Guyer & Vaughan-Johnston, 2018; Li, 2018). Upward social comparison can increase self-improvement as the individual can use it as a motivator. However, it can also have the opposite effect as one might believe it is impossible to attain such results (Wang et al., 2017). Studies have shown that upward social comparisons in some circumstances have positive outcomes, such as increasing personal achievement or self-improvement (Li, 2018; Wang et al., 2017). Evidence has shown that exposure to people doing relatively better may increase performance (Wang et al., 2017). It has been stated that individuals who control the situation and are exposed to upward social comparison are likely to increase motivation and self-improvement. In contrast, one with no control will experience the opposite (Guyer & Vaughan-Johnston, 2018).

### **2.5.2 SELF-ESTEEM (DOWNWARD)**

Self-esteem refers to how people refer positively or negatively given a social comparison (Wang et al., 2017). In his social comparison theory, Festinger argued that people with relatively lower self-esteem tend to use more downward comparison because of the need for self-enhancement (Wang et al., 2017). People with lower self-esteem are more sensitive to social comparison because they know their traits and abilities (Wang et al., 2017). In contrast, scholars found that people with high self-esteem are self-serving in using social comparisons and are self-relevant (Li, 2018). Studies have revealed that downward comparison increases expectations of success with individuals who have lower self-esteem (Guyer & Vaughan-Johnston, 2018; Krause & Weber, 2018).

### **2.5.3 DESIRE TO AVOID FAILURE (DOWNWARD)**

Social comparison is seen as natural human behaviour that has evolved with time and helps us learn from one another, avoid falling too far, and live in a cohesive group (Guyer & Vaughan-Johnston, 2018). The social comparison also helps us fall behind our potential by allowing individuals to define



their abilities and traits based on what appears possible (Festinger, 1954; Krause & Weber, 2018). Studies have shown that continuous comparison can increase stress and individual competitiveness (Buunk & Schaufeli, 2018; Wang et al., 2017). Studies have shown that downward social comparison increases the desire to avoid failure, which is a motivator (Guyer & Vaughan-Johnston, 2018; Krause & Weber, 2018).

## **2.6 SOCIAL MEDIA AND SOCIAL COMPARISON THEORY**

Researchers have investigated social comparison theory in social media (Buunk & Schaufeli, 2018; Yang, 2016). Previous studies have suggested a link between social media usage, upward comparison, and negative impacts on users (Grover et al., 2016; Yang, 2016). Although, as previously mentioned, the social comparison theory originated in psychology, scholars and developmental psychologists have refined the theory using empirical investigation (Krause & Weber, 2018). Studies have stipulated that social comparison is used to increase self-socialisation, where individuals compare their limitations, traits, and abilities to other peers in their group (Krause & Weber, 2018; Li, 2018; Yang, 2016). Scholars have stipulated that appearance-based comparisons begin in early adolescence for boys and girls (Carey et al., 2014). Qualitative and quantitative studies have shown that social media are salient to social media comparison theory among teenagers/adolescents, where competition is essential (Soh et al., 2018; Youn & Shin, 2019). Empirical studies have focused on the impacts women and men feel due to the pressure and set standards on social media (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020a; Tiggemann & Zinoviev, 2019). Upward social comparison and downward social media comparison may be used to explain social media's influence on social media users. Social comparison-online refers to the users comparing with other users' popularity, lifestyle, skills, or generally doing better or worse than others (Yang & Robinson, 2018). Another example of the association between social media and the concept of comparison is the use of filters. People often add them to their photos to make them look better than the other users (Chae, 2017). Studies have shown that users with a high level of social comparison experience a decrease in positive effect when viewing posts on social media, however, the ones with low level of social comparison experience a positive effect (De Vries et al., 2018; Schmuck et al., 2019).

## 2.7 CONCLUSION

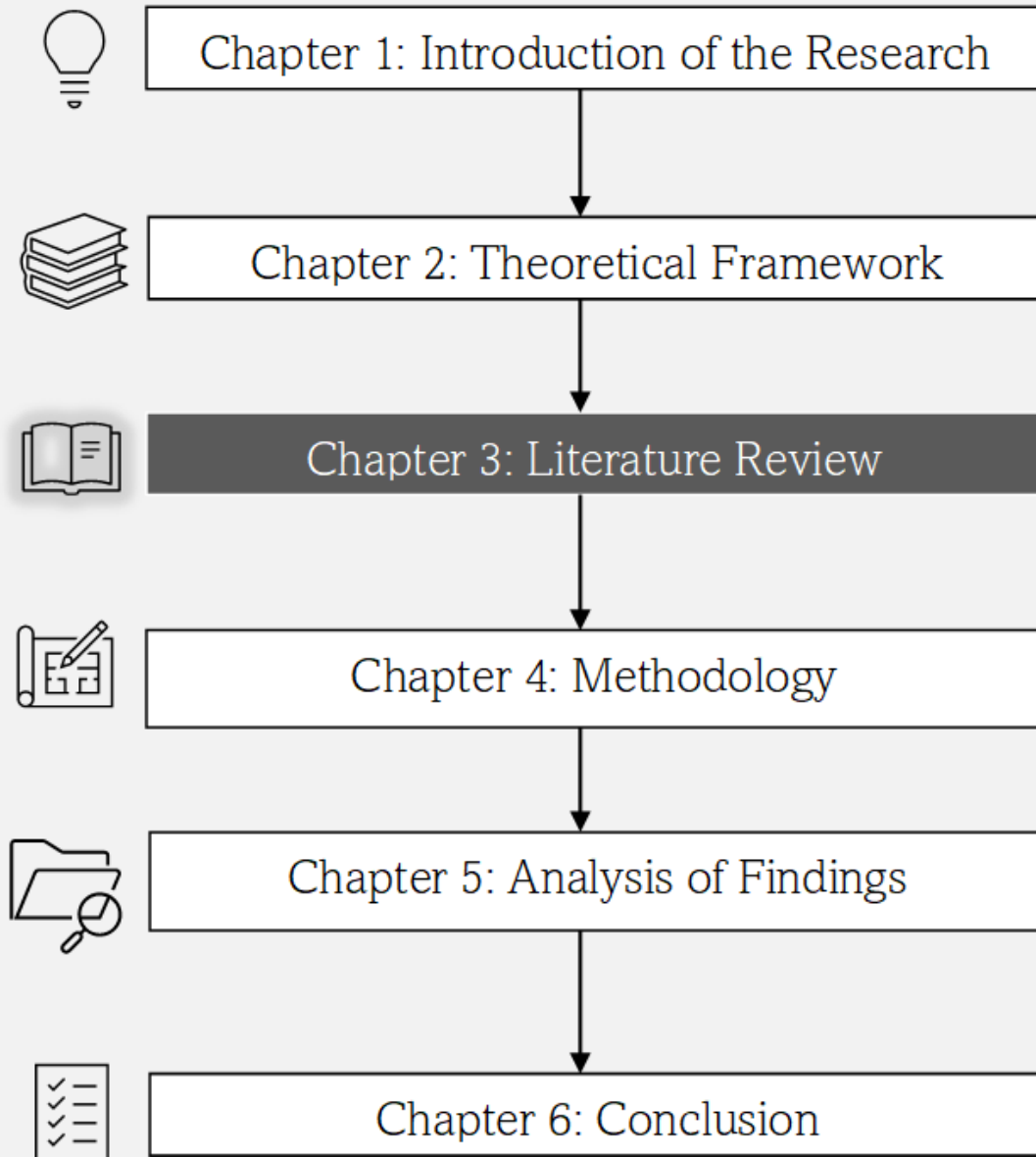
The researcher presents and discussed the theoretical framework in this chapter. Table 2 below summarises the main topics discussed in this section.

**Table 2: Chapter 2 Summary**

<b>THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK</b>	
<b>Social Comparison Theory</b>	The theory suggests that people judge themselves through social comparisons and analysing their traits and abilities to others (Guyer & Vaughan-Johnston, 2018). The social comparison theory points out that people use the comparison process to create an effective benchmark to develop accurate evaluations (Guyer & Vaughan-Johnston, 2018). This theory process begins when individuals decide to learn about themselves by evaluating their traits, beliefs, opinions, and attitudes to others.
<b>Upward Social Comparison</b>	Upward comparison focuses on individuals trying to improve their current abilities and traits. Abilities are often manifested through performance which depends on the particular ability (Li, 2018). The upward social comparison provides self-evaluative information and produces negative effects and decreased self-evaluations caused by comparison (Wang et al., 2017).
<b>Downward Social Comparison</b>	Downward social comparisons make individuals feel better about their abilities and traits. Downward social comparison can be seen as a coping mechanism that helps people feel better for a short period, and it is not seen as the best mechanism for the long term when dealing with a threat (Guyer & Vaughan-Johnston, 2018). Studies have shown that downward social comparisons increase optimism regarding the future, increase relationship satisfaction, and enhance self-esteem in individuals (Li, 2018). A relevant category in the downward social comparison would be group affiliation (Krause & Weber, 2018).
<b>Drives of Upward and Downward Social Comparison</b>	Research has shown that there are reasons behind both social comparisons (Krause & Weber, 2018). Individuals who often adopt upward comparison look to enhance their improvement (self-improvement) (Li, 2018), which motivates them to attain or reach their personal goals. However, individuals who often adopt downward social

	comparison tend to have low self-esteem and avoid failure. In this section, the researcher discussed the drivers of each social comparison (Guyer & Vaughan-Johnston, 2018).
<b>Social Media and Social Comparison Theory</b>	Previous studies have suggested a link between social media usage, upward comparison, and negative impacts on users' self-esteem and self-improvement (Grover et al., 2016).

### 3 LITERATURE REVIEW



### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

This study's main objective is to understand social media influencers' impact on young men. Therefore, this chapter looks at the existing literature on social networking sites and social media influencers. The literature review is based on the theory discussed in the following section.

### 3.2 LITERATURE REVIEW SCOPE

Figure 2 illustrates the Literature Review and the discussed themes related to the present study. This relevant literature was used to respond to the current study's research questions adequately.

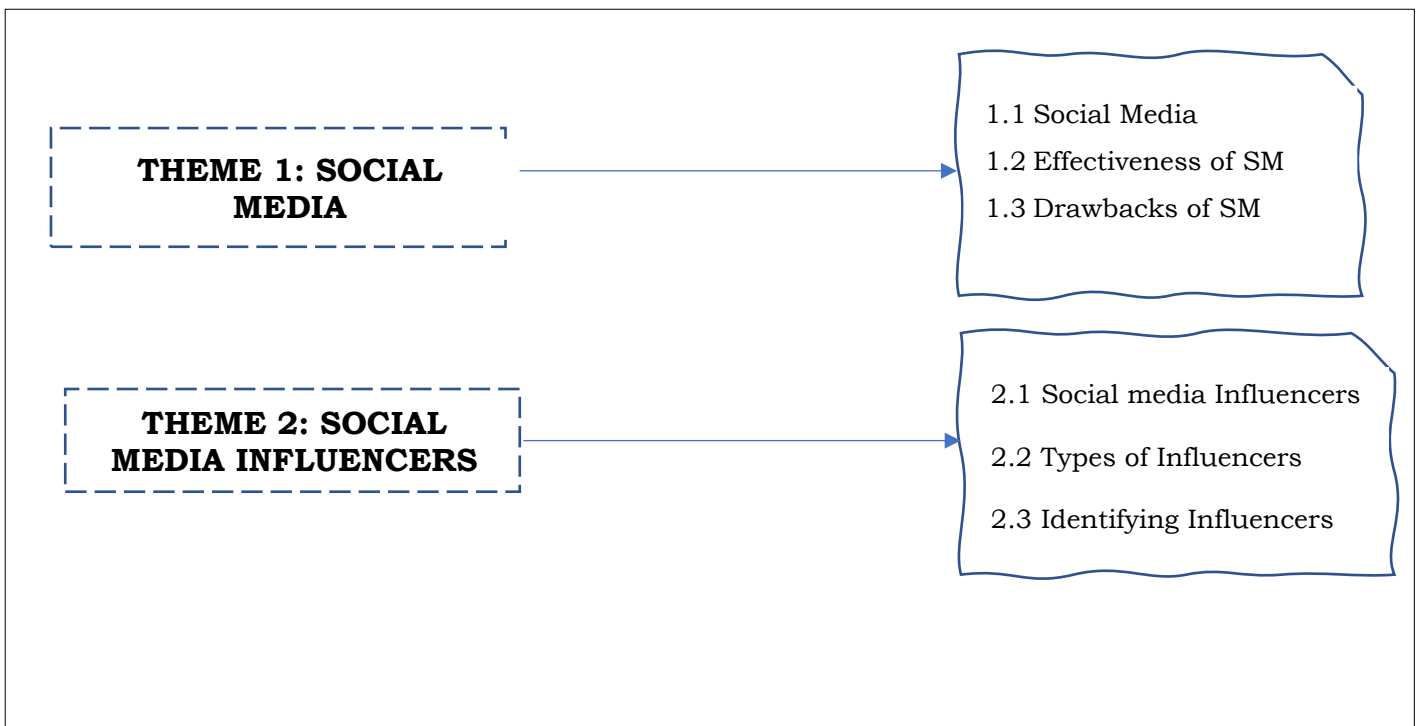


Figure 2: Scope of Literature Review

The first theme defines *social media* as perceived usefulness and challenges. The second theme, *social media influencers*, is defined, the types of influencers are discussed, and the identification process is underlined.

### 3.3 THEME 1: SOCIAL MEDIA

#### 3.3.1 SOCIAL MEDIA

Researchers argue that the definition of social media is based on the existing technology, and there is no universally accepted definition, both functionally and theoretically (Rounsefell et al., 2020). Given that there is no accepted definition, this phenomenon leads to many definitions for social media. According to Asur & Huberman (2010), social media is a genre of online disclosure where users create content, share, tag, and network at an incredible speed. Social media refers to applications designed to allow users to interact, share, collaborate and create content (Bell, 2016; Carr & Hayes, 2015). The common factor about these definitions is that they both mention that social media is used to share content, and they differ on the point that one says the interaction of users and the other does not. Since social media is a communication channel that allows interaction between users, the definition of Asur & Huberman (2010) is the most accurate. However, to better understand social media, one needs to be familiar with Web 2.0 and social networking sites (Caliskan et al., 2019, p. 0). Web 2.0 allows users to interact with one another and control all the data and information shared (Caliskan et al., 2019, p. 2). A decade after its creation, Web 2.0 functions spread quickly, which allowed for the revolutionary leap of the social element on the web (Obar & Wildman, 2015). Social networking refers to online platforms users use to build their social relationships or connections with other users who share common interests (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). The user profiles created by the users on the platforms are the backbone of social media (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017).

How a user is created on social media varies from platform to platform. However, the general process often includes creating a username, providing contact information, and uploading a profile picture. The profile picture and the collected data in creating the user enable the connections between the users on social media (Obar & Wildman, 2015). Lists are the most common method social media platforms use to manage the ongoing interaction between users. The lists are named differently across various social media platforms. Facebook and Snapchat refer to the lists of users as “Friends”, Twitter and Snapchat as “Followers”, and LinkedIn uses the term “Connections” (Carr & Hayes, 2015; Obar & Wildman, 2015). Once generated, the users use these lists to interact with the other users. Social media can also be used at an enterprise level and not only at an individual level. Statistics show that the average user had 8.6 accounts on social media platforms in 2020, which is an increase from 4.8 in 2014 (*How Many People Use Social Media in 2021?*, 2020). The most

used social media platform is Facebook, with 2.7 billion monthly users. YouTube and WhatsApp are the second with 2 billion users (*How Many People Use Social Media in 2021?*, 2020). Popular social media platforms include similar characteristics: content-sharing features, messaging systems, open forums/groups, notifications, and responsiveness (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

### **3.3.2 EFFECTIVENESS OF SOCIAL MEDIA**

Social media became part of the everyday routine when it was introduced to society, and today, it became part of many people's routines in many ways (Garcia & Silva, 2017). The introduction of social media has brought many positive and valuable impacts, such as increasing knowledge acquisition, the easy creation of interpersonal relationships, and sharing of information (Garcia & Silva, 2017). Previous research has shown that social media tools have improved learning motivation, allowed user collaborative activities, enhanced relationships, and offered detailed and personalised course material (Aparicio et al., 2016). Studies have also demonstrated social media's positive impact on learning and teaching foreign languages and how it can help users' oral and written language skills (Aparicio et al., 2016). Social media usage also enhances the social constructivist learning technique (Hung & Yuen, 2010; Oskouei et al., 2018). The results show that social media encourages cooperation and communication among students, which reinforces their learning behaviour and performance (Hung & Yuen, 2010; Oskouei et al., 2018). Universities worldwide now provide access to social media to assist learning, gather course material, and easily collaborate with lecturers and colleagues (Al-Ammary et al., 2014). Social media networking tools have positively impacted the public sector by increasing satisfaction, community building, and consolation (Todisco et al., 2021). The public sector social media tools allow citizens to participate in government processes and decision-making, as well as collaborate with stakeholders and other government organisations (Todisco et al., 2021). Research has indicated that social media also significantly affects the economy.

In some cases, they were doubling the growth rate of a country's overall economy (Shawky et al., 2020). In the education field, the advantages of social media are increased communication and collaboration, improved reading and communication skills through news articles, online messages, comments, and learning opportunities through online courses (Raza et al., 2020). In the business sector, social media has increased marketing reach through online advertising in international

marks, brand development, and recruiting skills and resources through social networking platforms such as LinkedIn and getting customer feedback through social media (Diba et al., 2019).

### **3.3.3 DRAWBACKS OF SOCIAL MEDIA**

Given that social media networking tools have shown enormous advantages in educational institutions, it is not without some detected concerns. Research has indicated that one of the most serious concerns regarding social media is its higher usage, which increases the probability of wasting time on insignificant tasks (Lau, 2017). Educators and parents have also expressed concerns about the increasing utilisation of social media and its impact on students in the education field (Lau, 2017). Years of research have documented the negative impact of social media on the user (Cohen et al., 2019; Tiggemann & Zinoviev, 2019). Users use their social media profiles to upload unrealistic and retouched pictures of themselves. Research suggests that users' exposure to this content can cause appearance comparison, influencing the user's image (Bell, 2016; Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019).

The American Psychiatric Association has proved that the leading cause of eating disorders is body dissatisfaction, which can be developed by users influenced by the content posted on social media (Grover et al., 2016). Dissatisfaction levels increase among social media users by comparing themselves to models and social media influencers they interact with or see on social media platforms (Grover et al., 2016). Due to the challenges identified in the literature review, this study examines the impact of social media networking tools on young men. In their research, Sypeck et al. (2006) blamed social media influencers and social platforms for the unrealistic need for female users to attain an unrealistic image and lifestyle. This study aims to show the effect that the same platforms and social media influencers have on the young men audience to see the full impact from different perspectives. In education, social media platforms have been proven to increase distractions in students, expose them to inappropriate content, and decrease critical thinking and patience (Raza et al., 2020). In business, social media can cause bad publicity and bad reputation. It is seen as a very expensive investment as qualified users are required to run the business platforms to avoid the drawbacks mentioned before (Lim et al., 2017).

Published studies have shown that cyberbullying has been increasing on social media. Cyberbullying means using electronic communication such as social media, email, and instant messaging platforms



to harass another user (Abidin, 2019; Lowry et al., 2016). Cyberbullying is a form of aggression that occurs online, involving repeated acts of aggression intended to cause harm or distress. It has a repetitive quality, and it occurs among individuals whose relationship is characterised by a power imbalance (Ahmed et al., 2021). Studies have shown that social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter seem to be the leading platforms in which cyberbullying and victimisation occur due to their sudden increase in popularity (Abidin, 2019; Ahmed et al., 2021; Lowry et al., 2016). Several social media platform features have been previously identified as points that might cause the increased risk of cyberbullying on social media (Abidin, 2019; Ahmed et al., 2021; Lowry et al., 2016). Examples of the features are the easy ability to find a target, the fact that the user can quickly edit or delete a post published by them and completely deny any involvement in cyberbullying, and the fact that users can easily blame other people on social media for it (Abidin, 2019). This and the fact that social media allow anonymity increases the risk of cyberbullying as the perpetrators are hardly identifiable (Abidin, 2019). In addition to the points mentioned above, users use their popularity on their social media platforms as a status symbol. However, users might connect to others without taking precautions to achieve a certain status, which can increase the risk of victimisation (Abidin, 2019; Ahmed et al., 2021; Lowry et al., 2016).

### **3.4 THEME 2: SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS**

Social media have become a modern autonomous third party known for shaping and changing users' attitudes of users through their posts, tweets, or overall content (Howison et al., 2015). Due to the fast technological advances, there have been several cultural shifts. This has created new types of idols and a more significant number than before (Khamis et al., 2017). There is a lack of research and consensus between practitioners and scholars in today's age on who should be identified as a celebrity and who is identified as an influencer. Social media influencers refer to a group of people who before had no prior fame and then became famous using one or several social media platforms (Freberg et al., 2011). Although not all content creators are social media influencers, all SMIs are creators who build capital out of their attention on social media platforms. Social media influencers have been recognised as opinion leaders to enhance their information's influence when transmitting it across platforms to other users (Jalilvand et al., 2017). Scholars have contradictory opinions about social media influencers. Some view social media influencers as belligerent or unfavourable (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020). Others recognise their ability to create alliances to

promote a product, organisation, or brand (Algharabat et al., 2020). Social media influencers increase engagement by constantly interacting with users and updating their social media platforms (Zhao et al., 2018).

Based on social media engagement, organisations started picking influencers with the most followers on their social media platforms as brand ambassadors (Shawky et al., 2020). This is because the information shared by social media influencers nowadays is perceived as reliable and compelling to the users (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Social media influencers shape attitudes and behaviours through the different social media platforms, and they build their capital by acting as a third-party endorser (Freberg et al., 2011; McFarlane & Samsioe, 2020). Studies show that users are more likely to purchase a product from a recommendation of influencers than from random advertising (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Zafar et al., 2019). Social media influencers exhibit content of things the users do not have but wish to have on their platform (Shawky et al., 2020). Social media influencers turned to self-branding to get capital using social media platforms. Social media influencers must create a unique selling point that elevates them from other social media influencers to generate capital on social media. To create a unique selling proposition, they must provide content to their intended audience (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Zhao et al., 2018). Social media influencers use personality and content as the main factors to attract recognition. This is because users tend to be attracted to users with strong storytelling skills and authenticity and are also attracted to different and unique content. Social media influencers must ensure that they position themselves as a credible source to attract a larger audience. This means that their marketability depends on the content they create and the long-lasting relationships they establish with the audience.

### **3.4.1 SOCIAL MEDIA AND YOUNG MEN**

For opinions, people tend to compare themselves to a similar group of people (who share similar ideas), while for abilities, people compare themselves with slightly better individuals (Schmuck et al., 2019). Researchers have provided evidence that people with higher self-esteem make more downward comparisons than those with low self-esteem (Li, 2018; Schmuck et al., 2019). However, this can be the case that the ones with low self-esteem have just not learned to use downward comparison effectively. Appearance comparison in young men focuses on muscle-toning, leading to excessive muscle-building behaviour and higher body dissatisfaction (Frederick et al., 2012; Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020a). Young men live hoping that their bodies will eventually change to

match their expectations and reactions, while females tend to get depressed with their current state (Myers et al., 2012).

Social media is known to be one of the most engaging activities online. Because social media platforms are actively being used, young men are exposed to various forms of materials and content according to their preferences. These can either be beneficial or detrimental. Given that social media is pervasive, scholars, educators, parents, and adults have begun to worry about social media's role in young men's lives (Brooks 2015). Young men using social media platforms can confuse self-identity crises and can even make them targets of delusions and persuasions (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020a)

### 3.4.2 TYPES OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS

The modern-era idols who own their fame solemnly on social media platforms exist in many forms. Social media influencers build their audience by creating digital print, persona, and content (Freberg et al., 2011). Although practitioners do not know how to classify social media influencers and celebrities, they categorise them according to their size (audience) and social media platforms. Social media consists of four influencers: Nano-influencers, macro-influencers, micro-influencers, and mega-influencers (Kay et al., 2020).

**Nano-influencer:** This refers to a recently added type of social media influencer. Nano influencers refer to a group of influencers considered influencers within their community (Freberg et al., 2011; Khamis et al., 2017). Their audience ranges from 1 000 to 10 000 followers. As a result of their lower audience, these groups of influencers are known to have a more intimate relationship with their audience.

**Micro-influencer:** This refers to a user with a constant presence on social media platforms that shares their recommendations, passions and opinions with an audience (Kay et al., 2020). These include fashionistas, gym gurus, and beauty and food bloggers. This group of influencers shares endorsed opinions towards products of companies. They face fierce competition from macro-celebrities. Users relate more to micro-celebrities because they post more relatable content than macro-celebrities. After building trust, users start seeing them as peers and trusting their

recommendations and opinions more and more (Kay et al., 2020). Micro-influencers are content creators that form the largest group but have the lowest following count (audience). They are known to be specialised in a particular area and know a specific subject, which means they provide a more targeted follower base (Freberg et al., 2011). They are more authentic than other social media celebrities with a larger audience, and this is because they are less accessible as popularity grows.

**Macro-influencer:** This refers to a specialist in a field who decided to take their expertise to social media platforms. Macro-celebrities use their expertise to post information and quality-filled content to attract users to follow them. They have a more significant follower count than micro-celebrities, including singers, actors, entrepreneur photographers, and more. They influence users through idolisation's power (Kay et al., 2020; Zhao et al., 2018). Micro-influencer's audience size ranges from 100 000 to 1 million users following them on social media platforms (Freberg et al., 2011).

**Mega-influencer:** This refers to a group of people known on social media as celebrities (Freberg et al., 2011). They have less personal engagement and intimate relationships with their audience because of their popularity (Freberg et al., 2011; Lim et al., 2017). Mega-influencers are used as a marketing strategy by brands to advertise services and products on their social media platforms. Then, the users associate themselves with the brand value from the influencer's perspective (Freberg et al., 2011; Lim et al., 2017). With users being more active on social media platforms, mega-influencers have evolved as users now follow their activities and keep up with their trends. Studies have shown that these influencers convey more commercial intentions than micro-influencers, making their posts less personal and more business-driven than micro and macro-influencers (Khamis et al., 2017; Sinha & Fung, 2021).

**Table 3: Classification of Social Media Influencers and Audience Size (Freberg et al., 2011; Khamis et al., 2017)**

Term	Definition	Audience Size
<b>Nano-influencer</b>	Smaller audiences and highly engaged influencers	1k to 10k followers
<b>Micro-influencer</b>	The most significant influencers have the highest engagement rate with users.	Up to 99k followers

<b>Macro-influencer</b>	They have a more significant follower count compared to micro-celebrities. They are specialists in a specific field.	100-1 million followers
<b>Mega-influencer</b>	They have the highest following count and are highly visible on social media due to their celebrity status.	1 million + followers

### 3.4.3 IDENTIFICATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS

Since more and more people have access to social media, it can collect information and news. Users rely on social media to spread and organise events, and it is essential to identify credible users from the evildoers who spread fake information (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Social media platforms made it easier to recognise social media influencers. These influencers across platforms have a blue badge or a blue checkmark next to their username, which indicates that their account is verified and who they say they are (Chetioui et al., 2020; Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019).

### 3.5 CONCLUSION

In this section, the researcher discussed the literature behind the essential concepts of the study. Social media and influencers were introduced, and the existing relationship between social media and social comparison.

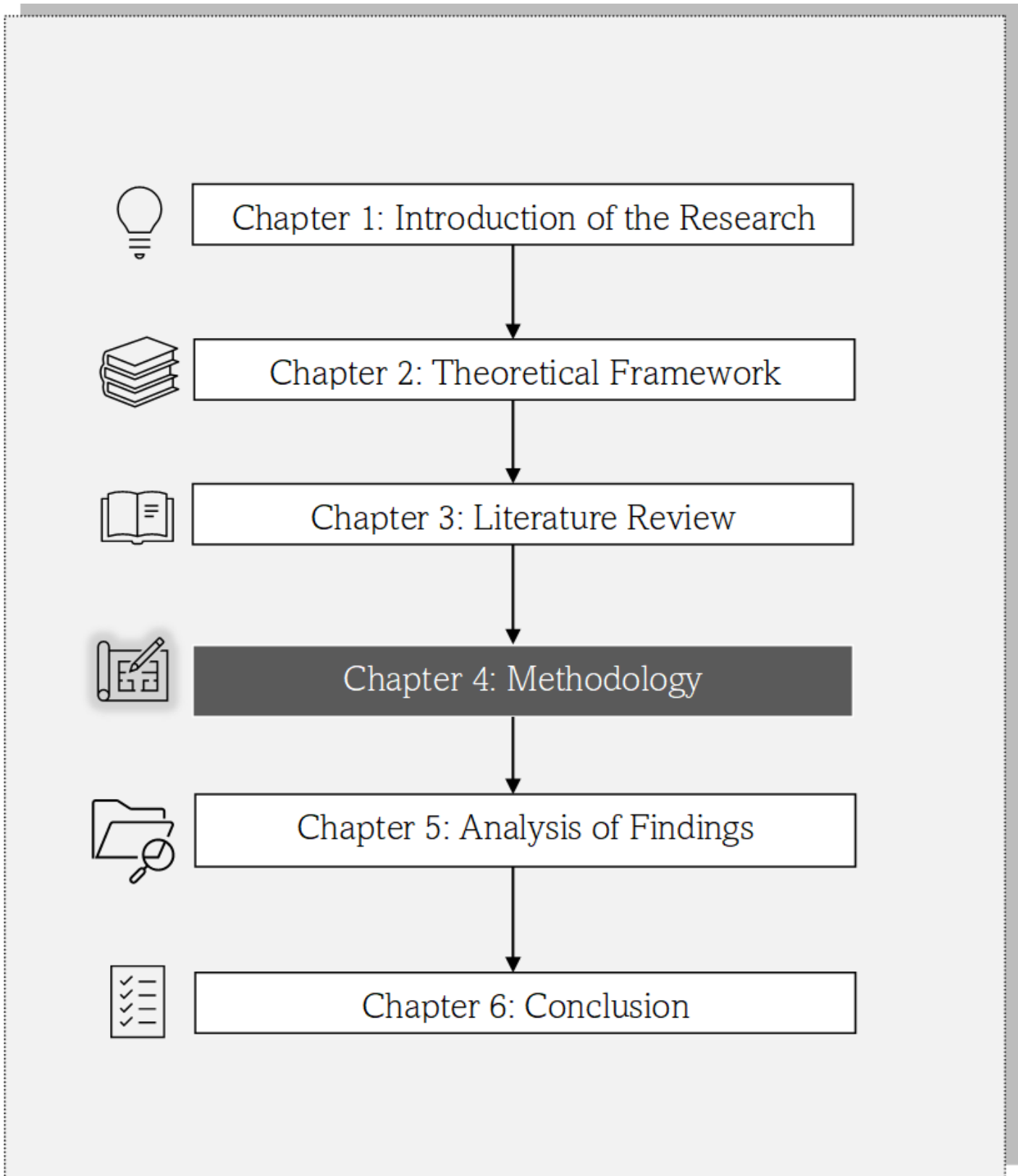
**Table 4: Chapter 3 Summary**

<b>LITERATURE REVIEW SUMMARY</b>	
<b>Social Media</b>	According to Asur & Huberman (2010), social media is a genre of online disclosure where users create content, share, tag, and network at an incredible speed. How a user is created on social media varies from platform to platform. However, the general process often includes creating a username, providing contact information, and uploading a profile picture. The profile picture and the collected data in creating the user enable the connections between the users on social media (Obar & Wildman, 2015). Lists are the most common method social media platforms use to manage the ongoing interaction between users.
<b>Effectiveness of Social Media</b>	Previous research has shown that social media tools have improved learning motivation, allowed user collaborative activities, enhanced relationships, and offered detailed and personalised course material (Rifkin et al., 2012). Studies

	<p>have also demonstrated social media’s positive impact on learning and teaching foreign languages and how it can help users’ oral and written language skills (Aparicio et al., 2016). Social media usage also enhances the social constructivist learning technique (Hung &amp; Yuen, 2010; Oskouei et al., 2018). In the education field, the advantages of social media are increased communication and collaboration, improved reading and communication skills through news articles, online messages, comments, and learning opportunities through online courses (Raza et al., 2020). In the business sector, social media has increased marketing reach through online advertising in international marks, brand development, and recruiting skills and resources through social networking platforms such as LinkedIn and getting customer feedback through social media (Diba et al., 2019).</p>
<p><b>Drawbacks of Social Media</b></p>	<p>Research has indicated that one of the most serious concerns regarding social media is its higher usage, which increases the probability of wasting time on insignificant tasks (Lau, 2017). Educators and parents have also expressed concerns about the increasing utilisation of social media and its impact on students in the education field (Junco, 2012). Years of research have documented the negative impact of social media on the user (Cohen et al., 2019; Tiggemann &amp; Zinoviev, 2019). Users use their social media profiles to upload unrealistic, retouched pictures of themselves. Research suggests that users’ exposure to this content can cause appearance comparison, influencing the user’s image (Bell, 2016; Dhanesh &amp; Duthler, 2019). Dissatisfaction levels increase among social media users by comparing themselves to models and social media influencers that they interact with or see on social media platforms (Grover et al., 2016).</p>
<p><b>Social Media Influencers</b></p>	<p>Social media influencers have been recognised as opinion leaders to enhance the influence of the information they receive when transmitting across the platforms to other users (Burleson et al., 2005; Jalilvand et al., 2017). Social media influencers exhibit content of things the users do not have but wish to have on their platform (Freberg et al., 2011). Social media consists of two types of influencers: macro-celebrities and micro-celebrities (Kay et al., 2020).</p>

<p><b>Social Media and Young Men</b></p>	<p>Social media is known to be one of the most engaging activities online. Because social media platforms are actively being used, young men are exposed to various forms of materials and content according to their preferences. These can either be beneficial or detrimental. Given that social media is pervasive, scholars, educators, parents, and adults have begun to worry about social media’s role in young men’s lives (Brooks 2015). Young men using social media platforms can confuse self-identity crises and can even make them targets of delusions and persuasions (Tiggemann &amp; Anderberg, 2020a).</p>
<p><b>Types of Social Media Influencers</b></p>	<p><b>Nano-influencer:</b> smaller audience and highly engaged influencers.</p> <p><b>Micro-influencer:</b> The largest group of influencers that has the highest engagement rate with users.</p> <p><b>Macro-influencers:</b> They have a more significant follower count compared to micro-celebrities and are specialists in a specific field.</p> <p><b>Mega-influencer:</b> They have the highest following count and are highly visible on social media due to their celebrity status</p>

## 4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY





## 4.1 INTRODUCTION

In chapter 3 of this study, the researcher discussed existing literature on social media, social media influencers, and social comparison. The focus of this chapter is the research methodology of the study. The researcher will discuss data collection and analysis techniques, tools adopted in the study, research design, and the research onion model. The specific tools and techniques adopted in this study were specified.

## 4.2 THE RESEARCH ONION MODEL

This research model consists of six thoroughly described layers, and each layer needs to be discussed to develop an effective research methodology (Melnikovas, 2018). The illustration of the research onion model in Figure 3 outlines the philosophy of the study, the approach to theory development, the methodological choices, the chosen strategies, time horizons, and data collection techniques. The description of each layer is described as follows:

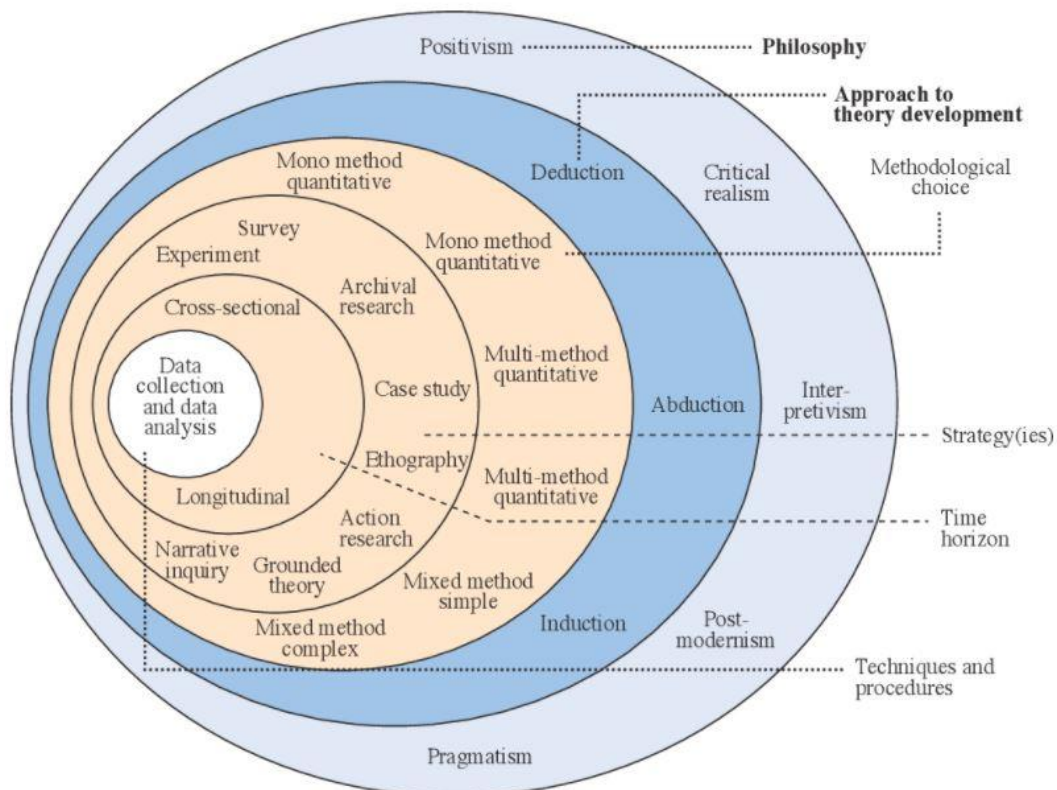


Figure 3: Research Onion Model

- 1. Philosophy:** Refers to the belief that data relating to a phenomenon should be collected, analysed, and used (Buunk & Schaufeli, 2018). Philosophy can also be described as delineating ontology, epistemology, and axiology. Ontology is defined as the nature of reality, Epistemology, on the other hand, is what is known, facts, and knowledge base, and Axiology is the ethics, beliefs, and value of research (Melnikovas, 2018). The philosophical paradigms are the following: interpretivism, realism, positivism, and pragmatism (Melnikovas, 2018).
- 2. Approaches to Theory Development:** In this layer of the research model, it is implied by the research philosophy used in the previous layer. In this layer, the researcher uses an existing theory to raise questions and hypotheses and collects data to confirm or reject the hypotheses.
- 3. Methodological Choice:** This layer identifies if either quantitative, qualitative, or a mixture of both approaches will be used in the study. The quantitative approach uses quantitative data (Flick, 2015), while the qualitative approach is concluded using the paradigm of the study (Bryman, 2016).
- 4. Strategies:** This is the layer where data is collected and analysed. The data analysis is used to answer the research questions (Oates, 2006; Myers et al., 2012; Saunders et al., 2015). Myers et al. (2012) described a strategy as a way in which empirical data is found and pointed out its influences on the data collection method chosen by the researcher. The strategy options in the research onion model include grounded theory, case studies, surveys, ethnography, action research, experiment, and narrative inquiry (Melnikovas, 2018; Saunders et al., 2015).
- 5. Time Horizons:** This layer in the research onion model defines the study's timeframe. The types of time frameworks include cross-sectional and longitudinal. Cross-sectional (short-term) is when data is collected at a specific time. In contrast, the longitudinal time framework applies to the repeated collection of data over a more extended time, which compares the data collected (Saunders et al., 2015).

- 6. Techniques and Procedures:** These are the last and final layer of the research onion model. In this layer, the data is collected and analysed. The researcher picks the data, chooses the sample groups, and develops the questionnaires or interviews (Melnikovas, 2018). These tools and techniques will help the researcher analyse the research problem (Sahay, 2016; Saunders et al., 2015).

### 4.3 RESEARCH DESIGN

The research design is a detailed plan for the study's data collection and refers to the plan to be followed by the researcher to answer the existing research questions and to test the proposed hypothesis (Bhattacharjee, 2012). Durrheim (2006) described research design as what seals all the elements in a research paper. In short, the researcher must follow a detailed plan in their research. Jahoda et al. (1951) defined research design as the organisation of data collection and data analysis tools and techniques to add value and relevance to the research. Research design does not entail that the study needs to adopt a specific technique of data collection or data type (Akhtar, 2016). Research design tends to vary depending on whether the researcher starts from the observation phase and tries to rationalise (inductive research) or if the researcher starts from a theory and attempts to validate (deductive research) (Bhattacharjee, 2012). The research design should specify the data collection process, development process, and sampling method (Bhattacharjee, 2012). The purpose of a research design includes anticipating decisions regarding data collection, process, and data analysis and presenting logical reasoning for the decisions (Melnikovas, 2018). The researcher should conclude the research design once the objectives have been identified and the research hypothesis is adequately laid out.

The following section covers and discusses the research philosophy implemented in this study.

### 4.4 RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY

A research philosophy theory indicates the strategies and techniques of research and a classical research methodology (Sahay, 2016). The philosophical research paradigms include interpretivism, positivism, pragmatism, and critical realist (Saunders et al., 2015).

**Interpretivism:** This approach is based on ontology. These ontological assumptions point out that socially constructed reality can only be analysed and researched using social constructions

(Melnikovas, 2018). Interpretivism assumes an unpredictable future. Predicting the future is impossible as it consists of a random, surprising, and chaotic chain of events. Because prediction improves, knowledge about the future can only be acquired through intuitive strategy (Melnikovas, 2018; Saunders et al., 2015).

**Positivism:** It is the reflection of the philosophical point of view of a natural scientist. The ontology, in this case, is based on objectivist assumptions. In positivism, entities are observed, and credibility is only given to observation and empirical data (Sahay, 2016).

**Critical Relativism:** This paradigm assumes a flexible future. This means that the future is random and has many possibilities, yet actors can influence it (Melnikovas, 2018). Previous studies (Bell, 2016; Saunders et al., 2015) argued that critical relativism help with the development of the theoretical framework for future studies.

**Pragmatism:** This paradigm assumes that it is possible to adapt both interpretivism and positivism to answer a particular research question (Melnikovas, 2018).

In this research study, the research philosophy chosen was interpretivism. The interpretivism paradigm believes that a single event or action can have multiple interpretations and that reality is complex (Ryan, 2018). A participant can, for example, have a positive interpretation of social media influencers, while another participant might interpret the situation negatively. Interpretivism focuses on what individuals say, feel, and act to make meaning to the researched phenomena (Melnikovas, 2018; Saunders et al., 2015). According to Ryan (2018), interpretive studies are ideal for qualitative research as it guides the research to analyse and understand the collected data. This study is interpretive because the researcher gathered all the data from the participants to understand the role of social media influencers in terms of social comparison in the lives of young males.

#### 4.5 RESEARCH APPROACH

There are three research approaches: inductive, deductive, and abductive (Sahay, 2016; Saunders et al., 2015). Deductive research makes use of physical argumentation. This approach starts with an existing theory, that then hypotheses are developed to help answer the research questions (Melnikovas, 2018; Saunders et al., 2015). Inductive research starts with an observation, and it is used as a way of theory building. Teherani et al. (2015) stated that the inductive approach is mainly based on intuition, while the deductive approach is based on factual argumentation. The abductive approach starts with observing signs that provide direction for future research (Melnikovas, 2018).

Saunders et al. (2015) described the deductive approach as using an existent theory in a study to answer research questions. In this study, the researcher used the deductive approach. The deductive approach was the most appropriate because the theory framework was used to make sense of the literature and the data collected in the current study.

#### 4.6 RESEARCH STRATEGY

The research strategies presented as the primary research strategies by Saunders et al. (2015) and Oates (2006) include grounded theory, survey, narrative inquiry, experiments, action research, archival research, case study, and ethnography. However, future studies can use slightly different research strategies.

**Grounded theory** refers to a research strategy that involves constructing valid hypotheses developed through the data collected and analysed by the researcher (Ivey, 2017). It applies inductive reasoning.

**Narrative inquiry** is a research strategy of collecting data and information through storytelling to answer the research question (Haydon et al., 2018). The researcher achieves this by writing a detailed narrative through their experience (Haydon et al., 2018).

**Experiments** is a strategy that refers to when the researcher manipulates the variables in the study to cause changes in the other variables to test the hypotheses (Panchal & Szajnfarber, 2017).

**Action research** refers to a strategy in which the researcher and the participant of a study collaborate in the analysis of the problem and the development of the solution based on the analysis (Mac Naughton, 2020).

**Case study** is a research strategy that a researcher use. The data is collected through reports and past research to gather more in-depth and selected information to answer the research question (Ridder, 2017).

**Ethnography** is a strategy used when the researcher uses the participants' cultural settings and background to develop an in-depth narrative of their culture and ethnicity against existing theoretical content (Fusch Ph.D. et al., 2017).

In this study, the researcher decided that the survey strategy was the most suitable. According to Gable (1994), the survey research method is a collection of methods that accentuate quantitative analysis. In the survey research method, the researcher collects data from several individuals and organisations through interviews, questionnaires, published statistics, and analyses through statistical techniques. Research strategy helps the researcher choose the techniques and tools to collect and analyse the data to help answer the research question.

The survey method is the most appropriate for this study because the researcher intended to study the impact of social media influencers on young men in natural settings. Previous studies have concluded that the survey method can explain, describe, and explore (Bhattacharjee, 2012; Oates, 2006).

Based on the above reasons, the researcher decided that the survey research method was the most appropriate for the current study as the data was collected to answer the research question.

#### **4.7 RESEARCH CHOICE**

Research choices refer to qualitative, quantitative, mixed, or mono methods to answer the research questions (Saunders et al., 2015). Quantitative research methods involve collecting more descriptive information to answer the research question. In contrast, qualitative research methods include collecting numerical data and statistics to answer the research question (Melnikovas, 2018; Saunders et al., 2015). Mixed Methods refer to when a study includes quantitative and qualitative data to answer the research question by avoiding the constraints of using a single method (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Mono methods refer to whether the study focuses on qualitative and quantitative research to answer the research question. Multi-method refers to when the study uses quantitative and qualitative methodologies to answer the research question. The study is mainly based on one method, and the other is just auxiliary (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Melnikovas,

2018). For this study, the researcher focused on the collection of only qualitative data, which means that the mono-method choice was the one adopted.

#### **4.8 TIME HORIZON**

According to Gable (1994), there are three time horizons: short, medium, and long. The first time horizon (short term) is up to 10 years, the medium up to 25 years, and the long term refers to a period longer than 25 years. When working on research, the researcher needs to decide whether the study will be based on a particular point. The researcher does this through the observation of events. The researcher's focus on a particular period is classified as a cross-sectional time horizon. If the researcher decides to focus on the study over a more extended period, it is longitudinal (Oates, 2006; Saunders et al., 2015). The researcher bases the decision on whether to pursue a cross-sectional or longitudinal study on the research question and the necessary data to fix the research problem (Oates, 2006). Due to time constraints associated with academic deadlines, the researcher chose a cross-sectional study.

#### **4.9 TECHNIQUES AND PROCEDURES**

All previously discussed, layers determine how data was collected and analysed to answer the research question. A survey research method was employed in this study. Interviews and questionnaires were the data collection methods chosen. The researcher decided that semi-structured questionnaires and interviews were the most suitable to answer the research question. The semi-structured questions are based on the social comparison theory and literature. Before each interview scheduled, the participants had to answer a questionnaire, and based on the answers provided, the researcher would know which direction to take during the interviews. The questionnaire and interview questions can be found in Appendix A and B.

#### **4.10 DATA COLLECTION**

Scholars have used different data collection strategies to collect and analyse the collected data. Primary and secondary data collection methods are the two types (Myers et al., 2012). Primary data refers to data collected for a specific study using the techniques and tools that best fit the study (Hox & Boeije, 2005). In every research or occasion in which scholars collect data, new data is added

to the existing knowledge base (Hox & Boeije, 2005). As the data collected is made available to other researchers once published, it becomes secondary data for them to use in their research (Hox & Boeije, 2005). Secondary data was previously collected for a specific question, but now it is used by the researcher to answer another research question (Oates, 2006). The researcher used interviews and questionnaires as the most suitable data collection methods. The sampling method, interviews, and questionnaires are discussed in the following section.

#### **4.10.1 TARGET POPULATION**

The study's target population refers to the group of interest that is essential to answer the research question. In this case, the target population is young men aged 20 to 26 years who use social media.

#### **4.10.2 SAMPLING METHOD AND SIZE**

The sampling method is a crucial and essential step in qualitative research studies. Sampling can be described as a research method that refers to selecting members of the population to make statistical conclusions that will answer research questions (Parfitt, 2005; Tyrer & Heyman, 2016). There are two categories of sampling methods: probability and non-probability (Tyrer & Heyman, 2016). Non-probability sampling methods use the subjective judgment of the researcher to select the sample instead of a standard random sample (Elfil & Negida, 2017). Existing probability sampling methods include snowball, quota, self-selection, and purposive (Parfitt, 2005). Probability sampling ensures that each existing case in the population has an equal likelihood of being selected by incorporating an aspect of random selection (Elfil & Negida, 2017; Hox & Boeije, 2005). Cluster sampling, random sampling, stratified sampling, and systematic sampling are examples of probability sampling.

When choosing a sampling method, the researcher considered factors such as the research objective, research questions, theory framework, study methodology, knowledge about the selected population of interest, population similarity, and population differences to answer the research question. Determining the sampling method assisted the researcher with selecting the representative sample and the sample size to reach the desired conclusions. For this study, the researcher opted for stratified random sampling. Stratified random reference is part of the probability sampling method, in which the researcher divides the population into smaller groups, and the groups can be organized in ranges and ages (Elfil & Negida, 2017; Parfitt, 2005). For this



study, the quota sampling method was the chosen method. This refers to a non-probable form of the sampling method. In this sampling method, a selected number of participants are chosen based on the study's requirements. In this case, 20 men aged 18 to 26 years have access to and use social media platforms. The decision was based on previous studies stating that nearly no new concepts were found after 20 interviews. This was also done to avoid saturation of the data collected (Morgan & Tindale, 2002). Saturation refers to the point at which linking concepts between two or three interviews yield no new categories or themes (Francis et al., 2010).

#### 4.10.3 INTERVIEWS

Dorney (2007) outlined that qualitative data is often collected through interviews by researchers. Interviews are a powerful collection technique that allows researchers to investigate people's views more in-depth (Alshenqeeti, 2014). Interviews allow the people involved to express their true feelings, speak up, analyse words and create detailed reports of the people interviewed (Alshenqeeti, 2014; Sullivan, 2012). Interviews are the most appropriate data collection tool in cases where detailed information or opinions are required (Gill et al., 2008). Structured, semi-structured, and unstructured are the types of interviews that exist.

**Structured Interviews:** These consist of a group of direct questions that have been pre-determined by the researcher and are usually "yes" or "no" types of questions (Alshenqeeti, 2014). Structured interviews have a minimum level of freedom as the questions were already set. Structured interviews are easier to administer as they list pre-determined questions.

**Semi-structured Interviews:** The interview type is more flexible than a structured interview. Semi-structured interviews allow the interviewer to allow the interviewee to expand their responses to collect more in-depth responses (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). This type of interview allows more in-depth responses but still stays within the parameters traced by the researcher (Alshenqeeti, 2014).

**Unstructured Interviews:** Unlike structured interviews, these are more flexible, and there is more freedom regarding the interview content and implementation (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002). In unstructured interviews, the interviewer allows them to go more in-depth and elaborate on their answers (Oskouei et al., 2018).

The researcher decided to go with one-on-one interviews for the current study and opt for a semi-structured interview. The interviews were unstructured; however, the interview questions were

prepared beforehand to guide the conversation and were similar across all twenty (20) participants. Interview questions were prepared based on the research questions and objectives mentioned in Chapter 1.

#### **4.10.4 QUESTIONNAIRES**

Questionnaires are a data collection technique used in qualitative research (McGuirk & O'Neill, 2016). Questionnaires collect original information from people on their personal experiences, opinions, beliefs, and attitudes on a specific topic (Maroši & Bauer, 2017; Parfitt, 2005). Even though there is a limitation on the number of qualitative data questionnaires that can collect, they can provide detailed insights into individuals' attitudes, trends, and social trends (McGuirk & O'Neill, 2016). Cost-effectiveness and extensive research over dispersed populations are reasons to opt for using questionnaires as a practical data collection method (McGuirk & O'Neill, 2016). In this study, the researcher opted for a questionnaire survey conducted online, wherein this case was the best option because of the pandemic caused by COVID-19 and the minimised costs (Sue & Ritter, 2012; Velavan & Meyer, 2020). Questionnaires are also the most suitable solution because of their flexibility combined with other collection methods.

#### **4.10.5 PARTICIPANT SELECTION**

Qualitative selection participant selection is purposeful, as the participants selected are the ones that can best help solve the problem behind the study question and help people understand the topic (Ryan et al., 2007). Hence, selecting the participants for a study is a crucial step. When choosing the participants, the researcher focuses on the theoretical framework and the research questions. The individuals selected should help the researcher with enough evidence to answer the research question. The target population for this study was young men aged 18 to 25 years.

#### **4.11 DATA ANALYSIS**

The researcher opted to use qualitative analysis. Quantitative research methods involve collecting more descriptive data to answer the questions and solve the research problem. In contrast, qualitative research involves collecting numerical data and statistics to answer the research question (Saunders et al., 2015). Mixed Methods refer to when a study includes quantitative and

qualitative data by avoiding the constraints of using a single method (Flick, 2015). For this research, the researcher opted for thematic analysis because it was the most flexible approach to generate mindful insights and concepts from the collected data.

#### **4.12 ETHICAL CONSIDERATION**

Ethics is described as guiding the conduct of moral principles held by an individual or a group of people (Wiles et al., 2006). Universities dedicate to promoting ethical considerations in research. These institutions do this by requiring the researchers to get ethical clearance before writing or publishing an article. For the current study, the researcher followed all the ethical considerations in data collection and analysis. The researcher reached out to the committee for research ethics at the University of Pretoria and asked for permission before collecting any data from the participants. Ethical clearance was obtained under the protocol number: EMS014/22 (see Appendix C), and all participants signed a consent form before participating in the study (see Appendix D).

##### **4.12.1 PARTICIPANTS**

This refers to individuals involved in the research directly or indirectly (ethical considerations). It is vital during research that the participants give consent before formally participating in the study. This is done by signing a consent form. The contributors involved in this study will receive all the information required to decide if they want to participate or not. Ethical risks of consent and confidentiality risks are going to be discussed and clearly defined to them.

##### **4.12.2 CONFIDENTIALITY**

It is essential to respect each participant by ensuring their information remains confidential and their anonymity is respected throughout the study.

##### **4.12.3 INTEGRITY**

Integrity is a vital point of research. In this study, the researcher is honest and transparent throughout the research process.

In addition to the points mentioned above, the following will be applied to meet the ethical standards of the University of Pretoria:

- The Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences will provide ethical clearance before data collection occurs.
- Participants will sign and be informed of consent forms before they decide to participate.
- Participants will have the opportunity to withdraw their input and no longer participate in the study at any point.
- No pictures of the participants or personal details will be included in the study.

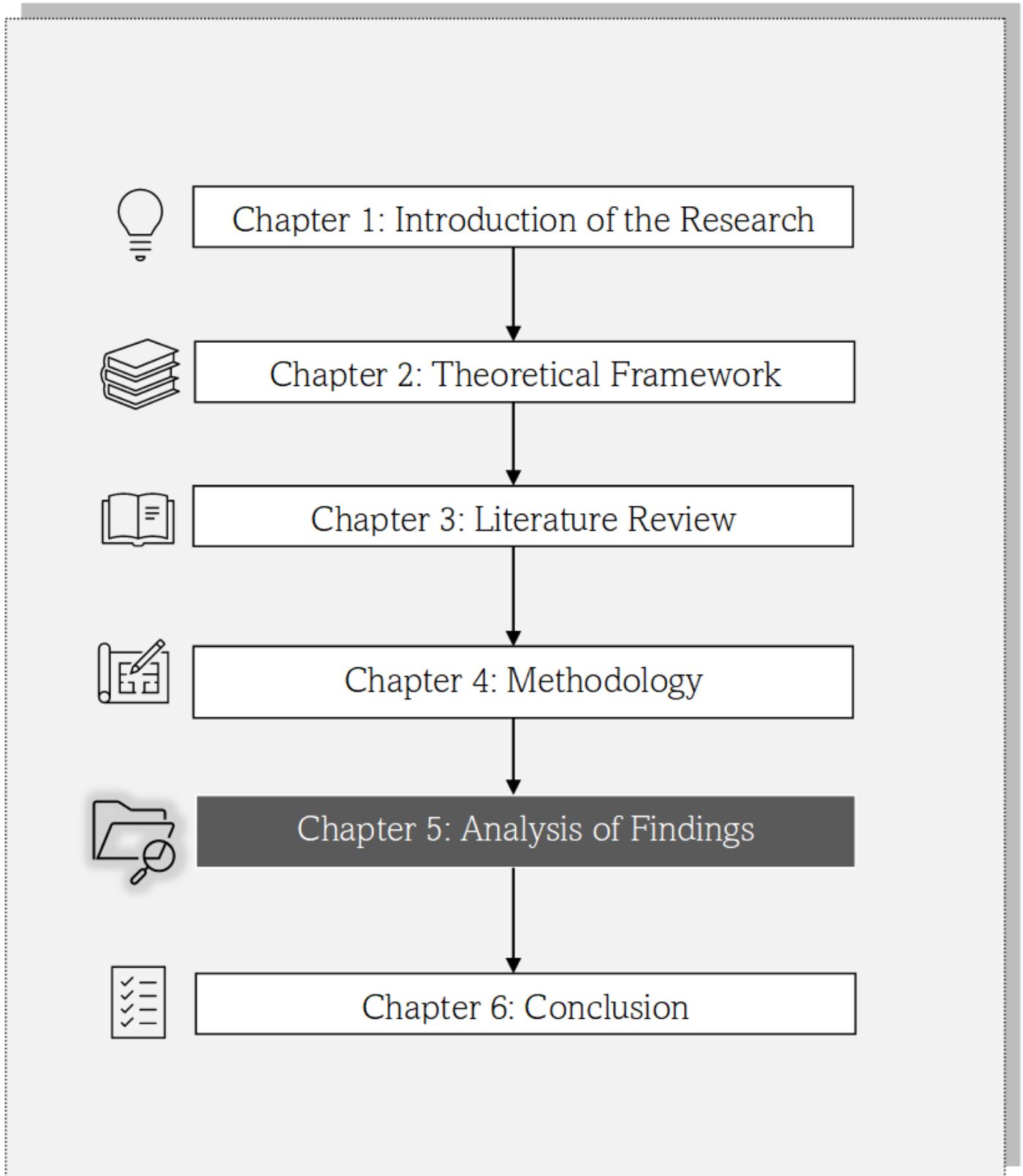
#### 4.13 CONCLUSION

In this section, the researcher discussed the chosen research methodology. The philosophy, approach, strategy, choice, time horizon, data collection techniques, and data analysis used in the study were specified. The researcher also focused on the ethical consideration of the study.

**Table 5: Chapter 4 Summary**

<b>RESEARCH METHODOLOGY SUMMARY</b>	
Philosophy	Interpretivism
Approach	Deductive
Strategy	Survey
Choice	Mono-Method
Time Horizon	Cross-Sectional
Data Collection	Interviews and Questionnaires
Data Analysis	Qualitative – Thematic Analysis

## 5 ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS



## **5.1 INTRODUCTION**

The research methodology followed in this study was discussed in great detail in the previous section. Interviews were the data collection method were used were discussed in the previous chapter. This chapter aims to analyse the feedback collected from the interviews that were held with the group of young males selected to participate in the current study. In this study, the researcher went through the topics of social media influencers. Social media (upward and downward comparisons) attempts to answer the research question. This chapter includes the researcher's understanding and interpretation of the data collected and the drawing of conclusions formed based on the information. In Chapter 1, the researcher discussed the study's objectives, and the interview questions were developed based on the objectives to gather the answers.

To understand and dissect the effect social media influencers have on young males' lives in terms of social media comparison, a sample was selected based on their gender (male) and age (young adults). The current study participants were a group of twenty young males between the ages of 20 to 26 years. Although many young males wanted to participate in the present study, the researcher decided only to run twenty interviews.

The researcher presented 10-30 minutes of research interviews, using online conferencing tools such as Google Meets, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and Transcript Software to transcribe all the interviews in detail. The interviews did not take place face-to-face due to restrictions in place due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher also looked at the demographic factors of the selected participants. The researcher also believed that all the participants could answer the interview questions in a way that would add value to the current study.

## **5.2 DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF PARTICIPANTS**

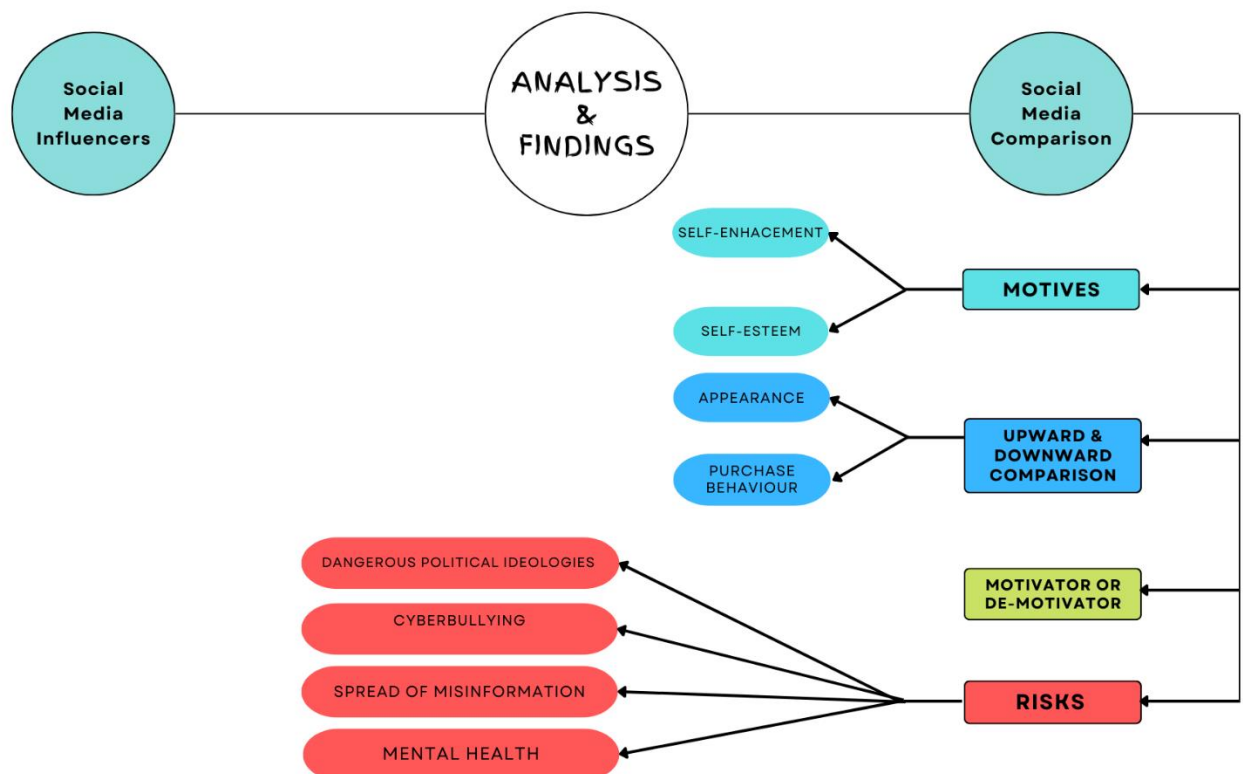
The first section of the interviews includes the demographic details of the participants. The demographic details such as age, gender, ethnicity, and duration of the interviews are discussed in the following sub-sections. To maintain their anonymity and confidentiality, the researcher omitted details such as names and contact details.

### 5.2.1 AGE

The age of the participants ranged from 20-28 years. Four 20-year-olds and four 23-year-olds represented 40% of the total sample. Three 21-year-olds and three 22-year-olds represent 30% of the sample. Two 24-year-olds and two 25 years represent 20%. The remaining 10% comes from one 26-year-old and one 28-year-old. These results show that there was a fair representation across the age group. The age distribution is represented in the graph below.

### 5.3 PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

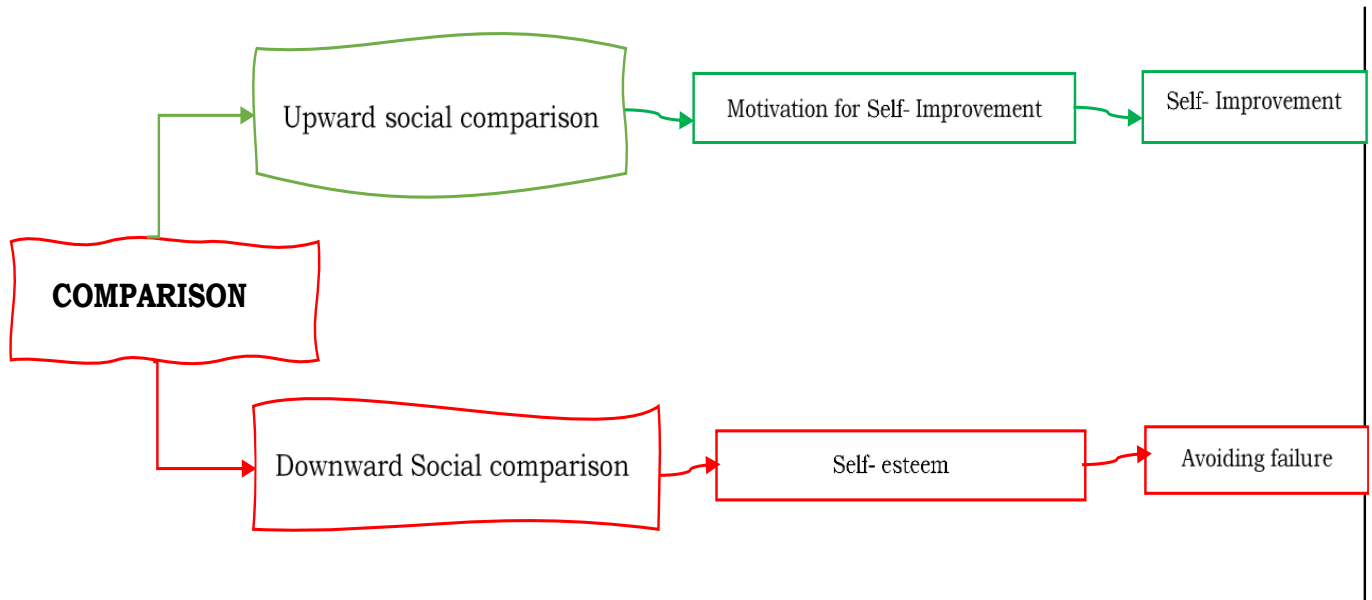
The mind map bellow provides a visual representation of what is going to be discussed in this section. Each point on the diagram represents a result that was discussed in the subsection.



**Figure 4 - Visual Representation of Analysis & Findings**

The data collected was analysed based on the interpretation of the researcher. The researcher followed the thematic analysis approach. In chapter 2, the researcher presented the notion of social comparison (Festinger, 1954), which stated that humans tend to compare themselves to individuals and that there are two types of comparisons: upward and downward. In addressing the objectives of the current study, the social comparison theory was used from which the themes were derived.

Figure 4 provides a visual representation of the social comparison theory and the themes derived from the framework.



**Figure 4: Social Comparison Theory (Adapted from Leon Festinger 1954 and Goethals G.R. 1986)**

Social media has caused much discussion on whether it is beneficial or detrimental to its users. The main objective of this study is to determine the role social media influencers have in the social comparison of young men. Three secondary research objectives support this primary objective. The primary aim is to understand why social media influencers influence young men. The second objective is to determine how social media influencers easily influence young men on social media platforms. The third and final secondary objective is to determine if young men know the risks of using social media platforms.

By following the framework approach suggested by Leon Festinger, the researcher could identify points into meaningful knowledge that would add value to the research through the interviews.



### 5.3.1 SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS

In an attempt to find out whether the participants were aware of the existence and role that social media influencers play on social media, the researcher began by asking them to define the term “social media influencer”. The researcher gathered that the participants did not share the same opinion toward social media influencers. Six (6) out of 20 participants believe that a social media influencer’s primary role is monetary. They shared the opinion that social media influencers’ role is to advertise, sell, and promote products on different platforms to get the users to purchase from the companies they work with.

*Participant 1: Those people whose primary job is to create content to advertise various products to their social network.*

*Participant 2: Someone that influences a vast group of people to purchase an item, dress a certain way.*

*Participant 5: I suppose they are people who promote products, ways of living and therefore are highly influential.*

*Participant 14: An influential individual on social media, with capabilities of promoting products and service.*

*Participant 17: Social media influencers are people capable of influencing others to buy products and services.*

*Participant 18: People who can use their existing celebrity platform or status to influence their fans, be it for capitalistic purposes or trends.*

This perception of the role of social media influencers supports numerous studies that have explored how companies and brands have used social media influencers to change the selling process (Boerman et al., 2017; Liljander et al., 2015; Youn & Shin, 2019). Different companies use social media influencers to understand their target buyers, discover their needs, present the value, numerous close sales, and provide post-sale services (N. Ahmed et al., 2008; Lashgari et al., 2018).

Companies recruit social media influencers to advertise their services and products and create an emotional connection with their target audience (Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014). The researcher goes in-depth on the purchase behaviour in section 5.3.2: “social media comparison.”

Even though six (6) out of the 20 participants believed that social media influencers’ role is to advertise products and services, three (3) of the participants believed that social media influencers are there to alter the behaviour of their followers and to get them to act the same as them.

*Participant 2: Someone that influences a vast group of people to purchase an item, dress a certain way, or anything that will essentially alter a person’s usual way of doing things.*

*Participant 7: People with many followers that have a die-hard audience.*

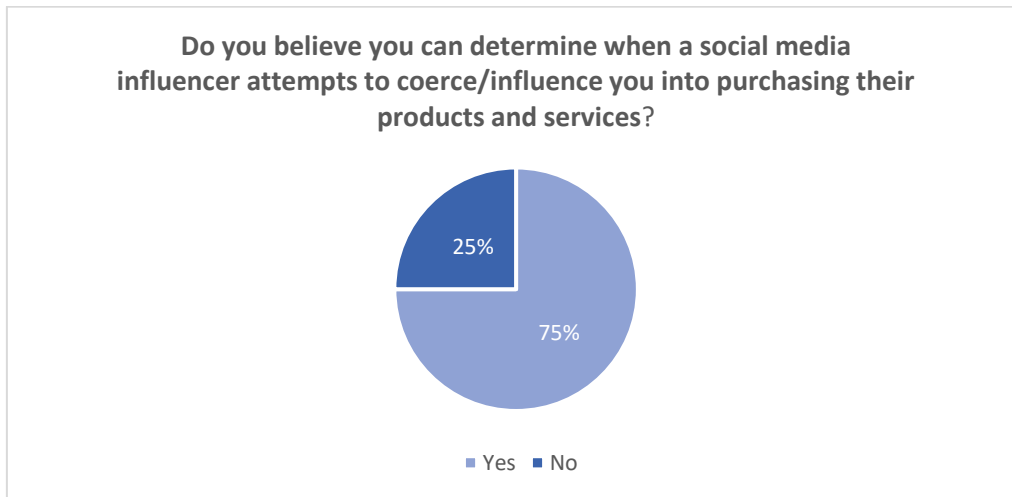
*Participant 13: Social media influencers are people that create content for other social media users and have a fan base that will do, believe, and vouch for their opinions and choices.*

These results can also be supported by numerous studies on the influence of social media influencers (Freberg et al., 2011; Lau, 2017; Lim et al., 2017). Since their teenage years, users have been influenced by social media influencers. This happens when the social media influencer’s content matches the personality and interests of the users (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Therefore, a social media influencer whose content reverts around technology, music, and video games, will attract users who are more inclined to technology, music, and gaming consoles (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014).

In an attempt to find out whether the participants were able to identify when they were being influenced or coerced by social media influencers, the researcher asked the following question:

**“Do you believe you can determine when a social media influencer attempts to coerce/influence you into purchasing their products and services?”**

The results of this question were that fifteen (15) out of the 20 replied that they could determine when a social media influencer is trying to influence them, and five (5) expressed that they cannot identify the act. Figure 4 provides a visual representation of the results in question.



**Figure 5: Visual Representation of how many Participants can be Determined when Social Media Influencers are Influencing Them**

Even though the results show that most users believe they can identify when they are being influenced or coerced by someone else, there are still some people who are still gullible regarding social media influencers getting them into purchasing products or making life decisions. Most users equate persuasion to pop-up ads, banners, and ads, not recommendation posts from their favourite social media influencers (Chu & Seock, 2020).

A group of users are aware of and suspect social media influencers and can easily differentiate a recommendation from a sponsorship post (Boerman et al., 2017). This indicates that these users are aware of the tactics that are being used nowadays by organisations and social media influencers and sometimes still choose to be influenced by them (Boerman et al., 2017; Youn & Shin, 2019). This choice is made by the users so that they can keep up with the current trends and maintain their social media print.

Social media influencers use their power of influence towards the user to increase engagement on their platforms, which ultimately means that there will be an increase in their remuneration (Chu & Seock, 2020; Khamis et al., 2017). This means that the more social media influencers can influence

the users' daily activities, decisions, and thoughts, the more successful they will be (Freberg et al., 2011). Studies have shown that this can end up with the users spending money they do not have or even cause more prominent issues such as depression and social media fatigue because of failure to adhere to what they are promoting, selling, or keeping up with the trends (Chetioui et al., 2020; Lim et al., 2017).

The remaining eleven (11) participants defined social media influencers as a group of celebrities or models, and the other half described them as people who have built their reputation on a topic of their expertise.

*Participant 3: It is an individual who has a massive audience on a related topic and can engage and translate or add value to a topic.*

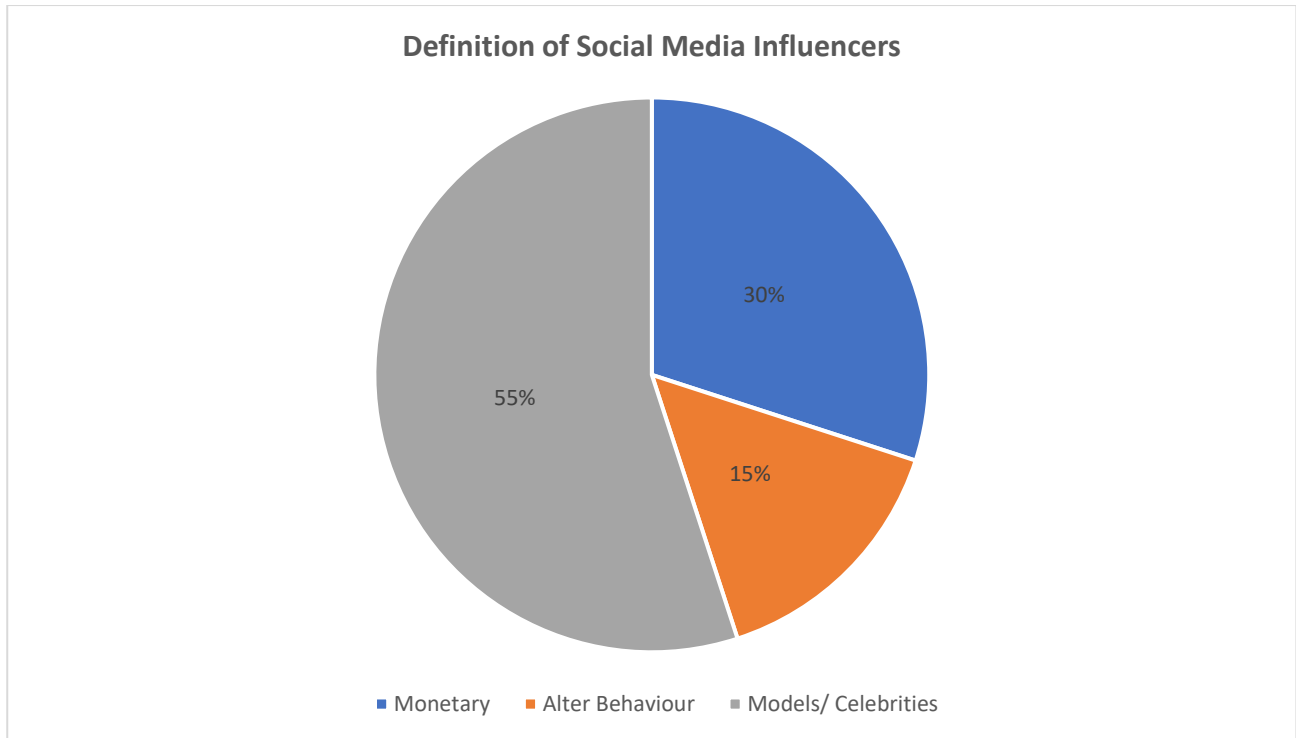
*Participant 8: People who have built a reputation for their knowledge and expertise on a topic.*

*Participant 9: People who use their platform to expose their craft and inspire their audience in the process.*

*Participant 10: Models*

By asking the participants to define social media influencers, the researcher determined that although the participants did not have the same opinion towards their role on social media platforms, they were all aware of their existence on the platforms and the power they held towards the users. This helped the researcher in deciding which direction to take on the interviews. Figure five (5) provides a visual representation of the results for the definition of social media influencers. The results show that six (6) out of 20 participants, representing 30% of the sample size, defined *social media influencers* as individuals whose role is to advertise, sell and promote products on their social media platforms for a monetary value. Three (3) out of 20 participants, representing 15%, believed that social media influencers are people who alter the behaviour of their followers to match their own. The remaining eleven (11) participants representing 55% of the sample size,

described social media influencers as a group of celebrities/models who have built their reputation on a topic of expertise.



**Figure 6: Visual Representation of the Definition of Social Media Influencers Provided by the Participants of the Study**

### 5.3.2 SOCIAL MEDIA COMPARISON

In social comparison theory, Festinger (1954) suggested that people judge themselves through social comparisons and by analysing their traits and abilities. The social media comparison theory states that people use the comparison process to accurately develop effective benchmarks to evaluate themselves (Myers et al., 2012).

The social comparison makes part of self-socialisation in which individuals compare their abilities, traits, and limitations to others in their environment (Burluson et al., 2005; Myers et al., 2012). The motivations for social comparison include maintaining a positive self-evaluation (downward social comparison) and self-enhancement (upward social comparison) (Burluson et al., 2005).

To identify the type of social comparison (downward and upward) and the motive behind it (self-enhancement, self-improvement, self-evaluation), the researcher asked the participants who their favourite social media influencers are and the reason behind their choice.

Three (3) participants out of the 20 who participated in the study claimed that they did not have a favourite social media influencer and used social media platforms exclusively to interact with other people or for entertainment.

*Participant 2: I do not happen to have a favourite social media influencer at the moment because I haven't been connected to my socials like that in a bit. Do check out Allan Shane's <sup>1</sup>podcasts, though, some good content can easily interact with his guests and makes them comfortable enough to open.*

Participants 4 and 6 also mentioned that they did not have a specific social media influencer. The other 17 participants identified their social media influencers and provided reasoning for their choice.

*Participant 1: Jose Zuniga. Jose has helped me improve on various aspects of my life.*

Participant 1 said that the fashion influencer Jose Zuniga was his favourite social media influencer and when asked why, he replied that Jose helped him improve various aspects of his life. Jose Zuniga is a 27-year-old American-Honduran social media influencer known for creating clothing and hairstyle tutorials on his YouTube channel (*Jose Zuniga Net Worth 2022 - Income, Car, Businesses, Wife, Bio - Bio Overview, 2022*). Jose currently has over 5 million subscribers on his YouTube channel and around 1.3 million followers on his Instagram account (*Jose Zuniga Net Worth 2022 - Income, Car, Businesses, Wife, Bio - Bio Overview, 2022*). Participant 1 then detailed that because of the social media influencer Jose Zuniga he started following more fashion trends and began to dress better or keep up with trendier looks. The participant also mentioned that Zuniga helped increase his confidence by changing how he presented himself. The participant also specified that he was able to build these skills by following all of the social media influencers' content on every social media platform. The participant then explained that he improved his sense of style by looking at and following precisely what Jose Zuniga was doing, what type of clothing pieces he wore, the

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<sup>1</sup> Mozambican podcaster

colours he mixed, and what shoes he wore in his outfits. The participant described using Jose Zuniga's Pinterest blog to inspire his everyday outfits and expose himself to a broader range of styles. The participant justified that by copying Zuniga's style, he was forced to pay attention to minor details, like the accessories and silhouette of every outfit. The participant then said that he believed that the best way of experimenting was by imitating someone with similar likes and interests, which was his case. The participant acknowledges that even if one is not a fan of a specific piece of clothing or outfit, one can use that particular experience to learn about style and what one like or dislike.

*Participant 3: Trevor Noah because he has accomplished so much in such a short time.*

Participant 3 said that Trevor Noah was his favourite social media influencer because he was able to accomplish a lot in a short period. Trevor Noah is a South African comedian, actor, and television host of one of the biggest shows in America (Daily Mail) (*Trevor Noah | About, n.d.; Trevor Noah | Biography, Comedy, The Daily Show, Book, & Facts | Britannica, n.d.*). Trevor Noah currently has 7.6 million followers on his Instagram account, 11.6 million followers on his Twitter account, and an average number of views per Daily Show Videos sitting on 233.6k per video (*Trevor Noah | Biography, Comedy, The Daily Show, Book, & Facts | Britannica, n.d.*). Participant 3 then detailed that the reason he picked Trevor Noah was that not only is he the host of one of the most popular shows aired on television, but because he still managed to develop one of the best senses of humour while overcoming one of the most challenging known segregation periods from his country (South Africa). The participant detailed that even though Trevor Noah was 'born a crime' because of being descended from a white man and a black woman, which was illegal at the time (apartheid), and despite all the rough patches in his life, the comedian still managed to develop the best sense of humour and become very popular in his home country. The participant then went on to explain how he admires that Trevor Noah became the successor of John Steward, who was one of the most famous talks show hosts and took his position. The participant sees him as an inspiration because even though he was born when he was not supposed to be, he overcame and became one of the most successful and known African people.

*Participant 6: I wouldn't call a favourite, but I enjoy Heike Pinto's and Clark Jr posts.*

Participant 6 said that Heike Pinto and Clark Jr were his favourite social media influencers. Heike Pinto is a young Mozambican who has completed his computer science degree and a Master's degree in Business Administration and is the founder of "Fuel Injection Technology" ((54) Heike Pinto | LinkedIn, n.d.). Heike currently has around 3 000 followers on Instagram and about 200 subscribers on his YouTube channel ((54) Heike Pinto | LinkedIn, n.d.). Clark Jr is an American who is 38 years old and known for playing Blues, Rock, and Soul music. Gary Clark Jr has around 413 followers on his Instagram, and his most watched YouTube Music video has around 20 million views with 304k subscribed to his channel (Gary Clark Jr. Official Website – GaryClarkJr.Com | New Album "This Land" Available Now, n.d.). When asked the reason behind these two favorites, the participants explained that Heike believes that the life he portrays is attainable and not far-fetched and looks up to living the same lifestyle in a couple of years. The reason why Clark Jr is a favourite is because he enjoys his music, style and charisma. Participant 6 then detailed that these were his choices because he would like to get his Master's degree in the same area as Heike and would also love to open and run his social media platforms. The participant then went on and detailed that following Heike made him realise which area he wanted to do his Master's degree in Business Administration. The participant explained that he had no intention or planned to study before following Heike. However, he was inspired to do so to improve his lifestyle and open the possibility of multiple income streams. Participant 6 explained that Clark Jr is also one of his favourite social media influencers because he has recently started building interest in music and found that the best way to learn more about the genre was to follow one of his favourite singers and keep up with everything that is released so that he is not behind. The participant added that by following Clark Jr, he purchased a guitar and is now having lessons with the current aim/objective of learning one of Clark Jr's songs before the end of the current year.

*Participant 7: Junior Khoza. He boosts the brand (Herbalife) awareness by showing how the brand changed his life and that anyone is capable. Junior has an incredible connection with his audience.*

Participant 7 said that Junior Khoza was his favourite SMI because he boosted and influenced him into joining Herbalife<sup>2</sup> and his special connection with the audience. Junior Khoza is a South African

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<sup>2</sup> Herbalife Nutrition is a global marketing company that sells dietary supplements.



Fitness influencer known for posting fitness tutorials and meal plans on all his platforms. Junior focuses on fitness, lifestyle, wealth, spirituality, and motivational videos. This SMI currently has around 176 000 followers on his Instagram account (Herimbi, n.d.). Participant 7 then specified that the reason behind following Junior Khoza was that he was interested in becoming one of Herbalife's resellers. Seeing how Khoza's life was progressing because of the brand motivated him to pursue that specific dream.

Participants 8 and 10 mentioned Felipe Franco, CBum, Greg Doucette, Jess West, and More Plates More Dates as their go-to social media influencers. These are all professional bodybuilders who also have become social media influencers. Both participants have said they follow them to help them go through their ongoing fitness journey.

*Participant 8: Cbum, Felipe Franco, and a few others. I always get to learn a bit from what they share.*

*Participant 10: Right now, my favourite influencers are: Greg Doucette, Jesse West, and More Plates More Dates because they are helping me through this fitness journey with their content.*

Participants 8 and 9 then specified that they are both currently pursuing their fitness journey, and following these bodybuilders gives them a sense of direction and helps them go through this journey. The participants then added that regardless of their fitness level, with access to the internet, they can have all of the information regarding all forms of exercise and fitness plans a button away. They mentioned that they check these social media influencers' platforms if they need any information about their journey. This includes help with nutrition, exercise, or general help with planning their programmes. Following these influencers has taught them the fitness essentials to achieve their fitness milestones.

Participant 9 mentioned Neymar Jr as his favourite social media influencer. Neymar is a Brazilian professional football player who plays for Ligue 1 Paris-Saint Germain and the Brazilian National Team. Neymar currently has around 57.6 million followers on his Twitter account and about 177 million followers on his Instagram account (*Neymar | Biography & Facts | Britannica*, n.d.). The

participant chose Neymar as his favourite social media influencer because he enjoys the sport, and Neymar happens to be his favourite player.

Participant 11 mentioned Sonny D, the founder of *The Best Food Review Show* on YouTube. Sonny is a 38-year-old YouTuber known for capturing food reviews with a hilarious approach. He is also known for his mouth-watering experiences worldwide, in which he reviews traditional dishes. Sonny D currently has around 1.3 million subscribers on YouTube, and his most-watched video has 32 million views. The participant chose him because he enjoys food reviews and has embarked on a cooking journey using his videos to get more insights (Tran, 2020).

After gathering the participant's favourite social media influencers and the motives behind the choices, the researcher could determine a trend among the answers. Seven (7) out of seventeen (17), representing 41% of the sample group, chose a social media influencer based on something they wanted to achieve. These results support the males' trend to engage in upward comparison by comparing themselves.

### **5.3.2.1 SOCIAL COMPARISON: MOTIVES**

After a brief overview of the favourite social media influencers and the reason behind the different mentions, the researcher will discuss the possible motives behind each participant's favourite social media influencer in this section. As mentioned in section 2, when deep diving into the theoretical framework, when Festinger (1954) introduced the social comparison theory, he emphasised self-evaluation being one of the factors for social comparisons, and this motive is supported by people's preference for comparing with upward' targets (Myers et al., 2012).

#### **Self-enhancement/Self-improvement**

Self-enhancement is one of the motivators for social media comparison, according to Festinger (1954). The self-enhancement end of social media comparison is satisfied through the goal approach on the irreality level, where comparison is made towards someone better off than oneself. Self-enhancement is another motive for social comparison. This motive is supported when young males engage in downward comparisons, which is when they examine negative traits, habits, and values of other individuals to enhance themselves (Schmuck et al., 2019).

## Self-esteem

Self-esteem is a known motive for the social media comparison theory. It is known that young males with low self-esteem are more likely to use more strategies to increase their self-esteem because they need more, and the ones with higher self-esteem may also use strategies to increase or maintain their self-esteem, keeping it high (Schmuck et al., 2019).

Research done on strategies of social media comparison around self-esteem supports each position. However, there is more evidence that individuals with high self-esteem are more likely to engage in self-enhancement (Myers et al., 2012). Studies have shown that people avoid engaging in social comparisons when they have lower self-esteem (Burleson et al., 2005; De Vries et al., 2018; Myers et al., 2012). This is because they fear public exposure to their inferiority, and they avoid upward comparisons or comparisons to people deemed superior to them (Burleson et al., 2005). To support this theory, the researcher asked the following questions to the group of participants:

“Would you say that you are a confident person?”

The results of this question were that 14 participants replied that they were confident individuals, three (3) expressed that they were not, and the other three replied that they were unsure. Figure 6 provides a visual representation of the results of this question.

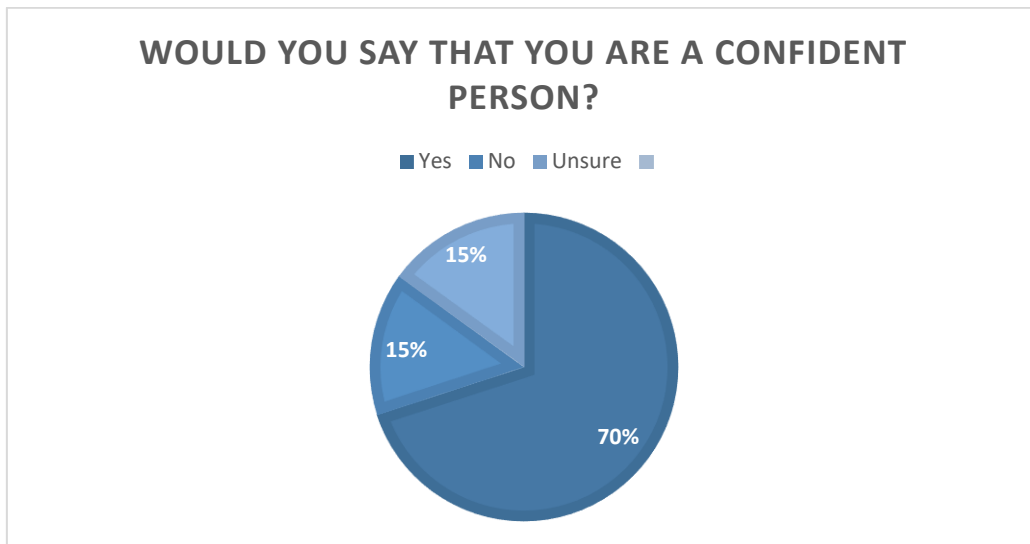


Figure 7: Representation of Confidence

The three (3) participants that replied that they were not confident were the same ones who, when asked who their favourite social media influencers were, replied that they did not have any and that they only used social media to socialise with friends or to seek entertainment.

These results support the theory that individuals with lower self-esteem will avoid social comparison to reduce or temper their self-esteem (Myers et al., 2012). Although the evidence does support that people with low self-esteem usually avoid social comparison, sometimes they may venture beyond self-protection and seek self-enhancement, but this only takes place when it is safe to do (Myers et al., 2012).

These safe opportunities for self-enhancements are the ones in which favourable outcomes are inevitable. People with lower self-esteem fear failure, which makes them seek further information about themselves when it promises to be favourable (Burlison et al., 2005).

Studies have shown that young males with higher self-esteem seem more energised by social comparison than people with lower self-esteem, as they usually shrink from further evaluation or comparison offer failure (Burlison et al., 2005; Myers et al., 2012; Yang & Robinson, 2018).

Studies also show that young males or individuals with lower self-esteem compare themselves with people or subjects who also have experience failure or failed to do something in hopes of boosting their self-esteem (Burlison et al., 2005; Li, 2018; Schmuck et al., 2019). The other participants who responded that they were confident all provided their social media influencers. This also supports that individuals with higher self-esteem are more willing to take risks to achieve gains in terms of boosting their self-esteem.

### **5.3.2.2 SOCIAL MEDIA COMPARISON: UPWARD AND DOWNWARD COMPARISONS**

As discussed in Chapter 2, the social comparison theory states that people have an intuitive impulse to evaluate their progress and current standing in various aspects of their lives (Festinger, 1954). The theory also states that in the absence of pre-determined standards, individuals settle on comparison to determine where they currently stand (Festinger, 1954; Myers et al., 2012).

Discussed in the theoretical framework of the current study, Festinger (1945) mentioned two types of comparisons: downwards and upwards.

Upward comparison is when an individual compares themselves to someone better off, and these comparisons are known to produce negative consequences (Burleson et al., 2005). The downward comparison refers to when someone compares themselves to an individual in a worse condition, having positive consequences. In-depth studies previously published (Guyer & Vaughan-Johnston, 2018) determined that individuals can also make lateral comparisons, which is when they compare themselves to someone they believe is in the same position as them in a particular aspect of their life (Burleson et al., 2005; Schmuck et al., 2019).

Lateral comparisons, like downward comparisons, are known to yield positive results (Myers et al., 2012). To determine and identify the type of comparison and the motive behind the comparison that SMI caused the young male to engage, the researcher asked a couple of questions in the context of social media comparison.

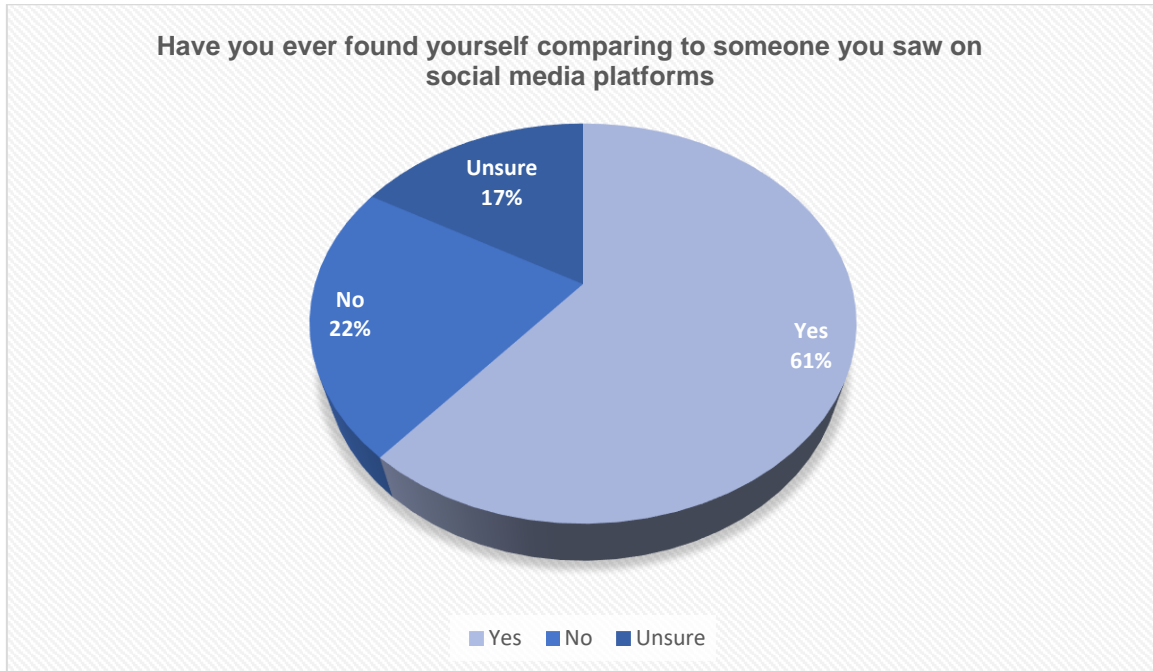
Social media comparison is known to cover several different topics. For this specific study, to answer the pre-defined questions, both research and secondary research questions, the researcher decided to focus on four areas where social media influencers might play a role in social comparison. Appearance, purchase behaviour, motivation and risks are associated with social media comparison. These four (4) themes were the ones that the researcher pinpointed as trend-common sub-sections during the interviews. The researcher will analyse the findings under each topic in the following subsection.

### **Social Media Comparison: Appearance**

Previous studies have shown that individuals are more likely to make upward comparisons (comparisons to someone considered to be more attractive) than downward or lateral comparisons (comparisons to someone to be less attractive or with the same level of attractiveness) (Burleson et al., 2005; Myers et al., 2012). To determine if the participant had engaged in social media comparison, the researcher asked if they had ever engaged in social media comparison:

**“Have you ever found yourself comparing to someone you saw on social media platforms?”**

From the question, the researcher was able to obtain 18 responses. From the 18 responses, 77.7% (14) replied yes, 16.7% (3) responded that they never had, and the remaining 5.5.% (1) were unsure if they had ever engaged in social media comparison.

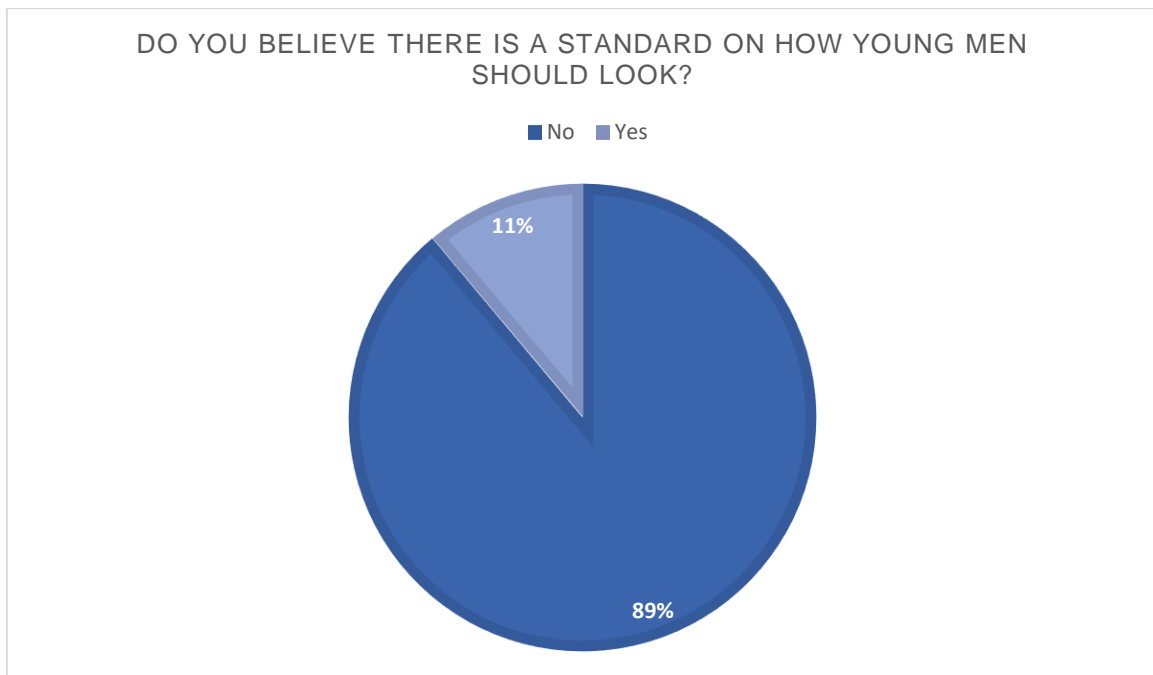


**Figure 8: Visual Representation of how many of the Participants have Engaged in Social Media Comparison**

Figure 7 above provides a visual representation of the results. The results show that most young men compare themselves with social media influencers. These results support previous studies that have stated that people often evaluate their opinions and abilities using how they compare to others (Myers et al., 2012). This is because the comparison has been proven to be a human tendency and not an inherited habit (Burluson et al., 2005). To get more insight into the impact of such comparisons on the participants, the researcher asked if the participants believed that there is a standard for how a young man should look in today’s society:

**“Do you believe there is a standard on how young men should look?”**

From this question, the results were that 89% of the participants believed there was no standard on how men should look, and the other 11% believed there was an existing standard. Figure 8 below shows a visual representation of the question.



**Figure 9: Visual Representation of Young Male Belief of an Existent Standard**

Previous studies have shown that women tend to make more upward social comparisons to evaluate their appearance (Myers et al., 2012; Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020b). Although Festinger’s social comparison theory argued that individuals are more likely to engage in comparison with people who share similarities with them, women were proven to compare themselves to thinner, unrealistic images of women portrayed on social media platforms (Bell & Dittmar, 2011; Myers et al., 2012). Festinger also states in his framework that humans will likely stop comparing themselves once it becomes unfavourable or damaging to them (Festinger, 1954; Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020b). Numerous studies have shown that women continue to make appearance-related comparisons even after experiencing all the adverse effects (Chae, 2017; Lim et al., 2017; Yang & Robinson, 2018). By asking the above question, the researcher was trying to see if young men would show the same results as women. The results are precise. Although we had predicted that social media influencers could inflict results in the belief of a thin ideal or an existing standard, it is not the case. Young men seem not to have appearance concerns. In this way, it might be that young men are somewhat protected from any risks and effects of social media exposure. Future research should dive into these possibilities. This might also be because young men do not engage as much in social comparison as women do or are more reluctant to admit that they compare themselves to other men and believe that there is a standard. This shows that comparison does not appear to affect men as it affects women. When the researcher asked why the participants believed

there were no standards, most of them replied that as long as one lives a healthy life and is comfortable in their skin, one meets all the standards.

*Participant 2: Average body type, for me, is a healthy body type for a young male. This is the age when your body can easily loose or gain weight because our metabolism is at its best. Thus, I think it is disappointing not to use the blessing of youth.*

*Participant 3: I feel comfortable in my skin. I am a young man who works out, has a job, and generally lives a healthy life; what is there not to be confident about.*

*Participant 5: In my opinion, whatever body type they feel most comfortable and confident in, provided they are healthy. I disagree that there can only be one ideal body type for a young male.*

*Participant 11: I believe there is no ideal body type. If the person feels good about their body, that is ideal for the young male.*

*Participant 12: I do not believe in “the ideal body”, just stay healthy.*

*Participant 13: I do not think people should have a standardized body type. As long as you are healthy and taking care of yourself.*

*Participant 16: There is no ideal body type. I think we all have our preferences.*

*Participant 18: As long as you have a healthy body mass index, I do not think there is an ideal body type for anyone.*

The posts or images posted on social media platforms by social media influencers may be less impactful to young men. Future research could compare their responses across all of the social media platforms. Even though a more significant sample said there was no standard ideal of how young men should look, a group of the participants said there was one. To these, the researcher



asked what the standard was, and all of them replied with tall, ripped, and muscular, which has been advertised on fitness-related posts by SMIs.

Participant 1: *The hard, chiselled/shredded body type as it puts on the perception that you are hard-working.*

Participant 4: *Fit because to be fit means promoting a good exercise routine and diet. It is also aesthetically good.*

Participant 6: *15% body fat and muscular.*

Participant 7: *Fit and Healthy. It will make you look more attractive to the opposite sex.*

Participant 8: *Buff, pumped up because I am quite big myself (chubby, to be honest).*

Participant 9: *Ectomorph and tall.*

Participant 10: *Defined chest and arms. Physical strength in men is often mistakenly correlated to a muscular physique.*

Participant 14: *Thin or a defined body.*

Participant 15: *Lean with low body fat (less than 20%) and all-around proportional.*

Participant 17: *Trapezoid body type. It has broad shoulders, slim waist.*

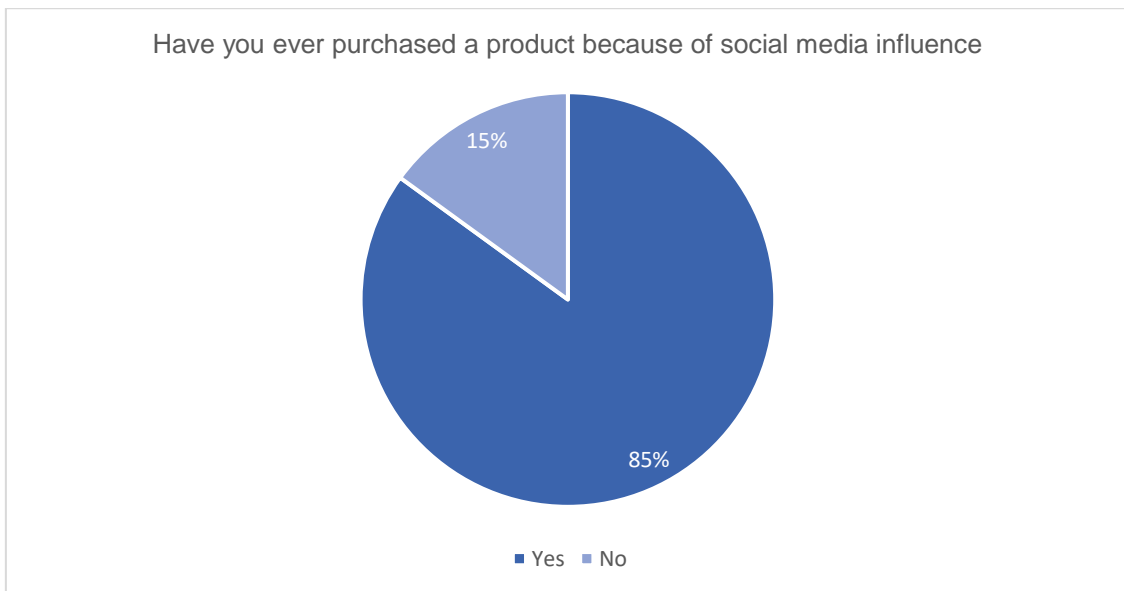
These statements are supported by recent research showing the growing importance of muscle bodybuilding in today's culture (Olivardia et al., 2004; Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020a). Studies have also shown that when young men are asked to choose the ideal body type, they usually pick around 12 kilograms of muscle, more than their actual muscle count (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020a). This standard-defined body ideal is consistent with all earlier studies on the subject (Olivardia et al., 2004; Pritchard & Cramblitt, 2014; Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020a). Research also shows that,

contrary to women with a thin body ideal, young men are more muscular and leaner. This is because previously, men believed that women wanted more muscular men than thinner, which has to do with the social comparison and society's pressure on men to achieve the ideal muscular form (Olivardia et al., 2004).

The researcher asked the participants how these implied standards made them feel, and three participants said that it reduced their confidence and did not make them feel good about themselves because they did not meet the standard. Previous studies have pointed out that muscle culture, and belittlement correlate with body image issues and depression (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020a, 2020a).

### **Social Media Comparison: Purchase Behaviour**

In subsection 5.3.2, the researcher discussed how a group of participants believed that social media influencers' primary role was to influence the purchase behaviour of the other users on the platforms. They shared an opinion that they mainly use their power and influence to advertise, sell and promote brand products and services. Noticing that a large sample of the group of participants shared this opinion, the researcher decided to deep dive more into the *purchase behaviour* topic. To gather more information on the topic, the researcher asked if the participants had ever purchased a product or acquired a service because of a post by a social media influencer. The results of this question were that 17 (85%) out of our sample of 20 said yes, and the other 3 (15%) said they had not purchased a product because of influence.

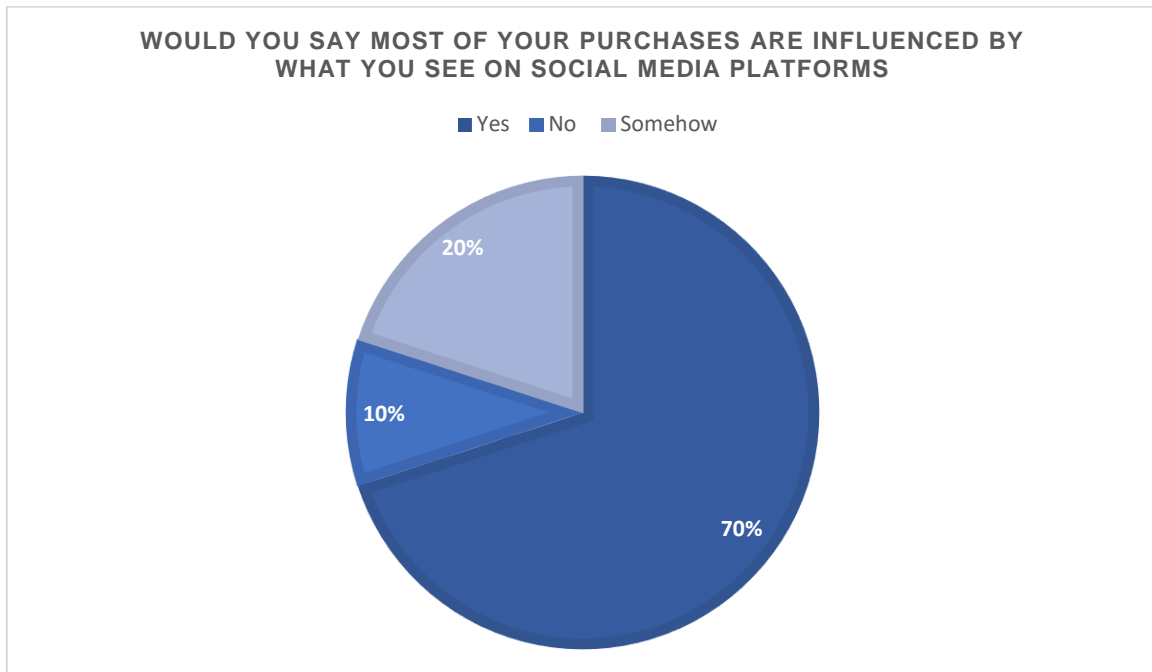


**Figure 10: Visual Representation of the Results of Products/Services bought due to Social Media Influence**

Figure 9 provides a visual representation of the results. These results support previously published studies that explored how social media influencers influenced the selling process (Diba et al., 2019; Lashgari et al., 2018). Social media influencers use features such as reviews, hauls, referral codes, and recommendations to provide enough information and content to the target audience to influence their purchase decisions (Chetioui et al., 2020; Lim et al., 2017). These features not only influence the customers purchasing decisions but also provide insights to the recruiting organisations, which they then use to intensify their branding selling activities (Chetioui et al., 2020; Lim et al., 2017). Therefore nowadays, organisations look at social media influencer’s engagements as what has been proven to increase sales and brand loyalty (Kaiser et al., 2019; Shawky et al., 2020).

Social media influencers build in-depth relationships with their followers. Then they use these relationships to get their followers to purchase what they are advertising through persuasion and extensive marketing (Kaiser et al., 2019).

To support these statements, the researcher asked the participants if most of their purchases were influenced by what they see on social media platforms. 70% replied yes, 10% replied no, and the other 20% replied somehow.



**Figure 11: Visual Representation of the Results of when Participants were asked if most of their Purchases were Influenced by Social Media**

Figure 10 provides a visual representation of the results. Organisations, when recruiting social media influencers, besides looking at their engagement count, consider their lifestyle and the overall content they publish on their platforms, as they will be using this individual to represent their company and be responsible for their brand reputation (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Suppose the company overlooks this step and they recruit the wrong social media influencer to represent them. In that case, they can experience the opposite effect as the users will quickly identify that the influencer is only posting the product for compensation, which will change the customer’s perception of the company and the social media influencer to the wrong side (Argenti & Druckenmiller, 2004; Jalilvand et al., 2017).

A great example of this was when the football player Cristiano Ronaldo posted an advertisement for a Japanese brand for a product called Facial Fitness Pao. The product was a mouthpiece said to strengthen facial muscles. Not only did the collaboration not increase the product’s sales, it only

caused numerous news channels and tabloids to comment on the most bizarre celebrity endorsement (*Cristiano Ronaldo Is Endorsing One of Japan's Weirdest Ever Beauty Products* [Video] | SoraNews24 -Japan News-, n.d.)



**Figure 12: Soccer Player Cristiano Ronaldo Advertisement (Cristiano Ronaldo Is Endorsing One of Japan's Weirdest Ever Beauty Products) [Video] | SoraNews24 -Japan News-, n.d.)**

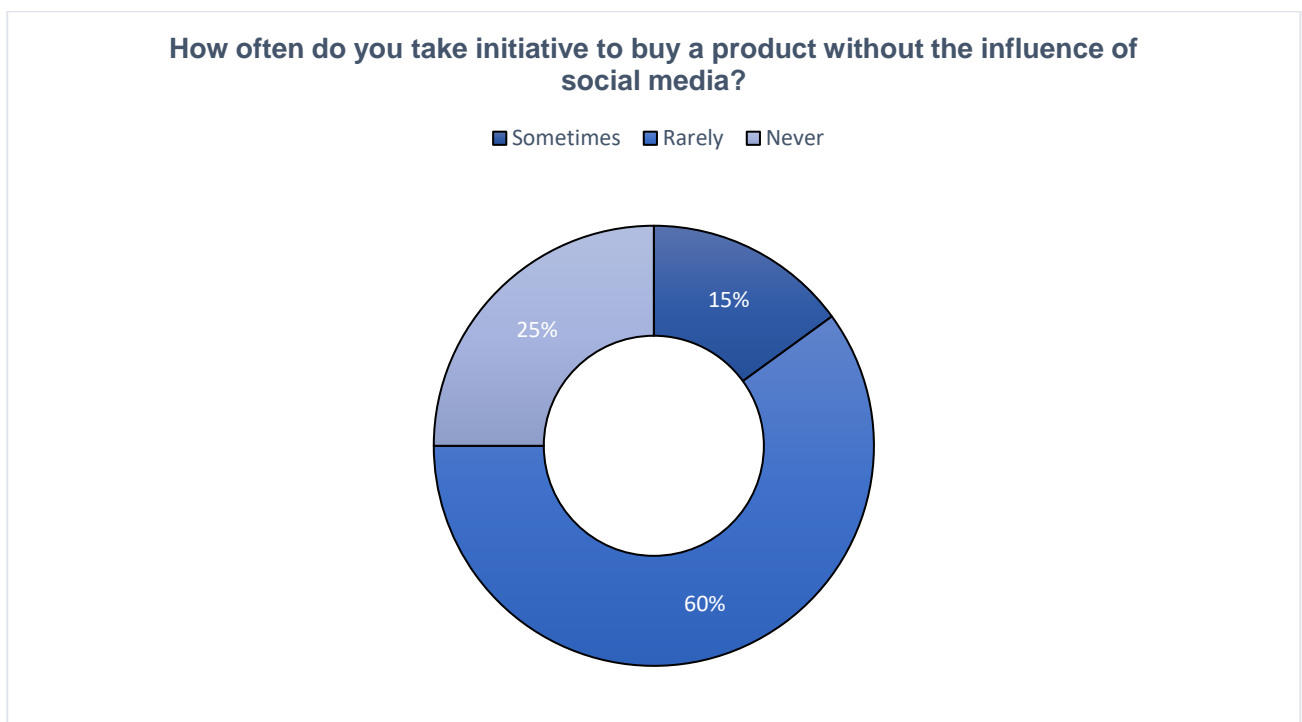
To maintain influence, organisations do need to recruit a large number of social media influencers. The organisations recruit the social media influencers that are most influential in their follower count, and this is done by analysing their social media engagement (Shawky et al., 2020). The relationship between a customer (user) and a social media influencer begins when the influencer uses his power over the users to persuade them to make purchasing decisions. After the influencers set their relationship with the users, the organisations use the same relationship to improve their brand image, sales, and reputation (Argenti & Druckenmiller, 2004; Khamis et al., 2017).

An excellent example is the known company Fashion Nova, which is based in the United States of America and is currently one of the most daily searched online stores. Fashion Nova has earned around 120 billion dollars through social media (Müller & Mattke, 2018; Oskouei et al., 2018). This was done by using about 3 000 social media influencers to generate popularity (Müller & Mattke, 2018). Furthermore, this is possible because the typical user rarely takes the initiative to purchase

an item without someone else’s recommendation. To support this statement, the researcher asked the following question:

**“How often do you take the initiative to buy a product without the influence of social media?”**

Most participants answered that they “rarely” take the initiative to purchase a product. The researcher provided the following option: Always, often, sometimes, rarely, and never. 60% replied that they rarely take the initiative, 25% said that they never take the initiative, and 15% said sometimes, which means that no one chose the options always and often.



**Figure 13: Visual Representation of Young Male Purchase Initiative**

### **5.3.2.3 SOCIAL MEDIA COMPARISON: MOTIVATOR OR DE-MOTIVATOR**

The researcher wanted to use Festinger’s framework to pinpoint if most young males make upward or downward comparisons and how that help with the motivation factor. While collecting data from the interviews, the researcher detected that motivation was one of the reasons that the participants gave for following social media influencers.

Below are the initial raw data extracts from the interviews presented in Table 6. In the following sub-sections of this chapter, the researcher details the motivation behind the chosen comparison types.

<b>Question:</b>	
When comparing yourself to the social media influencers you are currently following, does it motivate you to work harder or the opposite? Explain.	
<b>Raw Data Extract</b>	<b>Comparison Type</b>
<b>Answers:</b> - “Motivates me to work hard as I see them as competition to better myself.”	Upward Social Comparison
- “I would say that it motivates me to push harder toward my goals, but at the end of the day, everyone has their own, and I have learned to take my time and trust my process. It is a marathon, not a sprint. Good things come to those who wait!”	Upward Social Comparison
- “In some ways I get influenced to work harder.”	Upward Social Comparison
- “It motivates me more to do my own thing and create my own pattern because not everything that the influencer post is actually so I would prefer to live my reality than try to live another's a person reality.”	Downward Social Comparison
- “Some of them make me want to try harder because some of them look like they are doing great with some of their deals, such as Djimetta <sup>3</sup> with Fashion Nova and Castle Lite. However, social media can be pretty tricky sometimes.”	Upward Social Comparison
- “It does not because I would like to be like them, but sometimes their content reminds me of my personal life goals.”	Downward Social Comparison
- “It motivates me to work hard because my future success/failure will be determined by how hard I am working right now.”	Upward Social Comparison

<sup>3</sup> Djimetta is a Mozambican rapper and social media influencer.

- "It motivates me to work harder. That is why I follow them. They have reached a level (not only financial) that I hope to achieve and am currently working towards."	Upward Social Comparison
- "Working harder because they are showing me a lifestyle I aspire to live."	Upward Social Comparison
- "Since I started working out, it has made me work harder because they can be my daily motivation when I am not feeling the best."	Upward Social Comparison
- "No. The influencer I watch just reviews ethnic cooking. It is purely for entertainment purposes."	Downward Social Comparison

**Table 6: Raw Data Extract from Interviews**

It seemed as if they used the comparison to boost their confidence and motivation to work towards a goal. To get run a more in-depth analysis on this point, the researcher asked the following question:

**"When comparing yourself to the social media influencers you are currently following, does it motivate you to work harder or the opposite?"**

The researcher gathered all the answers and identified the type of comparison using the social comparison theory discussed in Chapter 2. This sub-section discussed the motivation behind the chosen kind of comparison for each answer. The raw data for this question can be seen in Table 1.

Out of the 20 participants, only 12 felt comfortable answering this question. From the ones that answered, the results showed that 8 out of the 12 (66,7%) undergo upward social comparison towards social media influencers they follow. This is an upward social comparison because, in this case, the participant is focusing on improving his current skills and working harder to better himself. As discussed in the current study, upward social comparison focuses on an individual trying to improve their abilities manifested through performance which depends on the particular ability (Burlison et al., 2005). In this case, the participants use social comparison to motivate them to achieve their goals and measure their success.



Participant 1: *Motivates me to work hard as I see them as competition to better myself.*

Participant 2: *I would say that it motivates me to push harder towards my goals, but at the end of the day, everyone has their own, and I have learned to take my time and trust my process. It is a marathon, not a sprint. Good things come to those who wait!*

Participant 3: *In some ways, I get influenced to work harder.*

Participant 5: *Some of them make me want to try harder because some look like they are doing great with some of their deals, such as Djimetta<sup>[1]</sup> with Fashion Nova and Castle Lite. However, social media can be pretty tricky sometimes.*

Participant 7: *It motivates me to work hard because my future success/failure will be determined by how hard I am working right now.*

Participant 8: *It motivates me to work harder. That is why I follow them. They have reached a level (not only financial) that I hope to achieve and am currently working towards.*

Participant 9: *Working harder because they are showing me a lifestyle I aspire to live.*

Participant 10: *Since I started working out, it has made me work harder because they can be my daily motivation when I am not feeling the best.*

The remaining participants seemed to use downward social comparison. The results showed that the participants used the lives of the social media influencers to feel better about their abilities and traits. As discussed, this is described as a downward social comparison as it makes the individual feel better about their skills and achievement (Burlison et al., 2005; Schmuck et al., 2019). Studies have also shown that downward social comparison increases optimism regarding the future and enhances self-esteem (Burlison et al., 2005; De Vries et al., 2018; Schmuck et al., 2019).

Participant 6: *It does not because I would like to be like them, but sometimes their content reminds me of my personal life goals.*

Participant 10: *Since I started working out, it has made me work harder because it can be my daily motivation when I am not feeling the best.*

Participant 11: *No. The influencer I watch just reviews ethnic cooking. It is purely for entertainment purposes.*

To go more in-depth on how social comparison in social media helps with boosting their motivation and confidence, the researcher asked the following question:

**“Do comparisons boost your confidence or the opposite?”**

The results of this question were that eight (8) participants out of the twelve (12) felt comfortable answering this question and replied that it boosted their confidence. At the same time, the remaining four explained that comparison has the opposite effect on them. This means that around 67% of the participants have used social comparison upward to boost their confidence.

Self-esteem is a known motive for the social media comparison theory. It is known that young males with low self-esteem are more likely to use more strategies to increase their self-esteem because they need more, and the ones with higher self-esteem may also use strategies to increase or maintain their self-esteem, keeping it high (Schmuck et al., 2019, 2019).

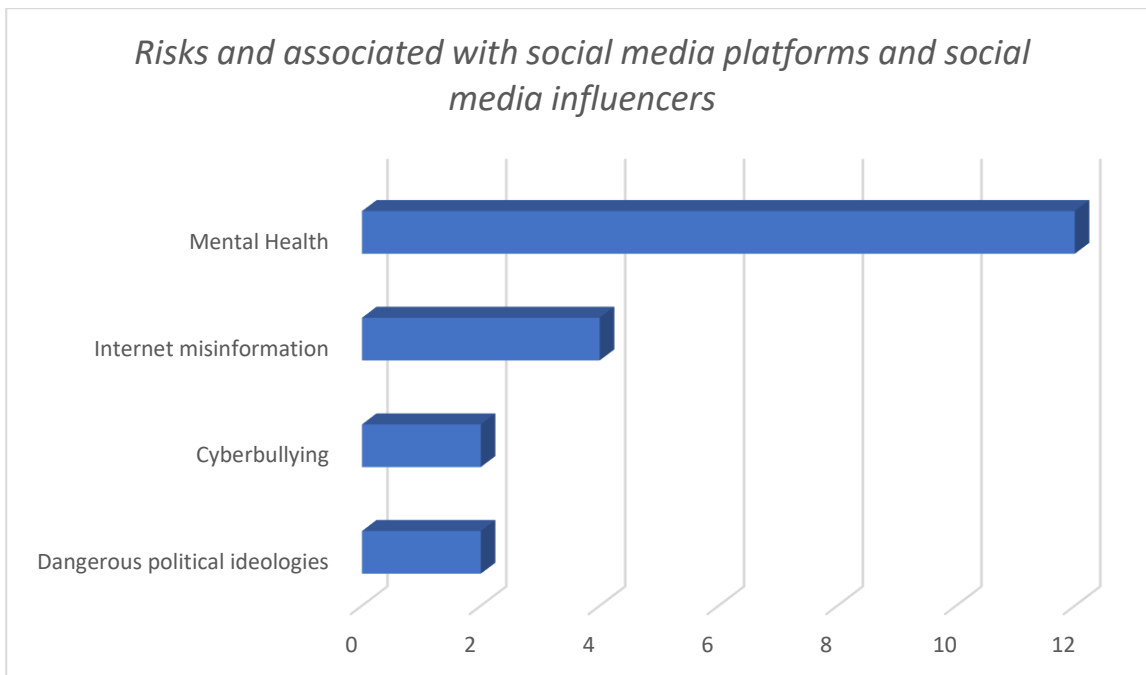
These results show the beneficial sides of social comparison on social media. It seems that young males use social media comparison to measure their individual personal development and motivate them to improve their self-esteem. It looks as if young males use social media influencers to push themselves to work harder. Studies have pointed out that friendly competition can effectively push individuals to work harder toward their goals, exercise more, and achieve personal goals (Wang et al., 2014; Wu, 2017).

#### **5.3.2.4 SOCIAL MEDIA COMPARISON: RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS AND SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS**

One of the objectives of the current study was to determine the risks associated with social media comparison and the role those social media influencers played in increasing the risk. For the researcher to gather the participant's thoughts and opinions on the risks associated with social media comparison, the researcher started by asking the question:

**“Would you say they are risks associated with using social media platforms?”**

All 20 participants were aware of the risks associated with social media. These results could show that most young men who have social media and are aware of social media influencers know of the existing risks and still choose to join the different platforms and compare themselves with the other users. Future studies could cover more on acknowledging the risks associated with social media platforms. The researcher then asked each participant to point out the risks they believed were related to social media platforms and social media influencers. To avoid data saturation, the researcher noticed that participants mentioned the same risks, so that the results will be discussed around the expected risks. The risks are endorsement of dangerous political ideologies, cyberbullying, internet misinformation, and mental health. Figure 12 provides a visual representation of how the participants distributed the results. Mental health scored the highest, with twelve (12) participants pointing it out as a risk. Internet misinformation was the second highest, with four (4) participants providing it as an answer. The remaining 4 (four) participants mentioned cyberbullying and dangerous political ideologies as possible risks associated with social media influencers and platforms.



**Figure 14: Visual Representation of the Risks Associated with Social Media Influencers**

### **Endorsement of Dangerous Political Ideologies**

One of the most common answers was that one of the risks associated was the promotion of dangerous political ideologies and beliefs.

**Answer 1:** “People can be influenced to promote or endorse dangerous political ideologies and beliefs. People’s actions can be influenced easily as a result.”

Today, during election periods all over the world, voters with access to the internet use their access to gather all of the available information to address possible doubts and queries regarding the elections (Biswas et al., 2014; Dabula, 2017). This possibility of voters participating in forums, group chats, and exposure to social media increases the possibility of the users being influenced and changing their voting decision to different candidates (Dabula, 2017). Previous studies published in the United States turned on the topic of the election have shown that social media has a direct impact on changing voters’ decisions, the ones exposed to different social influencers’ opinions, which means that their votes are changed to match social media influencers (Biswas et al., 2014, 2014; Dabula, 2017; Papagiannidis et al., 2012).

Social media forums and platforms were created in different countries to increase youth participation in politics and their opinions and engagements towards the events or campaigns of the elections (Papagiannidis et al., 2012). It is known that social media has created an opportunity for politicians to use celebrities and social media influencers to build solid connections and relationships with their voters to win the elections (Biswas et al., 2014). Even though social media has brought all these opportunities, it can have a detrimental effect where the voter's final decision will not necessarily be their own but what the social media influencers influenced them to choose (Biswas et al., 2014; Papagiannidis et al., 2012). This statement can be backed up by the elections of 2020 in the USA. The African-American rapper, entrepreneur, and social media influencer Kanye West announced he had plans to run for president. This simple announcement caused young voters to shift their vote immediately and vouch for him (*Kanye West Election: How Many Votes Did He Get?* - *BBC News*, n.d.). This shows the power of social media influencers, where someone with no prior political experience can end up running a country and change the faith of that country.

### **Cyberbullying**

The second standard answer was that social media influencers increase cyberbullying on social media platforms.

**Answer 2:** "The risks associated with social media is that some people tend to move away from the person they are, there is much cyberbullying on social media that can turn young people suicidal, and there is much scamming going on social media."

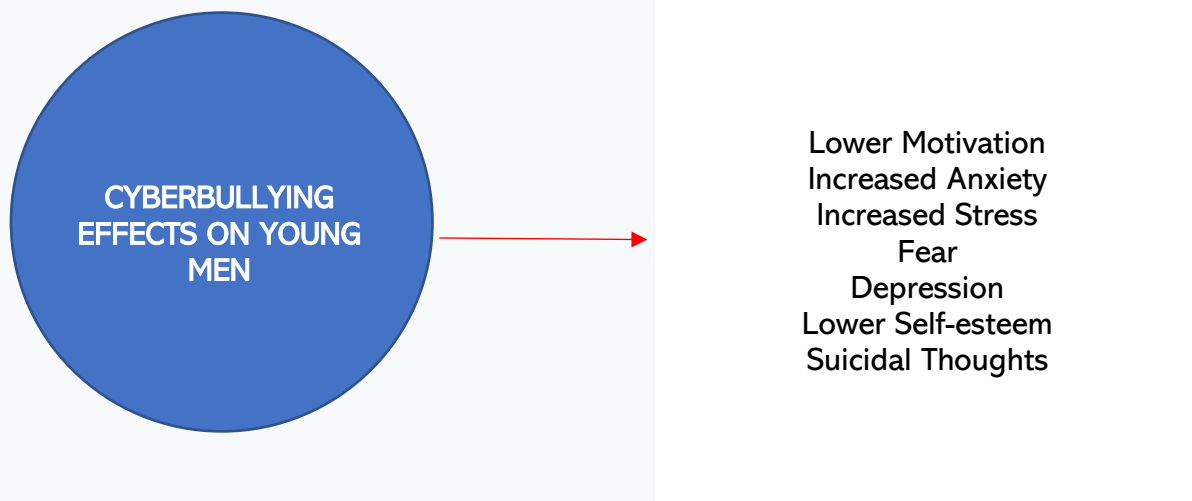
Social media influencers could be considered one of the most crucial, controversial stakeholders regarding cyberbullying (Arslan et al., 2012; Yang, 2016). As prominent opinion leaders on social media for young people, they get to communicate their opinion through many different platforms. Even though when the topic of cyberbullying is brought up, people usually think of internet trolls, and social media influencers are also role players in the problem (Apampa, 2019). Because social media influencers are deeply concerned with their reputation metrics and creating and maintaining a self-brand, they are often put into situations where they have to appropriate such hostile and, moral and social aggression further to promote themselves and their products (Abidin, 2019; Arslan et al., 2012). This consequently causes social media influencers to promote cyberbullying (Arslan et al., 2012; Lowry et al., 2016). Influencers get involved in cyberbullying

because it steers up a conversation and increases their engagement (Abidin, 2019, 2019). As previously discussed, more engagement means they get paid more per post or advertisement.

The researcher decided to go in-depth on the topic of cyberbullying by asking the following question:

“What were the effects of cyberbullying you experienced on social media?”

Two (2) out of 20 participants have experienced lower motivation, increased levels of anxiety and stress, fear, depression, and lower self-esteem and one of the participants mentioned suicide as one of the effects.



**Figure 15: Mind map representing cyberbullying effects on young men**

Figure 14 visually represents the effects experienced by the two (2) participants. The effects of cyberbullying are similar to those registered for bullying (Lowry et al., 2016). However, cyberbullying is harder to avoid as it follows you across different social platforms, and it might seem that one cannot escape it.

## Spread of Misinformation

The third most repeated answer was that one of the risks associated with social media influencers was spreading misinformation to other users on social media platforms.

Participant 3: *Too much exposure can be detrimental. The internet is very dense so that misinformation can spread very fast & people's opinions can be seen as truth.*

Misinformation can be described as false or inaccurate information created to deceive the recipients deliberately (Apampa, 2019). Studies have shown that misinformation can lead to severe and detrimental problems such as loss of money and breaking the law of order (Apampa, 2019; De Regt et al., 2019). Due to the increase in popularity of social media, misinformation, also known as “fake news,” has gained so much ground that it is difficult to distinguish between authentic and fake information (Apampa, 2019).

In the past five years, studies have shown that 40% of the links shared on different social media platforms contain misinformation, which has been shared more than 500 000 times (*Misinformation during the COVID-19 Pandemic*, n.d.). This fake news is usually created to change and influence the opinions of different groups of people for selfish gains (Apampa, 2019).

The amount of different social media platforms has made spreading misinformation easier. Studies have shown that social media influencers, or users that hold influence power on social media platforms, play a significant role in spreading information to gain advantages such as more engagement or selling products and services (Risselada et al., 2014).

Over the past years, the emergence of social media influencers on social media platforms has led to a mass amount of misinformation being spread for monetary reasons. Future studies could cover the different types of misinformation spread and their effects on young males.

## Mental Health

The researcher also identified mental health as being one of the most mentioned risks associated with social media influencers and social comparisons.

Participant 4: *Body dysmorphia, thinking you are a failure.*

Participant 5: *Social Media May cause depression as people are constantly being compared.*

Participant 7: *Low self-esteem, depression.*

Participant 8: *I have the impression that some people take social media too serious in a way that they end up comparing their lives to other people only based on what is displayed on the platform forgetting that people choose only what they want to show but not the whole truth creating at last envy, anxiety, and other lousy mental “issues.” Besides all the cyberbullying we can see on interactive platforms.*

Studies have shown that social media usage can lead to mental health issues like depression (Olivardia et al., 2004; *Upward Social Comparison and Depression in Social Network Settings*, n.d.). The unrealistic posts and trends created by social media influencers might cause envy due to the exposure of desirable attributes (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020a). For example, previously published articles have pointed out the association between the increase in envy and the use of Facebook (Youn & Shin, 2019).

Studies have shown that the mortality rate due to mental health issues caused by social media usage has also been increasing (Lau, 2017; Yang, 2016). This is due to the social pressure to follow trends and keep up with everything posted by content creators or, as we know them, social media influencers (Myers et al., 2012).

Due to the fact nowadays, social media forms are more image and appearance drove, which gives space to social media influencers to share and set the tone for looks on how young males should aspire (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020a). As trends are created, and social media influencers set



the standards for beauty, fashion, and what the target audience should aspire to achieve, users might fall into a narrative that they need to accomplish that (Chu & Seock, 2020; Jin & Ryu, 2019).

This focus on reaching unrealistic goals set by social media influencers causes low self-esteem, body dysmorphia, and depression (Olivardia et al., 2004; Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020b). Studies have shown that the prolonged use of social media is associated with decreased life satisfaction, decreased well-being, and an increase in mental-related diseases (Carey et al., 2014; Frederick et al., 2012; Olivardia et al., 2004).

#### **5.4 CONCLUSION**

In this section, the researcher discussed the findings and analysis behind the data collected during the interviews with the participants. Social media influencers, motives behind social comparisons, upward and downward social comparisons, and the risks associated with social media comparisons were some of the topics covered in this section and social media influencers were introduced, and the existing relationship between social media and social comparison.

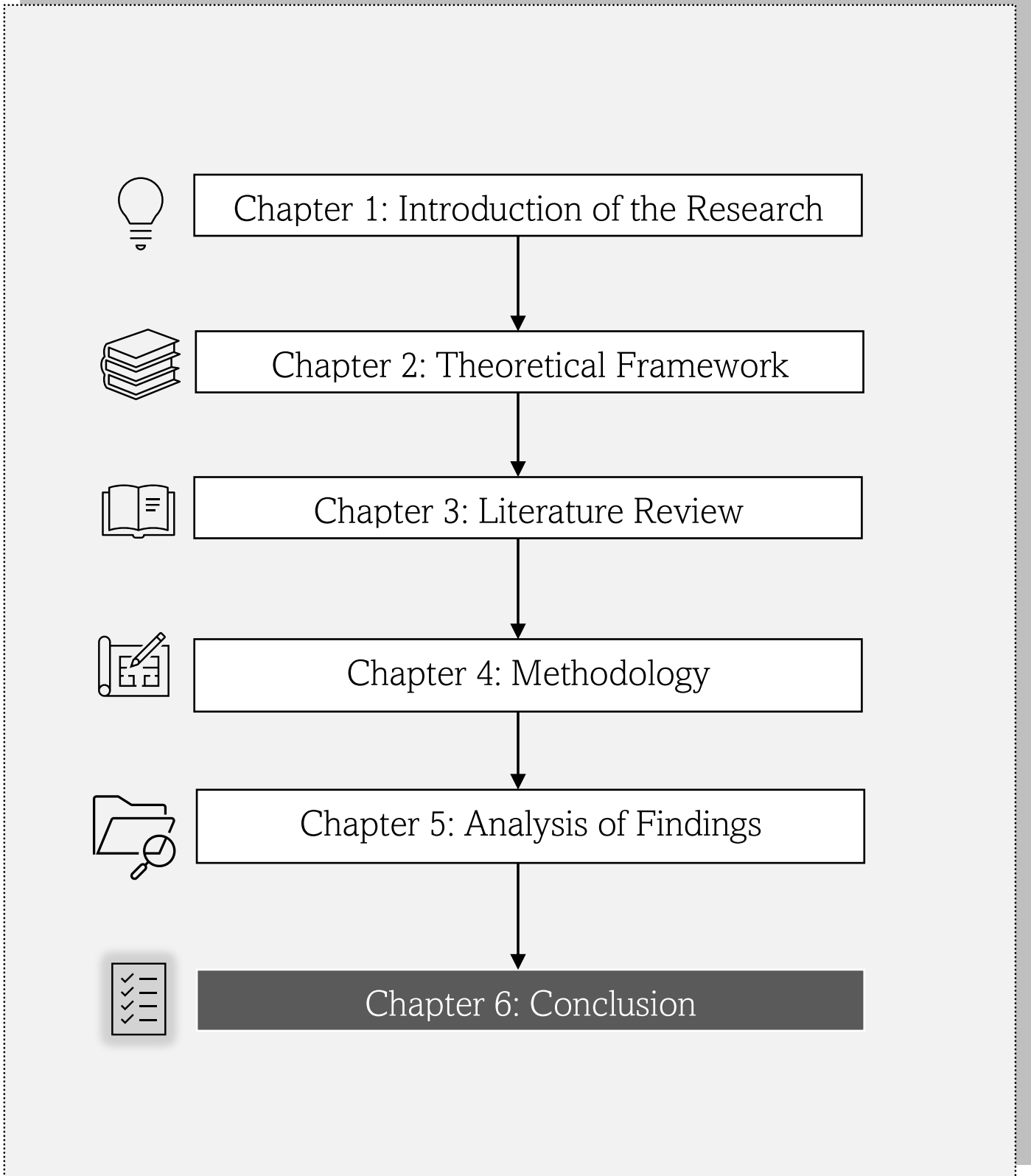
Table 7: Chapter 5 Table Summary

<b>FINDINGS &amp; ANALYSIS SUMMARY</b>	
<b>Demographic Profile of Participants</b>	<p>The age of the participants ranged from 20-28 years. Four 20-year-olds and four 23-year-olds represented 40% of the total sample. Three 21-year-olds and three 22-year-olds represent 30% of the sample. Two 24-year-olds and two 25-year-olds represent 20%. The remaining 10% comes from one 26-year-old and one 28-year-old.</p>
<b>Social Media Influencers</b>	<p>In an attempt to find out whether the participants were aware of the existence and role that social media influencers play on social media, the researcher began by asking them to define the term <i>social media influencer</i>. The researcher gathered that the participants did not share the same opinion toward social media influencers. A group of participants believes that a social media influencer's primary role is monetary. They shared the opinion that social media influencers' role is to advertise, sell, and promote products on different platforms to get the users to purchase from the companies they work with. Even though a significant number of the participants believed that social media influencers' role is to advertise products and services, a group of participants believed that social media influencers are there to alter the behaviour of their followers and to get them to act the same as them. The remaining participants defined social media influencers as a group of celebrities or models, and the other half defined them as people who have built their reputations on a topic of their expertise.</p>
<b>Social Media Comparison</b>	<p>In the social comparison theory, Festinger (1954) suggested that people judge themselves through social comparisons and by analysing their traits and abilities. The social media comparison theory states that people use the comparison process to accurately develop effective benchmarks to evaluate themselves (Myers et al., 2012). Social comparison makes part of self-socialisation in which individuals compare their abilities, traits, and limitations to others in their environment (Burlison et al., 2005; Myers et al., 2012). The motivations for social comparison include maintaining a positive self-evaluation (downward social comparison) and self-enhancement (upward</p>

	<p>social comparison) (Burluson et al., 2005). To identify the type of social comparison (downward and upward) and the motive behind it (self-enhancement, self-improvement, self-evaluation), the researcher asked the participants who their favourite social media influencers is and the reason behind their choice. After a brief overview of the favourite social media influencers and the reason behind the different mentions, the researchers will discuss the possible motives behind each participant’s favourite social media influencer in this section. As mentioned in section 2, when deep diving the theoretical framework, when Festinger introduced the social comparison theory, he emphasised self-evaluation being one of the factors for social comparisons, and this motive is supported by people’s preference for comparing with ‘upward’ targets (Myers et al., 2012).</p>
<p><b>Social Comparison: Motives</b></p>	<p><b><u>Self-Enhancement/Self-Improvement</u></b> Self-enhancement is one of the motivators for social media comparison, according to Festinger (1954). The self-enhancement end of social media comparison is satisfied through the goal approach on the irreality level, where comparison is made towards someone better off than oneself.</p> <p><b><u>Self-Esteem</u></b> Self-esteem is a known motive for social media comparison theory. It is known that young males with low self-esteem are more likely to use more strategies to increase their self-esteem because they need more, and the ones with higher self-esteem may also use strategies to increase or maintain their self-esteem, keeping it high (Schmuck et al., 2019).</p>
<p><b>Social Media Comparison: Upward and Downward Comparisons</b></p>	<p>As discussed in Chapter 2, social comparison theory states that people have an intuitive impulse to evaluate their progress and current standing in various aspects of their lives (Festinger, 1954). The theory also states that in the absence of pre-determined standards, individuals settle on comparison to determine where they currently stand (Festinger, 1954; Myers et al., 2012). Discussed in the theoretical framework of the current study Festinger (1945) mentioned two types of comparisons: downward and upward. Social media comparison is known to cover several different topics. For this specific study, to answer the pre-defined questions, both research and secondary research</p>

	<p>questions, the researcher decided to focus on four areas where social media influencers might play a role in social comparison. Appearance, purchase behaviour, motivation and risks are associated with social media comparisons. The researcher will analyse the findings under each topic in the following subsection.</p>
<p><b>Risks associated with Social Media Platforms and Social Media Influencers</b></p>	<p><b><u>Endorsement of Dangerous Political Ideologies</u></b></p> <p>In today's age, during election periods all over the world, voters with access to the internet use their access to gather all of the available information to address possible doubts and queries regarding the elections (Biswas et al., 2014; Dabula, 2017). This possibility of voters participating in forums, group chats, and exposure to social media, increases the possibility of the users being influenced and changing their voting decision to different candidates (Dabula, 2017).</p> <p><b><u>Cyberbullying</u></b></p> <p>Social media influencers could be considered one of the most crucial, controversial stakeholders regarding cyberbullying (Arslan et al., 2012; Yang, 2016). As prominent opinion leaders on social media for young people, they get to communicate their opinion through many different platforms.</p> <p><b><u>Spread of Misinformation</u></b></p> <p>Misinformation can be described as false or inaccurate information created to deceive the recipients deliberately (Apampa, 2019). Studies have shown that misinformation can lead to severe and detrimental problems such as loss of money and breaking the law of order (Apampa, 2019; De Regt et al., 2019).</p> <p><b><u>Mental Health</u></b></p> <p>The unrealistic posts and trends created by social media influencers might cause envy due to the exposure of desirable attributes (Tiggemann &amp; Anderberg, 2020a). For example, previously published articles have pointed out the association between the increase in envy and the use of Facebook (Youn &amp; Shin, 2019).</p>

## 6 CONCLUSION



## 6.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter, the researcher completed the analysis and findings for the current study. This chapter discusses the results and concludes the research.

In this section, the researcher presents the conclusion for the research questions (main research question and secondary research questions), the contribution of the research paper to the body of knowledge, and the concluding remarks and the summary of the findings as future research.

This study aims to determine the role of social media influencers in terms of social comparison in young men's lives. The researcher formulated the main research question and sub-research questions to achieve this objective.

**Research question:** "To what extent are young men affected by social media influencers?"

**Secondary research question 1:** "Why are young men influenced by social media influencers?"

**Secondary research question 2:** "How do social media influencers easily influence young men on social media platforms?"

**Secondary research question 3:** "Are young men aware of the risks associated with social media influencers?"

In the following sections, the researcher covered how the above questions were answered and met the abovementioned objectives of the study.

## 6.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS ANSWERS

**Secondary research question 1: "Why are young men influenced by social media influencers?"**

After analysis of the favourite social media influencers of each participant and the reason behind every mention, the researcher discussed possible motives behind why social media influencers influence young men. The results showed self-enhancement and self-esteem as the motives. According to Festinger (1954), as discussed in section 2 (theoretical framework), self-enhancement is satisfied through the goal approach where someone compares themselves to someone

considered better off than them. This specific motive is supported when young men make downward comparisons, examining negative traits, habits, and values of social media influencers to enhance their own. Self-esteem is another well-known motive for social media comparisons. The results showed that young males with lower self-esteem are more likely to use strategies to boost their confidence and those with high self-esteem are likely to use strategies to maintain it. These results support previous studies that stated that young men with high self-esteem are more likely to engage in self-enhancement as people with lower self-esteem avoid engaging in social comparison (Schmuck et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2017). This is caused by fear of public exposure and inferiority. By determining the confidence level of the participants, the researcher determined that the ones that scored the lowest (low self-esteem) were the same participants who, when asked to identify their favourite social media influencer, replied that they did not have any and that they used social media purely as a form of entertainment.

These results support the theory that young males with lower self-esteem will avoid engaging in social media comparison to reduce any possible impact that it might have on their confidence level. The results showed that young men with lower self-esteem feared failure, which made them only follow information about themselves when it was favourable to their confidence. The results also showed that young men (70%) with high self-esteem seemed keener on social media comparison, which showed that they are more willing to take risks to boost their confidence. The researcher asked several questions about social media comparison to identify if young men are more likely to engage in downward or upward comparisons. The results showed that most participants used the comparison to boost their confidence and motivate them to work towards a specific goal. The results showed that most participants (67%) engaged in upward social comparison and mainly focused on upskilling a specific skill and working harder to better themselves. These results show that young men use social media to measure their personal development and help them improve their self-esteem. The results also show that young men often used social media influencers to push themselves to work harder. They pointed out that friendly competition helps them work harder to achieve their goals, exercise, and achieve personal milestones.

**Secondary research question 2:** “How do social media influencers easily influence young men on social media platforms?”

Data analysis determined that social media influencers influence participants according to their personal development goals and interests. The results determined that some participants followed social media influences to follow fashion trends to help them improve their fashion skills. The results showed that the participants experienced an improvement in their confidence by changing how they presented themselves to match the trends. The results showed that some men believe that imitating social media influencers with similar likes and interests was the best way to experiment. The results also showed that males tend to get influenced by social media influencers that they see as inspiration to achieve their personal goals. The in-depth analysis also determined that appearance, purchase behaviour, and motivation were the most common answers on how social media influencers influence young men.

### **Appearance**

The results showed that young men compare themselves to social media influencers. These results support all of the previous studies that have stated that people evaluate their own opinions and beliefs by comparison to other individuals. The results also showed that most young men do not believe there is an ideal standard for how men should look. Although previous studies predict that social media influencers could inflict belief on an existing standard, it was not the case for our study. Young men seem not to have the same appearance concern as women. The researcher also determined that this might be because young men do not engage as much in social comparison as women do or that they are just more unlikely to admit to doing so. These results show that the posts by social media influencers might be less impactful to young men than to women when analysed in terms of appearance. Even though most participants claimed that social media influencers did not have any impact on how they viewed themselves, several participants said that there was a standard on how men should look. After analysis of the standard, the researcher gathered that the description of an ideal young man's body type would be tall, ripped, and muscular, which is said to be advertised by social media influencers across different social media platforms. These statements are supported by published research focusing on how young men believe that the ideal body type is more muscular and leaner than women. This body type is because it was believed that women tend to go for men who are more muscular than thinner. The results also showed that the participants believed that a standard body type made them feel less confident and sad as they did not necessarily meet the standard. These results support the studies that point out that the social



influencer muscle culture and belittlement have contributed to many body issues and mental health.

### **Purchase Behaviour**

The results showed that young men believed that one of the social media influencers's primary roles was to influence the purchase behaviour of other users on the social media platforms. The participants shared a common opinion that social media influencers mainly used the platforms to advertise products, sell services, and promote different brands. In-depth analysis showed that social media influencers use their platforms and features, such as reviews, hauls, recommendations, and posts, to provide target information and continue to influence the purchase behaviour of young men. The results showed that social media influencers build relationships with young men (followers) and then use the same relationships to get them to purchase the products and services they advertised. The analysis also showed that most of the purchases young men make are influenced by information, content, or posts they see on social media platforms. The results also showed that the participants rarely took the initiative to buy a product without the influence of social media and social media influencers.

### **Motivation**

The results showed that most young men follow social media influencers to boost their confidence and motivate them toward a goal, and that most of the young men influenced by social media influencers, used it to work on their personal development and achieve personal goals. Most participants follow social media influencers who share the same interests and goals as them, as they see it as a way to get inspired to attain their own goals.

**Secondary research question 3:** "Are young men aware of the risks associated with social media influencers?"

One of the following objectives of the study was to determine if young men were aware of the risks associated with social media influencers. The data collected showed that all study participants were aware of the possible risks of social media influencers. These results indicated that most young men who have social media profiles and engage on social media platforms are aware of the potential risks and still choose to do so. The researcher asked each participant what the risks were to get

more in-depth information on the risks associated with social media influencers. After an in-depth data analysis, the results showed that four (4) common risks were mentioned across the participants. The researcher then discussed the following risks: Endorsement of dangerous political ideologies, cyberbullying, internet misinformation, and mental health.

### **Endorsement of Dangerous Political Ideologies**

The results showed dangerous political ideologies as one of the most common risks associated with social media influencers. The participants believe that young men in today's age can be easily influenced to promote or endorse dangerous political ideologies and beliefs. These results support previous studies showing that social media influencers can directly impact changing voters' votes to match their votes. The participants believe that it works because social media influencers build solid connections and relationships with these groups of young men to get extra information before making voting decisions. This risk exists due to the possibility of voters participating in different forums, groups, and chats on social media platforms. It also increases the possibility of changing their voting decision to match the other candidates.

It has been determined that even though these social media forums and groups were created with the idea of increasing young men's participation in political discussions and election campaigns, it also created an opportunity for social media influencers to build relationships with other users, to influence them in to change their votes and win elections. This situation has shown to be a detrimental effect where their final decision is not theirs but the social media influencer's final decision. It has shown to be a detrimental effect where their final decision is not theirs but the social media influencer's final decision. This shows the risk of the power of social media influencers, where someone with no prior political experience can hold much weight on big topics about a whole country.

### **Cyberbullying**

Data analysis also determined cyberbullying to be one of the most common risks. The participants believed that social media influencers are one of the most crucial stakeholders when it comes to the topic of cyberbullying. The results showed that because social media influencers are one of the

most prominent opinion leaders on social media platforms, they communicate their opinion across different channels, giving them space to spread unkind commentary/bullying. The participants and previous studies showed that this is because social media influencers have to focus on their reputation metrics and self-branding, which means that they often are put in a position where they appropriate hostile and immoral situations as well as aggression to promote themselves and their products and services. Social media influencers promote cyberbullying to steer a conversation and increase engagement to get paid more for each post or content.

### **Spread of Misinformation**

The spread of misinformation was discussed as another risk. The participants believe that too much exposure to social media platforms and social media influencers can be detrimental to young men. This is because they believe that misinformation nowadays can be spread quickly, and social media influencers' opinions can be seen as the truth. These results support previous studies that have stated that – due to the increase in popularity of social media and social media platforms – misinformation, which is also known as “fake news”, has been spread so quickly that it is now difficult for someone to distinguish between authentic information and fake information. Social media influencers usually spread misinformation to easily change or influence the opinions of different groups of people for selfish gains, such as engagement and money. The increasing number of social media platforms has made it easier for social media influencers and anyone to spread misinformation. Previous studies have shown that the amount of power social media influencers hold on social media play a significant role in spreading information to increase engagement. The emergence of social media influencers on the platforms has led to an increase in misinformation for mainly monetary reasons.

### **Mental Health**

The researcher identified mental health as the most common risk. The results showed that the participants believed that following social media influencers could cause severe mental issues under young men. These results support previous studies showing that social media usage can lead to mental health issues like depression. This is due to the unrealistic content created by social media influencers that might cause envy and depression due to exposure to desirable attributes. This is

because of social pressure to follow the existing trends created by social media influencers. As trends are created on social media, and social media influencers set the standards for beauty, fashion, and what young men should aspire to achieve, they might fall into the narrative that they need to attain everything. This constant focus on unrealistic goals set by social media platforms can cause mental issues such as low self-esteem, depression, body dysmorphia, decreased life satisfaction or wellbeing, and many other mental health-related diseases.

**Research question: “To what extent are young men affected by social media influencers?”**

The above secondary research questions were formulated to assist the researcher in answering the study’s research question. It can be deduced that the main research question has been answered by answering all of the set secondary questions. The researcher followed the social comparison theoretical framework to answer all the secondary questions. The social comparison theory was significant to the current study because it helped organise and communicate the different types of comparisons that the participants engaged in. The theoretical framework helped with the extensive explanation of decisions and actions to others, with the compelling predictions of the phenomenon and the ability to explain them, with the effective identification of gaps in the knowledge base and research, and fill in possible gaps that were previously identified (Aparicio et al., 2016; Kittler, 1998). The different constructs of the theory, including upward social comparison, downward social comparison, and the motives of motivation and self-esteem, have all been adapted and discussed in the current study and helped identifying the type of comparisons when running the in-depth analysis of the data collected. The main research question focused on the overall impact of how young men are affected by social media influencers. The results showed that young men with lower self-esteem are more likely to use strategies to boost their confidence and those with high self-esteem are likely to use strategies to maintain it. The results showed that most participants engaged in upward social comparison and mainly focused on upskilling a specific skill and working harder to better themselves. These results indicate that young men use social media to measure their personal development and help them improve their self-esteem. Results show that most young men follow social media influencers to boost their confidence and motivate them toward a goal. The results showed that most of the young men influenced by SMIs used it to work on their personal development and achieve personal goals. Most participants follow SMIs who share the same interests and goals as them, as they see it as a way to get inspired to attain their own goals. The

remaining impacts were discussed in detail in Chapters 3 (Literature Review) and the analysis and findings were discussed in Chapter 5 (Analysis of Findings).

### **6.3 CONTRIBUTION TO THE BODY OF KNOWLEDGE**

The topic of social media has been trending amongst scholars and academics, covering many departments and areas such as business, communication, and technology. The increased popularity of social media created social media influencers – users who carry influence and power on social media platforms. As discussed in the study, social media influencers can interfere with the users' decisions-making process. The increased popularity of social media platforms increases users' exposure to social media influencers. This study covered the impact social media influencers have in terms of social media comparison in the life of young men. A review of the literature indicated that several studies on how social media influences users have been conducted. However, all these studies had women as subjects of the research. Few studies have been published on how social media influencers impact young men. The researcher considered this study's body's *social media platforms and social media influencers*. The researcher focused on these considerations, but it is not a claim that the consideration is limited to the ones mentioned. In this current study, the researcher underlined social media influencers' impact on young men by answering the main research questions and the secondary ones. Previous studies published on social media influencers and social media comparison mainly focused on women, so this study highlighted the role that social media influencers have in social comparison, which had young men as the target audience. Both the positive and negative effects were thoroughly analysed in this study and evaluated, which was used to conclude the overall impact social media influencers have on young men. The researcher carefully and appropriately evaluated the impact social media influencers have in terms of social media comparisons so that they can be mitigated to avoid adverse effects in society possibly. The results of this research are essential as they contribute to showing the overall impact of social media influencers on the day-to-day lives of young men. This paper also addressed the gap by conducting surveys and expanding on the social media theory.

### **6.4 CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The main objective of this study is to determine the role of social media influencers in young men's lives. For this study, the researcher opted to use the social comparison theory. This theoretical

framework was suggested by Leon Festinger in 1954 when he proposed that individuals often evaluate themselves by comparing themselves to others. Social comparison theory includes two classifications of comparisons: upward social comparison and downward social comparison, both used by the researcher when analysing the impact of social media influencers in these young men's lives. Researchers have argued that the effects of upward and downward social comparisons depend on individuals. In this study, the researcher analysed the effects of each individual. This would mean that the social comparison direction will not guarantee only negative or positive results. The upward social comparison is when an individual compares themselves to someone in a better position than them. This form of comparison includes self-enhancement and motivation, both discussed in this study as possible motives or drives for social comparison. This study successfully showcased social media's impact on young men's lives. With the shortage of studies published on the same topic having young men as their focus, this study adds knowledge to what could be the effects that social media and social media influencers have on young men's lives. The key findings of this study are summarised in the section below.

## **6.5 SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS**

1. The results showed self-enhancement and self-esteem as the motives behind young men being influenced by social media influencers. According to Festinger, as discussed in section 2 theoretical framework, self-enhancement is satisfied through the goal approach where someone compares themselves to someone considered better off than them.
2. The results showed that young men with lower self-esteem are more likely to use strategies to boost their confidence and those with high self-esteem are likely to use strategies to maintain it. These results support previous studies that stated that young men with high self-esteem are more likely to engage in self-enhancement as people with lower self-esteem avoid engaging in social comparison. This is caused by fear of public exposure and inferiority.
3. The results showed that young men with lower self-esteem feared failure, which made them only follow information about themselves when it was favourable to their confidence.

4. The results showed that most participants engaged in upward social comparison and mainly focused on upskilling a specific skill and working harder to better themselves. These results indicate that young men use social media to measure their personal development and help them improve their self-esteem.
5. Data analysis determined that social media influencers influence participants according to their personal development goals and interests.
6. The results also showed that most young men do not believe that there is an ideal standard for how men should look. Although previous studies predict that social media influencers could inflict belief on an existing standard, it was not the case for our study. Young men seem not to have the same appearance concern as women.
7. The results also showed that the participants believed that a standard body type made them feel less confident and sad as they did not necessarily meet the standard.
8. The results showed that social media influencers build relationships with young men (followers) and then use the same relationships to get them to purchase the products and services they advertised.
9. Results show that most young men follow social media influencers to boost their confidence and motivate them toward a goal. The results showed that most of the young men influenced by social media influencers used it to work on their personal development and achieve personal goals. Most participants follow social media influencers who share the same interests and goals as them, as they see it as a way to get inspired to attain their own goals.
10. The data collected showed that all study participants were aware of possible risks associated with social media influencers. These results showed that most young men who have social media profiles and engage on social media platforms are aware of the possible risks and still choose to do so.

11. After an in-depth data analysis, the results showed that four (4) common risks were mentioned across the participants. The researcher then discussed the following risks: Endorsement of dangerous political ideologies, cyberbullying, internet misinformation, and mental health.
12. The participants believe that young men in today's age can be easily influenced to promote or endorse dangerous political ideologies and beliefs. These results support previous studies showing that social media influencers can directly impact changing voters' votes to match their votes.
13. Social media influencers build solid connections and relationships with these groups of young men to get extra information before making voting decisions. It has shown to be a detrimental effect where their final decision is not theirs but the social media influencer's final decision. This shows the risk of the power of social media influencers, where someone with no prior political experience can hold much weight on big topics about a whole country.
14. The participants believed that social media influencers are one of the most crucial stakeholders when it comes to the topic of cyberbullying.
15. The results showed that because social media influencers are one of the most prominent opinion leaders on social media platforms, they communicate their opinion across different channels, giving them space to spread unkind commentary or bullying.
16. The participants believe that too much exposure to social media platforms and social media influencers can be detrimental to young men.
17. Social media influencers usually spread misinformation to easily change or influence the opinions of different groups of people for selfish gains, such as engagement and money.
18. The results showed that the participants believed that following social media influencers could cause severe mental issues under young men.



19. The unrealistic content created by social media influencers might cause envy and depression due to exposure to desirable attributes. This is due to social pressure to follow the existing trends created by social media influencers. As trends are created on social media, and social media influencers set the standards for beauty, fashion, and what young men should aspire to achieve, they might fall into the narrative that they need to attain everything. This constant focus on unrealistic goals set by social media platforms can cause mental health issues such as low self-esteem, depression, body dysmorphia, decreased life satisfaction or wellbeing, and many other mental health-related diseases.

## 6.6 FUTURE RESEARCH

The findings of this research can lead to new lines of inquiry due to the limitations below faced by the researcher:

- Young men aged 20 to 28 were the target population for the current study. Therefore, this study was limited to young men in this age group. The interviewed participants are based in South Africa and Mozambique.
- The study was grouped according to age group and gender. The age group is from 20 to 28 years and the gender is male.
- The study focused on young men in South Africa and Mozambique. Due to the pandemic and shortened resources at this time, the group of people selected might not be considered a random sample.

Therefore, the results of the current study cannot be considered to be an accurate representation of all possible perspectives. Future studies covering a more comprehensive range of age groups, ethnicity, and gender should be initiated to expand on the different considerations and perspectives. Future research should explore the following issues:

- The posts or images posted on social media platforms by SMIs may be less impactful to young men. Future research could compare their responses across all of the social media platforms.
- The possibility that young men are somewhat protected from any risks and effects of social media exposure in terms of appearance. Future research should dive into these possibilities.
- Assessing the impact of social media influencers on young men's lives focus on broader age gaps.

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## APPENDIX A – INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Research Question	Interview question
1. To what extent are young men affected by social media influencers?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do you define social media influencers?</li> <li>• Would you say that you are confident?</li> <li>• Is your style influenced by anyone that you follow on social media?</li> <li>• Do you believe there's a standard on how men should look?</li> </ul>
2. To understand why young men are influenced by social media influencers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How often does the participant check on his followed accounts?</li> <li>• Have ever purchased a product because of social media?</li> <li>• Would you say that most of your purchases are influenced by what you see on social media platforms?</li> <li>• How often do you take initiative to buy a product without the influence of social media?</li> <li>• Who are your current role models or someone you look up to? Why?</li> </ul>
3. To determine how social media influencers easily influence young men on social media platforms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do you look for when following a social media account?</li> <li>• Do you follow trends that you see on social media platforms?</li> <li>• Would you see you are easily influenced in general?</li> </ul>
4. To determine if young men are aware of the risks associated with using social media platforms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Would you say they are risks associated to using social media platforms?</li> <li>• Have you ever changed your diet plan because of a social media influencer?</li> <li>• Have you followed any workout plans created by social media influencers?</li> <li>• What would say is the ideal body type for a young male? Why?</li> <li>• Have you ever tried to attain the ideal body type?</li> <li>• Have you ever found yourself comparing to someone you saw/see on social media platforms?</li> <li>• Do the comparisons help you boost your confidence or the opposite?</li> </ul>
5. Why are young men influenced by social media influencers?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What entertains you on social media?</li> <li>• Do you believe that there are common characteristics between your followers?</li> </ul>
6. How do social media influencers easily influence young men on social media platforms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In what aspects of your life would you say that you are easily influenced by?</li> <li>• Are you a person who is easily influenced?</li> <li>• Who can easily influence you?</li> <li>• What characteristics do you check in for social media influencers before following them?</li> </ul>

- *The questions may vary since it will be an interview*

## APPENDIX B - QUESTIONNAIRE



### SOCIAL COMPARISON OF YOUNG MEN: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS

20. How do you define social media influencers?

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21. Who are your favourite social media influencers?

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22. Is your style influenced by anyone that you follow on social media?

Yes  No  Maybe

23. Would you say that you are confident?

Yes  No  Maybe

24. Do you believe there's a standard on how men should look?

Yes  No  Maybe

25. How often do you check your followed accounts?

Daily  Weekly  Monthly  Not at All

26. Have ever purchased a product because of social media?

Yes  No

27. When comparing yourself to the social media influencers you are currently following does it motivate you into working harder or the opposite?

- Motivates  
 Does not motivate me

28. Would you say you are easily influenced in general?

- Yes  No  Maybe

29. Would you say they are risks associated with using social media platforms?

- Yes  No  Maybe

30. What would say is the ideal body type for a young male? Why?

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31. Have you ever found yourself comparing to someone you saw/see on social media platforms?

- Yes  No  Maybe

32. In what aspects of your life would you say that you are easily influenced by?

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***Thank you for answering this questionnaire! Looking forward for our interview tomorrow!***

\*

## APPENDIX C – ETHICAL CLEARANCE


 UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA  
 UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA  
 YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA

Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences

### RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

#### Approval Certificate - Conditional

11 March 2022

 Ms EVI Dos Santos  
 Department: External department

Dear Ms EVI Dos Santos

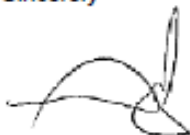
 The application for ethical clearance for the research project described below served before this committee on:  
 2022-03-11

<b>Protocol No:</b>	EMS014/22
<b>Principal researcher:</b>	Ms EVI Dos Santos
<b>Research title:</b>	Social comparison of young men: the role of social media influencers
<b>Student/Staff No:</b>	16113218
<b>Degree:</b>	Masters
<b>Supervisor/Promoter:</b>	Prof MJ Hattingh
<b>Department:</b>	External department

The decision by the committee is reflected below:

<b>Decision:</b>	Conditionally Approved
<b>Conditions (if applicable):</b>	<p>The study is conditionally approved based on the following:</p> <p>The application states that "the researcher collects data from several individuals and organisations through interviews, questionnaires, available published statistics, ..." Note that if representatives of companies will be targeted and their views be interpreted as that of the company, the researcher should first obtain written permission from the company's authority for conducting such interviews apart from the informed consent from the individual.</p> <p>All questionnaires (different to interview questions) that are to be distributed and completed online as part of the study must be submitted for review before final approval is provided.</p>
<b>Period of approval:</b>	2022-02-28 - 2022-11-30

Sincerely



 pp PROF JA NEL  
 CHAIR: COMMITTEE FOR RESEARCH ETHICS

## APPENDIX D -CONSENT FORM

Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences



### Department of BCom Informatics

**Researcher:** Miss Ester Dos Santos (16113218)

**Cell phone number:** +27768157123

I, \_\_\_\_\_, understand that I will be participating in the interview which is part of a research study being conducted by Ester dos Santos who is a student in the University of Pretoria. The subject in which this interview was designed around is the following:

#### **Social comparison of young men: the role of social media influencers**

Before agreeing to participate in this interview, I have been given detailed information about the subject and the type of questions that will be asked. I understand that the interview/questionnaire will be conducted on the internet due to the current situation the world is facing (COVID 19) and that the session will take approximately 30 minutes.

#### **Please note the following statements:**

- I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and that I am free to retract my decision without facing any consequence.
- I understand that all the information I provided as the participant will be kept confidential and exclusively used for the research mentioned above.
- I understand that the information provided by me will not be used in any way to identify me.
- I understand that my participation in this study will not put me at risks beyond the ones I experience in everyday life.

I have read and agree with all the above information. By signing this consent form, I am consenting to participate in this interview/ questionnaire.

Please feel free to keep a copy of this consent form on your records. For any questions or queries regarding your participation, please contact me or my research lead: Dr M.J Hattingh ([marie.hattingh@up.ac.za](mailto:marie.hattingh@up.ac.za)).

**Participant Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_