

Marketing communication strategies for Chinese automotive OEMs operating in South
Africa: The role of diversity in consumer decision-making

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Abstract

Chinese automotive Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEMs) have expanded rapidly in South Africa, yet performance is uneven when global playbooks meet a super-diverse market where cultural legitimacy, identity alignment and informal institutions (e.g., language, dignity norms, community values) shape how consumers decode brand messages. This study explores how marketing communication strategies can be designed to align with South Africa's plural consumer base and how diversity cues influence decision-making in a high-involvement category. An integrated lens, Institutional Theory (macro), Homophily (meso) and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)(micro) guides the inquiry.

An exploratory qualitative design combined four online focus groups (FG1–FG4) (South African consumers) and a document/content analysis of recent brand communications by OEMs operating locally (including Chinese OEMs). The data was analysed thematically and triangulated to strengthen credibility and generate practice-proximal insights. The research setting was Gauteng, reflecting South Africa's socio-cultural heterogeneity and media density.

Findings converge on eight themes, the salience of localised language and cultural relevance, the positive yet fragile effects of representation (risk of tokenism and backlash), patterns of marketing exclusion/disconnect, the role of storytelling in emotional resonance, entrenched brand heritage and generational loyalty, indecisive attitudes toward Chinese brands, multi-factor purchase dynamics (value, reliability, financing, service coverage) and peer-based homophily and social proof that amplify or dampen purchase intention. Across cases, attitudes and subjective norms are moved by identity-congruent cues, while perceived behavioural control (PBC) hinges on transparent finance and aftersales architectures.

The study delivers a context-sensitive framework that sequences institutional fit (what communications must signal to be legitimate), identity congruence (how cues are read as “for people like me/us”) and intention levers (attitudes, norms, control) to translate communication fit into action. Managerially, it specifies four design imperatives, vernacular language strategy, representation beyond surface tokens, community activation and credible sources and post-purchase relationship architectures that sustain trust. Theoretically, the work localises inclusive-marketing scholarship to an African, super-diverse context and advances a multi-level pathway from norms to choice.

Keywords

Chinese automotive OEMs, South Africa, inclusive marketing, diversity, homophily, Institutional Theory, Theory of Planned Behaviour, consumer decision-making, automotive marketing

Declaration

I declare that this research project, Marketing communication strategies for Chinese automotive OEMs operating in South Africa: The role of diversity in consumer decision-making, is my own work. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Philosophy in Corporate Strategy at the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at any other university. I further declare that I have obtained the necessary authorisation and consent to carry out this research.

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List of acronyms and abbreviations

ABDP	Automotive Production and Development Programme
Ads	Advertisements
Bakkie	Pickup
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa
BMW	Bayerische Motoren Werke
DEI	Diversity, Equity and Inclusion
EFF	Economic Freedom Fighters
EV	Electric Vehicle
FG	Focus Group
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GenZ	Generation Z
GWM	Great Wall Motors
LCA	Latent Class Analysis
LIC	Low Income Consumer
LGBTQ+-	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Quer, Plus
Lingo	Language
LSM	Living Standards Measure
MIR	Mobility Insights Report
Mzansi	South Africa
NIQ	NielsenIQ
NEV	New Energy Vehicle
OEM	Original Equipment Manufacturer
PBC	Perceived behavioral control
PSL	Premier Soccer League
Q	Quarter
Rainbow nation	South Africa
RQ	Research question
Spec	Specification
SA	South Africa
SAAM	South African Automotive Masterplan
TCO	Total Cost of Ownership
VW	Volkswagen

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1. CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO RESEARCH PROBLEM

1.1. Background to the research problem

The automotive sector is a key driver of South Africa's economy, accounting for 5.3% of the country's GDP and 21.9% of manufacturing output (NAAMSA, 2025), yet the central strategic challenge for foreign entrants is not industrial capacity but market heterogeneity that complicates marketing communication and segmentation (NAAMSA, 2025; GCIS, 2025). South Africa's 12 official languages, high levels of ethnic and cultural plurality and continuing process of social renegotiation in the post-apartheid era render South Africa a textbook case of superdiversity, in which the "Rainbow Nation" is both a national aspiration and a practical segmentation constraint (GCIS, 2025; Vorster et al., 2020).

While Chinese automotive Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEMs) have demonstrated rapid global expansion, their home-market context may inadvertently predispose them to segmentation errors in highly heterogeneous environments like South Africa (Liu et al., 2024). China, despite its vast geography, is relatively homogeneous in cultural and linguistic terms, approximately 91% of its population identifies as Han Chinese, and Mandarin dominates as the official language (EastChinaTrip, 2025). This contrasts sharply with South Africa's "rainbow nation" reality, where multiple ethnic identities shape consumer expectations (Statistics South Africa, 2025).

Research suggests that firms originating from culturally homogeneous environments often underestimate the complexity of multicultural markets, leading to representational missteps and tone-deaf messaging (Uduehi et al., 2025). Homogeneity fosters managerial schemas that privilege standardisation and efficiency over cultural adaptation, which can result in campaigns that fail to resonate with diverse audiences (Jadhav, 2024; David, 2025). For Chinese firms, this risk is amplified by institutional logics emphasising harmony and collectivism within a relatively uniform cultural frame (Haveman et al., 2023; Xia & Liu, 2025). When transposed into pluralistic societies, these logics may clash with local norms of inclusivity and identity recognition, creating legitimacy gaps (Zhang & de Vries, 2022).

Empirical evidence underscores this vulnerability. Studies on cross-cultural marketing failures reveal that brands entering diverse markets without robust cultural intelligence often face backlash, reputational damage, and operational disruption (Hart, 2024). For

instance, Burberry's misinterpreted Lunar New Year campaign in China illustrates how even global brands can falter when cultural nuance is overlooked (Smith, 2019). Conversely, successful entrants invest in cultural adaptation strategies, including local language integration, community engagement, and identity-sensitive representation (Panchal, 2025).

South Africa's diverse population of over 62 million people with roughly 31% of the population classified as middle class, provides a uniquely heterogeneous consumer base that requires careful strategic consideration (Cunningham & Petzer, 2021). This environment heightens the salience of identity, informal norms (e.g., respect, dignity, linguistic inclusion), and community values in consumers' interpretation of brand messages (Kipnis et al., 2020; Potgieter & Roux, 2024). Within this context, Chinese automotive OEMs such as Chery, Great Wall Motors (GWM), and OMODA to name a few have expanded rapidly on the back of value-for-money propositions and product innovation, but their sustained growth depends on achieving cultural legitimacy and identity-aligned communication rather than on price-led acquisition alone (Chen et al., 2024; NAAMSA, 2025; Moshikaro-Amani & Mahlangu, 2024). While geopolitical alliances like BRICS offer strategic advantages, long-term success hinges on resonating with South Africa's pluralistic consumer base.

In superdiverse markets, traditional demographic segmentation (age/income/Living Standards Measure (LSM)) underperforms because purchase-relevant meanings are often organised around identity markers (race, language, gender, locality) and community norms that filter the credibility and appropriateness of messages (Potgieter & Roux, 2024; Vorster et al., 2020). Accordingly, the more decisive question is not what consumers are demographically, but how they see themselves and each other, and what norms they expect brands to uphold in their communications (Kipnis et al., 2020; GCIS, 2025).

Multicultural identity affiliation significantly influences brand engagement, aligning with Homophily Theory, which delves into the innate human inclination to establish connections with individuals perceived to share similar attributes or characteristics (Lawrence & Shah, 2020). In South Africa, both surface-level (race, language) and deep-level (values, lifestyle) homophily shape consumer affinity, increasing demands for representation and emotional authenticity (Hu et al., 2023). This increases demands for representation, cultural competence, and emotional authenticity in advertising (Hu et al., 2023).

Complementing this is the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) developed by Ajzen (1991), which presents an understanding into how psychological constructs such as perceived behavioural control (PBC), attitudes, norms (subjective) influence consumer decision making (Ajzen, 1991). In fragmented markets like South Africa, TPB is especially relevant due to cultural capital, life course changes, and structural inequality (Moschis, 2021; Bhat et al., 2021; Morozov et al., 2021).

The over-diversification effect (Saini et al., 2024) captures how the introduction of multiple identity-based signals in marketing for example, race, language, or cultural symbolism can inadvertently amplify the perceived heterogeneity of consumer preferences. Instead of clarifying audience expectations, these signals may distort how managers interpret consumer needs, making markets appear more fragmented than they actually are (Saini et al., 2024). In practical terms, this means that well-intended efforts at inclusivity may overwhelm managers with what looks like countless micro-segments, complicating the task of crafting coherent strategies. This is particularly challenging in South Africa, where consumers already interpret brand messages through the intersecting prisms of culture, language, and historical inequity (Kipnis et al., 2020; Vorster et al., 2020).

Closely linked is the concept of audience heterogeneity (Wang, 2022), which highlights how consumers themselves read market signals inconsistently. When confronted with diverse identity cues, audiences may project greater differences onto others than actually exist. For instance, an advert that uses multiple languages and cultural symbols could lead some consumers to assume that “others” have very different tastes, even if underlying preferences are shared. This does not only complicate segmentation but also creates a demand for continuous brand-consumer dialogue to sustain relevance, rather than having once off representational gestures (Campbell et al., 2023; Edelman, 2023a).

To address these issues, scholars advocate moving beyond blunt demographic segmentation, moving toward statistical models that uncover hidden heterogeneity. One such tool is Latent Class Analysis (LCA), which enables researchers to identify unobserved subgroups within a consumer base whose preferences might otherwise be masked (Gonçalves et al., 2020). Unlike surface-level demographic splits (e.g., age or income), LCA accounts for preference patterns shaped by identity and values, making it well-suited for emerging markets where social categories are fluid and overlapping (Morozov et al., 2021). For Chinese automotive OEMs operating in South Africa, LCA

could provide actionable insights into how consumers cluster around cultural identity, aspirations, and informal norms, enabling brands to align communications more authentically without succumbing to the paralysis of over-diversification (Chen et al., 2024; Tuli et al., 2025).

In sum, the above underscores a paradox in inclusive marketing, while identity-based cues are necessary for authenticity and legitimacy, they can also distort managerial perceptions of diversity. This reinforces the need for context-sensitive segmentation tools that balance representational inclusivity with analytical clarity. By combining the theoretical insights of Saini et al. (2024) and Wang (2022) with methodological advances like LCA (Gonçalves et al., 2020), marketers can avoid superficial tokenism and instead design strategies that resonate with real, underlying consumer heterogeneity.

Contemporary trust research further intensifies this challenge. The Edelman Brand Trust data show that trust and ongoing post-purchase engagement increasingly drive loyalty and advocacy, with GenerationZ (GenZ) both demanding more from brands and influencing older generations' expectations regarding inclusivity and social alignment (Edelman, 2023a; Edelman, 2023b). In practice, this means that communication fit, including representation, tone, language and source selection must be continuously earned and locally relevant and not assumed from global templates (Edelman, 2023a; Packard et al., 2023). South African media and regulatory discourse since 2017 has repeatedly highlighted that misaligned representational choices can catalyse public backlash and operational disruption, raising the stakes for foreign brands entering the market (Daily Maverick, 2020; Nkanjeni, 2020). Therefore, communication fit, representation, tone, language, and source must be locally relevant and continuously earned.

Finally, South Africa's demographic and cultural dynamics are evolving, they are not static. Ranging from the rise of multiracial and multilingual households to shifting social affiliations which further increases the need for context-sensitive, identity-aware approaches (Statistics South Africa, 2025). In sum, the national context encourages Chinese automotive OEMs to segment through identities and norms and to design inclusive, trustworthy marketing communications that align with informal institutions shaping everyday consumer judgements (Kipnis et al., 2020; Vorster et al., 2020).

Despite a growing global discourse on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in marketing, there is evidence that context-specific studies focused on how identity markers influence consumer decision-making in African emerging markets are currently limited (Peñaloza et al., 2023; Park et al., 2022). In summary, the South African automotive market demands marketing communication strategies that go beyond transactional appeals. Brands must engage with informal institutions (language, cultural norms, community values) and align with consumer identities to build trust, legitimacy, and emotional connection. This study addresses this strategic imperative by exploring how Chinese OEMs can develop marketing communication strategies that resonate with the real-life experiences of South African consumers.

1.2. Business relevance of the research

South Africa's consumer landscape is characterised by profound diversity, consisting of four main racial groups, Black Africans representing 81.4%, Coloureds representing 8.5%, Caucasians representing 7.2%, and Indian/Asians representing 2.6%, each with distinct cultural practices, norms, and preferences (Statistics South Africa, 2025). This plurality is further amplified by the country's 12 official languages and regional dialects, creating a complex communicative environment that demands culturally attuned marketing strategies (GCIS, 2025).

For Chinese automotive OEMs operating in South Africa, this diversity is not a peripheral consideration but a strategic requirement. Standard industry diagnostics often prioritise vehicle volumes, exports, and capacity utilisation as useful indicators that obscure the fundamental reality that consumer response in South Africa turns on cultural and institutional fit (NAAMSA, 2025; GCIS, 2025). Two decades of globalisation have shown that standardised global campaigns frequently underperform in post-colonial and multicultural markets unless adapted to local identity semantics, that is, how meanings attached to imagery, language, and roles are read through a society's historical and normative lenses (Vorster et al., 2020; Kipnis et al., 2020). From a managerial perspective, the central risk is misrecognition this is when creative that appears neutral in one context carries harmful or exclusionary connotations in another (Payne & Shoba, 2020; Packard et al., 2023).

Institutional Theory is used to understand how informal institutions such as cultural norms, historical memory and language preferences shape consumer expectations and influence perceived brand legitimacy (Scott, 2001; Park et al., 2022). In South Africa,

these informal institutions are especially salient due to the country's post-apartheid socio-political context, where dignity, equality, and representation are not just values but binding expectations. Marketing communications that fail to engage with these norms risk alienating consumers and triggering reputational backlash.

The South African Clicks/TRESemmé incident is enlightening. In September 2020, imagery on the Clicks website compared Black African hair with deficit descriptors ("dry/damaged", "frizzy/dull") and Caucasian hair with neutral/positive descriptors ("fine/flat", "normal"), prompting nationwide protests mobilised by the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) (Daily Maverick, 2020; Nkanjeni, 2020). Reports indicate that at least 425 stores were affected, seven stores damaged, and the supplier subsequently withdrew TRESemmé products for 10 days (Nkanjeni, 2020; Unilever South Africa, 2020). Cabinet publicly characterised the advert as "profoundly offensive and racist", underscoring how communications can escalate to political-institutional censure (News24, 2020; Daily Maverick, 2020). The relevant strategic lesson is not simply to avoid offense, but to recognise that norms of dignity, equality and informal institutions are binding expectations that co-determine a campaign's legitimacy (Kipnis et al., 2020; Vorster et al., 2020).

Other widely cited precedents illuminate the stakes. First, Dove in 2017 a Facebook creative depicting a Black African woman "turning white" triggered global condemnation, boycotts and a rapid apology, subsequent analyses describe the crisis response and brand repositioning as attempts to limit immediate reputational damage but this was construed as being superficial, as it failed to directly confront the deeper issue of racialised imagery in beauty marketing (Loreta, 2020; Institute for PR, 2023). Another being POND'S South Africa, a brand housed under Unilever who market broadly in skincare, Unilever's historical "fairness" portfolio ("Fair & Lovely", "Glow & Lovely") reflects a global colourism logic which is highly critiqued. In 2020, Unilever publicly removed "fair/white/lightening" language, acknowledging the normative signal embedded in such claims. In South Africa, where skin-tone politics are tightly bound to dignity and equality, colourism-coded segmentation is legitimacy-fragile (Govender & Moodley, 2025). Thirdly, H&M in 2018, the "coolest monkey in the jungle" hoodie on a Black African child model produced store vandalism, temporary closure of all South African stores, and police interventions (ABC News, 2018; The Independent, 2018). While the categories (beauty, apparel) differ from automotive, the mechanism is comparable, identity-incongruent communications undermined brand legitimacy under

South Africa's cultural-cognitive expectations (BBC News, 2018; Payne & Shoba, 2020).

For Chinese automotive OEMs, these cases generalise to two communication design requirements. First, language and voice matter, vernacular usage and community-authentic sources can signal respect and familiarity enhancing interpretations of sincerity and inclusion (Potgieter & Roux, 2024; Vorster et al., 2020). Second, representation must move beyond surface tokens to deep-level homophily, values, aspirations, and everyday realities, otherwise messaging risks being decoded as tokenistic (Edelman, 2023a; Ao et al., 2023). This is amplified in automotive because purchase cycles are long, high-involvement, and publicly visible (social signalling), which ties subjective norms and perceived control (e.g., finance, service coverage) directly to TPB-style behavioural intention (Fatoki, 2021; Ajzen, 1991).

Moreover, the trust dynamic has shifted, consumers increasingly form or revise brand judgements after the first purchase, this means the purchase funnel is now a loop, and post-purchase engagement, service quality, owner community, content relevance all shape loyalty and advocacy (Edelman, 2023a; 2023b). For Chinese OEMs that are still consolidating aftersales networks and owner communities, communications must be designed as relationship architectures, not just as launch bursts (Edelman, 2023a; NAAMSA, 2025). In practice, that means community activation (e.g., township test-drive events, locally relevant ambassadors), multilingual content, and norm-aware narrative frames that match institutional expectations around dignity and inclusion (Kipnis et al., 2021; Potgieter & Roux, 2024).

Gender and generational dynamics further complicate the landscape. Women in South Africa represent approximately 51% of the population with Black African women representing a significant number of the consumer bloc of over 26 million people (Statistics South Africa, 2024). Their preferences and decision-making agency have profound implications for vehicle design, safety features, advertising representation, and aftersales service expectations (Hu et al., 2023). Concurrently, youth segments, particularly digital natives are increasingly vocal in demanding authenticity, inclusivity, and brand alignment with progressive values (Tuli et al., 2025).

The strategic pivot shifts from relying on industry metrics to adopting institution- and identity-aware communication as the primary lever for segmentation effectiveness and

brand legitimacy in South Africa (Vorster et al., 2020; Kipnis et al., 2021). Beyond moral and image considerations, inclusive marketing is a critical business strategy. Brands that engage meaningfully with diversity outperform competitors in trust, purchase intent, and long-term loyalty (Peñaloza et al., 2023; Yale Center for Customer Insights, 2023). This study fills a key capability deficiency through offering a framework for Chinese OEMs to develop culturally inclusive, identity-aligned marketing communication strategies tailored to South Africa's socio-cultural terrain.

The outcomes aim to guide tactical actions and decisions such as messaging and segmentation, as well as broader strategic imperatives related to brand positioning, localisation, and stakeholder engagement. By integrating Institutional Theory, the study underscores that marketing success in South Africa depends on economic value propositions and on alignment with the informal institutions that shape consumer trust, legitimacy, and emotional connection.

1.3. Theoretical and practical relevance

1.3.1. Theoretical relevance

The South African automotive market offers a unique empirical setting to interrogate and extend multi-level theories. At the macro level, Institutional Theory posits that organisational legitimacy is shaped by three interdependent pillars: regulatory, normative and cultural-cognitive dimensions (Scott, 2001). While the regulative pillar (laws, compliance) is relatively stable, the normative, cultural-cognitive pillars, informal norms, shared meanings, and symbolic expectations, are highly salient in post-apartheid South Africa (Kipnis et al., 2020; Vorster et al., 2020).

These informal institutions govern what is perceived as “appropriate” or “respectful” in marketing communication. Misalignment with these norms can trigger collective sanction, as evidenced by the Clicks/TRESemmé and H&M controversies, where representational missteps escalated into political condemnation, store closures and brand boycotts (Daily Maverick, 2020; The Independent, 2018). These cases empirically validate Institutional Theory's claim that legitimacy is shaped by social factors and varies by context (Scott, 2001).

At the meso level, Homophily Theory explains how shared identities influence the way people engage with each other. In marketing, perceived similarity between consumers and brand representations enhances trust, message credibility, and purchase intention

(Ao et al., 2023). In South Africa, identity signalling through local language and slang further operationalises homophily, for example, vernacular such as “lekker” (nice in Afrikaans) on billboards functions as an immediate “in-group” cue. Volkswagen (VW) South Africa’s Polo Vivo campaigns infused youth slang (e.g., “Drive your vibe”) to position the brand as a lifestyle companion rather than a corporation, Isuzu adverts have leveraged Afrikaans and isiZulu expressions to resonate with “bakkie” (Pickup) owners who pride themselves on community and ruggedness (e.g., “Siyathembisa impilo ende” to connote durability and loyalty) and MINI South Africa’s localisation of the global “Not Normal” platform to “Stay weird, Mzansi” leveraged the country’s colloquial self-reference to celebrate diversity among urban millennials (“Mzansi” being a widely used nickname for South Africa) (Odendaal, 2025).

Recent South African evidence likewise confirms that ethnic–language cues and culturally congruent visuals significantly improve advertising attitudes and brand evaluations (Potgieter & Roux, 2024). Collectively, these patterns underscore the inadequacy of traditional demographic segmentation and strengthen the case for identity-based segmentation (including language repertoire and subcultural affinity) as a strategic necessity in multicultural markets, especially salient for multinational OEMs seeking authentic localisation in South Africa. (Lawrence & Shah, 2020; Ao et al., 2023; Potgieter & Roux, 2024; AutoAds, 2025).

At the micro level, the TPB offers a robust framework for predicting behavioural intention through attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 1991). In markets characterised by high consumer involvement such as the automotive market, these constructs are particularly relevant. For example, Fatoki (2021) found that attitudes toward electric vehicles and PBC (e.g., affordability, service availability) significantly predicted purchase intention among South African consumers. This suggests that marketing communication must not only shape positive attitudes but also activate social norms (e.g., peer approval, community endorsement) and reduce perceived barriers (e.g., finance clarity, aftersales support). Integrating TPB with Institutional and Homophily theories enables a multi-level analysis of how macro norms, meso identity dynamics, and micro decision drivers interact to influence consumer behaviour (Lawrence & Shah, 2020; Scott, 2001).

1.3.2. Practical significance

From a managerial perspective, the stakes are high. South Africa’s superdiverse consumer base characterised by intersecting identities of race, language, gender, and

socio-economic status renders generic global campaigns ineffective and risky (Vorster et al., 2020). The Clicks/TRESemmé case illustrates the cost of cultural misalignment as a result of a single misjudged creative asset resulted in nationwide protests, store closures, political intervention and reputational damage (Nkanjeni, 2020; Unilever South Africa, 2020). Similarly, H&M's "coolest monkey" hoodie incident led to a similar outcome, demonstrating that representational errors can escalate into operational crises (ABC News, 2018; BBC News, 2018). These incidents underscore that communication missteps are not marginal; they are existential threats to market access and brand equity.

Conversely, inclusive and identity-sensitive communication offers competitive advantage. Recent global research shows that brands perceived as inclusive enjoy higher trust, stronger advocacy, and greater resilience during crises (Edelman, 2023a; Packard et al., 2023). Where historical inequities amplify the symbolic weight of representation as in the case of South Africa, true inclusion goes beyond moral responsibility, it is a strategic imperative differentiator (Kipnis et al., 2020). For Chinese OEMs, which lack the legacy trust enjoyed by established Western brands, cultural legitimacy is a prerequisite for converting first-time buyers into loyal advocates (Kipnis et al., 2020; Tuli et al., 2025). Failure to achieve this legitimacy risks relegating these brands to the status of transactional alternatives, vulnerable to price wars and easily displaced by competitors (Andéhn et al., 2019; Peñaloza et al., 2023).

1.3.3. Emerging consumer expectations

The urgency of this challenge is heightened by shifting consumer expectations, particularly among GenZ and Millennials, who prioritise representation, authenticity, and brand values alignment (Edelman, 2023a; 2023b). According to Edelman's 2023 Trust Barometer, 79% of GenZ consumers globally, and 82% in emerging markets, expect brands to reflect diversity in their communications and 72% report willingness to switch brands over perceived misalignment with social values (Edelman, 2023a).

These expectations are not confined to youth segments, they diffuse across cohorts through social contagion, amplifying the reputational risk of exclusionary or tone-deaf messaging (Ao et al., 2023). In South Africa, where social media activism has repeatedly catalysed brand crises (e.g., #ClicksMustFall), the speed and scale of backlash can overwhelm even well-resourced firms (Daily Maverick, 2020).

1.3.4. Evidence of market impact

Empirical studies increasingly link inclusive marketing to positive business outcomes (Tuli et al., 2025; Kipnis et al., 2020). A recent meta-analysis of 62 studies (Ao et al., 2023) found that perceived similarity between consumers and brand representations significantly predicts engagement, purchase intention, and word-of-mouth advocacy. Similarly, a Packard et al. (2023) report that diversity cues in advertising enhance perceived assortment variety, which in turn drives choice satisfaction and purchase likelihood. These findings suggest that inclusive communication is not merely risk mitigation, it is a lever for value creation (Peñaloza et al., 2023). For Chinese OEMs, which operate in a high-involvement category where trust and reassurance are critical, the ability to signal cultural competence and identity alignment can accelerate adoption and foster long-term loyalty (Andéhn et al., 2019; Lawrence & Shah, 2020).

1.3.5. Strategic imperatives for Chinese OEMs

The implications for Chinese automotive brands are clear. First, language strategy must move beyond token translation to embrace vernacular authenticity, signalling respect and cultural fluency (Potgieter & Roux, 2024). Second, representation strategy must integrate both surface-level diversity (race, gender) and deep-level congruence (values, aspirations), avoiding the pitfalls of tokenism (Lawrence & Shah, 2020). Third, message framing should leverage social proof and community endorsement to activate subjective norms, while addressing perceived control barriers through transparent communication about financing, warranties, and service networks (Fatoki, 2021).

Finally, post-purchase engagement, including owner communities, multilingual service content, and culturally resonant brand storytelling must be prioritised to sustain trust in a market where brand narratives are co-created with consumers (Edelman, 2023b).

In summary, the problem sits at the intersection of theory and practice, offering an opportunity to advance scholarly understanding of institutional alignment, identity-based segmentation, and behavioural intention formation (Scott, 2001; Lawrence & Shah, 2020; Ajzen, 1991), while addressing a pressing managerial challenge in one of the most complex consumer markets (.Kipnis et al., 2020; Tuli et al., 2025). For Chinese OEMs, success in South Africa will not depend on price competition or product parity, but on the ability to communicate with cultural intelligence, institutional sensitivity, and identity awareness (Andéhn et al., 2019; Peñaloza et al., 2023).

1.4. Theoretical lens

This study mobilises three complementary lenses, Institutional Theory (macro), Homophily Theory (meso) and the TPB (micro), not to restate their foundations, but to specify how each is operationalised to diagnose communication (mis)fit and explain intention formation in South Africa's automotive market. Together, they offer a multilevel pathway, institutional expectations, identity-congruent cues, attitude/norm/control shifts.

1.4.1. Institutional alignment (macro)

Rather than revisiting basic definitions, Institutional Theory is used here to map the informal expectations (e.g., language, dignity, and community values) that govern what audiences deem appropriate in brand communication, and to treat marketing as institutional work, ongoing alignment with normative and cultural-cognitive expectations (Scott, 2001; Kipnis et al., 2020). The research adopts a dynamic view in which legitimacy is not a one-off compliance outcome but an emergent property of continuous interaction with a pluralistic marketplace (Vargo et al., 2023). Practically, this lens directs the study to (i) surface locally salient norms during focus groups and (ii) evaluate whether sampled campaigns embed locally meaningful signs, voices and language (Andéhn et al., 2019; Park et al., 2022). In short, the institutional lens tells us which expectations matter and how legitimacy is earned in everyday sense-making.

1.4.2. Identity congruence and homophily (meso)

At the meso level, Homophily Theory specifies how brands become relatable, by aligning surface-level cues (e.g., race, gender, language) and deep-level cues (values, aspirations, lifestyle) that audiences read as "people like me/us" (Lawrence & Shah, 2020). South African evidence indicates that ethnic-language appeals and culturally congruent visuals improve advertising evaluations, supporting identity-based segmentation over coarse demographics (Potgieter & Roux, 2024). In digital contexts, perceived similarity with endorsers further strengthens engagement and downstream responses (Han & Balabanis, 2023; Leonhardt et al., 2020).

1.4.3. Behavioural intention formation (micro: TPB)

The TPB lens translates perceived fit into action tendencies by tracing how communication shapes attitudes, subjective norms and PBC (Ajzen, 1991). In the local automotive context, attitudes to product value/quality and control beliefs around finance clarity and service coverage are empirically tied to purchase intention (Fatoki, 2021). In

addition, incorporating granularity from prosocial choice research, the SHIFT levers (Social influence, Habit, Individual self, Feelings, Tangibility) enrich how norms and feelings are surfaced (White et al., 2020).

These three lenses are sequenced to explain how context translates into choice. Institutional expectations define the boundary conditions for what communication must signal to be seen as legitimate (Scott, 2001; Vargo et al., 2023). Identity-congruent cues express those expectations in creative choices that are processed through perceived similarity and authenticity (Lawrence & Shah, 2020; Potgieter & Roux, 2024). These cues then influence TPB constructs, attitudes (e.g., reassurance), norms (e.g., peer or community approval), and perceived control (e.g., affordability, service access), which shape intention. Peer diffusion can further amplify these effects (Ajzen, 1991; Gershon et al., 2024). This integration also clarifies the managerial stakes namely that inclusive, identity-aware execution is a value-creation lever that builds trust and loyalty, not a compliance exercise (Tuli et al., 2025; Kipnis et al., 2020).

Overall, the integrated lenses provide an analytical scaffold for diagnosing communication failures such as institutional misfit, identity misalignment or behavioural frictions and for specifying remedies that are culturally intelligent, identity-aware and behaviourally effective (Andéhn et al., 2019; Tuli et al., 2025).

The three lenses retained in this research, Institutional Theory (macro), Homophily Theory (meso) and the TPB (micro) were selected using three criteria. Firstly, conceptual fit to the research problem. Institutional Theory captures how South Africa's informal norms (language, dignity, community) function as legitimacy boundaries for brand speech, Homophily explains identity-congruent cueing in communications, TPB operationalises how messaging shifts attitudes, subjective norms and PBC to form Intentions to purchase in a high-involvement category (Ajzen, 1991; Scott, 2001; Lawrence & Shah, 2020). Secondly, together these lenses provide a layered path from context, cues and intention, avoiding redundancy while covering macro, meso and micro-mechanisms that recur in the South Africa (Ajzen, 1991; Scott, 2001; Lawrence & Shah, 2020).

Lastly, they provide empirical traceability. Each lens maps directly to how the data were collected/coded and to the decision levers managers control (e.g., language, representation, voice).

1.5. Research problem and research aims

Chinese automotive OEMs have grown rapidly in South Africa, yet marketing performance remains uneven when communications imported from global playbooks encounter local informal institutions, language practices, dignity norms and community-centred values that govern what is deemed appropriate and credible (Kipnis et al., 2020; Park et al., 2022). Concurrently, identity-based processing means audiences evaluate brand messages through perceived similarity on both surface-level cues (race, gender, language) and deeper value congruence, with material consequences for engagement and trust (Lawrence & Shah, 2020; Potgieter & Roux, 2024). In high-involvement categories such as automotive, these identity and legitimacy judgments ultimately translate into behavioural intention via shifts in attitudes, subjective norms and perceived control (Ajzen, 1991; Fatoki, 2021). The business risk is clear, without cultural legitimacy and identity alignment, Chinese automotive OEMs are confined to price-led acquisition and fragile loyalty (Özsomer et al., 2024; Peñaloza et al., 2023).

Literature is yet to yield an integrated, context-sensitive account of how macro-level institutional expectations should be encoded into meso-level identity cues and then leveraged through micro-level intention levers in multicultural emerging markets, particularly South Africa, where socio-historical plurality and inequality heighten the salience of representation and voice (Statistics South Africa, 2025; Andéhn et al., 2019). Existing work treats these levels largely in isolation, Institutional Theory on legitimacy (Scott, 2001), Homophily on identity congruence (Lawrence & Shah, 2020) and the TPB on intention (Ajzen, 1991), with limited cross-walks that show managers how to translate norms into creative choices and message architectures that reliably move intention (Vargo et al., 2023; Park et al., 2022).

This problem holds significant strategic implications. Without tailored, inclusive marketing communication strategies, foreign brands risk cultural misalignment, consumer disengagement and reputational damage in the long term. Addressing this problem is therefore essential not only for competitive advantage but also for the development of more equitable and inclusive market ecosystems in South Africa.

1.5.1. Research aim

This study's aim is to explore how Chinese automotive OEMs can develop and execute culturally inclusive and identity-aligned marketing communication strategies that (i)

earn cultural legitimacy (Institutional Theory), (ii) achieve identity congruence without tokenism (Homophily), and (iii) shift intention by addressing attitudes, norms and barriers (TPB) in South Africa's automotive market (Kipnis et al., 2021; Potgieter & Roux, 2024; Ajzen, 1991).

Through the integration of Institutional Theory (Scott, 2001), Homophily Theory (Lawrence & Shah, 2020) and the TPB (Ajzen, 1991), the study seeks to generate a theoretical and empirically grounded conceptual model for localising global marketing communication strategies in emerging markets. In so doing, it offers actionable recommendations for foreign firms seeking to embed themselves more authentically and effectively within multicultural contexts.

This study seeks to advance academic discussions on inclusive marketing communications and strategic localisation while offering Chinese OEMs a framework to foster cultural legitimacy, psychological resonance, and sustainable brand equity in South Africa.

1.6. Research questions

Consumer decision-making in the automotive sector is shaped by a constellation of elements, including cultural identity, social norms, economic constraints and brand perception (Castro & Sáiz, 2019; Park et al., 2022). For South Africa, these factors are further complicated by South Africa's rich diversity, historical legacies, and linguistic plurality. As such, understanding how marketing communication strategies can be tailored to reflect this complexity is both a theoretical and practical imperative.

Drawing from the integrated theoretical framework, Institutional Theory (Scott, 2001), Homophily Theory (Lawrence & Shah, 2020) and the TPB (Ajzen, 1991), this study formulates two central research questions (RQ):

Primary research question:

RQ1: What marketing communication strategies can Chinese automotive OEMs adopt to align with the preferences of South Africa's diverse consumer base?

This question addresses the macro-meso challenge of strategic localisation in a superdiverse market. It seeks to identify how Chinese OEMs can develop marketing communication approaches that resonate with South African consumers across dimensions such as race, language, gender, and socio-economic status. The question

is grounded in Institutional Theory (Scott, 2001), which emphasises the need for cultural legitimacy and alignment with informal institutions (Scott, 2001), and Homophily Theory, which elevate the significance of perceived similarity in promoting consumer engagement (Lawrence & Shah, 2020).

By focusing on how Chinese OEMs can operationalise these principles, RQ1 responds to Tuli et al. (2025) who identified a critical gap in marketing scholarship, noting that inclusive marketing remains underexplored in multicultural and emerging markets, particularly in contexts where identity-aware execution can serve as a strategic lever rather than a compliance exercise. They further call for research that examines “how culturally intelligent and identity-sensitive communication strategies influence consumer trust and loyalty across diverse segments (Tuli et al., 2025). This aligns directly with the proposed research question (Tuli et al., 2025).

South Africa’s market is characterised by pronounced cultural heterogeneity and institutional complexity, making it an ideal setting to respond to Tuli et al.’s invitation. By investigating strategies that embed identity-aware and culturally intelligent communication, this study addresses the theoretical and managerial stakes outlined by Tuli et al. (2025), positioning inclusive execution as a value-creation mechanism for brand legitimacy and consumer engagement.

It further addresses a gap in the literature, which often overlooks the operationalisation of inclusive marketing in emerging markets (Benito et al., 2022). By exploring this question, the study aims to bridge this gap and narrow the gap between global strategy and local responsiveness, offering insights into how foreign brands can adapt their messaging, representation, and communication channels to reflect the lived experiences of South African consumers.

Secondary Research Question:

RQ2: How does diversity in marketing communication influence consumer decision-making in the South African automotive sector?

This question focuses on the psychological and behavioural impact of inclusive marketing. It examines how elements such as representation, language, cultural relevance and identity alignment affect the attitudes, trust, and purchase intentions of consumers. The question is rooted in TPB (Ajzen, 1991), particularly models that

explore the role of attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control in shaping decisions (Ajzen, 1991; Leonhardt et al., 2020).

The rationale for this question stems from the increasing body of work that underscores the strategic value of inclusive marketing in enhancing brand resonance and consumer loyalty (Tuli et al., 2025; Peñaloza et al., 2023). However, most existing studies are grounded in Western contexts, leaving a gap in understanding how these dynamics play out in emerging markets like South Africa (Tuli et al., 2025; Kipnis et al., 2020; Park et al., 2022). This question enables the empirical investigation of how inclusive marketing communication practices influence psychological and behavioural outcomes among consumers in different demographic segments (Ajzen, 1991; Leonhardt et al., 2020).

Together, these research questions aim to generate a nuanced understanding of how diversity can be strategically leveraged in marketing communications to foster consumer connection, brand legitimacy, and competitive advantage (Scott, 2001; Lawrence & Shah, 2020; Peñaloza et al., 2023). They also respond to calls for more context-specific, identity-sensitive research in global marketing strategy (Andéhn et al., 2019; Park et al., 2022), particularly in multicultural societies where consumer behaviour is shaped by complex socio-cultural dynamics.

1.7. Research scope

This study is situated within the South African automotive industry, with a specific focus on the marketing communication strategies employed by Chinese automotive OEMs operating in the country. The geographical scope is Gauteng province focused, which is the economic epicenter of South Africa, which contributes over 34% to national GDP and houses key metropolitan hubs such as Johannesburg and Pretoria (Statistics South Africa, 2025). Gauteng's socio-economic and demographic diversity offers a rich empirical setting to examine how marketing communication strategies engage with a pluralistic consumer base. (Statistics South Africa, 2025).

Gauteng's population reflects the broader national diversity in terms of race, language, income, and lifestyle (Statistics South Africa, 2025). It includes a mix of urban and peri-urban communities, offering a rich context for exploring how marketing communication strategies resonate across different consumer segments. This diversity is essential for investigating the role of informal institutions such as cultural norms, language preferences and social values as emphasised in Institutional Theory (Scott, 2001). By

focusing on Gauteng, the study captures a microcosm of South Africa's broader institutional environment, enabling a nuanced analysis of how these factors influence consumer decision-making.

The research will explore varied consumer characteristics, including age. The study will explore consumer behaviour across generational cohorts, from first-time car buyers in their twenties to older, established consumers with long-term brand preferences (Moschis, 2021). Given women constitute 51% of the population, with distinct needs and preferences influencing product engagement, especially in vehicle safety, reliability, and representation, gender will be another consumer characteristic observed (Hu et al., 2023). Race and ethnicity will be incorporated, including Black Africans, Coloureds, Caucasians, and Indian/Asians (Statistics South Africa, 2025), each with distinct cultural and linguistic identities.

This multidimensional approach aligns with the theoretical scope defined by the integration of three frameworks: TPB, which emphasises the role of psychological, cultural, and social factors in shaping purchasing decisions (Ajzen, 1991; Leonhardt et al., 2020); Homophily Theory, which examines how consumers respond to marketing messages that reflect their identities and values (Lawrence & Shah, 2020) and Institutional Theory, which analyses how informal societal norms and expectations influence brand legitimacy and consumer interpretation of marketing communication (Scott, 2001; Kipnis et al., 2020).

Although the primary focus is on Gauteng, the study is analytically generalisable. Its findings are intended to inform broader strategic localisation models applicable across other South African provinces and emerging markets with similar socio-cultural characteristics. Future research may extend the geographic scope to provinces such as KwaZulu-Natal, the Eastern Cape, or the Western Cape, each with unique institutional configurations and consumer identities. Additionally, future research could incorporate other dimensions of diversity, such as religion, disability, or sexual orientation, to further enrich the understanding of inclusive marketing in multicultural societies.

Scope limitations and strategic relevance

This study does not attempt to assess the performance of individual automotive brands or conduct large-scale quantitative generalisations. Instead, it aims to generate

strategic, context-sensitive insights that bridge the gap between global marketing theory and local consumer realities.

By focusing on the intersection of marketing, diversity, and identity in a complex emerging market, the study contributes to both theory development and practical strategy formulation. It also lays the foundation for future inquiry into under-researched dimensions of inclusivity such as religion, sexual orientation, and disability in marketing communications within multicultural societies.

In summary, the scope of this study is deliberately designed to balance depth and breadth. By focusing on Gauteng, the research captures a concentrated yet representative sample of South Africa's diverse consumer landscape. This enables a rigorous examination of how Chinese automotive OEMs can tailor their marketing communication strategies to align with local consumer expectations, institutional norms, and identity-based preferences, thereby contributing to both theoretical advancement and practical business strategy.

2. CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Introduction to the literature review

This study seeks to expand on existing literature, which highlights the growing importance of culturally resonant brand identities in international markets (Özsomer et al., 2024). This literature review examines and synthesises current academic discourse relevant to the strategic localisation of marketing communication within emerging markets focusing specifically on the intersection of diversity, identity and consumer behaviour in South Africa's automotive sector. This review builds on the theoretical framing introduced in Chapter 1 but extends its depth through engagement with a broader body of literature that informs the study's conceptual foundations and empirical direction.

A systematic review of 27 peer-reviewed articles from high-ranking journals (CABS rated) published between 2019 and 2025 was conducted, in addition, seminal works were included for theoretical grounding. Of these 27 articles 21 were identified as being pertinent to the research. These articles, summarised in Table 1, represent diverse industries and theoretical frameworks, including and not limited to Psychic Distance Theory, Country-of-Origin Effect, Institutional Theory, SHIFT Framework, Homophily Theory, and the Theory of Planned Behavior. These articles were used to contextualise the challenges and opportunities facing Chinese OEMs in South Africa.

The review employed a rigorous search strategy using databases such as Scopus, Springer, and Sage. Research questions were used to identify keywords, these keywords were isolated and adapted to execute the search. The keywords included "Chinese Original Equipment Manufacturers", "South African market", "inclusive marketing", "social norms", "marketing strategies", "automotive market", "competitive advantage", "diversity in marketing", "consumer decision-making", "consumer behaviour", "brand perception", "leveraging diversity", "vehicle sales", "multicultural marketing".

While the studies depicted in Table 1 offer valuable theoretical insights, their applicability to culturally complex and historically unequal societies like South Africa is limited. For example, Kipnis et al. (2020) advocate for institutionalising diversity in marketing but do not explore how this can be operationalised in postcolonial, multilingual environments. Similarly, Tuli et al. (2025) identify the strategic importance of inclusivity but fall short of offering actionable strategies for foreign entrants in African

markets. This study addresses this gap by applying established theories to a South African context, offering localised insights that are currently missing from the literature.

Table 1: Most relevant articles reviewed

Article Name	Authors	Purpose	Related Theory/Framework/Concepts	Main Theory	Method/Empirical Context	Number of Respondents	Dataset/Articles Reviewed	Industry	Country	Main Findings
New Product Introductions for Low-Income Consumers in Emerging Markets (Arunachalam et al., 2020)	Arunachalam et al. (2020)	Factors that influence the success of new product introductions for low-income consumers in emerging markets (Arunachalam et al., 2020)	Multi level theoretical framework	Consumer Behaviour	Mixed method	+250	12-year panel data	Consumer Packaged Goods	India, Chile, 27 emerging markets globally	Key factors influencing product adoption among LICs include affordable aspirations, region-based versioning, visible packaging, product demonstrations, retailer advocacy, and connector marketing (Arunachalam et al., 2020)
Luxury fashion retailers' localised marketing strategies in practice – Evidence from China (Bai et al., 2022)	Bai et al. (2022)	Examine how luxury fashion retailers adapt their marketing strategies (Bai et al., 2022)	McGoldrick's retailer marketing mix; Psychic distance theory, Country-of-Origin Effect	Consumer Behaviour	Qualitative	31 respondents	Interviews; company documentation and market reports	Luxury fashion retail	China	Over time, localised strategies became more prominent, especially in product design, branding, and regional adaptation (Bai et al., 2022)
The future of global strategy (Benito et al., 2022)	Benito et al. (2022)	Explore evolution of global strategy (Benito et al., 2022)	Institutional Theory, Global strategy, Dynamic Capabilities, Agency Theory	Institutional Theory	Qualitative (Conceptual)	N/A	N/A	Multi-industry	Global	Global strategy must adapt to institutional pressures (Benito et al., 2022)
Diversity Representation in Advertising (Campbell et al., 2023)	Campbell et al. (2023)	Investigate diversity in advertising (Campbell et al., 2023)	Consumer Behaviour, Marketing communication	Consumer Behaviour	Qualitative (Content Analysis)	N/A	337	Advertising	Global	Representation affects consumer perception (Campbell et al., 2023)
Examining the luxury apparel behavioural intentions of middle-class consumers: The case of the South African market (Cunningham & Petzer, 2021)	Cunningham & Petzer (2021)	To investigate behavioural intentions of middle-class South African consumers in the luxury apparel sector (Cunningham & Petzer, 2021)	Theory of Planned Behavior	Theory of Planned Behavior	Quantitative survey-based study	629 respondents	Primary data collected via structured questionnaire	Luxury apparel	South Africa	Attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control significantly influence luxury purchase intentions among middle-class consumers (Cunningham & Petzer, 2021)
Brand transgressions: How, when, and why home country bias backfires (Davvetas et al., 2024)	Davvetas et al. (2024)	To examine how a brand's origin (domestic vs foreign) shapes consumer reactions and brand performance after transgressions (Davvetas et al., 2024)	Country of Origin, Moral Foundations Theory	Consumer Behaviour	Mixed Methods	1089 participants, 5852 observations, 200 000 usable tweets	Twitter, stock prices, online experiments	Automotive & airlines	Germany, United Kingdom, United States	Consumers react more negatively to domestic brand transgressions (Davvetas et al., 2024)

Older People in Advertising (Eisend, 2022)	Eisend (2022)	Study age representation in ads (Eisend, 2022)	Consumer Behavior, Social Identity Theory	Consumer Behaviour	Qualitative (Review)	N/A	66	Advertising	Global	Older consumers are underrepresented (Eisend, 2022)
The Differential Effect of Local–Global Identity Among Males and Females: The Case of Price Sensitivity (Gao et al., 2019)	Gao et al. (2019)	Gender identity and local–global identity (Gao et al., 2019)	Consumer identity, Social identity, Consumer culture	Social identity theory	Quantitative	Over 3 000 respondents	prior studies, experiments, and field data	Consumer goods and services	China and the United States	Identity incongruence reduces price sensitivity. Gender and identity alignment are key to consumer response to pricing (Gao et al., 2019)
Customer Referrals Are Contagious (Gershon et al., 2024)	Gershon et al. (2024)	Explore social contagion in referrals (Gershon et al., 2024)	Social Contagion Theory, Homophily Theory, Referral Theory	Social Contagion Theory	Quantitative (Causal)	N/A	41 million	Multi-industry	Global	Peer similarity drives referral behavior (Gershon et al., 2024)
Meta-analysis of Social Media Influencer Impact (Han & Balabanis, 2023)	Han & Balabanis (2023)	Examine influencer impact on consumers (Han & Balabanis, 2023)	Source Credibility Theory, Homophily Theory	Source Credibility Theory	Quantitative (Meta-analysis)	N/A	53	Multi-industry	Global	Homophily with influencers increases engagement and loyalty (Han & Balabanis, 2023)
Institutionalizing Diversity in Marketing (Kipnis et al., 2020)	Kipnis et al. (2020)	Institutionalising diversity in multicultural markets (Kipnis et al., 2020)	Institutional Theory	Institutional Theory	Mixed Methods	N/A	N/A	Marketing	UK, USA, South Africa	Diversity and inclusion should be embedded in marketing practices (Kipnis et al., 2020)
Ethical Consumerism in Emerging Markets: Opportunities and Challenges (Kutaula et al., 2024)	Kutaula et al. (2024)	Ethical consumerism in emerging markets (Kutaula et al., 2024)	Institutional Theory, Consumer Ethics Theory, Stakeholder Theory	Institutional Theory	Mixed Methods	34208 Surveys & 24 interviews	10 articles	Cross-sector (focus on emerging markets)	China, India, South Africa, Iran, Brazil, Indonesia, UK, USA, among others	Ethical consumerism in emerging markets is shaped by cultural values, socio-economic diversity, and institutional contexts. Inclusive marketing must reflect local identities and use context-sensitive methods. (Kutaula et al., 2024)
Homophily: Measures and Meaning (Lawrence & Shah, 2020)	Lawrence & Shah (2020)	Review homophily theory and applications (Lawrence & Shah, 2020)	Homophily Theory	Homophily Theory	Qualitative (Interpretive)	N/A	538	Multi-industry	Global	Homophily influences brand engagement and segmentation (Lawrence & Shah, 2020)
Gender Progressive Market Logics (Middleton & Turnbull, 2021)	Middleton & Turnbull (2021)	Explore gender representation in ads (Middleton & Turnbull, 2021)	Institutional Theory	Institutional Theory	Qualitative (Case Study)	20	N/A	Advertising	UK	Advertising shapes gender norms and market logic (Middleton & Turnbull, 2021)
Marketing in emerging markets: a review, theoretical synthesis	Paul (2019)	To review and synthesise marketing literature in emerging markets and propose a theoretical	Institutional Theory; Resource-Based View; Marketing Mix Framework	Institutional Theory	Systematic literature review	N/A	100+ articles reviewed	Cross-industry (focus on emerging markets)	Emerging markets globally (including South Africa)	Marketing strategies in emerging markets must be context-sensitive, culturally embedded, and responsive to

and extension (Paul, 2019)		framework for future research (Paul, 2019)								institutional dynamics (Paul,2019)
Economic Inequality Shapes Judgments of Consumption (Serena et al., 2022)	Serena et al. (2022)	Examine how economic inequality influences moral judgments of consumption (Serena et al., 2022)	Social Comparison Theory, Equity Theory, Moral Judgment Theory, Social Norms Theory, Zero-Sum Perception, and Theories of Firm Compensation	Social Comparison Theory	Conceptual	N/A	10 articles based on references	Multi-industry		Primarily United States, with generalizable implications for other unequal societies (Serena et al., 2022)
Social media "stars" vs "the ordinary" me: influencer marketing and the role of self-discrepancies, perceived homophily, authenticity, self-acceptance and mindfulness (Shehzala et al., 2024)	Shehzala et al. (2024)	Investigate how self-discrepancies influence consumer responses to social media influencers and how factors like homophily, authenticity, self-acceptance, and mindfulness shape these effects (Shehzala et al., 2024)	Self-discrepancy theory, Homophily Theory, Consumer Behaviour	Self-Discrepancy Theory	Mixed methods	17 interviews, 503 survey participants	empirical	Influencer marketing/cross category	Not specified	Consumers compare themselves with influencers (Shehzala et al., 2024)
Consumer Reactions to Nudity in Ads (Trivedi & Teichert, 2021)	Trivedi & Teichert (2021)	Compare gender-based ad reactions (Trivedi & Teichert, 2021)	Theory of differential plasticity, Consumer Behaviour, Advertising Effectiveness frameworks	Advertising Effectiveness frameworks	Quantitative	Not specified	61,399 evaluations	Multi-industry	Germany	Gender-based homophily affects ad effectiveness (Trivedi & Teichert, 2021)
Inclusive Marketing: A Review (Tuli et al., 2025)	Tuli et al. (2025)	Review inclusive marketing literature (Tuli et al., 2025)	Consumer Behavior, Institutional Theory	Institutional Theory	Systematic Literature Review	N/A	71 articles	Multi-industry	Global	Inclusive marketing enhances brand equity and trust (Tuli et al.2025)
Emergence in marketing: an institutional and ecosystem framework (Vargo et al., 2023)	Vargo et al. (2023)	To develop an institutional ecosystem framework explaining how marketing phenomena emerge & evolve (Vargo et al., 2023)	Service-Dominant (S-D) logic, Institutional Theory	Institutional Theory	Conceptual	N/A	No single data set	Cross-industry	Global	Marketing phenomena emerge unpredictably from multi-actor interactions in complex service ecosystems (Vargo et al., 2023)
A Review and Framework for Thinking about the Drivers of Prosocial Consumer Behavior (White et al., 2020)	White et al. (2020)	Synthesise existing research on prosocial consumer behavior (White et al., 2020)	SHIFT Framework, Consumer Behavior	Consumer Behavior	Conceptual /Theoretical Review	Conceptual paper; no primary data collection	+1700 articles	Multi-industry	Global	Prosocial consumer behavior is driven by five key psychological factors (White et al., 2020)

Source: Author's own work

Although globalisation has prompted greater cross-border mobility of brands, there is growing recognition that standardised marketing strategies often fail in culturally heterogeneous societies, particularly in emerging markets where identity politics, historical legacies and socio-economic inequalities strongly influence consumer perceptions and decision-making (Peñaloza et al., 2023; Park et al., 2022). South Africa, as a postcolonial, multilingual and racially diverse society, represents one such complex environment where inclusive marketing communications are not only morally imperative but also provide strategic differentiation.

Rather than categorising consumers demographically, this chapter critically explores how race, language, gender and socio-historical identity shape consumer-brand relationships, marketing legitimacy and brand loyalty. Recent scholarly work increasingly challenges the notion that emerging market consumers are solely price-sensitive and highlights their growing demand for representation, authenticity and emotional resonance (Tuli et al., 2025; Leonhardt et al., 2020).

Drawing from recent empirical studies reviewed, the review identifies points of convergence, theoretical tensions and gaps in the literature particularly the scarcity of empirical models that integrate institutional, sociocultural and behavioural dimensions in non-Western contexts. This review is not intended to be exhaustive but rather analytical, focusing on literature that directly informs the conceptual and methodological foundations of the study and its research questions.

A key contribution of this chapter is its emphasis on the South African context, which remains underrepresented in global marketing literature. While inclusive marketing has gained traction in Western contexts, there is a gap in empirical research that addresses how these strategies can be adapted in multicultural societies such as South Africa (Tuli et al., 2025; Kipnis et al., 2020).

Concluding this chapter is a conceptual framework that integrates the key constructs and relationships highlighted in the literature review. This framework serves as a foundation for the empirical investigation and provides a roadmap for understanding how Chinese OEMs can align their marketing communication strategies with the cultural, institutional, and behavioural dynamics of the South African market.

2.2. Gaps in the literature and theoretical synthesis

While global branding literature increasingly acknowledges the strategic importance of cultural alignment (Özsomer et al., 2024), its operationalisation within high-involvement sectors such as automotive, particularly in African contexts remains underexplored. Existing research on inclusive marketing, consumer behaviour and institutional adaptation is situated in Western or global North settings which fails to capture dynamics of post-colonial societies like South Africa (Tuli et al., 2025; Kipnis et al., 2020). This highlights critical gaps for emerging markets such as South Africa, where socio-cultural diversity and historical inequities shape consumer engagement in complex ways (Kipnis et al., 2020). This underrepresentation limits the generalisability of global marketing frameworks and necessitates context-specific models that reflect local norms, languages, and identity concepts. Gao et al. (2019) contribute to this discourse by demonstrating that when consumers see a match between their identity and a brand, it affects how sensitive they are to price, highlighting the importance of using identity-based strategies to understand consumer behaviour.

Complementing this, Kutaula et al. (2024) advocate for context-sensitive, qualitative methodologies to capture ethical consumerism in emerging markets, emphasising the multidimensional nature of diversity, including race, gender, language, and socio-economic status and the need for marketing strategies that authentically reflect these identities (Kutaula et al., 2024).

Arunachalam et al. (2020) bridge this gap by integrating qualitative and econometric analyses across 27 countries, offering a robust framework for understanding how consumer aspirations, retail dynamics and product design influence new product adoption. Together, these perspectives inform the need for the development of an integrative model which integrates behavioural, institutional and identity-based dimensions to offer a robust framework for understanding consumer engagement in South Africa's automotive sector, reinforcing the need for multi-level, context-sensitive models in African markets.

2.3. Demographic segmentation to identity semantics in superdiverse markets

Contemporary reviews show that in multicultural markets, identity semantics (how audiences read language, symbolism and representation) better explain campaign performance than coarse demographics alone. Synthesis across 337 studies documents that representation affects people's responses through identification,

perceived authenticity and ideas of fairness, with different impacts depending on the group (Campbell et al., 2023; Park et al., 2022).

Research in South Africa demonstrates that advertising which incorporates local languages and culturally relevant visuals leads to more positive consumer responses suggesting that effective market segmentation should focus on identity markers, such as language and culture, rather than relying solely on traditional demographic categories like age or living standards (Potgieter & Roux, 2024; Vorster et al., 2019).

However, as brands introduce more identity-based cues, audiences may appear increasingly diverse, a phenomenon known as the over-diversification effect potentially creating challenges for managers, especially if they rely too heavily on pretesting in contexts that do not reflect the actual target audience (Saini et al., 2024; Wang, 2022). To address this, scholars recommend using analytical approaches that uncover hidden market segments, rather than assuming all consumers within a demographic group will respond the same way (Gonçalves et al., 2020; Morozov et al., 2021). For brands entering the market without established local roots, building relevance through these nuanced identity signals becomes even more important, as functional product features alone are unlikely to secure long-term engagement (Tuli et al., 2025; Andéhn et al., 2019).

2.4. Representation, authenticity and backlash

A core pattern in the literature is that diverse representation yields positive outcomes when it is perceived as authentic and congruent with audience norms, however, when perceived as tokenistic or stereotype-reinforcing, it invites backlash (Campbell et al., 2023; Park et al., 2022). Henderson et al. (2023) discovered consumers are quick to detect inauthentic representation, which can lead to backlash and brand distrust. Park et al. (2022) similarly caution, that “diversity-washing”, the selective deployment of diversity tropes without genuine engagement can result in consumer scepticism.

Recent scholarship has increasingly examined the strategic risks associated with home country bias in global branding, particularly in multicultural markets. Davvetas et al. (2024) argue that while associations with a brand’s country of origin can enhance perceptions of authenticity and trust, they can also become liabilities when brand actions conflict with local cultural norms. Their study, which includes global brands such as BMW and VW, illustrates how brand transgressions such as culturally

insensitive advertising or tone-deaf messaging can be interpreted not as isolated missteps but as manifestations of broader cultural arrogance (Davvetas et al., 2024). In these cases, the brand's foreignness amplifies consumer backlash, especially when the brand is perceived to be imposing external values without local adaptation (Davvetas et al., 2024).

Their study uses the VW emissions scandal as a key empirical case, following revelations that VW had manipulated emissions data, the brand faced over \$30 billion in legal costs and a 50% drop in share price (Davvetas et al., 2024). While the scandal had global repercussions, the reputational damage was significantly more severe in Germany, VW's home market. German consumers perceived the scandal not just as corporate misconduct, but as a violation of national pride and a betrayal of the "Made in Germany" reputation for engineering excellence (Davvetas et al., 2024).

Similarly, BMW, although not directly involved in the emissions scandal, experienced negative spillover effects due to its shared national origin with VW. This phenomenon, known as a "country image spillover", occurs when the misconduct of one brand tarnishes the reputation of other brands from the same country (Davvetas et al., 2024). In this case, the scandal damaged the broader perception of German automotive brands, undermining the symbolic value of German engineering and trustworthiness.

This dynamic is particularly salient in South Africa, where the symbolic weight of representation, dignity, and cultural sensitivity in marketing communication is heightened by the country's socio-historical context. Masito and Lappeman (2025) argue that advertising strategies that overlook local cultural nuances often fail to resonate with consumers, leading to disengagement or rejection. A recent example is the Pick n Pay campaign featuring American rapper Rick Ross, which sparked widespread criticism for its perceived disconnect from local cultural realities. While the campaign may have aimed to project aspirational value, many South African consumers interpreted it as culturally tone-deaf and misaligned with community values, this aligns with Masito and Lappeman's (2025) findings, which highlight the importance of culturally inclusive advertising strategies in South Africa. This reaction aligns with findings by Schouten et al., (2020), who show that celebrity endorsements are only effective when there is a strong product-endorser fit and cultural congruence. When such fit is absent, especially in multicultural societies, endorsements can trigger accusations of cultural insensitivity and undermine brand legitimacy.

These cases reinforce Davvetas et al.'s (2024) assertion that in multicultural societies, brand missteps are rarely viewed in isolation. Instead, they are decoded through a lens of historical memory, identity politics, and expectations of cultural respect. In South Africa, where race, language, and representation remain deeply embedded in consumer consciousness, brands must navigate these sensitivities with care. Failure to do so risks not only reputational damage but also erosion of consumer trust and long-term brand equity.

Similarly, the legacy of apartheid, and the resulting hyper-visibility of race and language, means that marketing communication efforts perceived as tokenistic, stereotypical or superficially inclusive can backfire (Park et al., 2022). Instead of fostering connection, they may be interpreted as exploitative or inauthentic, particularly when divorced from deeper community engagement or cultural literacy. Campbell et al. (2023) supports the same view explicitly addressing backlash against diversity efforts when they are perceived as inauthentic or tokenistic, noting that such efforts can backfire and harm brand equity as seen in the case of the South African cases with Clicks/TRESemmé, H&M, which illustrate how representational missteps, decoded through post-apartheid racial tropes, rapidly escalate into institutional sanction and operational disruption.

Such cases reinforce that, in this context, representation is read as a moral and institutional signal, not merely a creative choice (Kipnis et al., 2020; Campbell et al., 2023). True inclusivity in addition to diverse imagery requires a deep comprehension of cultural nuances, language preferences, and community values. The strategic implication is clear, home country associations must be carefully managed and localised to avoid triggering identity-based resistance and reputational damage (Davvetas et al., 2024).

To navigate this complexity, brands must adopt what Peñaloza et al. (2023) refer to as "multidimensional inclusivity" the deliberate integration of both symbolic (e.g., imagery, language) and substantive (e.g., values, tone, positioning) markers of identity in their communication. Adopting multidimensional inclusivity is consistent with contemporary branding scholarship that views brands as co-created cultural meaning systems, in hyperconnected markets, brand narratives should not just mirror identities but participate in and support the communities with whom meanings are co-produced (Swaminathan et al., 2020).

For Chinese automotive OEMs operating in South Africa, the branding challenge is twofold, they need to reduce perceptions of being “outsiders” by collaborating with local stakeholders to create culturally meaningful brand narratives, while also leveraging the opportunity to stand out through deliberate inclusivity and authentic alignment of values, tone and messaging with local identities (Swaminathan et al., 2020).

Gao et al. (2019) offer a compelling extension to Homophily Theory through their investigation of identity congruence and price sensitivity. Their research demonstrates that when consumers experience identity incongruence such as female consumers with a global identity or male consumers with a local identity, their sensitivity to price diminishes, driven by the activation of a sacrifice-oriented mindset (Gao et al., 2019). This mindset is triggered by cognitive resource depletion, which shifts consumers careful, analytical thinking to more emotion-driven processing (Gao et al., 2019). These findings reinforce the importance of identity alignment in marketing, particularly in multicultural contexts, where both surface-level and deep-level homophily shape consumer-brand relationships (Gao et al., 2019).

In the South African context, this means moving beyond generic global campaigns and developing locally rooted strategies that reflect the complexity of consumer identities (Tuli et al., 2025; Kipnis et al., 2020). For Chinese OEMs, this includes using local languages in advertising, showcasing diverse models and aligning brand narratives with community aspirations (Henderson et al, 2023).

2.5. Diversity in marketing: Dimensions and strategic relevance

Diversity in marketing is the deliberate inclusion of varied consumer identities across dimensions including race, gender, age, language, and socio-economic standing within brand messaging, imagery and positioning (Burgess et al., 2022). Cunningham and Petzer (2021) demonstrate that authentic representation is key to influencing consumer attitudes and purchase intent. Their findings support the strategic use of identity-based segmentation and culturally resonant messaging in high involvement sectors such as the automotive sector (Cunningham & Petzer, 2021).

Bai et al. (2022) also offer critical insights into identity-based segmentation. In China, luxury fashion retailers increasingly adapted their product designs and even brand names to align with local consumer identities and preferences (Bai et al., 2022). These adaptations are not superficial but deeply informed by regional cultural values, body types, aesthetic preferences and symbolic meanings (e.g., zodiac-themed products),

mirroring the role of homophily in marketing (Bai et al., 2022; Lawrence & Shah, 2020). The Chinese case validates the strategic value of deep-level homophily and the call for inclusive, identity-aligned marketing communication strategies in multicultural societies. Marketing communication strategies that do not authentically reflect the lived experiences of diverse consumer groups could marginalise key segments and undermining brand legitimacy (Torelli & Rodas, 2024).

2.5.1. Multidimensional nature of diversity

Earlier marketing literature often treated diversity as a singular construct, focusing on isolated dimensions such as race or gender (Campbell et al., 2023). However, this reductionist approach fails to capture the intersectionality of consumer identities. For example, a campaign that includes women may still fall short if it does not consider variations in age, cultural background, or language. Burgess et al. (2022) argue that a multidimensional view of diversity is crucial for developing inclusive and effective marketing communication strategies. This study adopts such a multidimensional perspective, focusing on three key diversity dimensions that are particularly prevalent in South Africa.

The first dimension being age. Preferences and decision-making patterns evolve across life stages (Moschis, 2021). For example, younger consumers are more likely to prioritise affordability and digital engagement, while more seasoned consumers may value service accessibility and product reliability. Second dimension being gender, this is because representation influences brand perception and emotional connection (Middleton & Turnbull, 2021). Inclusive portrayals of gender roles can enhance brand favourability (Middleton & Turnbull, 2021). Third dimension being race and ethnicity. Race and ethnicity were selected as a dimension because cultural identity shapes how consumers interpret marketing messages (Campbell et al., 2023). Campaigns that reflect local cultural symbols and racial diversity are more likely to resonate (Campbell et al., 2023).

Arunachalam et al. (2020) highlight region-based versioning, where products and messaging are tailored to local linguistic and cultural preferences being highly important. In South Africa's multilingual landscape, region-based versioning is not just a tactical choice but is also strategically necessitated for cultural legitimacy and emotional resonance, complementing the need identity-based segmentation, as successfully executed by Toyota South Africa through their extension of this localisation logic displayed in their Hilux campaigns which included elements in

English, isiZulu, isiXhosa, Sepedi and Afrikaans across TV, radio, out-of-home and digital, aligning tone, symbolism, and language with South Africa's lived identities (Arunachalam et al., 2020).

2.6. Strategic value of inclusive marketing

Inclusive marketing is more than just a moral imperative, it is also a strategic differentiator. Tuli et al., (2025) argue inclusive marketing enhances brand equity, consumer trust and purchase intent. In their systematic review of 71 articles, they identified four dominant themes: inclusive marketing practices, consumer representation, marketplace actor responses and the dynamics of consumer identity. Their findings highlight the growing expectation among consumers for brands to reflect their values and lived experiences (Tuli et al., 2025).

In South Africa, where historical inequalities and cultural diversity intersect, inclusive marketing becomes even more critical. Kipnis et al. (2020) contend that consumers demonstrate a predisposition toward engaging with brands that reflect and reinforce their personal identities and core values. This aligns with Homophily theory, anchoring that individuals are drawn to others who share similar characteristics (Lawrence & Shah, 2020). It also resonates with Institutional theory, which emphasises the crucial need to align with informal norms and cultural expectations (Scott, 2001).

2.7. Local informal institutions as boundary conditions for communication

Inclusive marketing is additionally framed in top-tier work as institutional work, ongoing alignment with normative and cultural-cognitive expectations within a specific marketplace (Kipnis et al., 2020). Markets are conceived as emergent institutional ecosystems, where legitimacy is continuously co-created and contested (Vargo et al., 2023). South African analysis emphasises how informal institutions, dignity, linguistic inclusion and community values, shape perceived appropriateness and legitimacy of brand speech (Kipnis et al., 2020). For foreign firms, this implies that fit with informal norms functions as a boundary condition on message effectiveness (Vargo et al., 2023; Park et al., 2022).

2.7.1. The architecture of identity-congruent cues

Across high-quality empirical studies, perceived similarity (homophily) reliably predicts trust, engagement and information seeking, establishing a mechanism for identity-based segmentation. In collectivist or community-oriented settings, homophily

amplifies reliance on user-generated information and strengthens persuasion (Leonhardt et al., 2020; Han & Balabanis, 2023). Evidence also differentiates surface-level cues (race, gender, language) from deep-level cues (values, aspirations), with the latter sustaining authenticity and longer-term outcomes (Shehzala et al., 2024; Campbell et al., 2023). Importantly, identity congruence can shift price sensitivity, a commercially meaningful lever for value brands by altering the evaluative mindset (Gao et al., 2019; Leonhardt et al., 2020). Together, these findings justify analysing which identity cues (surface and deep) matter most in South Africa's automotive segments (Han & Balabanis, 2023; Potgieter & Roux, 2024).

2.7.2. Language, framing and social proof as communication levers

Consumer research shows that subtle linguistic framing shifts how people assign causality and what they choose (Packard et al., 2023). Language is not neutral in high-stakes categories, linguistic framing shapes understanding, inferences about the brand and downstream choices (Campbell et al., 2023; Packard et al., 2023). In parallel, social proof moving through homophilous networks such as owner communities or peer endorsements enhances credibility and speeds diffusion where community validation matters (Han & Balabanis, 2023; Leonhardt et al., 2020). For multicultural South African audiences, this implies that language-fit and voice selection (e.g., vernacular registers, credible local endorsers) are consequential design decisions rather than executional details (Park et al., 2022; Potgieter & Roux, 2024).

2.7.3. Communication fit to behavioural intention in high-involvement purchases

The literature converges that identity-congruent and institutionally legitimate communications operate through proximal psychological drivers, attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control to shape intention (Ajzen, 1991; Tuli et al., 2025; Kipnis et al., 2020). In South Africa's automotive context, control beliefs concerning finance and aftersales access, alongside quality/safety attitudes, are strong intention predictors (Fatoki, 2021). Message elements like finance clarity, service-network assurances, owner community signals and safety/reliability framing thus represent the most actionable levers for intention shift (Packard et al., 2023).

2.8. South African empirical cases of segmentation misfit (foreign brands)

While Chapter 1 established the reputational and operational risks of segmentation misfit in South Africa's superdiverse context, a closer look at high-profile cases such as Clicks/TRESemmé, H&M, Dove and POND'S reveals that the consequences of

representational missteps extend beyond immediate backlash to reshape the institutional landscape for all foreign brands. These incidents have catalysed a recalibration of what constitutes legitimate brand behaviour, with consumers, regulators and civil society actors now more attuned to the symbolic and psychological impacts of marketing communication (Campbell et al., 2023; Kipnis et al., 2020). Notably, the public response to these cases demonstrates that South African audiences interpret brand messages through a lens of lived experience, historical memory, and evolving identity norms, making surface-level diversity insufficient if not matched by deep cultural competence and authentic engagement (Govender & Moodley, 2025; Henderson et al., 2023).

Furthermore, these cases illustrate that segmentation misfit is not merely a failure of creative execution but signals a deeper misalignment with the informal institutions such as dignity, linguistic inclusion and community values that underpin legitimacy in the South African market (Park et al., 2022; Nkuna et al., 2023). Importantly, Crockett (2022) frames such incidents as racial projects that reproduce systemic inequalities through consumer markets, showing how brand actions can inadvertently reinforce racial hierarchies when they fail to engage with the sociohistorical context of race.

In this view, brand communications do more than offend consumers at a surface level, they allocate symbolic and material resources in ways that can either reinforce or challenge racial hierarchies (Crockett, 2022). For example, the Clicks/TRESemmé and H&M campaigns functioned as meso-level racial projects by legitimising certain racialised images of beauty and aspirational lifestyles while marginalising others. The backlash they provoked demonstrates how South African consumers and civil society act as counter-projects, mobilising public discourse and institutional interventions to resist these hierarchies. Thus, segmentation misfit is best understood as part of an ongoing negotiation over the racial meanings embedded in markets, rather than an isolated error of judgment.

For foreign brands, especially new entrants, these precedents have raised the threshold for what is considered “fit”, requiring a proactive, multidimensional approach to representation and voice that is continuously negotiated with local stakeholders. Ultimately, these cases serve as cautionary tales and learning opportunities, highlighting the need for brands to move beyond tokenistic inclusion and toward sustained, context-sensitive dialogue with South African consumers (Tuli et al., 2025; Kipnis et al., 2020).

2.9. Implications for this study

Taken together, the thematic evidence implies a sequenced causal logic. Firstly, informal institutional expectations in South Africa define the legitimacy threshold for brand speech (Kipnis et al., 2020; Vargo et al., 2023). Identity-congruent cues balanced across surface and deep levels drives similarity, authenticity and trust (Leonhardt et al., 2020; Gao et al., 2019). Lastly, language and voice framing, augmented by social proof, channel these effects into attitudes, norms and PBC, culminating in behavioural intention (Packard et al., 2023; Ajzen, 1991).

This logic motivates the study's focus on which norms and identity cues matter most in South Africa's automotive market and how specific message elements move the TPB antecedents of intention for Chinese OEMs (Tuli et al., 2025; Potgieter & Roux, 2024). The preceding thematic synthesis revealed recurring mechanisms, institutional legitimacy, identity congruence and behavioural intention drivers that underpin marketing communication effectiveness in multicultural markets.

2.10. Navigating complexity: Institutional and cultural boundaries in marketing

As marketing communication strategies are deployed in South Africa's pluralistic environment, the literature consistently highlights the challenge of navigating both formal and informal institutional boundaries. Rather than focusing solely on regulatory compliance, recent studies emphasise the salience of unwritten social norms, language practices and community values in shaping what is perceived as credible or legitimate brand behaviour (Kipnis et al., 2020; Paul, 2019). These informal institutions, often more influential than formal rules, set the parameters for acceptable marketing conduct and are deeply rooted in historical memory and collective identity (Scott, 2001; Vargo et al., 2023).

The South African context, marked by ongoing transformation and heightened sensitivity to dignity and inclusion, demands that brands engage with these evolving expectations in a dynamic, iterative manner. The literature thus points to the need for frameworks that can account for the fluid interplay between institutional pressures and market adaptation, especially for foreign entrants seeking legitimacy in a post-apartheid society (Benito et al., 2022; Park et al., 2022).

Institutional Theory, particularly Scott's (2001) three-pillar model of regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive elements offers a rigorous lens for understanding

marketing legitimacy in South Africa's pluralistic society. While the regulative pillar concerns formal rules and compliance (e.g., Automotive Production and Development Programme (APDP)), durable consumer responses in South Africa are governed by normative expectations (dignity, equality, representational fairness) and cultural-cognitive schemas (shared meanings embedded in language and symbolism) that define what counts as "appropriate" brand behaviour (Benito et al., 2022; Kipnis et al., 2020; Park et al., 2022; Scott, 2001). These informal institutions are especially salient in post-apartheid South Africa, where multilingual practice and identity-sensitive cues shape audience interpretation of marketing messages (GCIS, 2025; Vorster et al., 2019).

For Chinese automotive OEMs such as Chery, GWM, and OMODA, early growth from value-for-money and product innovation must evolve into durable cultural legitimacy if brands are to avoid price-led churn (NAAMSA, 2025; Tuli et al., 2025). Legitimacy arises through engagement with informal institutions, language preferences, community values and symbolic representation rather than through transactional appeals alone (Kipnis et al., 2020; Park et al., 2022). South African evidence shows that ethnic-language appeals and culturally congruent visuals improve advertising evaluations and signal respect and familiarity as seen in Toyota South Africa's multilingual Hilux campaigns which functions as a legitimacy cue aligning with broader emerging-market guidance on region-based versioning and connector marketing (Arunachalam et al., 2020).

Alignment is not a one-off act of compliance but an ongoing process of institutional work in an evolving marketplace ecosystem (Kipnis et al., 2020; Vargo et al., 2023). Practically, firms need to embed themselves in local cultural life through credible local ambassadors, participation in community events, and creative that reads authentically across township culture, gender roles and generational cohorts, avoiding tokenism that audiences quickly detect and punish (Campbell et al., 2023; Middleton & Turnbull, 2021; Moschis, 2021). Because normative fit is also socially transmitted, homophilous networks amplify well-fitted messages via peer endorsement and referrals, further entrenching legitimacy (Gershon et al., 2024; Leonhardt et al., 2020).

Paul's (2019) PBSI model, Political, Business, Social, and Internal, further expands the institutional lens by highlighting the relational dimensions of legitimacy. In South Africa, the Social (community norms, group identity, cultural familiarity) and Internal

(organisational capabilities to localise) dimensions are decisive, policy compliance and localisation targets are necessary but insufficient without resonance with the lived experiences of diverse consumer communities (Benito et al., 2022; Paul, 2019; Scott, 2001).

Institutional complexity in South Africa is therefore a strategic opportunity for brands willing to engage meaningfully with informal institutions, language, representation, community presence to secure cultural legitimacy and build long-term trust (Campbell et al., 2023; Kipnis et al., 2020; Tuli et al., 2025). The Clicks/TRESemmé and H&M incidents underscore why an institutional lens is essential for proactive legitimacy management (Scott, 2001).

2.11. Identity as a strategic lever in consumer engagement

As research delved deeper into the drivers of consumer engagement, another theme emerges, the centrality of identity and perceived similarity in shaping how consumers relate to brands. Initial studies on segmentation and targeting often relied on demographic categories, but empirical evidence from South Africa and other multicultural markets revealed that consumers respond more powerfully to brands that reflect their lived identities through language, imagery and values than to those that simply acknowledge demographic differences (Lawrence & Shah, 2020). This insight was reinforced by findings that both surface-level cues (such as race, language and gender) and deeper markers (such as values, aspirations, and lifestyle) foster trust, emotional resonance and advocacy (Han & Balabanis, 2023; Cunningham & Petzer, 2021).

Cunningham and Petzer (2021) found that middle-class South African consumers, particularly those in lower-income brackets are highly responsive to brands that reinforce aspirational self-concepts and facilitate social belonging. Their study in the luxury apparel sector reveals that brand appeal is amplified when it aligns with peer group norms and supports consumers' efforts to project status and gain social acceptance (Cunningham & Petzer, 2021). Similarly, Leonhardt et al. (2020) show that in collectivist cultures, perceived similarity between consumers and brand representations enhances trust and increases the likelihood of seeking user-generated content, reinforcing the role of identity congruence in high-involvement decision-making.

The literature thus moves from a focus on representation as a “tick box” exercise to a recognition of homophily, the tendency for individuals to connect with those perceived as similar as a mechanism for building authentic brand relationships (Leonhardt et al., 2020; Gershon et al., 2024). This thematic evolution was driven by the observation that brands which successfully mirror the identities and aspirations of their audiences enjoy greater loyalty and social proof, especially in collectivist or community-oriented contexts.

Homophily also plays a critical role in digital marketing and influencer engagement. Han and Balabanis (2023) show that consumers are more likely to engage with social media influencers who share their identity markers. In South Africa, this means that local influencers who speak indigenous languages, reflect township aesthetics, or advocate for community values are more effective than global celebrities with little cultural resonance. This insight is particularly relevant for Chinese OEMs, which may lack legacy trust and must build emotional connection from the ground up.

Moreover, homophily is not just about representation, it is about recognition and validation. Cunningham and Petzer (2021) found that middle-class South African consumers are highly influenced by group conformity and face-saving behaviours. Brands that affirm consumers’ social identity and offer cultural validation are more likely to foster loyalty and advocacy. This is especially true in collectivist cultures, where peer approval and community endorsement amplify individual decision-making (Gershon et al., 2024).

Recent studies also reveal that identity congruence can shift price sensitivity. Gao et al. (2019) demonstrate that when consumers experience identity alignment with a brand, they are more willing to pay a premium, driven by emotional resonance and a sacrifice-oriented mindset. This finding is commercially significant for value brands like Chinese OEMs, which often compete on price but must also build emotional equity to sustain long-term loyalty.

In South Africa, where race, language and community affiliation remain salient identity markers, homophily offers a strategic pathway for foreign brands to build trust and relevance. However, the literature cautions against superficial inclusion. Trivedi and Teichert (2021) warn that tokenistic representation such as using diverse models without cultural depth can backfire, leading to consumer skepticism and reputational

risk. Authenticity, therefore, must be embedded not only in visuals but also in tone, values and brand narrative.

For Chinese automotive OEMs operating in South Africa, homophily is not a creative preference but a strategic imperative. By aligning surface-level cues with deep-level values, brands can foster emotional connection, build trust and activate peer-driven advocacy in a market where identity is both personal and political.

2.12. Psychological levers: From communication fit to consumer action

A further theme that emerged from the literature is the importance of psychological processes in translating communication fit into consumer behaviour. While early work in this area often treated attitudes and intentions as outcomes of rational evaluation, more recent studies especially those focused on high-involvement categories like automotive have shown that attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control are shaped by a complex interplay of cultural identity, social expectations and economic realities (Ajzen, 1991; Fatoki, 2021; Cunningham & Petzer, 2021). The literature also highlights the role of language framing, peer influence and the reduction of perceived barriers in shifting these psychological levers (Packard et al., 2023; White et al., 2020). The recurring finding is that culturally and psychologically attuned communication rather than generic or transactional messaging drives intention and behaviour in diverse markets.

The TPB, developed by Ajzen (1991), provides a robust framework for understanding these processes. TPB posits that behavioural intention, the immediate antecedent to action is shaped by three core constructs: attitudes (the degree to which a person has a favourable or unfavourable evaluation of the behaviour), subjective norms (perceived social pressure to perform or not perform the behaviour) and PBC (the perceived ease or difficulty of performing the behaviour) (Ajzen, 1991). In the context of automotive purchases, these constructs map onto how consumers evaluate a brand's value proposition, how they perceive peer and community endorsement and how they assess their own ability to afford, access and maintain a vehicle.

Empirical studies in South Africa reinforce the relevance of TPB. Fatoki (2021) found that attitudes toward electric vehicles, subjective norms (such as peer approval and family influence) and PBC (including affordability and service network availability) significantly predicted purchase intention among South African consumers. Similarly, Cunningham and Petzer (2021) demonstrated that in the luxury apparel sector,

attitudes, social norms and perceived control all played decisive roles in shaping purchase intentions, with social influence and aspirational motivations particularly salient among middle-class consumers.

The literature also highlights the importance of language framing, social proof and barrier-reduction messaging in activating these psychological levers. Packard et al. (2023) show that subtle shifts in language such as using inclusive pronouns, culturally resonant metaphors, or vernacular expressions can significantly alter consumer attitudes and perceived relevance. In South Africa, where language is a marker of identity and inclusion, campaigns that use indigenous languages or local slang are more likely to be perceived as authentic and trustworthy (Potgieter & Roux, 2024).

Social proof, the influence of peer behaviour and community endorsement is another powerful driver. Leonhardt et al. (2020) and Gershon et al. (2024) demonstrate that in collectivist or community-oriented societies, consumers are more likely to trust and act on recommendations from people they perceive as similar to themselves. This effect is amplified in digital contexts, where user-generated content, influencer endorsements, and online reviews serve as proxies for subjective norms.

PBC is shaped not only by economic factors (such as price and financing options) but also by the clarity and transparency of brand communication. For example, clear messaging about aftersales support, warranty coverage and service accessibility can reduce perceived barriers and increase consumers' confidence in their ability to own and maintain a vehicle (Packard et al., 2023).

The SHIFT framework (White et al., 2020) further enriches TPB by identifying five psychological levers, Social influence, Habit, Individual self, Feelings, and Tangibility, that drive prosocial consumer behaviour. In the South African context, "social influence" and "feelings" are particularly relevant, as consumers often seek emotional reassurance and community validation before making high-stakes purchases.

For Chinese automotive OEMs, these insights translate into actionable strategies. Marketing communication must not only align with institutional norms and reflect consumer identities but also activate the psychological drivers of intention. This means designing campaigns that foster positive attitudes (e.g., by highlighting product quality and cultural relevance), leverage social norms (e.g., through community ambassadors

and peer testimonials), and reduce perceived barriers (e.g., by offering transparent financing and multilingual support).

In summary, the literature reveals that effective marketing in South Africa's automotive sector requires a nuanced understanding of how communication fit is processed psychologically. The TPB, enriched by frameworks like SHIFT, emerge as responses to the empirical reality that attitudes, norms and perceived control are decisive in moving consumers from awareness to action. For foreign brands, especially Chinese OEMs, success depends on their ability to engage these psychological levers in ways that are culturally and contextually attuned.

2.13. Integrative rationale

The convergence of these themes', informal institutional boundaries, identity-based engagement, and psychological drivers prompted a shift in the literature toward more integrative, context-sensitive models of marketing communication. Rather than privileging a single theoretical lens, scholars increasingly advocate for frameworks that can accommodate the layered realities of emerging markets like South Africa (Tuli et al., 2025; Kipnis et al., 2020). The literature moved from isolated studies of regulation, identity, or behaviour, to calls for models that dynamically align with local norms, reflecting the identities and aspirations of diverse consumer groups and activate the psychological mechanisms that drive intention and action. The selection of Institutional Theory, Homophily Theory and the TBC creates a multi-level scaffold. Resulting in a multi-level framework designed to capture the interplay between macro-level institutional expectations, meso-level identity dynamics and micro-level behavioural drivers that together shape marketing effectiveness in South Africa.

2.14. Inclusive marketing in emerging markets

Inclusive marketing in emerging markets presents both a strategic opportunity and a complex challenge. As Özsomer et al. (2024) argue, successful global brands increasingly rely on local cultural alignment to build on trust and relevance in diverse markets. Although Paul (2019) offers the PBSI model as a roadmap for foreign firms to build cultural relevance and consumer trust through community engagement, local language use and lifecycle sensitivity and the increased traction of diversity-aware strategies globally, their application in non-Western contexts particularly in Africa remains underexplored (Tuli et al., 2025).

While inclusive marketing in emerging markets has gained scholarly attention, the gap in operationalising strategies for consumers remains. Arunachalam et al. (2020) provide a multi-method framework that identifies four critical dimensions, acceptability, awareness, availability and affordability as essential for successful product introductions in Low Income Consumer (LIC) segments. These dimensions align with the study's theoretical pillars, particularly the TPB, which emphasises the role PBC and subjective norms play in shaping consumer decisions (Ajzen, 1991).

The localisation strategies adopted by the Chinese in luxury fashion offer valuable parallels for foreign firms operating in other culturally complex emerging markets such as South Africa. Bai et al. (2022) demonstrate that while many luxury brands initially entered China using standardised global marketing strategies to preserve brand uniformity, they later transitioned to localised multinational strategies in response to market complexity, regional diversity, and evolving consumer expectations.

In China, localised strategies were driven by the need to overcome psychic distance, gain local knowledge and respond to regional cultural and climatic differences (Bai et al., 2022). Similarly, in South Africa, where linguistic plurality and socio-cultural heterogeneity are pronounced, Chinese automotive OEMs must adapt their marketing strategies to reflect local institutional realities and informal norms such as language, cultural symbolism and community values.

[2.14.1. Brand loyalty & neocolonialism in the South African automotive context](#)

In South Africa, where historical injustices and cultural identity are deeply embedded in consumer consciousness, superficial or tokenistic marketing by foreign brands can trigger moral backlash.

Henderson et al. (2023) highlight consumers are quick to detect inauthentic representation, this may result in diminished trust and potential harm to an organisation's reputation. Kipnis et al. (2020) argue that brands must institutionalise diversity and inclusion to avoid being perceived as culturally tone-deaf. Echoing Henderson et al. (2023) and Kipnis et al. (2020), White et al. (2020) argue that consumers are inclined to engage in prosocial behaviours such as ethical purchasing or brand advocacy when their actions are visible to others, particularly in contexts where social identity and group belonging are salient.

In South Africa, where community validation and social signalling are powerful motivators, this insight reinforces the importance of culturally embedded marketing that enables consumers to express identity alignment publicly. However, White et al. (2020) also caution against “slacktivism”, where superficial engagement (e.g., liking a brand’s inclusive post) may substitute for deeper commitment. This underscores the need for Chinese OEMs to ensure that identity cues in marketing are not only visible but also authentic and emotionally resonant.

Chinese OEMs, despite their affordability and innovation, risk backlash if their marketing fails to reflect South African cultural norms, languages and community values. For example, campaigns that ignore township culture or use generic global imagery may be seen as dismissive of local identity, leading to consumer disengagement and negative word-of-mouth.

Research by Hagerty et al. (2022) reveals that economic inequality not only shapes individual consumption behaviour but also intensifies moral scrutiny of others’ consumption choices. Lower-income consumers are disproportionately judged for purchasing items deemed “frivolous”, even when those purchases are functionally justified such as safety-enhancing car features (Hagerty et al.,2022). This double standard reflects broader societal norms that penalise visible consumption among economically marginalised groups (Hagerty et al.,2022).

For South Africa, a country with historical and structural inequalities, such moral scrutiny may influence how consumers perceive Chinese automotive brands. If these brands are marketed without sensitivity to socioeconomic disparities, they risk alienating lower-income consumers who may feel judged or excluded from aspirational consumption narratives (Hagerty et al.,2022). This insight reinforces the need for inclusive marketing communication strategies that validate diverse consumer identities and avoid reinforcing class-based consumption norms.

2.14.1.1. Brand loyalty

Brand loyalty in South Africa is increasingly shaped by emotional and cultural resonance rather than historical brand dominance or price alone. Leonhardt et al. (2020) and Lawrence & Shah (2020) show that perceived identity alignment fosters emotional connection and loyalty. Cunningham & Petzer (2021) found that middle-class South Africans are influenced by group conformity and aspirational motives, suggesting that loyalty is tied to social validation.

Chinese OEMs must navigate this duality, while their vehicles are economically attractive, long-term loyalty will depend on their ability to build trust through culturally embedded marketing. If consumers perceive these brands as foreign or disconnected from their lived experiences, loyalty may remain transactional and fragile.

2.14.1.2. Neocolonialism

In this study Neocolonialism is positioned as the economic and cultural dominance of foreign entities that undermine local industries and identities (Andéhn et al., 2019). The rapid expansion of Chinese OEMs backed by state support and BRICS alliances raises concerns about supply chain displacement and cultural erasure (Chen et al., 2024; Moshikaro-Amani & Mahlangu, 2024). Local manufacturers and suppliers may struggle to compete with Chinese imports, threatening job security and industrial development goals laid out in the South African Automotive Masterplan (SAAM). If Chinese brands impose globalised marketing narratives without local adaptation, they risk marginalising South African cultural expressions and consumer identities.

Andéhn et al. (2019) argue that brands must engage in 'implaced identity' work, embedding themselves in the local cultural fabric rather than imposing external narratives. Failure to do so may reinforce perceptions of neocolonialism, where economic penetration is not matched by cultural respect or community investment (Andéhn et al., 2019; Kipnis et al., 2020; Tuli et al., 2025).

To mitigate these risks and foster sustainable market integration, Chinese OEMs should avoid moral backlash by engaging in community-based marketing, using local languages and reflecting authentic cultural symbols (Kipnis et al., 2020; Tuli et al., 2025). They should build brand loyalty through inclusive representation, peer-driven advocacy and lifecycle-sensitive messaging (Lawrence & Shah, 2020; Gershon et al., 2024; Moschis, 2021). They must also counter neocolonial perceptions by investing in local supply chains, collaborating with South African creatives and aligning with national transformation goals (Andéhn et al., 2019).

2.14.1.3. Strategic imperatives in emerging markets

Emerging markets are characterised by rapid urbanisation, rising middle classes and increasing consumer awareness. However, they also present unique socio-cultural dynamics that require localised marketing strategies. Shultz et al. (2021) emphasise

that culturally complex environments demand inclusive marketing not only for ethical alignment but also for organisational effectiveness. In South Africa, where identity is shaped by race, language, and historical inequality, inclusive marketing becomes a competitive necessity (Kipnis et al., 2020; Tuli et al., 2025; Park et al., 2022).

Chinese OEMs operating in this market must recognise that traditional global campaigns may not resonate with local consumers. Instead, they must develop strategies that reflect the lived experiences of South African communities, through language, representation, and cultural symbolism. This includes adapting brand narratives to local values, engaging with community leaders and ensuring that marketing materials are linguistically and visually inclusive (Kipnis et al., 2020; Tuli et al., 2025; Park et al., 2022).

2.14.1.4. Challenges in implementation

Despite its potential, inclusive marketing in emerging markets faces several challenges. Superficial representation can lead to consumer backlash (Henderson et al., 2023). Cultural misalignment may result in miscommunication or brand rejection if campaigns fail to reflect local norms and values (Tuli et al., 2025). Operational complexity increases the cost and effort of localisation, particularly for firms unfamiliar with the local context (Kipnis et al., 2020).

Lack of empirical models limits strategic guidance for foreign firms attempting to implement inclusive marketing in culturally diverse environments (Benito et al., 2022). These challenges are particularly acute for Chinese OEMs, which may lack deep cultural familiarity with South African consumers. Without localised insights, their marketing efforts risk being perceived as foreign or irrelevant.

2.14.1.5. Opportunities for strategic differentiation

Despite these challenges, inclusive marketing offers significant opportunities for strategic differentiation. Brands that successfully reflect consumer identities can foster emotional connection, brand loyalty, and social advocacy (Gershon et al., 2024). This is especially powerful in collectivist cultures, where peer influence and community validation are central placed in the consumer decision-making process (Gershon et al., 2024).

Homophily Theory supports this approach by highlighting the significance of perceived similarity in brand engagement (Lawrence & Shah, 2020). Institutional Theory further reinforces the need to align with informal norms and cultural expectations (Scott, 2001). Together, these frameworks provide a roadmap for Chinese OEMs to develop marketing communication strategies that are both inclusive and contextually grounded.

2.15. Moving toward a context-sensitive framework

Literature reveals a gap in context-sensitive models that integrate diversity, consumer behaviour, and institutional alignment in emerging markets. Most existing frameworks are either conceptual or Western-centric, limiting their applicability to African contexts. This research seeks to fill that gap by proposing a framework that combines, cultural legitimacy (Institutional Theory), identity-based segmentation (Homophily Theory), and behavioural insights (TBC). This integrated approach enables Chinese OEMs to move beyond transactional marketing and build long-term brand relevance in South Africa.

2.16. Lack of integrated theoretical models

Another gap is the fragmentation of theoretical approaches. Figure 1 represents the number of theories used in the 21 articles reviewed reveal the studies reviewed were predominately anchored around single-theory frameworks. While theories such as Consumer Behavior Theory have each been applied, few studies integrate these frameworks to offer a holistic understanding of how diversity influences marketing strategy and consumer decision-making (Benito et al., 2022; Lawrence & Shah, 2020).

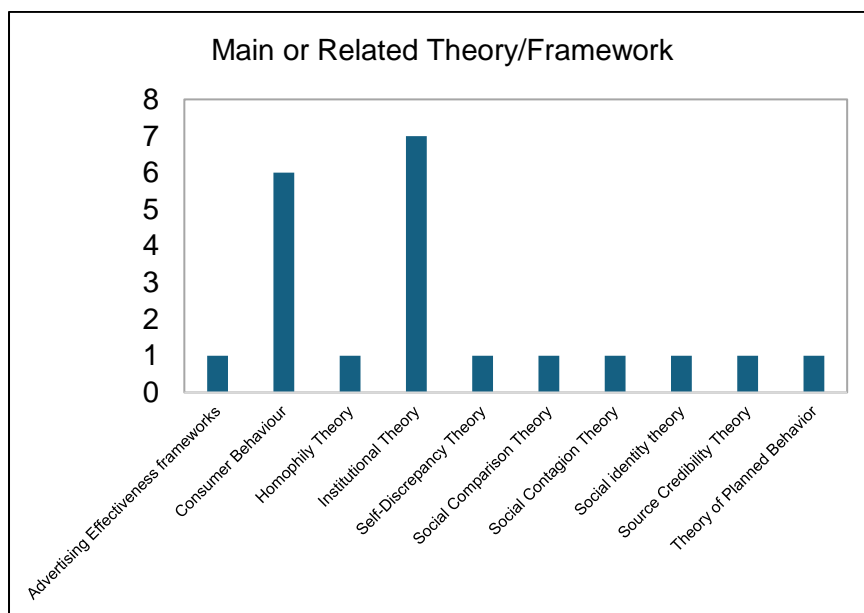


Figure 1: Main/related theories/frameworks use

The distribution in Figure 1 indicates frequent reliance on single-theory frames, with notable clusters around Institutional Theory, consumer-behaviour lenses, identity-based approaches and TPB. Read together, these strands signal a converging scholarly interest in how macro structures, identity alignment and micro decision processes shape outcomes in multicultural, emerging-market settings (Scott, 2001; Kipnis et al., 2020; Cunningham & Petzer, 2021).

Institutional Theory remains prominent because it explains how organisations earn and maintain legitimacy by aligning with formal (laws, policies) and informal (language, dignity, community values) institutions (Scott, 2001; Kipnis et al., 2020).

In South Africa's superdiverse context where socio-political transition heightens sensitivity to representation, this lens clarifies why the same creative that feels "neutral" elsewhere can be decoded as unfit or offensive locally (Kipnis et al., 2020; Park et al., 2022). The Clicks/TRESemmé and H&M incidents illustrate how representational missteps can escalate from consumer discontent to institutional sanction, reputational damage, protests and operational disruption underscoring that legitimacy is socially constructed and must be continuously earned (Nkanjeni, 2020). Seen this way, marketing is not merely communication, it is institutional work, ongoing, context-sensitive alignment with normative and cultural-cognitive expectations (Scott, 2001; Vargo et al., 2023).

Against that macro backdrop, Homophily Theory provides the meso-level mechanism for how identity signals operate. Homophily posits that perceived similarity, both surface-level (race, gender, language) and deep-level (values, lifestyle, aspirations) drives trust, message credibility and engagement (Lawrence & Shah, 2020). Evidence across digital and influencer contexts shows that when audiences recognise "people like me", attention, liking and behavioural responses strengthen, these effects are amplified when similarity is not only visual but also value-congruent (Han & Balabanis, 2023; Potgieter & Roux, 2024). Although underapplied to high-involvement categories such as automotive, this gap provides an opportunity where South African consumers repeatedly reference language, community cues and lifestyle fit, which map directly to homophily's dual (surface/deep) architecture (Lawrence & Shah, 2020; Han & Balabanis, 2023).

Social Identity Theory (Henderson et al., 2023; Eisend, 2022) complements Homophily perspectives by highlighting how consumers' behaviour is shaped by their membership in social groups and the roles these groups confer (Henderson et al., 2023; Eisend, 2022). In multicultural markets such as South Africa, group affiliations, race, gender, age, and even socio-economic class strongly influence how marketing messages are interpreted. Evidence from Henderson et al. (2023) shows that advertising which aligns with salient group identities can enhance perceived fairness and emotional engagement, while Eisend (2022) demonstrates that inclusive representation of age and gender in advertising improves brand evaluations among underrepresented cohorts. These insights are highly relevant to the study because they underscore the strategic importance of recognising identity politics and societal roles in crafting marketing communication for superdiverse contexts.

However, while Social Identity Theory explains why group-level alignment matters, it is less suited as a core lens for this study for two reasons. First, its explanatory focus is primarily on categorical group membership rather than the nuanced, multi-dimensional similarity cues such as language, lifestyle and values which consumers use to judge authenticity in brand communication. Second, it does not provide a mechanism for translating identity alignment into behavioural intention in high-involvement purchases like automotive, where psychological drivers such as attitudes, norms, and perceived control are decisive. Homophily Theory offers a more flexible and granular approach by capturing both surface-level and deep-level similarity, while the TPB operationalises the intention pathway. Together with Institutional Theory, these lenses provide a layered framework that connects macro legitimacy, meso identity congruence, and micro intention formation, making them better suited to address the research problem (Lawrence & Shah, 2020; Ajzen, 1991; Kipnis et al., 2020).

Automotive decisions hinge on attitudes (towards quality, value, safety etc.), subjective norms (family/peer approval, community cues) and PBC (such as parts accessibility). Cunningham and Petzer (2021) confirm in South Africa that attitudes, norms and control significantly predict purchase intention in a high-involvement category aligning with TPB. Complementary work in the literature review like White et al., 2020 who add tactical levers, social influence and feelings that nest naturally within the norm and attitude components of TPB. TPB provides a micro-level engine that offers a tight, well-validated route from communication exposure to intention and its constructs are directly operationalisable in automotive communications (e.g., messages that increase

storytelling and attitudes). TPB interfaces cleanly with Institutional expectations which shape what messages are acceptable (the pre-intent boundary conditions) and Homophily which determines which identity cues feel authentic (the meso-level), cementing its appropriateness to the study as it specifies how those cues shift intention (Ajzen, 1991; Cunningham & Petzer, 2021).

Two adjacent strands in the review are informative but non-anchoring. First, Source Credibility findings show influencer campaigns perform better when endorsers are seen as trustworthy, expert and authentic highly relevant where local ambassadors and community figures can enhance acceptance (Han & Balabanis, 2023). Second, Self-Discrepancy work demonstrates that messages which reduce the gap between the actual and ideal self (e.g., aspirational narratives) foster positive affect and engagement (Shehzala et al., 2024). Both contribute useful tactics ;however, they are narrower than homophily (communicator attributes versus broader similarity dynamics) and do not provide a full intention mechanism in a high-involvement setting (Han & Balabanis, 2023; Shehzala et al., 2024). Homophily incorporates these effects by explaining why similarity with endorsers, peers, and story worlds matters, TPB then embeds those effects within an intention pathway (Lawrence & Shah, 2020; Ajzen, 1991).

The literature also highlights network diffusion, which is important in South Africa's community-oriented market. At scale, Gershon et al. (2024) show that referrals are contagious and notably, travel through homophilous ties, people act on recommendations from peers they perceive as similar. In this study's context, that maps to owner communities, local influencers and township ambassadors as plausible channels of diffusion once cultural fit is achieved (e.g., multilingual content, credible local voices) (Gershon et al., 2024). Therefore, Social Contagion Theory is treated as an amplifier in the model, once communication is legitimate (Institutional) and identity-congruent (Homophily), peer networks magnify reach and adoption. Contagion adds less value as a standalone core lens because it presumes fit rather than determining it (Gershon et al., 2024; Lawrence & Shah, 2020).

Relatedly, several reviewed papers speak to advertising-effectiveness levers. Campbell et al. (2023) show that representation influences attitudes via identification and fairness judgments, which is insightful for diagnosing authenticity versus tokenism. Trivedi and Teichert (2021) demonstrate systematic variation in responses by gendered homophily,

warning against one-note casting or narratives. Packard et al. (2023) show how language framing shapes inferences and choice which is directly relevant in a multilingual society. These findings are actionable for creative and media teams, copy, visuals, casting and vernacular choices but they function best as tactical toolkits rather than core explanatory lenses. On their own they do not provide a multi-level theory of context (why certain cues are legitimate), a theory of identity (why similarity matters across segments), or a theory of intention (how attitudes/norms/control move in high-involvement categories). In this study, those roles are supplied by Institutional Theory, Homophily and TPB, respectively, advertising-effectiveness insights then plug in to satisfy legitimacy, express identity-congruent similarity and nudge TPB antecedents (Campbell et al., 2023; Trivedi & Teichert, 2021; Packard et al., 2023).

Finally, the consumer-behavior strand in the reviewed literature clarifies what matters in emerging markets, identity, affordability and context, but functions as an umbrella concept rather than a single causal mechanism. Arunachalam et al. (2020) demonstrate that acceptability, awareness, availability, and affordability, together with connector marketing and region-based versioning, drive adoption, findings that align with local language and community cues. Gao et al. (2019) demonstrate that identity incongruence depletes cognitive resources and can shift price sensitivity, reinforcing the value of identity-aligned creative. Serena et al. (2022) show that inequality shapes moral judgments of consumption, further explaining why dignity-affirming representation matters. Tuli et al. (2025) synthesise that truly inclusive marketing improves trust and equity when it reflects lived identities. These contributions inform variable selection and context, but they do not supply a unified pathway from context to cue to intention. That integration is precisely what the selected triad delivers (Institutional Theory for macro-level legitimacy boundaries, Homophily for meso-level identity-congruent cueing and TPB for micro-level intention formation) (Scott, 2001; Lawrence & Shah, 2020; Ajzen, 1991).

The distribution of theories in the reviewed literature supports the selection of Institutional Theory, Homophily Theory and TPB as the core pillars of this study's conceptual framework. Together they offer a coherent macro, meso, micro lens for analysing how Chinese automotive OEMs can design inclusive, identity-aware and behaviourally effective communications that resonate with South Africa's diverse consumer base. This synthesis contributes a novel, context-sensitive integration of macro-level institutional dynamics, meso-level identity alignment and micro-level

behavioural drivers offering a comprehensive scaffold for inclusive marketing in emerging-market, high-involvement settings (Scott, 2001; Kipnis et al., 2020; Lawrence & Shah, 2020; Ajzen, 1991; Cunningham & Petzer, 2021; Tuli et al., 2025).

2.17. Limited application to high-involvement sectors

Most existing research on diversity in marketing focuses on fast-moving consumer goods, fashion, or digital products (Han & Balabanis, 2023; Trivedi & Teichert, 2021). There is a notable absence of studies examining how diversity-aware strategies influence consumer behaviour in high-value and high-involvement sectors like automotive, where decisions are more complex and emotionally charged. Cunningham and Petzer (2021) demonstrate that middle-class South African consumers are influenced by group conformity and aspirational motives, reinforcing the need for culturally resonant messaging in automotive marketing. By focusing on the automotive sector, this study expands the scope of inclusive marketing research and explores how identity, trust, and cultural resonance influence high-stakes consumer decisions.

2.17.1. Methodological limitations

Figure 2 illustrates that the reviewed literature employs a mix of methodological approaches. Conceptual followed by quantitative method showed notable dominance. While quantitative methods are valuable for generating statistically generalisable insights and measuring consumer responses at scale, they often fall short in capturing the nuanced, context-embedded meanings that consumers attach to marketing messages in multicultural settings (Middleton & Turnbull, 2021). These approaches tend to prioritise numerical patterns over interpretive depth, which means they frequently overlook how consumers construct meaning, negotiate identity cues, and experience inclusion or exclusion in brand communication (Middleton & Turnbull, 2021; Flick, 2022).

In contrast, the research problem addressed in this study, requires an approach capable of surfacing lived experiences, identity negotiations, and informal norms that shape behavioural responses. Quantitative surveys may indicate whether diversity “matters”, but they cannot explain why certain cues feel authentic or tokenistic, nor how cultural legitimacy and identity congruence interact to influence intention in high-involvement purchases (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Chandy et al., 2021).

For these reasons, this study adopts a qualitative design, which is widely recognised as the most appropriate paradigm for exploring complex, socially constructed phenomena (Flick, 2022). Qualitative methods enable the researcher to engage deeply with participants' narratives, uncover interpretive patterns, and trace the mechanisms through which institutional norms and identity cues shape attitudes, norms and PBC constructs central to the TPB (Ajzen, 1991; Cunningham & Petzer, 2021). By privileging depth over breadth, this approach ensures that the findings are contextually grounded, theoretically rich and strategically actionable for foreign brands navigating legitimacy and inclusion in emerging markets.

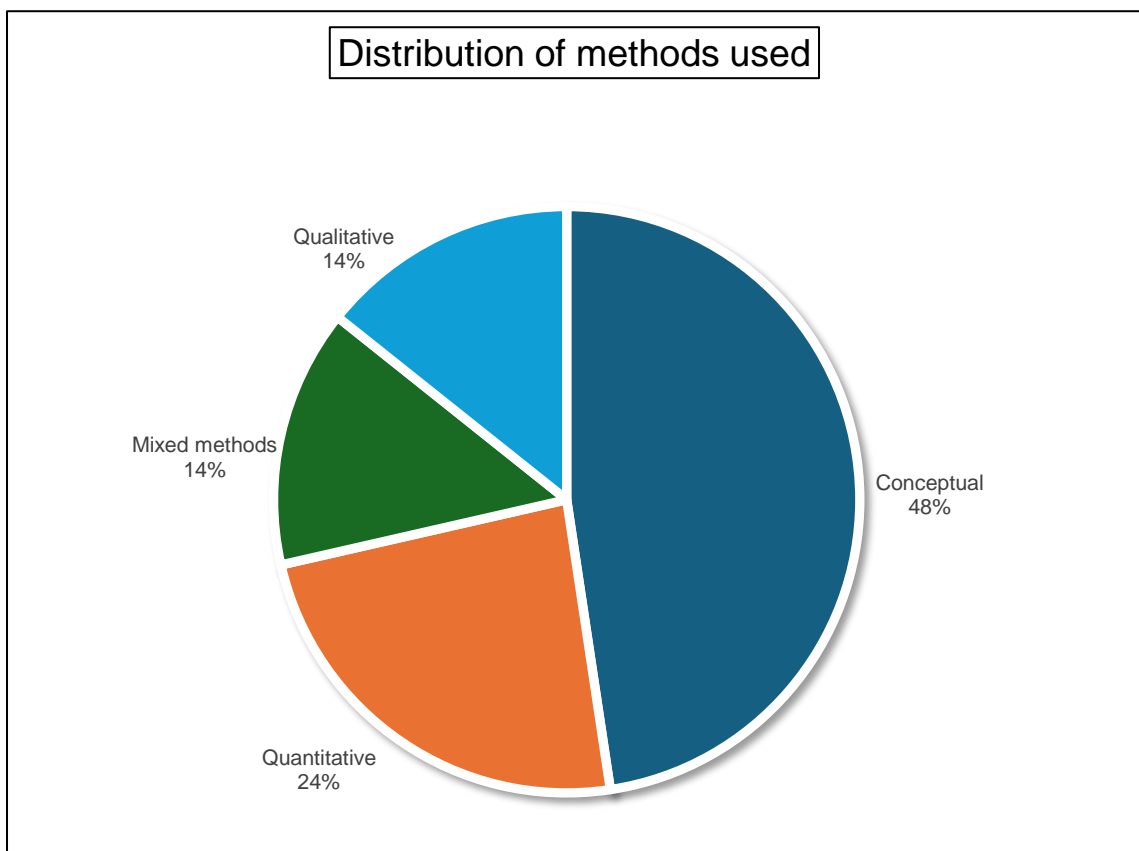


Figure 2: Distribution of methods applied

2.17.2. Strategic disconnect in global marketing

Finally, there is a strategic disconnect in the literature between global marketing strategy and local cultural responsiveness. While scholars such as Sang (2022), Paul (2019) and Morgan et al. (2019) stress the significance of adapting competitive advantage to local markets, but do not explicitly address how cultural diversity and identity influence strategic marketing decisions. This study bridges that gap by

examining how Chinese OEMs can align their global strategies with the cultural and institutional realities of South Africa.

2.17.3. Theory selection rationale and integrative justification

The selection of Institutional Theory, Homophily Theory and the TPB anchoring the study was guided by a screening criteria derived from the review and from the empirical setting of this study (in a high-involvement, multicultural market). The theories provide a conceptual fit to the South African context and research questions, they give a level of complementarity between macro, meso and micro levels while maintaining a level of frugality and avoiding theoretical redundancy. Additionally, the three theories provide managerial operationalisability, for example, each lens point to concrete communication levers (language, representation, voice).

South Africa's legitimacy conditions for brand speech are shaped as much by informal institutions, dignity, representation, language and community expectations as by formal regulation. Institutional Theory uniquely captures how normative and cultural-cognitive expectations set boundary conditions for what communication is read as "appropriate", and why representational missteps escalate into backlash or sanction as pointed out earlier in chapter 2 with inferences to Clicks/TRESemmé and the H&M campaigns (Scott, 2001; Kipnis et al., 2020). "Fit" with dignity and linguistic inclusion are a pre-condition for message credibility framing legitimacy as an ongoing alignment activity in a pluralistic ecosystem as in the case of South Africa (Vargo et al., 2023). From the articles reviewed in the literature review, the only lens among the contenders that directly explains why inclusive cues matter before consumers even evaluate features is Institutional Theory, deeming it appropriate for the study (Scott, 2001; Kipnis et al., 2020; Vargo et al., 2023).

After enough has been done to be recognised as legitimate, persuasion in superdiverse markets hinges on perceived similarity, both surface-level (race, gender, language) and deep-level (values, lifestyle). Homophily explains why identity-congruent cues (local languages, credible local voices, culturally resonant visuals) enhance trust, message credibility and willingness to engage, including peer diffusion via look-alike networks (Lawrence & Shah, 2020; Han & Balabanis, 2023; Leonhardt et al., 2020). Homophily theory is broad enough to avoid duplicating Social Identity or Source Credibility while still explaining how identity cues work at a marketing communication campaign level (Lawrence & Shah, 2020; Potgieter & Roux, 2024).

In high-involvement purchases like vehicles, intention formation travels through attitudes (quality, value, safety), subjective norms (peer/family approval, owner communities) and PBC (finance clarity, parts/after-sales coverage). TPB gives the most prudent, empirically validated micro-mechanism to translate communication fit into intention which is consistent with South African evidence in automotive and adjacent categories (Ajzen, 1991; Fatoki, 2021; Cunningham & Petzer, 2021). TPB antecedents offer a clear line of sight from creative choices to intention shifts. (Ajzen, 1991; Cunningham & Petzer, 2021).

Together, these three lenses provide a non-redundant cascade, the macro lense (Institutional) defines what signals communication must carry to be legitimate in SA (dignity, inclusion, language). Meso (Homophily) specifies how those signals should be expressed as identity-congruent cues in messaging and source choice to feel authentic. Micro (TPB) clarifies through which psychological levers (attitudes, norms, control) these cues translate into purchase intention in a high-stakes category.

The choice of these three theories minimises theory sprawl while maximising explanatory reach and managerial actionability for the Chinese OEM case. (Scott, 2001; Lawrence & Shah, 2020; Ajzen, 1991; Kipnis et al., 2020; Tuli et al., 2025).

2.18. Conceptual Framework

This study presents a conceptual framework which integrates three interrelated theoretical perspectives Institutional Theory, Homophily Theory, and TPB summarised in Table 2. The conceptual framework to provide a multi-level understanding of how Chinese automotive OEMs can develop inclusive marketing strategies which are aligned with the preferences of South Africa's diverse consumer base.

Theoretical Lens	Level of Analysis	Key Constructs	Application to Study
Institutional Theory (Scott, 2001)	Macro	Formal and informal institutions, cultural legitimacy	Explains how local norms, values and expectations shape consumer perceptions and brand legitimacy (Scott, 2001)

Theoretical Lens	Level of Analysis	Key Constructs	Application to Study
Homophily Theory (Lawrence & Shah, 2020)	Meso	Surface-level and deep-level similarity, identity alignment	Explains how consumers engage with brands that reflect their identities and values (Lawrence & Shah, 2020)
Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991; Leonhardt et al., 2020)	Micro	Attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioural control	Explains how consumers form intentions and make purchase decisions (Ajzen, 1991; Leonhardt et al., 2020)

Table 2: Framework overview

At the intersection of these theories lies the strategic outcome: the development of the Generalisable Inclusive Marketing Strategy Model (GIMSM) geared to foster inclusive marketing strategies that are culturally embedded, psychologically informed and institutionally aligned. This framework can guide Chinese OEMs in crafting marketing communication strategies that foster trust, relevance and long-term brand loyalty in South Africa, with potential to scale across emerging markets and varying industries.

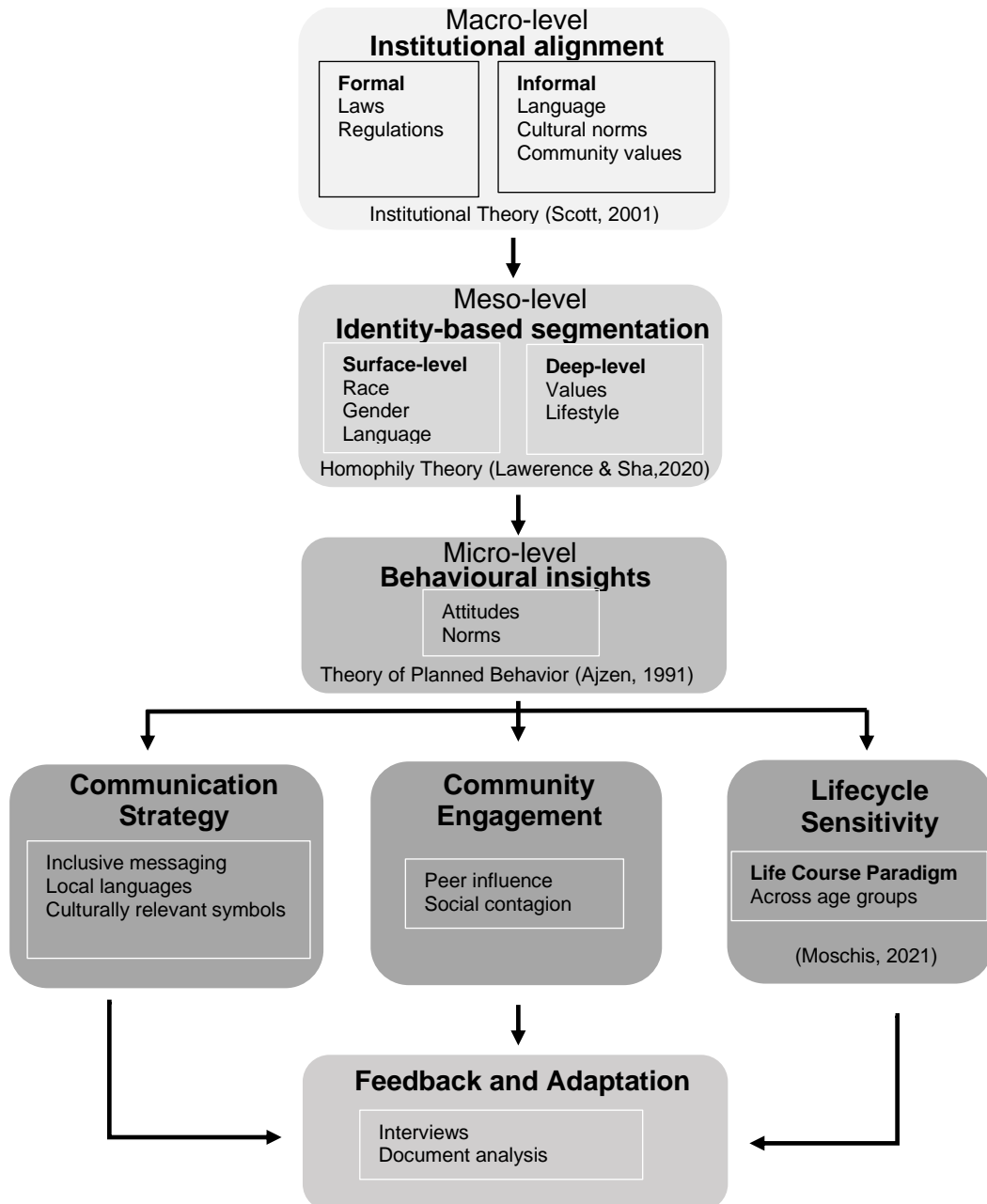
The model aims to integrate:

- Macro-level institutional alignment (Institutional Theory (Scott, 2001))
- Meso-level identity-based segmentation (Homophily Theory (Lawrence & Sha,2020))
- Micro-level behavioural insights (Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991))

Visual Representation

The conceptual framework can be visualised as a layered model:

Figure 3: Conceptual framework



Source: Author's own work

Institutional layer (Macro-level):

Aligns with formal institutional structures such as legal frameworks and regulatory policies and informal institutions, including linguistic practices, cultural norms and community-based values. For example, the use indigenous languages and township culture in branding to enhance legitimacy.

Identity layer (Homophily)(Meso-level):

Applies Homophily Theory to segment consumers by surface-level (race, gender, language) and deep-level (values, lifestyle) traits. For example, showcase diverse models and community narratives in advertisements, mediating how consumers relate to brand messaging based on perceived similarity.

Behavioural layer (Micro-level):

Uses TPB to understand attitudes, norms and PBC. For example, addressing affordability and social influence in vehicle marketing. At this level you determine how consumers evaluate, decide, and act based on internal attitudes and external influences.

Communication strategy:

Develop inclusive, multilingual and culturally resonant messaging. For example, use local languages and culturally relevant symbols in campaigns.

Community engagement:

Leverage peer influence and social contagion for brand advocacy. For example, engage community leaders and influencers to build trust.

Lifecycle sensitivity:

Apply Life Course Paradigm (Moschis, 2021) to tailor strategies across age groups. For example, digital engagement for youth, reliability messaging for older consumers.

Feedback and adaptation:

Use qualitative methods (interviews, document analysis) to refine strategies. For example, conduct thematic analysis to align brand messaging with consumer expectations.

This layered approach allows for a context-sensitive analysis of how marketing strategies can be localised to resonate with diverse consumer groups in South Africa.

2.18.1. Strategic implications

For Chinese OEMs, the framework highlights the need to align with local cultural and institutional norms (Institutional Theory), reflect consumer identities in brand messaging (Homophily Theory), understand the psychological drivers of purchase decisions (Theory of Planned Behavior). The aim is to enhance brand legitimacy and trust,

drive emotional connection and loyalty. For marketing scholars, the framework aims to offer a novel integration of theories that are often treated separately, providing a more holistic context-sensitive understanding of inclusive marketing in multicultural contexts across emerging markets and varied industries.

2.19. Conclusion

The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 underpins the strategic imperative for culturally embedded marketing communication in emerging markets, particularly within the South African automotive sector. By integrating Institutional Theory, Homophily Theory and the TPB, the chapter reveals that consumer engagement is shaped not only by economic rationality but by cultural legitimacy, identity alignment and psychological resonance. The review highlights the inadequacy of standardised global marketing strategies in multicultural contexts, calling for a multifaceted approach that reflects the lived experiences of diverse consumer groups.

Notably, the chapter identifies critical gaps in the operationalisation of inclusive marketing within high-involvement sectors and African markets, reinforcing the need for context-sensitive frameworks. This synthesis provides a robust theoretical foundation for the empirical investigation, offering actionable insights into how Chinese OEMs can navigate the complex socio-cultural terrain of South Africa to foster brand legitimacy, emotional connection and long-term consumer loyalty (Scott, 2001; Lawrence & Shah, 2020; Ajzen, 1991; Tuli et al., 2025; Kipnis et al., 2020).

3. CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND PROPOSITIONS

3.1. Introduction

This chapter defines the academic focus of the study by presenting the research questions and propositions that guide the empirical investigation. These elements are derived from the research problem and aim outlined in Chapter 1 and are grounded in the theoretical frameworks discussed in Chapter 2 namely, Institutional Theory, Homophily Theory, and TBC. The chapter ensures conceptual alignment between the literature review and the objectives.

Given the exploratory and context-sensitive nature of this research focused on inclusive marketing communication strategies in the South African automotive sector, this study adopts a proposition-based approach. Propositions, unlike hypotheses, are not subjected to statistical testing but serve as conceptual expectations derived from the literature (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). They are particularly appropriate for qualitative research designs that aim to generate nuanced insights in under-researched domains (Flick, 2022).

3.2. Research Questions

The research questions are designed to explore how Chinese automotive OEMs can develop inclusive marketing communication strategies that resonate with South Africa's culturally and demographically diverse consumer base. These questions are informed by the theoretical synthesis in Chapter 2 and the contextual challenges outlined in Chapter 1.

Primary Research Question 1

RQ1:

How can Chinese automotive OEMs develop inclusive marketing communication strategies that align with the preferences of South Africa's diverse consumer base?

This question addresses the strategic imperative for Chinese OEMs to localise their marketing efforts in a way that reflects the cultural, linguistic and socio-economic diversity of South African consumers. It is grounded in Institutional Theory, which emphasises the importance of aligning with both formal and informal institutions (Scott, 2001) and Homophily Theory, which highlights the role of identity alignment in consumer engagement (Lawrence & Shah, 2020). The question responds to the

growing demand for culturally embedded marketing strategies in postcolonial, multicultural societies (Tuli et al,2025).

Secondary Research Question

RQ2:

How does diversity in marketing communication influence consumer decision-making in the South African automotive sector?

This question explores the psychological and behavioural dimensions of consumer response to inclusive marketing. It is grounded in the TPB, which suggests that attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control shape consumer intentions and actions (Ajzen, 1991). In the context of South Africa's diverse consumer landscape, these constructs are influenced by cultural identity, language, community values and socio-economic realities. For example, Leonhardt et al. (2020) demonstrate that perceived identity congruence enhances trust and purchase intent, reinforcing the importance of culturally resonant messaging.

Moreover, Arunachalam et al. (2020) highlight a critical gap in the literature, while inclusive marketing is increasingly recognised as a strategic imperative, there is a lack of operational models that guide its implementation in emerging markets. Their study identifies four key dimensions, acceptability, awareness, availability and affordability that influence low-income consumers' engagement with new products (Arunachalam et al., 2020). These dimensions are not only functional but also deeply tied to how consumers interpret marketing communication within their cultural and socio-economic contexts. The absence of systematic frameworks for inclusive marketing in such settings underscores the need for empirical research that investigates how diversity in representation, language, and cultural relevance affects consumer decision-making.

By addressing this gap, RQ2 contributes to both theoretical advancement and practical strategy. It enables a deeper understanding of how inclusive marketing communication can be tailored to foster emotional connection, trust, and behavioural intent among South African consumers, particularly in high-involvement sectors like automotive. This aligns with calls for context-sensitive models that reflect the lived realities of consumers in postcolonial, multicultural societies (Arunachalam et al., 2020; Tuli et al., 2025).

3.3. Research Propositions

The following propositions are derived from the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 and are intended to guide the empirical analysis. They reflect conceptual expectations based on prior research and theoretical insights and will be explored through qualitative methods such as semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis.

Proposition 1: Institutional alignment

Chinese automotive OEMs that align their marketing communication strategies with South Africa's informal institutional norms such as language, cultural values and community expectations are more likely to cultivate consumer trust and be perceived as legitimate market actors.

This proposition is informed by Scott's (2001) three-pillar model of institutions, which includes regulatory, normative and cultural-cognitive pillars. In the South African context, informal institutions such as linguistic preferences, township fashion and community-based trust are particularly influential in shaping consumer perceptions (Kipnis et al., 2020; Statistics South Africa, 2025).

Marketing strategies that fail to reflect these informal norms risk being perceived as culturally irrelevant or even exploitative. This proposition also aligns with the concept of "implaced identity" (Andéhn, Hietanen, & Lucarelli, 2019), which emphasises the need for brands to embed themselves in the lived experiences of local consumers.

Proposition 2: Identity-based engagement

Marketing campaigns that reflect surface-level and deep-level homophily are more likely to foster brand loyalty and emotional connection among South African consumers.

Homophily Theory suggests that individuals have a greater propensity to interact with others and, by extension, engage with brands more that reflect their own characteristics (Lawrence & Shah, 2020). In marketing, this translates into a preference for advertisements and brand narratives that feature relatable characters, languages and cultural symbols. Research by Hu et al. (2023) and Trivedi and Teichert (2021) confirms that perceived similarity enhances trust, emotional connection and purchase intent. In the South African context, where identity is multifaceted and historically shaped, homophily becomes a powerful mechanism for building brand affinity.

The concept of connector marketing, as articulated by Arunachalam et al. (2020), provides empirical support for Proposition 2. Their findings show that local influencers and community-based brand advocates significantly enhance product acceptability and emotional connection (Arunachalam et al., 2020). This reinforces Homophily Theory's assertion that perceived similarity and trust are critical drivers of brand engagement (Lawrence & Shah, 2020).

The empirical findings of Gao et al. (2019) provide strong support for Proposition 2. Their multi-study analysis reveals that identity congruence between gender and local–global identity significantly influences consumer behaviour, with incongruence leading to reduced price sensitivity through a sacrifice mindset (Gao et al., 2019). This behavioural mechanism underscores the psychological depth of identity-based engagement and validates the strategic importance of aligning brand messaging with consumer identities (Gao et al., 2019). In the case of South Africa where identity is multifaceted and historically shaped, alignment is critical for fostering trust, emotional resonance and long-term brand loyalty (Gao et al., 2019).

Proposition 3: Cultural representation and purchase intent

Inclusive marketing communication that authentically represents diverse cultural identities exerts a favorable impact on consumer attitudes and strengthens purchase intentions. This proposition is grounded in the TPB and supported by empirical findings that link cultural representation to brand favourability and purchase behaviour (Tuli et al., 2025; Castro & Sáiz, 2019). The TPB (Ajzen, 1991) supports the idea that culturally resonant messaging can shape consumer attitudes and intentions. In South Africa, where cultural identity is deeply embedded in consumer consciousness, authentic representation is more than a moral obligation it is a strategic imperative.

Proposition 4: Social norms and peer influence

Social norms and peer influence play a pivotal mediating role in shaping the relationship between inclusive marketing and consumer decision-making in collectivist communities. This proposition reflects the role of subjective norms in the TPB (Ajzen, 1991) and is supported by research on social contagion and word-of-mouth dynamics in collectivist cultures (Gershon et al., 2024). In South Africa, where community validation is a crucial driver of consumer behaviour, peer influence is a critical factor in marketing effectiveness. Brands that successfully align with community values can benefit from organic brand advocacy and peer-driven diffusion.

3.4. Theoretical Linkages

Each research question and proposition is directly linked to the theoretical frameworks discussed in Chapter 2. Institutional Theory provides the macro-level lens for understanding how societal norms and cultural expectations shape brand legitimacy (Scott, 2001). Homophily Theory offers a meso-level perspective on how identity alignment influences consumer engagement (Lawrence & Shah, 2020). The TPB delivers micro-level insights into how attitudes, norms, and perceived control affect purchase decisions (Ajzen, 1991).

This multi-level integration ensures that the research questions and propositions are not only theoretically grounded but also empirically actionable. The propositions informed the development of the interview guide and the thematic coding framework for data analysis, thereby maintaining coherence across the research design.

3.5. Conclusion

This chapter has articulated the research questions and propositions that guide the empirical phase of the study. These are firmly rooted in the theoretical frameworks of Institutional Theory, Homophily Theory and TPB and are aligned with the research problem and aim outlined in the Chapter. This chapter sets the stage for the methodological design in Chapter 4, where the propositions will be operationalised through qualitative inquiry.

4. CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1. Introduction

A research design constitutes a systematically structured plan that directs and organises the entire investigative process (MacMillan & Schumacher, 2001). Research designs encompass the selection of research sites, procedures to collect data, as well as participant recruitment strategies (MacMillan & Schumacher, 2001). Research designs offer systematic framework for interpreting a specific phenomenon within a defined context (MacMillan & Schumacher, 2001). In this study, the investigated phenomenon was the development of marketing communication strategies for Chinese Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEMs) operating in South Africa, focusing on how diversity influences consumer decision-making. The chosen research design was not arbitrary, it was purposefully selected for its alignment with the aims of the study and its capacity to address the research questions effectively. By structuring the inquiry around this design, the study ensured logical and consistent coherence and strengthened the validity of its findings (Creswell, 2017).

In academic research, selecting an appropriate research methodology is foundational to the credibility and relevance of the intended outcomes of the research (MacMillan & Schumacher, 2001). According to Creswell and Creswell (2023), research methodologies are broadly categorised into three paradigms: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods. Each paradigm is underpinned by distinct philosophical assumptions and is suited to different types of research questions and objectives (Creswell & Creswell ,2023).

Pessu (2019) defines research methodology as the systematic set of methods and strategies employed by a researcher to gather, analyse and interpret data to understand and explain a particular phenomenon. It encompasses not only the tools of data collection but also the epistemological and ontological assumptions that guide the research process (Pessu, 2019).

Torelli et al. (2024) emphasise the importance of integrating cultural dimensions into consumer behaviour models and suggest using emerging methodologies such as neuroscience approaches. Although these approaches are more aligned with quantitative methods, Torelli et al. (2024) advocate for greater contextual sensitivity perspectives, which are often explored through qualitative research.

As Chandy et al. (2021) argue, research must evolve to address the complexities of multicultural societies. They call for better understanding of consumer experiences through interpretive and exploratory approaches, particularly in settings plagued by cultural heterogeneity and historical inequalities (Chandy et al.,2021). Qualitative research, with its emphasis on capturing lived experiences and subjective meanings, was therefore well-suited to uncover how identity, language and cultural norms shape consumer engagement with foreign automotive brands in South Africa (Chandy et al.,2021). As a result, the study utilised a qualitative research approach, with an interpretivist paradigm to co-construct knowledge with participants generating insights that are strategically actionable and contextually grounded (Chandy et al., 2021).

As Isik(2025) argues, qualitative research ideally captures the depth and richness of human experiences, especially when seeking to gain an understanding of how individuals interpret and respond to social and cultural stimuli. Given the study investigated how Chinese OEMs can develop inclusive marketing communication strategies in South Africa, a qualitative approach enabled the exploration of the nuanced ways in which diversity influences consumer decision-making.

Qualitative research is inherently exploratory and interpretive, allowing for the examination of subjective meanings and lived experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Aligning with the study's aim to uncover how diverse consumers from diverse backgrounds perceive and engage with marketing messages from foreign automotive brands. As Miles and Huberman (1994) emphasise, qualitative inquiry is particularly effective for in-depth analysis of social phenomena, as it facilitates and identifies patterns, themes, as well as contradictions within participant narratives.

Moreover, the qualitative paradigm was well-positioned to accommodate the study's focus on diversity a multidimensional construct encompassing race, gender, language, socio-economic status and cultural identity. Kipnis et al. (2020) highlight the importance of context-sensitive methodologies when researching multicultural markets, noting that qualitative methods are uniquely capable of capturing the layered and often contradictory nature of consumer identities. To enrich the study's analytical depth, the researcher accessed multiple participant perspectives and experiences by conducting online focus groups and document analysis.

Nind et al. (2023) further argue that qualitative research enable a deeper understanding of complex social dynamics by prioritising participant voice and

contextual interpretation. This is more so relevant in South Africa, a country where historical inequalities and cultural heterogeneity shape consumer expectations and brand perceptions. The qualitative approach thus enabled the researcher to investigate how institutional norms, identity alignment, and psychological drivers interact in shaping consumer responses to Chinese automotive brands.

Given the study was exploratory and needed to capture the nuanced experiences of diverse South African consumers, the study employed qualitative data collection techniques using document analysis and online focus groups. These methods were chosen for their ability to produce rich, descriptive data that reflect the lived realities of South African consumers (Flick, 2022). Through this approach, the study aimed to produce a comprehensive and contextually grounded understanding of how inclusive marketing communication strategies can be designed to resonate with diverse consumer segments.

4.2. Research paradigm

A research paradigm serves as the foundational philosophical framework that shapes, conceptualise reality, supports to formulate research questions and interpret findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). It encompasses a set of beliefs and assumptions about the nature of knowledge (epistemology), reality (ontology) and the methodological approaches suitable for investigating a given phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Different paradigms such as critical theory ,positivism, post-positivism and interpretivism offer distinct lenses through which research can be conducted, each with its own implications for analysis, design and data collection (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017).

Given the study's emphasis on lived meanings, informal norms, identity cues and intention formation, an interpretivist qualitative design was adopted to surface how diverse consumers construct and negotiate the meanings of representation, language and brand voice in automotive advertising. Qualitative inquiry was well suited for making sense of context-embedded, identity-laden phenomena and revealing the mechanisms by which messages shift attitudes, subjective norms and perceived control (TPB) in high-involvement categories such as vehicles (Ajzen, 1991; Clarke & Braun, 2017). Interpretivism asserts that reality is socially constructed and that knowledge emerges through the interactive processes between researchers and participants (Creswell, 2017). It emphasises that the World should be understood from the view of those who live in it, making it ideal for research to uncover how individuals

interpret and respond to marketing messages in diverse cultural settings(Creswell, 2017).

The interpretivist paradigm assisted in facilitating an in-depth exploration of how South African consumers interpret and observe diversity in automotive marketing and how these perceptions influence their vehicle selection decisions (Creswell, 2017). By focusing on lived experiences, the study aimed to reveal nuanced ways in which identity markers such as age, gender, race, language, and occupation shape consumer engagement with marketing campaigns. This paradigm facilitated the capturing of rich and complex consumer narratives, thereby aligning with the study's broader objective of developing inclusive, context-sensitive marketing strategies for Chinese automotive OEMs operating in South Africa (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017).

This paradigm aligned to the study's aim of understanding how consumers from different cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds perceive and respond to marketing strategies employed by Chinese OEMs. It also supported the use of qualitative methods that prioritise depth, context, and meaning over generalisability (Maison, 2018).

The study focused on two distinct, complementary data sets, consumer perspectives and marketing content. Consumer perspectives were gained through online focus groups which were carried out through Microsoft Teams with consumers who have either purchased or are considering purchasing a vehicle. Consumer interpretations of marketing outputs generated valuable insights into the effectiveness and inclusivity of automotive marketing strategies (Leonhardt et al., 2020). For marketing content, a purposive sample of marketing materials from Chinese automotive OEMs and non-Chinese automotive OEMs operating in South Africa were collected and analysed. These materials included advertisements, social media campaigns, and promotional brochures sourced from official brand websites, digital platforms, and public media archives. This content was examined to assess how diversity is portrayed and whether it aligns with consumer expectations and preferences (Krippendorff, 2022).

The integration of consumer narratives and content analysis facilitated a holistic understanding of how diversity in marketing is constructed and received in the South African context.

4.3. Research design

The research design was qualitative, descriptive and exploratory. This design was selected to facilitate a detailed exploration of the role of diversity in marketing communication and its influence on consumer decision-making in the South African automotive sector. As MacMillan and Schumacher (2001) note, a research design is the blueprint used for conducting research, it guides the participant selection process, selection of methods of collecting data and data analysis procedures.

A multi-method qualitative design, combining online focus groups with document analysis will be utilised in this study. This triangulated approach enabled the researcher to capture both consumer perspectives and the content of marketing campaigns, thereby providing granular understanding of the phenomenon being investigated (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

The methodological approach adopted in this study was further justified by the work of Kutaula et al. (2024), who emphasise the importance of context-sensitive, qualitative methodologies in researching ethical consumerism in emerging markets. Their thematic review highlights the multidimensional nature of diversity including race, gender, language, and socio-economic status and the need for marketing strategies that authentically reflect these identities (Kutaula et al. (2024). By employing qualitative methods, the study aligned with best practices for capturing the lived experiences and nuanced perceptions of consumers in multicultural societies like South Africa (Kutaula et al., 2024).

4.4. Research setting

The research was based in the Gauteng province situated in South Africa, a province which is recognised as the country's highly diverse economic hub. Gauteng was selected as the research site due to its demographic heterogeneity, urban-rural mix, and its strategic importance in the automotive market. The province contributes over 34% to South Africa's GDP and houses major metropolitan areas such as Johannesburg and Pretoria (Statistics South Africa, 2025).

Gauteng's population reflects the broader national diversity in terms of race, language, income, and lifestyle. Making it an ideal setting for exploring how marketing strategies resonate across different consumer segments. The province's multicultural composition is aligned to the study's focus on diversity in marketing and consumer identity, allowing

for a rich contextual examination of how consumers interpret and respond to inclusive marketing campaigns (GCIS, 2025).

4.5. Unit of analysis

The unit of analysis in this study is the individual South African consumer who either owns or is considering purchasing a vehicle in the high-involvement automotive category. This choice aligns with the research aim of exploring how diversity in marketing communication influences consumer decision-making within the South African automotive sector. Focusing on individuals rather than households or organisations enables the study to capture personal interpretations of marketing messages, identity alignment, and behavioural intentions, constructs central to the theoretical framework integrating Institutional Theory, Homophily Theory and the TPB (Ajzen, 1991; Lawrence & Shah, 2020; Scott, 2001).

The decision to adopt the individual as the unit of analysis is supported by literature emphasising that consumer responses to inclusive marketing are shaped by subjective norms, attitudes, and perceived behavioural control, which operate at the personal level (Cunningham & Petzer, 2021; White et al., 2020). Furthermore, identity-based engagement such as language preference, cultural symbolism, and representation is inherently individualistic, even when influenced by group affiliations (Han & Balabanis, 2023; Henderson et al., 2023). By centering the analysis on individuals, the study can uncover nuanced, context-specific meanings that aggregate-level approaches might obscure, particularly in a superdiverse society where cultural and linguistic heterogeneity drives variation in consumer perceptions (Kipnis et al., 2020; Potgieter & Roux, 2024).

This unit of analysis is operationalised through online focus groups comprising participants from varied demographic segments, including race, gender and age, to reflect South Africa's pluralistic consumer landscape. While purposive sampling ensures relevance to the research question, the study acknowledges limitations related to selection bias and mitigates these through supplementary strategies such as snowball sampling and triangulation with document analysis (Robinson, 2014; Noy, 2008).

4.6. Target population

The study's target population comprised of South African consumers aged 18 to 56 years, who either currently own or are considering purchasing a vehicle. The selection of the target population age range was strategically aligned with the study's aim to capture a comprehensive spectrum of consumer decision-making behaviours across generational cohorts. This range encompassed first-time vehicle buyers in early adulthood, middle-aged professionals with evolving lifestyle needs, and older consumers with established brand preferences and purchasing power.

Moschis (2021) supports this segmentation through the life course paradigm, which posits that consumer preferences are shaped by socio-economic transitions and life events. Younger consumers may prioritise affordability and digital engagement, while older individuals may value reliability, safety, and service accessibility. Furthermore, this age range reflected the demographic reality of South Africa's economically active population, ensuring relevance and analytical generalisability. By including participants across this broad age spectrum, the study captured the intersection of generational diversity with cultural, linguistic and socio-economic factors, thereby enriching the understanding of inclusive marketing strategies in the automotive sector (Moschis, 2021; Statistics South Africa, 2025).

The population included both current and potential buyers of Chinese automotive brands as well as those of non-Chinese brands, to allow for comparative insights. Although diversity is multifaceted, for this study focus was on age, gender and race. Table 3 displays the demographic characteristics of the target population as mentioned above:

Table 3: Target population demographic characteristics

Demographic category	Sub-groups represented
Gender	Male Female Other
Race and ethnicity	Black African Coloured Indian/Asian Caucasian Other

Age range	18-30
	31-43
	44-56

Source: Author's own

This diversity was essential for capturing the intersectional nature of consumer identity and for understanding how different groups interpret marketing messages (Campbell et al., 2023; Moschis, 2021). The inclusion of both urban and peri-urban participants further enriched the data by incorporating perspectives from different geographic and cultural contexts within Gauteng.

4.7. Sampling strategy

The study employed purposive sampling, a sampling strategy which is common in qualitative research. Purposive sampling was used to select participants likely to provide diverse, relevant and rich insights (Maree & Pietersen, 2020; Saunders et al., 2019). Participants were selected based on their ability to contribute meaningfully to the research and questions, particularly in relation to their experiences with automotive marketing and their perceptions of diversity and inclusion in brand messaging.

The sampling aimed for maximum variation to ensure representation across key diversity dimensions. Participants were selected based on vehicle ownership status (owners of Chinese brands, non-owners, and intenders of both), demographic diversity (age, gender, race), geographic location (Gauteng based participants).

The study employed online focus groups as a qualitative data collection method. Focus groups were particularly appropriate for this research context, as they allowed for the exploration of shared and contested meanings among consumers from diverse cultural and demographic backgrounds. Flick (2022) emphasises the value of focus groups in capturing group dynamics and social influences, noting that a typical group size of 6 to 10 participants facilitates rich interaction while maintaining manageability.

Creswell and Creswell (2023) support the use of focus groups in qualitative inquiry, highlighting their effectiveness in generating narrative data through participant interaction. They additionally support the commonly accepted guideline which denotes that the ideal size for a focus group in qualitative research is between 6 to 8 participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). This range was considered optimal for this

research as it allowed for diverse perspectives without overwhelming the discussion. The group dynamics were manageable allowing for all participants to contribute meaningfully. In this study, focus groups were designed to capture a range of consumer perspectives across racial, cultural and socioeconomic lines, aligning with the study's emphasis on diversity as a key variable in marketing communication effectiveness.

While focus groups offer significant benefits such as uncovering complex social phenomena and facilitating comparative insights across consumer groups, both Flick (2022) and Creswell and Creswell (2023) acknowledge limitations. These include potential dominance by outspoken participants, challenges in managing group dynamics and concerns around confidentiality (Flick, 2022; Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Nonetheless, carefully designed and moderated focus groups remain a powerful tool for uncovering nuanced insights, in this case insights into how diverse South African consumers interpret and respond to marketing messages from Chinese automotive OEMs.

Participants were drawn from the researcher's educational, professional and social networks, including individuals from various industries such as finance, retail, and public service. This strategy supported the study's goal of exploring how institutional norms, identity alignment and consumer decision-making models interact in shaping responses to Chinese automotive brands in South Africa.

To broaden the participant pool and partially mitigate the limitations associated with relying on the researcher's immediate network, snowball sampling was employed as a supplementary recruitment strategy. Snowball sampling involves asking initial participants to refer other individuals who meet the inclusion criteria, thereby creating a chain of referrals that can extend beyond the researcher's direct social or professional circle (Noy, 2008). This approach is particularly useful in qualitative research where the target population may be dispersed or difficult to access, and where trust plays a critical role in participation (Etikan et al., 2016).

In the context of this study, snowballing enabled the identification of additional respondents who were not part of the researcher's immediate network, increasing diversity in perspectives and reducing the risk of homogeneity in the sample. While this method does not eliminate selection bias entirely, since referrals often share similar

characteristics with the initial participants, it enhances the likelihood of capturing varied experiences and viewpoints relevant to the research phenomenon (Robinson, 2014). Snowball sampling also aligns with the interpretivist paradigm underpinning this study, as it leverages social connections to access participants who can provide rich, contextually grounded insights into how diversity in marketing communication influences consumer decision-making (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). However, transparency about its use is essential because the technique can still perpetuate network-based biases if referral chains remain socially or demographically narrow (Noy, 2008).

4.7.1. Sample size

In addition to the target population characteristics as depicted in Table 3, the sample size for this study is depicted in Table 4 and comprised of four online focus groups with five to nine randomly selected participants each, totalling 29 participants. This is consistent with established qualitative research standards. According to Wutich et al. (2024), theme saturation in focus groups is typically achieved with four groups, while meaning saturation may require up to eight groups, depending on the diversity of the population and the complexity of the research questions.

Qualitative research prioritises depth over breadth and the concept of data saturation, the point at which no new themes emerge is central to determining adequacy (Guest et al., 2006; Wutich et al., 2024). The selected sample size was sufficient to explore the nuanced perceptions of South African consumers regarding diversity in automotive marketing, while remaining manageable for in-depth thematic analysis.

Some challenges experienced with sample sizes in qualitative research include, researchers confusing theme saturation with meaning saturation, leading to premature cessation of data collection (Wutich et al., 2024). Over- or under-sampling can also dilute depth and increase resource strain, while too small a sample may fail to capture diversity or reach saturation (Andrade, 2020). Another limiting factor is the possibility of over-recruitment, this may burden participants unnecessarily, while under-recruitment may waste their time without yielding meaningful insights (Andrade, 2020).

Table 4: Respondents demographic breakdown

Participant ID	Focus Group	Age	Gender	Race/Ethnicity
FG1-P01	1	31-43	Female	Caucasian

FG1-P02	1	31-43	Male	Coloured
FG1-P03	1	31-43	Female	Black African
FG1-P04	1	31-43	Male	Black African
FG1-P05	1	31-43	Female	Black African
FG2-P01	2	44-56	Female	Black African
FG2-P02	2	31-43	Male	Caucasian
FG2-P03	2	31-43	Female	Black African
FG2-P04	2	31-43	Female	Black African
FG2-P05	2	44-56	Male	Caucasian
FG2-P06	2	18-30	Female	Indian/Asian
FG2-P07	2	18-30	Female	Coloured
FG3-P01	3	31-43	Male	Black African
FG3-P02	3	31-43	Female	Black African
FG3-P03	3	31-43	Male	Black African
FG3-P04	3	31-43	Female	Black African
FG3-P05	3	18-30	Female	Caucasian
FG3-P06	3	18-30	Male	Caucasian
FG3-P07	3	31-43	Female	Black African
FG3-P08	3	31-43	Female	Black African
FG4-P01	4	31-43	Female	Black African
FG4-P02	4	44-56	Female	Indian/Asian
FG4-P03	4	44-56	Female	Caucasian
FG4-P04	4	31-43	Male	Black African
FG4-P05	4	31-43	Male	Black African
FG4-P06	4	18-30	Male	Indian/Asian
FG4-P07	4	18-30	Male	Black African
FG4-P08	4	18-30	Female	Black African
FG4-P09	4	18-30	Male	Caucasian

Source: Author's own

4.8. Research instrument

Yoon and Uliassi (2022) argue, “the researcher defines the meaning of data at all stages of the research process”, making their identities, experiences and reflexivity integral to research quality (p. 1088). The concept of the researcher as an instrument acknowledges that the researcher’s theoretical orientation, cultural background and linguistic identity shape how phenomena are understood and reported (Pezalla et al., 2012; Yoon & Uliassi, 2022). These identities can enrich interpretation by providing insider perspectives, but they can also introduce biases if left unexamined. Therefore, reflexivity which is the continuous process of questioning assumptions and positionality, is essential to maintain rigor and sincerity in qualitative work (Tracy, 2010).

This study explores marketing communication strategies for Chinese automotive OEMs operating in South Africa and the role of diversity in consumer decision, a topic deeply embedded in cultural norms, identity and lived experiences. Capturing these nuances requires more than structured questions, it demands empathetic engagement, contextual understanding and interpretive judgment during focus group facilitation and thematic analysis. As Yoon and Uliassi (2022) note, qualitative research benefits when the researcher actively interprets social interactions rather than acting as a detached observer. Similarly, Xu and Storr (2012) emphasise that congruence between philosophical stance and research practice is vital for coherence.

By serving as the research instrument, the researcher ensures flexibility in probing emerging themes, clarifying meanings and adapting to participants’ cultural cues. This adaptability is particularly critical in South Africa’s multilingual, multicultural context, where language choice, colloquialisms and non-verbal signals influence how participants articulate brand perceptions. Standardised tools cannot capture these subtleties, the researcher’s interpretive lens becomes indispensable.

In this study, the researcher moderated four online focus groups comprising diverse South African consumers. Acting as the instrument involved designing culturally sensitive prompts, questions were framed to elicit views on language, representation and trust in automotive advertising, aligning with participants’ lived realities. Facilitating inclusive dialogue, the researcher adapted communication styles to encourage participation across age, gender and linguistic backgrounds, reflecting Pezalla et al.’s (2012) insight that interviewer characteristics shape conversational depth.

Engaging in reflexive journaling after each session, the researcher documented observations, emerging biases and interpretive dilemmas. This practice aligns with Tracy's (2010) criterion of sincerity, which calls for transparency about subjective values.

Interpreting through a critical lens while analysing transcripts, the researcher acknowledged how personal knowledge of branding and cultural identity could influence coding decisions. Strategies such as peer debriefing and member checks were employed to enhance credibility.

Recognising oneself as an instrument also meant embracing vulnerability. As Yoon and Uliassi (2022) caution, researcher identities such as professional background in automotive and marketing can predispose interpretations toward certain theoretical frames (e.g., consumer behaviour). To mitigate this, the researcher engaged in iterative coding and triangulation, ensuring that findings reflected participants' voices rather than preconceived notions.

4.9. Data collection methods

To address the research questions and explore the propositions outlined in Chapter 3, two primary data collection methods were employed, document analysis and online focus groups. This multi-method approach enables the triangulation of data sources, which enhances the findings credibility and richness (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Kutsyuruba, 2023).

4.9.1. Online focus groups

Online focus groups were selected as the primary method to collect data. Each participant was sent an informed consent form and demographic form to complete and return to the researcher prior to the commencement of the online focus groups, both documents are included in Appendix 2 and 3. To align with the study's interpretivist paradigm and qualitative design, online focus groups were employed as the primary method of data collection. This approach enabled the exploration of shared consumer experiences and perceptions regarding diversity in automotive marketing communication, particularly among South African consumers engaging with Chinese OEMs.

Online focus groups are increasingly recognised as valid qualitative tools, offering enhanced accessibility, cost-effective, geographically flexible and inclusive alternatives to traditional in-person formats (Frey & Bloch, 2023; Olawade et al., 2025). They allow for synchronous interaction via platforms such as Microsoft Teams, which was used in this study. Participants appreciated the flexibility given they had varying work schedules and were unable to attend physical focus groups (Frey and Bloch, 2023).

Online focus groups offer a robust method for capturing diverse consumer perspectives, especially in multicultural contexts like South Africa. Pereira et al. (2024) argue that emotional branding and cause-related marketing foster deep consumer-brand engagement and trust, which are essential for understanding emotional connections in marketing communication. These insights supported the use of virtual platforms such as Microsoft Teams for synchronous interaction, as demonstrated by Frey and Bloch (2023) and align with broader qualitative research principles outlined by Flick (2022). The methodological validity and inclusivity of online focus groups are further supported by Olawade et al. (2025), who emphasise their effectiveness in geographically dispersed and technologically integrated research environments giving the researcher access to participants who would not be accessible face to face.

The segmentation of focus groups by age, race and gender reflects a consumer-centric approach aligned with Hamilton and Price (2019), who emphasise the strategic value of understanding diverse consumer journeys in shaping brand strategy. While not specific to the automotive sector, Grewal et al. (2020) highlight how in-store technologies can enhance consumer engagement by tailoring experiences to individual traits and preferences, an insight that supports the importance of contextual sensitivity in high-involvement purchasing environments. Additionally, Bartsch et al. (2022) demonstrate that consumer responses in digital settings are influenced by perceived authenticity and identity congruence, reinforcing the relevance of homophily theory in designing online focus group interactions.

The interview guide for this research, which is included in Appendix 1, was informed by the study's conceptual framework and included open-ended questions aligned with the three core theoretical lenses: Institutional Theory, Homophily Theory, and TPB. Questions were structured to explore the participants' awareness and perceptions of diversity in automotive marketing. The extent to which marketing messages reflect their cultural, linguistic, and identity-based preferences. How these perceptions influence their attitudes, trust, and purchase intentions. The focus groups were conducted

virtually via Microsoft Teams, allowing for geographic flexibility and convenience. Each focus group were scheduled to last between 20- and 30-minutes (but ran over 1 hour) including audio-recording with the participants' informed consent which were obtained prior to the commencement of the focus group. The recordings were transcribed verbatim to ensure accurate and rigorous thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017).

4.9.2. Document analysis

To complement the online focus data and provide depth, a document analysis was conducted on marketing materials produced by Chinese and non-Chinese automotive OEMs. Document analysis is a systematic procedure used to review and or evaluate all types of documents (Krippendorff, 2022). It is particularly useful for examining how organisations communicate values, norms, and identities through visual and textual content.

The documents analyses included, digital advertisements, social media campaigns, web and website content and industry reports and documents. These materials were sourced from official brand websites, digital platforms, and public media archives. The selection criteria focused on campaigns that were active or recently executed in the South African market between 2022 and 2025. The analysis aimed to assess the representation of diversity across varying dimensions (race, gender, age, language and so forth), the use of culturally resonant symbols, local languages, and community-based imagery and the alignment between brand messaging and the values or identities of South African consumers.

Document analysis enabled the researcher to evaluate the extent to which marketing communication strategies reflect the lived realities of the target audience. It additionally provided a basis for comparing consumer perceptions with actual marketing practices, thereby enhancing the study's legitimacy through triangulation (Kutsyuruba, 2023). The integration of document analysis and online focus groups was guided by the principle of methodological triangulation, served to strengthen the credibility and robustness of research findings (Flick, 2022). While focus groups capture the subjective experiences and interpretations of consumers, document analysis offers an objective lens on how diversity is constructed and communicated by automotive brands.

This dual approach allowed for the exploration of both the reception and production of marketing messages, providing a holistic understanding of the dynamics between

brand communication and consumer identity in a multicultural setting. It also aligned with the study's interpretivist paradigm, which emphasises the co-construction of meaning between individuals and their social environments (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

4.10. Data analysis methods

The document analysis and data collected through online focus groups was analysed using two complementary qualitative techniques, thematic analysis and content analysis. A reflexive thematic analysis was used to interpret how diversity in marketing communication shapes South African consumers' decision-making, with a focus on Chinese automotive OEMs. This approach is well suited to making sense of patterned meanings within focus group narratives, while still accommodating contextual nuance and intersectionality (Braun & Clarke, 2016; Nowell et al., 2017). These methods were selected to align with the interpretivist paradigm of the study and to ensure a rigorous, systematic approach to identifying patterns and meanings within the data (Clarke & Braun, 2016; Krippendorff, 2022).

4.10.1. Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis was utilised to analyse the four online focus group transcripts. Thematic analysis involves analysing, identifying and reporting patterns within qualitative data (Clarke & Braun, 2016). Thematic analysis is suited for studies that explore how individuals make sense of experiences and construct meaning (Clarke & Braun, 2016).

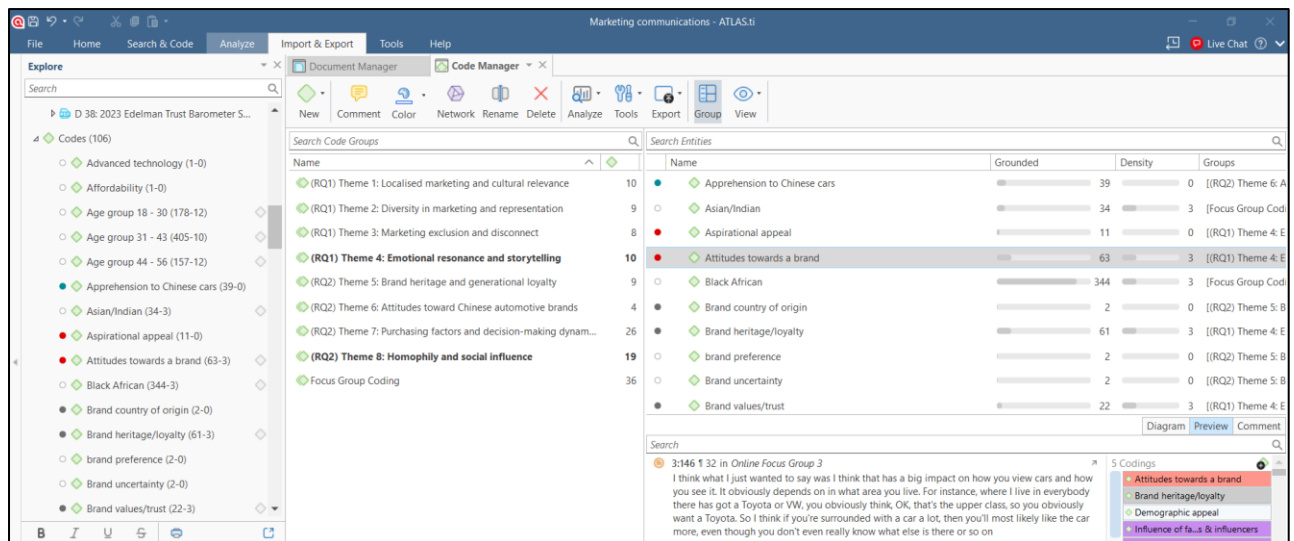
The thematic analysis process followed six-phases:

1. Familiarisation: In this phase the researcher deeply engaged and immersed themselves in the data, reading and listening to the four transcripts and four recordings multiple times.
2. Generating initial codes: Phase two required key phrases and concepts being highlighted and coded using ATLAS.ti. In this step the researcher coded each transcript, highlighting pertinent phrases and comments that were made by the participants, collating them to derive meaning to them. This resulted in first order codes being assigned to key quotations made by participants using ATLAS.ti which are depicted in Figure 4 and Appendix 5.
3. Searching for themes: For phase three, codes were grouped into wider themes based on the reoccurrence of ideas across participants (also visible in the

extract depicted in Figure 4). In this step the researcher revisited the codes identifying reoccurring topics, responses and possible linkages between codes. These “similarity linkages” between codes were congregated to form themes. This resulted in 8 themes derived from the 108 codes. The outputs of steps 3 and 4 are visually represented in Figure 4.

4. Reviewing themes: To ensure consistency, themes were then refined.
5. Defining and naming themes: For this phase, each theme was defined and linked to the research questions and theoretical framework. This is referred to as the conceptual leap which the closing of the gap between theory and empirical data (Klag & Langley, 2012). In this study, the conceptual leap was operationalised through reflexive thematic analysis, where initial codes were progressively abstracted into themes aligned with the integrated theoretical framework namely Institutional Theory, Homophily Theory and the TPB.
6. Producing the report: The final themes were used to develop a narrative addressing the study’s propositions and questions constructed.

Figure 4: Representation of code-document analysis from ATLAS.ti



This method enabled the researcher to uncover deep insights into how consumers interpret marketing messages, how they perceive diversity in advertising, and how these perceptions influence their decision-making processes (Leonhardt et al., 2020).

4.10.2. Content Analysis

Content analysis was applied to the marketing materials collected during the document analysis phase. This technique involved systematic coding and the interpretation of text and visual content to identify patterns, themes, and meanings (Krippendorff, 2022).

The analysis focused on the representation of diversity across dimensions such as race, gender, age, and language, the use of cultural symbols, local languages, and community references and the alignment between brand messaging and the values or identities of South African consumers.

Rather than merely quantifying word frequencies, the analysis interpreted the contextual meanings embedded in the marketing content. This approach allowed for the assessment of whether the marketing strategies of Chinese OEMs are inclusive, culturally resonant and aligned with consumer expectations (Tuli, Srivastava, & Kumar, 2025).

4.10.3. Triangulation of Findings

The integration of thematic and content analysis enabled methodological triangulation, enhancing and giving credibility plus trustworthiness to the findings of the research (Flick, 2022). By comparing consumer narratives with actual marketing content, the study was able to identify gaps, alignments, and contradictions between brand intentions and consumer interpretations.

4.11. Research quality and rigour

Ensuring research quality and rigor is crucial to credibility, reliability and transferability of qualitative findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Flick, 2022). Several strategies were employed to uphold methodological integrity of the study, therefore aligning with the qualitative research standards of the interpretivist paradigm.

4.11.1. Credibility

Credibility pertains to the degree of confidence in the authenticity and accuracy of research findings (Mertens, 2019). To enhance credibility through triangulation, integration of data from the focus groups and document analysis allowed for cross-validation of themes (Flick, 2022). Preliminary findings were shared with selected participants to confirm the accuracy of interpretations. Prolonged engagement with the data through iterative coding and theme refinement ensured depth and contextual sensitivity.

4.11.2. Generalisability

Generalisability refers to the extent to which findings from a study can be applied to broader populations or contexts beyond the specific research setting (Creswell &

Creswell, 2023; Shaw, 2025). Although qualitative research does not aim for statistical generalisation, it seeks analytical generalisability by generating rich, contextual insights that can inform understanding in similar settings (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). To support generalisability the research setting, participant demographics and data collection procedures were described in detail to enable contextual comparison. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that participants reflect the diversity of the South African consumer landscape, enhancing the relevance and applicability of the findings.

4.11.3. Dependability

Dependability refers to the consistency and replicability of the research process (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Creswell & Creswell, 2023). To ensure dependability, there is an audit trail and all methodological decisions were documented, along with coding procedures and the analytical steps (Miles & Huberman, 1994). To enhance transparency and reproducibility ATLAS.ti was used to manage and code data.

4.11.4. Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the extent to which research findings are shaped by the perspectives and experiences of participants, rather than being influenced by researcher bias or subjectivity (Flick, 2022; Creswell & Creswell, 2023). To enhance confirmability, reflective journaling was used to document research assumptions and any reflections made during the study. Direct quotations from participants were also included in the findings to ground interpretations in empirical evidence.

4.12. Ethical considerations

Ethical integrity is the cornerstone of this study, guided by respect, autonomy and justice (Mertens, 2019). The research adheres to the ethical clearance procedures of the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS), University of Pretoria.

4.12.1. Ethical clearance

Prior to data collection, submission was made to the GIBS Ethics Committee for review. Upon approval based on the study's compliance with ethical standards, including informed consent, confidentiality and data protection the researcher proceeded with the data collection.

4.12.2. Informed consent

Participants were provided with detailed information outlining the purpose of the study, procedures, potential risks and their rights. Written informed consent were obtained before the participation of each participant, including permission to record the online focus group sessions (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

4.12.3. Confidentiality and anonymity

All data is confidential and anonymised to protect participant identities. Pseudonyms were used in transcripts and reports, and identifiable information removed. Data will be stored securely for 10 years on a google drive cloud platform with restricted access.

4.12.4. Voluntary participation

Participants were informed that their participation is entirely voluntary and were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. No incentives were offered, ensuring that participation was based on genuine interest and willingness.

4.13. Validity assurance

In qualitative research, validity is conceptualised through credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Creswell, 2017). This study ensured validity through methodological triangulation to cross-verify findings. Rich, thick descriptions to support contextual understanding were employed. Continuous peer debriefing with an academic supervisor to challenge interpretations and systematic coding and theme development using established frameworks formed part of the validity assurance (Clarke & Braun, 2016). These procedures collectively ensured that the study's findings are trustworthy, replicable and can be applied to similar contexts, particularly in emerging markets with diverse consumer bases.

4.14. Limitations of the research design and methods

While the qualitative, interpretivist methodology were adopted in this study, offering rich insights into consumer perceptions and marketing strategies, several limitations must be acknowledged.

4.14.1. Limited generalisability

Due to the purposive sampling and the small sample size (29 participants), the findings may not be generalisable to the entire South African population. Instead, the research

aims for analytical generalisability, offering insights that may be transferable to similar multicultural and emerging market contexts (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

4.14.2. Geographic constraints

The study was geographically confined to Gauteng province. While Gauteng is demographically diverse, it may not fully capture regional variations in consumer behaviour across South Africa's other provinces, such as KwaZulu-Natal or the Western Cape (Statistics South Africa, 2025).

4.14.3. Temporal limitations

The study captured consumer perceptions at a single point in time. Given the dynamic nature of marketing and consumer behaviour, longitudinal research would be necessary to investigate how attitudes and responses change over time (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

4.14.4. Resource and time constraints

Qualitative research requires time and significant effort for data collection, transcription, and data analysis. The scope of this research was shaped by practical constraints, which may have limited the breadth of data collected.

4.15. Potential biases

Despite efforts to ensure rigor, potential biases may influence the study.

4.15.1. Researcher bias

Given the primary instrument is online focus groups, data collection and analysis, the interpretations of the research data may be influenced by personal beliefs, cultural background, or prior knowledge. Reflective journaling and peer debriefing was used to mitigate this bias (Flick, 2022).

4.16. Challenges in data collection

While the data collection methods identified for this research were carefully selected to align with the research objectives and theoretical framework, several challenges were encountered during the process, such as participants who committed to participating not showing up and network issues during online focus groups. Challenges of this nature are common in qualitative research, where issues of participant engagement, technological constraints, and contextual unpredictability often arise. As Saraswati

(2025) notes, qualitative research faces persistent methodological concerns, including difficulties in maintaining rigor when unexpected complexities occur, requiring researchers to adopt adaptive strategies to preserve trustworthiness and validity. In this study, such challenges were addressed through flexible scheduling, contingency planning and iterative adjustments to ensure methodological integrity and maintain the depth and reliability of the data collected.

4.16.1. Participant recruitment

Recruiting a diverse and representative sample was challenging, particularly in ensuring balanced representation across race, gender, language and socio-economic status. Although purposive sampling is effective in targeting information-rich participants, it required extensive outreach and consistent follow-up to secure participation (Maree & Pietersen, 2020).

4.16.2. Scheduling and availability

Given the professional and personal commitments of participants, scheduling focus groups proved difficult. The use of virtual platforms such as Microsoft Teams in this case was used to mitigate this issue by offering flexibility, but it also introduced limitations related to internet connectivity and digital literacy for some participants (Flick, 2022).

4.16.3. Social desirability bias

The likelihood of participants offering responses perceived as socially desirable, rather than those that may be accurately reflective of their true beliefs or experiences exists. Particularly when discussing sensitive topics such as race, identity, and inclusion. This bias can affect the authenticity of responses and is a known limitation in self-reported data (Patton, 2018). To address this, the researcher emphasised confidentiality and created a non-judgmental focus group environment.

4.16.4. Selection bias

A key limitation of this study arises from the sampling strategy. While purposive sampling is appropriate for qualitative research aimed at capturing rich, context-specific insights, the reliance on the researcher's personal and professional networks introduces a notable risk of selection bias (Maree & Pietersen, 2020). Recruiting participants primarily from existing connections can lead to a sample that is less diverse in socio-economic background, cultural orientation and lived experiences,

thereby constraining the variability of perspectives represented in the data (Robinson, 2014). This homogeneity may inadvertently skew findings toward viewpoints that align with the researcher's social circles rather than reflecting the broader heterogeneity of South Africa's automotive consumer base (Heckman, 1990).

Moreover, network-based recruitment can create implicit social pressures that influence participant responses. Individuals who share personal or professional ties with the researcher may feel compelled to provide socially desirable answers or avoid expressing critical views, which can compromise the authenticity of the data (Bryman, 2016). Such dynamics increase the risk of confirmation bias, where findings unintentionally reinforce the researcher's pre-existing assumptions (Robinson, 2014). These limitations underscore the importance of acknowledging how sampling decisions shape interpretive outcomes and the need for reflexivity throughout the research process (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

To mitigate these risks, the study implemented strategies such as snowball sampling, clear communication of voluntary participation, assurances of confidentiality and anonymity and triangulation with document analysis to enhance credibility. These practices align with established qualitative research standards for trustworthiness. Ting et al. (2025) emphasise that snowball sampling is particularly effective for accessing hard-to-reach populations but requires transparency and ethical safeguards to minimise bias and protect participant privacy. Similarly, Kang and Hwang (2023) highlight that confidentiality and anonymity are essential for maintaining trust and integrity in research processes. Nonetheless, reliance on the researcher's network remains a limitation that constrains transferability, a common concern in non-probability sampling designs.

4.16.5. Interpretation of marketing content

During document analysis, interpreting the intended meaning of visual and textual elements in marketing materials presented challenges. Cultural symbols, language choices and imagery may have been interpreted differently by different audiences. To mitigate this, the researcher triangulated interpretations with participant feedback and contextualised findings within the South African socio-cultural landscape (Krippendorff, 2022).

4.17. Conclusion

Chapter 4 has outlined a rigorous and context-sensitive methodological framework designed to explore how Chinese automotive OEMs can develop inclusive marketing communication strategies in South Africa. Anchored in an interpretivist paradigm, the study adopted qualitative methods, with online focus groups, along with document analysis to capture the nuanced interplay between consumer identity, institutional norms and marketing practices. The incorporation of thematic and content analysis ascertained methodological triangulation, fortifying the credibility, dependability and confirmability of findings (Clarke & Braun, 2016; Krippendorff, 2022). By prioritising participant voice and contextual interpretation, the research design was in alignment with the study's theoretical foundations and strategic objectives.

The chapter also acknowledges limitations related to generalisability, geographic scope and potential biases, while outlining adaptive strategies to mitigate these challenges. Overall, the methodological approach provided a robust foundation for generating actionable insights into inclusive marketing in multicultural emerging markets, thereby contributing to both academic discourse and strategic practice (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Kipnis et al., 2020).

5. CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

5.1. Presentation of findings

This chapter presents and discusses empirical findings on how diversity in marketing communication (language, representation, and local cultural cues) influences South African consumers' perceptions and choices, with a specific focus on Chinese automotive OEMs operating in South Africa. The analysis integrates demographic data, brand preferences and participant narratives. The analysis aimed at responding to the research questions outlined in chapter 3 through synthesis of four online focus groups (FG1–FG4), the themes, and content analysis being interpreted through the study's theoretical lenses outlined earlier in chapter 2 (Institutional Theory, Homophily Theory and the TPB). The chapter:

1. Profiles participants who participated and their baseline stances on Chinese car brands
2. Presents themes linked to RQ1 and RQ2
3. Integrates evidence across focus groups 1 to 4 (FG1–FG4), content analysis and
4. Derives strategy implications for Chinese OEMs in South Africa

The evidence triangulates the four online focus groups (conducted 11-18 September 2025). The four online focus group participants selected their preferred focus group based on their availability. The outcome of the online focus group participant dispersion profiles are depicted in Table 5 below (Table 6 below provides the race/ethnicity dispersion short keys).

Table 5: Focus group participants profiles

Focus group	Participants (n)	Age	Gender dispersion	Race/ethnicity dispersion	Consider Chinese car brand?	Chinese brand preference
FG1	5	31- 43	3= F; 2= M	3= BA;1= CA; 1= CO	3 Yes / 2 No	BYD, Jaecoo, Jetour,
FG2	7	18- 56	5= F; 2= M	AI= 2; 3= BA; 2= CA; 1= CO	5 Yes / 1 No / 1 N/A	Chery, GWM, Jetour, OMODA,
FG3	8	18- 43	5= F; 3= M	BA= 6;2= CA	3 Yes (incl. EV-only) / 5 No	Jetour, any EV
FG4	9	18- 56	4= F; 5= M	AI= 2; 5= BA; 2= CA;	3 Yes / 5 No / 1 N/A	Beijing, Chery, GWM

* Aggregates stance derived from notes: qualitative rationales elaborated in 5.4.4

Table 6: Race/Ethnicity short key

Race/Ethnicity	Short key description
Asian/Indian	AI
Black African	BA
Caucasian	CA
Coloured	CO

Some early signals from the profile registers that were pull factors for “Yes”/ “Maybe” I would consider a Chinese vehicle included, value for money, styling and feature density (e.g., Chery Tiggo 8 Pro, Jetour, Jaecoo J5/J7, GWM Tank, BYD).

Evidence of consumer Chinese vehicle consideration:

Early signals of pull factors for Chinese vehicles
<i>“budget is everything. And I think with the Chinese vehicles obviously coming into the market, you are seeing that a lot of them are a bit comfortable and are a bit more affordable” 3:180 ¶ 129 in Online Focus Group 3</i>
<i>“I would love to have that. Um. But obviously it doesn’t suit my pocket. Um, um. So yeah, I like a Chinese brand at the moment” 6:208 ¶ 175 in Online Focus Group 1</i>

Push factors for “No” I would not consider a Chinese vehicle included reliability, after sales/parts, poor resale value and brand image concerns.

Early signals of push factors for Chinese vehicles
<i>“then from a Chinese point of view. Because of historic perception, I think you’d probably think of the after sales of this, right? Meaning should you have an accident. Is Jetour going to have parts for me in literally two days? Is Cherry going to have a certain part for me? So I think those are the kind of decisions that you can think of before making a purchase. I think all these external factors, I think we can basically categorise them into one meaning” 3:191 ¶ 156 in Online Focus Group 3</i>
<i>“I sit down and I think and I look and I say, OK, why am I not seeing Haval’s more on the roads the way they were two years ago? What’s going on with them? So yeah, I won’t jump onto the bandwagon for the Chinese vehicles. I’m still staunch on German, but that was embedded in me by external factors” 5:189 ¶ 117 in Online Focus Group 4</i>

The data analysis bore eight themes that aligned with the constructs that form part of the conceptual framework presented in chapter 2. The eight themes that were identified were mapped. Crucial to the study was identifying varying views, similarities and comparative analysis among participants and across the four focus groups given the diverse dispersion of participants who indicatively represent the lay of the land in South Africa, therefore, legitimising their views which craft the strategies deemed necessary for Chinese OEMs operating in South Africa affirming the inductive nature of the data analysis.

Given qualitative research is exploratory in nature and participant narratives are deemed as insights which can be applied to the study's phenomenon, the researcher indicates whether a topic arose frequently, occasionally, or rarely (including not at all) in the online focus group discussions. To enhance interpretive clarity, the frequency of theme-related discussions across focus groups was quantified and visualised. The visualisations provide a comparative view of which themes dominated discussions in each group, thereby offering insights into the salience of issues among different consumer segments.

5.2. Restatement of the research aim and questions

This study's aim is to explore how Chinese automotive OEMs can develop and execute marketing communication strategies that enable them to connect credibly and inclusively with South African consumers and to understand how diversity cues shape brand attitudes and purchase intentions.

Research Questions:

RQ1: How can Chinese automotive OEMs develop inclusive marketing communication strategies that align with the preferences of South Africa's diverse consumer base?

RQ 2: How does diversity in marketing communication influence consumer decision-making in the South African automotive sector?

5.3. RQ1: How can Chinese automotive OEMs develop inclusive marketing communication strategies that align with the preferences of South Africa's diverse consumer base?

With inference from RQ1, this section discusses the themes linked to South African consumer preferences and inclusive marketing communication strategies. Through

data analysis, four themes emerged under this research question. Namely, localised marketing and cultural relevance, diversity in marketing and representation, marketing exclusion and disconnect, emotional resonance and storytelling. These themes collectively underscore the importance of cultural alignment, authentic representation and emotional engagement in marketing communication strategies.

5.3.1. Frequency analysis and interpretation

Table 7 below summarises the themes, key discussion topics and the frequency of mentions (numbers in the coloured blocked) across focus groups 1 to 4 (FG1–FG4), with darker shades indicating higher intensity of discussion.

Table 7: Themes, key topics and frequency of mentions (RQ1)

		3: Online Focus Group 3 237	5: Online Focus Group 4 217	6: Online Focus Group 1 246	7: Online Focus Group 2 370	Totals
(RQ1) Theme 1: Localised marketing and cultural relevance	4 40	6	10	9	15	40
(RQ1) Theme 2: Diversity in marketing and representation	6 62	15	11	14	22	62
(RQ1) Theme 3: Marketing exclusion and disconnect	2 26	5	7	7	7	26
(RQ1) Theme 4: Emotional resonance and storytelling	7 143	40	36	31	36	143
Totals		66	64	61	80	271

Darker shades in the frequency table indicate higher frequencies, enabling quick identification of dominant themes and group-specific emphases. The shading reveals that FG2 exhibited the highest engagement across all themes, particularly on emotional resonance and storytelling; and diversity in marketing and representation, suggesting that participants in this group prefer strongly emotionally engaging advertising and representation. FG1, FG3 and FG4 also emphasised the importance of diversity in marketing and storytelling, aligning with the assertion that authentic representation in advertising enhances brand relatability and trust. Conversely, marketing exclusion manifested in perceptions of foreign or generic ads and was a recurring concern, reinforcing the need for localised creative strategies.

5.3.2. RQ1: Theme 1: Localised marketing and cultural relevance

5.3.2.1. Evidence of localised marketing and cultural relevance

Participants emphasised the importance of advertising that reflects South African culture, language and humour. Ads using colloquial expressions and local references were perceived as authentic and engaging.

(RQ1) Theme1: Localised marketing and cultural relevance

“Toyota, the new Toyota that or was it Ford Sherbert, I can’t remember. But it had like to do with the farms and stuff, you know, as South Africa, a lot of, you know, you get

a lot of farmers and stuff and you know, you can relate because if I take my life experience, you know, we went to the farm a lot and usually it was bakkie . So when the new bakkie came out, you're like, OK. That is something that you know, I relate to and that I feel you know, had a voice in South Africa, impact on most South African. So there I would say, you know, it would be a Toyota ad or Ford ad for a new bakkie that was really an ad made for South Africa". [3:161 ¶ 68 in Online Focus Group 3](#)

"I think any ad that was like really relevant to me was anything I could relate to. I'm not sure what the ad was, but I remember they talked about the load shedding and let's say if they ever talk about the potholes in the ad or something". [3:208 ¶ 76 in Online Focus Group 3](#)

"Just to add on to the Nando's thing, they current with current affairs and also their ads on saying this is how we fry our chicken or whatever. Sometimes it's just something that's like so completely like the family having a conversation around the table and the one kid can't speak vernacular and they're trying to teach a kid vernacular and like there's like this white guy who's like trying to also learn. It's like it's funny and without saying we sell chicken, but they're eating chicken, you know? And at the end you say Nando's, so it doesn't have to be. This is the car, drive the car. Sometimes it's something else that engages you. And then at the end you say here's the car because we're in a day and age where like if I want to find out more about the car, I can just pick up my phone and Google the car and I get to get all the information. I can watch YouTube videos. That's how I look at cars. I look at YouTube videos. I look at stuff on online". [7:343 ¶ 285 in Online Focus Group 2](#)

"But the second you come to South African soil, I feel like brands need to kind of take that and kind of incorporate it into the South African market and kind of bring more of a cultural element to it. kind of speak to us. That's why I feel. Brands like Toyota, like with this whole with the Hilux campaign and it's not a Bakkie it's a Hilux, we could all resonate to that like whether you are a booit somewhere in the Free state or if you're somewhere out in Fourways but it doesn't matter. We could still resonate to it because it brought culture back and it made it proud to South Africa". [6:213 ¶ 54 – 55 in Online Focus Group 1](#)

"it's nice when you can relate, when you can go like, oh ****, that shot was taken in Cape Town. That's like Chaplain's Peak Drive. Like it like brings it home. It is that thing of like where you can identify even when movies are shot in South Africa". [6:204 ¶ 148 in Online Focus Group 1](#)

"the second you come to South African soil, I feel like brands need to kind of take that and kind of incorporate it into the South African market and kind of bring more of a cultural element to it. kind of speak to us. That's why I feel. Brands like Toyota, like with this whole with the Hilux campaign and it's not a Bakkie it's a Hilux, we could all resonate to that like whether you are a booit somewhere in the Free state or if you're somewhere out in Fourways but it doesn't matter. We could still resonate to it because it brought culture back and it made it proud to South Africa. To an extent, even though none of these brands are originally from South Africa, we've still adapted it. We've still made it our own. And I think that's where advertising can become very, very powerful if we kind of put the right direction and the right focus on it". [6:175 ¶ 54 – 55 in Online Focus Group 1](#)

"I do like it when they use South African words like Bakkie. My little boy loves that stupid ad where it's not a Hilux, it's a i Bakkie. It's a Hilux where the grandfather carves it out of wood and then he sees the real car. So I do think that makes it more relatable for us when they use words like bakkie, 'cause that's a very typical South African word that I think most people in South Africa, doesn't matter their mother tongue, understand that word" [5:168 ¶ 60 in Online Focus Group 4](#)

“if there's like colloquial language like South African like phrases that we resonate with, I think it speaks to me. So where I can relate and trends because that's the in thing if I may say so if I think Nando's does a very good job at this way. They use our current affairs in our country to find humor in it and it really just drives like it does justice for the ad. So if there's colloquial and like current affairs or things topics that are trending within. The advertisements I'm more likely to watch it till the end”. 5:163
[¶ 50 in Online Focus Group 4](#)

5.3.2.2. In-case analysis: Localised marketing and cultural relevance

Participants in FG1 strongly emphasised the importance of cultural alignment in automotive advertising, but their interpretations varied by gender and cultural background. FG1 articulated that, ads using colloquial language like South African phrase resonate deeply, citing Nando's as a benchmark for cultural humour and relevance. This sentiment was echoed by FG1-03 (18:06), who argued that using home languages brings authenticity “if you sell a VW Polo in Mexico, you will have to speak the lingo of the Mexicans” and makes the brand feel closer to the people.

Male participants such as FG1-02 (21:16) framed localisation as a matter of cultural pride and aspirational identity, praising Toyota's Hilux campaign for “bringing culture back”. FG1-02, who self-identified as a “car nut”, linked localisation to heritage and masculinity, referencing rugged imagery and off-road capability as culturally resonant. Citing Jeep ads that depict adventurous lifestyles, suggesting that such narratives align with his personal identity and social aspirations.

In contrast, female participants such as FG1-05 (12:43) favoured aesthetic and emotional appeal, recalling Renault's “Va Va Voom” ad as a formative influence. Her perspective suggests that visual storytelling and aspirational aesthetics matter more than technical specifications. FG1-03 (18:25), who grew up in Uitenhage, a historically industrial town, added a regional-cultural dimension, arguing that VW's dominance in her community shaped her expectations of brand authenticity. This illustrates how race and geography intersect with localisation preferences, as Black African participants from industrial hubs often over emphasise the importance of brands tied to local employment and economic identity.

Interestingly, FG1-02 (21:16) provided an operational perspective, noting that some OEMs, in this instance Suzuki “rework every single ad for South Africa”, even customising racial representation, which he viewed as a sign of respect for local diversity. While most participants agreed on the value of localisation, FG1-04 (11:35) offered a nuanced critique, suggesting that current ads often target extremes, either

youthful adventure or older luxury, leaving mid-life consumers feeling excluded. This highlights a life-stage gap in localised messaging.

FG2 participants reinforced the need for visual and contextual localisation but introduced gendered racial nuances. Black African female participants such as FG2-04 stressed the importance of linguistic respect and family-oriented messaging, linking localisation to inclusivity and cultural pride. FG2-01 (48:09) expressed appreciation for ads shot in recognisable South African landscapes, such as Chapman's Peak (in Cape Town), arguing that such imagery “brings it home”. FG2-04 (55:36) drew parallels with Nando's, praising its ability to weave humor and current affairs into campaigns, contrasting this with automotive ads that “throw specs at you”. FG2-03 (1:03) critiqued global templates, describing them as “lazy” and disconnected from local realities. However, FG2-06 (33:16) downplayed the role of representation, arguing that seeing someone who looks like her in an ad “doesn't matter” compared to functional messaging. This divergence suggests heterogeneity in consumer expectations, with some prioritising cultural cues and others focusing on product utility.

FG3 participants associated localisation with functional realism and cultural symbolism. Like FG1-01 (16:21) from FG1, FG3-05 (18:58) cited Toyota's Hilux ad as an example of cultural resonance, noting its alignment with rural lifestyles and farming culture. FG3-06 (22:38) emphasised the power of ads referencing everyday struggles like load shedding and potholes, arguing that such content “automatically creates a better connection.” FG3-02 (23:55) critiqued ads that mimic GenZ slang, labeling them “contrived and cringe,” suggesting that inauthentic attempts at localisation can backfire. FG3 also added that influencer-driven campaigns often feel more relevant than traditional TV ads, signaling a shift toward digital-first localisation strategies. Gendered differences also surfaced, with male participants (FG3-03, FG3-06) prioritising performance and individuality, whereas female participants (FG3-08) prioritised comfort and practicality, linking localisation to relatable life-stage narratives rather than rugged imagery.

FG4 participants identified linguistic diversity as a marker of respect with women leading this discourse. FG4-03 (15:44) stated, “I do think it makes it more relatable for us when they use words like bakkie, cause that is a very typical South African word”. Similarly, FG4-07 (14:50) argued that incorporating multiple South African languages and phrases signals cultural sensitivity. These views suggest that language inclusion functions as a proxy for cultural legitimacy, particularly among Black African female

participants. Unlike FG2, where some participants dismissed representation, FG4 participants consistently linked language inclusion to emotional engagement, reinforcing the symbolic power of vernacular in marketing.

5.3.2.3. Cross-case analysis: Localised marketing and cultural relevance

Across all four focus groups, localisation emerged as a non-negotiable expectation, but the dimensions of localisation varied. FG1 and FG2 prioritised cultural symbolism and humour, frequently referencing Nando's as a gold standard. FG3 introduced a pragmatic dimension, advocating for ads that reflect socio-economic realities such as load shedding and poor road conditions, issues absent from global templates. FG4, in contrast, elevated linguistic authenticity, framing language as a channel for emotional connection.

While consensus existed on the inadequacy of globalised ads, participants differed on executional priorities. FG1 and FG2 emphasised visual localisation (e.g., South African landscapes), whereas FG3 and FG4 stressed contextual and linguistic cues. Interestingly, FG2-03's assertion that representation doesn't matter "For me, I think that is slightly irrelevant now because we live in a South Africa that is a way of diversity. So, you know, could be an Indian guy, a coloured guy or whatever. The message will still be the same for me" contrasts sharply with FG4-08's insistence on vernacular inclusion "if there's like colloquial language like South African like phrases that we resonate with, I think it speaks to me", suggesting segment-specific sensitivities. This heterogeneity implies that Chinese OEMs cannot adopt a one-size-fits-all approach, instead, they must deploy segmented localisation strategies tailored to demographic and psychographic profiles.

The cross-case synthesis also reveals generational nuances. Younger participants (FG2-07, FG3-01, FG4-05) favoured digital-first localisation via influencer partnerships "if there's like colloquial language like South African like phrases that we resonate with, I think it speaks to me", while older participants (FG1-02, FG2-05) valued traditional media infused with cultural codes. This observation supports that platform choice mediates cultural resonance, underscoring the need for omnichannel localisation.

Racial dynamics further complicated these preferences. Black African participants across FG2 and FG4 consistently emphasised linguistic authenticity and community-oriented narratives, framing localisation as a vehicle for cultural affirmation. For instance, FG4-08's insistence on linguistic inclusion contrasts with FG2-03's

indifference to representation, revealing intra-racial heterogeneity shaped by individual identity orientations. Caucasian participants, particularly in FG1 and FG3, anchored heritage and aspirational imagery, placing halo importance on brands like Jeep and Volkswagen as cultural touchstones. This suggests that localisation strategies must navigate racialised brand hierarchies, balancing heritage cues with inclusive symbolism.

Gendered differences were equally salient. Female participants across FG1, FG2, and FG4 prioritised practicality, family representation, and linguistic respect, whereas male participants favoured performance, individuality, and rugged aesthetics. For example, FG1-05's nostalgic attachment to Renault's "Va Va Voom" ad contrasts with FG1-02's enthusiasm for Jeep's off-road imagery, illustrating gendered significance of aspiration. These findings corroborate that advertising operates as a cultural text, encoding and reproducing gendered and racialised meanings that shape consumer subjectivities.

5.3.2.4. Conclusion of analysis: Localised marketing and cultural relevance

Across FG1–FG4, local language use and everyday cultural cues were repeatedly read as markers of respect and credibility. The evidence unequivocally demonstrates that localisation is a strategic imperative for Chinese OEMs seeking legitimacy in South Africa. However, localisation has no uniformity, it is intersectional, shaped by the interplay of race, gender, and age. Black African female participants framed localisation as a matter of cultural respect, privileging linguistic authenticity and inclusive narratives. Caucasian male participants by contrast, placed great importance on heritage and aspirational ruggedness, while younger participants across racial lines advocated for digital-first localisation anchored in influencer culture.

These findings corroborate Institutional Theory, which posits that organisational legitimacy hinges on alignment with societal norms and resonate with the assertion that contextual resonance drives consumer engagement. They also demonstrate that localisation is not merely a creative choice but a socio-political act, mediating power relations embedded in race, gender, and class. For Chinese OEMs, the strategic implication is clear, adopt a glocalisation model that blends global brand equity with hyper-local cultural codes, deploying segmented creative strategies that speak to the plural identities of South African consumers.

5.3.3. RQ1: Theme 2: Diversity in marketing and representation

5.3.3.1. Evidence of diversity in marketing and representation

Participants valued authentic inclusive representation of South Africa's racial, gender, and lifestyle diversity in advertising. However, forced or tokenistic diversity was criticised.

(RQ1) Theme 2: Diversity in marketing and representation
<p><i>"I feel very jealous, if I see somebody who reminds me of me driving a **** car, of course. But God, it gives that relatability. It gives that emotion where it's achievable to. Get that car, 'cause you're like, yeah, that's somebody that looks like me, talks like me. Cool. That could possibly be me. So puts you in inverted commas in the driver's seat. So that definitely, well, it affects me emotionally".</i></p> <p>6:13 ¶ 74 – 75 in Online Focus Group 1</p>
<p><i>"You can probably go diverse, but sometimes you try and go too diverse and you miss the point".</i></p> <p>7:120 ¶ 261 – 263 in Online Focus Group 2</p>
<p><i>"But profound in representation, car brands are starting to show real diversity, you know, different races, body types. You know, even family structures, you get the disabilities, the genders and the identities. And if I have to use an example for that, the Sabaru ads with LGBTQ plus families weren't just inclusive, but they were also quite revolutionary when they first aired. You know, this is profound because it affirms what people see themselves on screens".</i></p> <p>3:207 ¶ 204 in Online Focus Group 3</p>
<p><i>"Yeah, also the same. I do agree with what FG1- 01: and FG1-02: said. I think just the ability to be able to imagine yourself in the car by seeing someone who reminds you of yourself almost".</i></p> <p>6:214 ¶ 79 in Online Focus Group 1</p>
<p><i>"If it's someone, like I said, they don't have to look like us or speak our language, but is it if it's someone that we follow on social media? As soon as you see them getting sponsored by a brand, that intrigues me saying, OK, what's the brand about? You know what type of cars they have"</i></p> <p>3:158 ¶ 62 in Online Focus Group 3</p>
<p><i>"think just the ability to be able to imagine yourself in the car by seeing someone who reminds you of yourself almost".</i></p> <p>6:182 ¶ 79 in Online Focus Group 1</p>
<p><i>Yeah, yeah, I do. There's like, person said, there's definitely more of a range of people that we're seeing in ads. There's more female focused ads. There is youth focused ads, I'm not seeing much for older people, but I'm just thinking about how Jaguar just launched some concept electric concept car and they went straight for the LGBTQ+ community and that whole woke vibe and all of that and it wasn't received very well by everyone but they did a strong attempt to include a whole new demographic in their marketing, which I thought was quite positive. So yeah, I am seeing brands kind of spread their demographic a bit in their marketing.</i></p> <p>5:197 ¶ 135 in Online Focus Group 4</p>

5.3.3.2. In-case analysis: Diversity in marketing and representation

FG1 participants consistently linked diversity in advertising to emotional relatability and aspirational identification, but their interpretations varied by gender and cultural

background. FG1-01 (24:03) articulated that seeing someone who “reminds me of me” in an ad creates a sense of achievability, stating “It gives that emotion where it’s achievable... it puts you in the driver’s seat”. FG1-02 (24:36) echoed this sentiment, emphasising relatability as a trigger for emotional engagement, while FG1-04 (24:52) reinforced the idea that representation enables consumers to “imagine yourself in the car”.

Female participants, however, nuanced this discourse by linking representation to social validation and empowerment. FG1-05 (25:10) recalled feeling inspired when a colleague purchased a premium car, framing it as evidence that “as a young Black girl, some of these things you can achieve”. This illustrates how race and gender intersect to shape the symbolic economy of advertising, where representation functions as a cultural script for aspirational identity. FG1-03 (25:41) added that representation fosters envious admiration, reinforcing the affective dimension of diversity in marketing.

FG2 participants offered a more critical and uncertain perspective on diversity. FG2-05 (53:45) warned that “sometimes you try too hard to be diverse and you miss the point”, critiquing performative inclusivity as counterproductive. This sentiment was echoed by FG2-02 (47:27), who argued that tokenistic representation undermines authenticity, suggesting that diversity should be organic rather than ornamental. Gendered differences emerged in how diversity was evaluated. Female participants such as FG2-04 and FG2-06 expressed conditional appreciation for diversity, emphasising that representation matters only when it aligns with functional relevance and life-stage narratives. FG2-03(33:33) dismissed superficial diversity, asserting “how it matters though is with regards to the positioning”. This contrasts sharply with FG1-05’s emphasis on identity affirmation, revealing intra-gender heterogeneity shaped by individual value orientations.

FG3 participants put emphasis on progressive inclusivity, celebrating ads that disrupt fixed general roles and racial stereotypes. FG3-05 (1:02:06) applauded Subaru’s LGBTQ+ family ads as referring to them as “revolutionary,” framing them as cultural interventions that affirm marginalised identities. This perspective was shared by FG3-03 (25:23), who argued that “any ad that speaks to you, you can relate to most” underscoring the emotional power of inclusive storytelling.

However, racialised nuances surfaced in how diversity was interpreted. Black African participants such as FG3-07 (2:48) linked representation to status recognition,

asserting that aspirational imagery featuring Black African professionals signals social progress. Caucasian participants, by contrast, were less vocal on racial representation, focusing instead on lifestyle congruence and performance cues. Gender differences mirrored those in FG1 and FG2, women prioritised family-oriented inclusivity, while men prioritised individualistic and performance-driven narratives.

FG4 participants reinforced the psychological salience of representation, particularly among women who asserted that seeing someone who reminds them of themselves makes the ads more powerful, framing diversity as a catalyst for identification and trust. Male participants in FG4, however, exhibited contradictions toward diversity, prioritising emotional storytelling and product aesthetics over representational politics.

5.3.3.3. Cross-case analysis: Diversity in marketing and representation

Across all focus groups, diversity in marketing was universally acknowledged as desirable, but it varied along racial, gendered, and generational lines. Black African female participants across FG1, FG2, and FG4 consistently framed diversity as a mechanism of cultural affirmation and aspirational validation, exemplified by FG1-05's narrative of empowerment and FG4-03's insistence on self-recognition in advertising scripts. These perspectives anchor that inclusive representation fosters brand intimacy among historically marginalised groups.

Conversely, Caucasian and coloured male participants (FG1-02, FG3-06) and some Black African male participants (FG2-02, FG4-05) adopted a more instrumentalist stance, evaluating diversity through the lens of aesthetic coherence and narrative authenticity rather than identity politics. This suggests that masculine consumer subjectivities irrespective of race, tend to resist politicised representations.

Generational differences further stratified these discourses. Younger participants (FG3-05, FG4-04) placed emphasis on intersectional inclusivity, celebrating ads such as Subaru and Jaguar that normalise LGBTQ+ families and non-traditional gender roles. Older participants, however, exhibited uncertainty toward progressive diversity, framing it as disconnected from functional messaging.

5.3.3.4. Conclusion of analysis: Diversity in marketing and representation

The analysis reveals that diversity in marketing is not a uniform construct, it is mediated by race, gender, and age. For Black African female participants, representation

functions as a symbolic resource for identity affirmation, while for male participants across racial lines, diversity is evaluated through narrative authenticity and aesthetic integration. These findings corroborate Institutional Theory, which suggests that organisational legitimacy is contingent upon alignment with societal norms and extend that inclusive representation must be both authentic and intersectional to avoid the pitfalls of tokenism.

For Chinese OEMs, the strategic implication is clear, diversity must transcend demographic optics to become a narrative logic, embedding inclusivity within storytelling architectures that resonate across plural identities. This entails deploying segmented creative strategies that accommodate the intersectional subjectivities of South African consumers, thereby transforming diversity from a compliance metric into a cultural asset.

5.3.4. RQ1: Theme 3: Marketing exclusion and disconnect

5.3.4.1. Evidence of marketing exclusion and disconnect

Participants criticised ads that felt foreign or irrelevant, noting that such ads failed to resonate with their lived realities describing them as emotionally disconnected.

<p><i>(RQ1) Theme 3: Marketing exclusion and disconnect</i></p>
<p><i>Volvo made an ad like with this couple and this well-behaved child sitting in the car and they were like driving through the mountains and it was showing how safe Volvo was. But if you have a child, they don't behave calmly and the cars never clean and the couple also looked very glamorous and handsome and I didn't. I couldn't relate to that at all. 5:169 ¶ 62 in Online Focus Group 4</i></p>
<p><i>So for me, more radio than TV on that, because a lot of TV ads nowadays are very overseas driven ads, you know, they take them from overseas and then try to make them feel nice and kind of like accommodate South Africans. So I haven't seen anything amazing like back then that you can always remember like your it's not inside, it's on top. 3:163 ¶ 74 in Online Focus Group 3</i></p>
<p><i>there has been a couple of ads, especially you know when you're listening to radio and then it's specifically like targeted to mothers and then you don't even want to visualize this car anymore or like. When you thinking of family, you don't even visualize it anymore because you're like, OK, it's targeted for mothers. So um, I think it was a Kia, one of those Kias. I heard it on radio and I was like, no. Even when I see that car and a male is driving it, I'm like, no, but it's not meant for you. You know, it's specifically cause of what that ad imprinted in my mind. 5:171 ¶ 66 in Online Focus Group 4</i></p>
<p><i>They just, they just lack relevance. Uh, and I'd say maybe a little bit too basic in in a sense 5:161 ¶ 44 in Online Focus Group 4</i></p>
<p><i>your Toyota Hilux ads are obviously skewed towards farm living, you know, outskirts. Which obviously means I'm not the target audience, you know? So your typical Afrikaans farmer, you know? So obviously I'm a city boy. I'm a Township boy. Definitely not for me. And to be fair, I think there's quite a lot of ads, man. 3:204 ¶ 196 in Online Focus Group 3</i></p>

there's not a lot of localizing going on. I mean, in the past, I don't know if it's still happening now. You'll even see the number plates is D what, what, what, what. So it's definitely not made for South Africa .So there was or is not a gap for you to have any local nuance or relevance with what's happening in our country. Like, oh, she's talking about dragging the VW's. They don't do that in the adverts [7:348 ¶ 309 in Online Focus Group 2](#)

just think, oh, they're a bit lazy. What a pity they don't get to localize. Shame for them, you know, the local team, what else can they do? There's very little that they that they'll do in that case. [7:351 ¶ 311 in Online Focus Group 2](#)

The Jaguar stuff. Yeah, they changed the logo and the colors and everything. It disturbed me. No, I didn't like it. Found very strange to me. [5:172 ¶ 67 in Online Focus Group 4](#)

So like my earlier comment regarding the one OEM, I know that reworks everything to match the market. Uh, Suzuki. But so then you get like others where you can see it's a generic like OK, this just plastered from another country even back down to the number plate on the vehicle. You can see that because if you rework that to fit in here which yeah you do understand cost this that and the other issue that other but then there's less like those ads those are bland for me. Because sometimes even in places that like where in the world in South Africa, are you going to find that [6:203 ¶ 145 in Online Focus Group 1](#)

5.3.4.2. In-case analysis: Marketing exclusion and disconnect

Participants in FG1 expressed strong dissatisfaction with ads perceived as foreign or culturally tone-deaf, framing them as emotionally disconnected from South African realities. FG4-03 (16:42) critiqued a Volvo ad featuring “a glamorous couple and a well-behaved child,” arguing that such imagery was “unrelatable” because it failed to reflect the messiness of real family life. This critique resonates with middle-aged female participants, who prioritised authenticity and life-stage congruence over aspirational perfection. FG1-02 (9:43) echoed this sentiment, lamenting the decline of emotionally resonant ads like Volkswagen’s iconic Kombi campaign, which he described as “all about family and lived experience”.

Male participants, however, framed exclusion through the lens of identity misalignment and lifestyle incongruence. FG1-04 (11:35) argued that current ads polarise audiences by targeting either “young thrill-seekers” or “older luxury consumers”, leaving mid-life professionals feeling invisible. This observation underscores the intersection of age and class in shaping perceptions of exclusion, suggesting that life-stage segmentation gaps exacerbate feelings of cultural disconnect.

FG2 participants reinforced the critique of globalised creative templates, describing them as “lazy” and “irrelevant”. FG2-03 (1:01:29) highlighted the persistence of Eurocentric aesthetics, noting that some ads “still carry European number plates”, which he interpreted as a symbolic belittling of local identity. Female participants in FG2 like FG2-04 (41:17) recounted an ad featuring a rapping influencer promoting a compact car, dismissing it as “not for me” and “turn-off material”. Her critique reflects a generational and gendered disapproval, where attempts to court GenZ audiences alienate older women seeking functional and family-oriented narratives. The sentiment in FG2 pointed to platform misalignment, arguing that traditional TV ads fail to engage digitally native consumers, thereby compounding the sense of disconnect.

FG3 participants articulated exclusion as a function of cultural homogenisation and aspirational excess. FG3-04 (21:06) lamented that “most TV ads nowadays are overseas-driven”, contrasting them with legacy campaigns that “you could always remember”. This nostalgia for heritage advertising was most pronounced among older participants, who place importance on narrative continuity and cultural specificity.

Younger participants, however, reframed exclusion through the prism of invisibility, arguing that brands fail to leverage social media micro-targeting to deliver culturally relevant content. FG3-02 (11:59) asserted that “I keep seeing certain types of influencers who kept advertising, showing these cars, and then I started to have a different view about the car and it’s never even been my car type”, signalling that this type of advertising feels more real than TV ad revealing a generational shift in authenticity. Racial nuances also surfaced, Black African participants such as FG3-07, critiqued ads that ignore Black African middle-class lifestyles, framing such omissions as a symbolic nullification of post-apartheid mobility.

FG4 participants felt minimising or ignoring the importance of language led to a path of exclusion framing language as a symbolic anchor of cultural belonging, often associating it with a lack of respect for who we are. These perspectives were particularly salient among Black African female participants, who positioned language inclusion as a proxy for cultural recognition.

Male participants in FG4, however, articulated instances of blatant exclusion, attaching it to emotional voids, critiquing ads that specifically target a gender ostracising specific target groups “when you're listening to radio and then it's specifically like targeted to mothers and then you don't even want to visualize this car anymore or like. When you

are thinking of family, you don't even visualize it anymore because you're like, OK, it's targeted for mothers. So um, I think it was a Kia, one of those Kias. I heard it on radio, and I was like, no. Even when I see that car and a male is driving it, I'm like, no, but it's not meant for you. You know, it's specifically cause of what that ad imprinted in my mind" (FG4-05, 17:50). This gendered conflict underscores the plural logics of exclusion, where women prioritise symbolic recognition and men prefer affective engagement.

5.3.4.3. Cross-case analysis: Marketing exclusion and disconnect

Across all focus groups, marketing exclusion was universally condemned, but its markers varied along racial, gender and generational lines. Black African participants across FG2 and FG4 consistently framed exclusion as a function of minimising the importance of language and Eurocentric aesthetics, interpreting these omissions as structural acts of cultural marginalisation. In contrast, Caucasian participants expressed concern over the loss of continuity in brand storytelling, noting the disappearance of heritage campaigns that once connected brand identity to family and community values. The differences in gender views were equally pronounced. Female participants in FG1, FG2, and FG4 criticised advertisements that did not reflect their current life stages, viewing this as a lack of representation of motherhood and everyday domestic experiences. In contrast, male participants described exclusion in terms of how well the ads matched their lifestyle and personal image, placing more importance on visual appeal than on demographic representation.

Generational differences added further layers to these views. Older participants valued nostalgic TV ads, recalling iconic campaigns as meaningful and culturally familiar. Younger participants, however, preferred localised digital content and criticised brands for failing to use algorithms effectively to connect with them. This generational divide shows how different media platforms shape cultural relevance, highlighting the importance of using integrated strategies that blend traditional brand symbols with modern digital language.

5.3.4.4. Conclusion of analysis: Marketing exclusion and disconnect

The analysis shows that marketing exclusion is not just about perception, it stems from the structure of global creative industries that prioritise efficiency over cultural relevance. For Black African female participants exclusion was experienced as a lack of linguistic representation and symbolic visibility. Male participants from FG1 and FG4 of different racial backgrounds described exclusion as emotional disconnect and

misalignment with their lifestyles. These findings support Institutional Theory, which argues that organisations gain legitimacy by being culturally grounded and signaling that advertising can cause harm when it ignores local cultural meanings.

For Chinese OEMs, this points to two strategic priorities, move away from global one-size-fits-all templates by developing creative strategies tailored to local markets, ones that reflect diverse languages, cultural symbols, and life stages. Secondly, redefine what authenticity means by incorporating emotionally resonant storytelling and local digital expressions into campaigns, turning exclusion from a structural challenge into a strategic opportunity.

5.3.5. RQ1: Theme 4: Emotional resonance and storytelling

5.3.5.1. Emotional resonance and storytelling

Participants expressed a preference for ads that evoke emotion, nostalgia, and humour rather than purely functional messaging.

(RQ1) Theme 4: Emotional resonance and storytelling
<i>"Where it's a dad who's driving and like funny things are happening, like there's balloons kind of flying up and like there's like a big robot or something. And at the end he's driving to his house and the daughter's having like a birthday party or something. And each element he was seeing was a part of the birthday party. So in that sense, you're kind of asking like what's going on here and then at the end. And you go, oh, OK, I see. But it's a different take to like you're saying we're racing or we're in the mountains or we're driving by the beach, which is kind of boring, you know?"</i> 7:344 ¶ 292 in Online Focus Group 2
<i>"the same with Chickenlicken, also very clever. I don't know if it's the same ad agency, but Chickenlicken has got brilliant ads as well. They're very clever to the point and sometimes they're not selling the chicken, but there's a message behind it".</i> 7:352 ¶ 294 in Online Focus Group 2
<i>"I don't know if you remember the VW Kombi ads, David Cramer and you know there was the ads of the father that came home with the VW golf and he eventually gave it to his son and it was all emotional, you know that kind of lived experience, but then the more recent stuff and maybe understanding that you know brands change over time and you know they're also growing whatever. But that's where I feel they're missing perhaps today in our market as a kind of a relevance or my relevance, at least today for me, VW is missing it from what I'm used to and I think what I'm used to growing up and you know what I'm used to having seen with them. But these days it's just, it's very bland, if I can put it that way"</i> 6:171 ¶ 40 in Online Focus Group 1
<i>"I wanted to say somebody else who does marketing where they're not marketing their product is pineapple with their yeah cause a lot of their billboards like I love them like they're so witty"</i> 7:349 ¶ 316 in Online Focus Group 2
<i>"We had that great Alfa Romeo Junior ad that they showed with a guy from Money Heist. But I think it's more the story that you tell".</i> 7:353 ¶ 141 in Online Focus Group 2
<i>"I'll be honest, I cannot recall a car advert at the moment. I haven't. I don't think I've paid much attention to them to be fair. But there's one that comes to mind when I</i>

was younger and it was a Renault Clio, something to do with Vava voom. And I think that's also something that probably influenced my like for that car was, you know, it would zip through town and it was like such a cool car and the whole Vava voom saying like, oh, the car's got that, you know" [6:172 ¶ 44 in Online Focus Group 1](#)

"I think any ad that was like really relevant to me was anything I could relate to. I'm not sure what the ad was, but I remember they talked about the load shedding and let's say if they ever talk about the potholes in the ad or something. Like that, I feel like that has the biggest impact on me because I can feel like, OK, yeah, I drive every day through a pothole and I wonder if my wheel is fine and then we have load shedding. So I feel like anything or even with the rugby ads. So that's anything that you can relate with. I feel you automatically have a better connection to that. So you feel like, OK, let me look what's next, maybe I can relate to something else. So I think that that's the biggest thing for me with ads". [3:211 ¶ 76 in Online Focus Group 3](#)

"one of my favorite ads for car was it was that talking dog, you know, from Toyota. And I don't think he could have done it in any, I think there was an Afrikaans ad and there was an English one, but the English one was funnier and more relatable. So yeah, I would think English best translates to me because I relate to it. It's probably the language I speak 70% of the time" [5:166 ¶ 56 in Online Focus Group 4](#)

"Jeep as an example. A lot of people think of Jeep as only a status symbol, but it's much more. It's a lifestyle. It's living, living the lifestyle, live life without expectations and then be able to go wherever you want to go". [7:356 ¶ 23 in Online Focus Group 2](#)

"I used to drive an A3 Cabriolet, and I look at the car now and I'm just thinking, you know, and if I see like somebody with kids driving a three door, I'm like what's happening? You know what I mean? So for me, it's like it's life phase. It's where am I at in life? I'm sure when the kids are grown and they've left the house and I don't need a mom car anymore, my needs will change again and I'll be looking at, you know, a car that suits my life phase". [7:355 ¶ 170 in Online Focus Group 2](#)

"Get Nando's to do a couple of car ads and see what they come up with". [7:231 ¶ 276 – 277 in Online Focus Group 2](#)

"I think particularly if we look at you know the role that influencers have begun to have you know where we follow these influences and we like some of the things that they're doing and they help us kind of shape what our aspirations might be as a result of seeing them, you know, in the kind of vehicles that we might be interested in and also just from a practicality perspective as well, looking at where you are, whether it's, you living with your parents or you are at the beginning stages of your career or somewhere else, you know, further ahead, their influence can help shape not only where you think you are now, but also where you aspire to be at some point. So I think because of that you find that these advertisements grow in terms of how much they factor into your lived experiences, aspirational or current". [3:212 ¶ 44 in Online Focus Group 3](#)

"I'm not watching TV actively where I have adverts about cars. I'm not buying magazines anymore where I see adverts about cars. When I log into Instagram, I'll see an influencer, you know, who has a contract with Volvo, with Mercedes. And interestingly enough, I'm bumping into a lot of those who are aspirational type of lifestyle influencers. I'm like, OK. All right. So the advertising, the expensive high end,

I wonder if the market is actually buying this. So, yeah, so that's the interaction I have in terms of car advertising". [3:213 ¶ 48 in Online Focus Group 3](#)

"I think what I just wanted to say was I think that has a big impact on how you view cars and how you see it. It obviously depends on in what area you live. For instance, where I live in everybody there has got a Toyota or VW, you obviously think, OK, that's the upper class, so you obviously want a Toyota. So I think if you're surrounded with a car a lot, then you'll most likely like the car more, even though you don't even really know what else is there or so on" [3:146 ¶ 32 in Online Focus Group 3](#)

"I don't look at an ad and go, oh, all that tiny writing at the bottom is so interesting, you know what I mean? So it's more like, stop telling us about the car and just catch my attention and then I'll remember your ad. Like right now I remember a VW ad". [7:354 ¶ 290 in Online Focus Group 2](#)

5.3.5.2. In-case analysis: Emotional resonance and storytelling

Participants in FG1 expressed a strong preference for emotionally engaging advertising, contrasting it with current campaigns that focus mainly on technical features. FG1-02 (9:43) recalled Volkswagen's Kombi ad with David Kramer as "emotional" and "unforgettable", reflecting a desire for storytelling that builds cultural connection. FG1-01 echoed this, calling for ads to bring culture back, suggesting that emotional resonance can help legitimise brands culturally.

Gender differences shaped how emotional storytelling was interpreted. Female participants like FG1-05 (12:43) emphasised aesthetic appeal and emotional impact, citing Renault's "Va Va Voom" campaign as influential in shaping brand loyalty. Her account highlights how emotional narratives support identity formation and aspirations. Male participants, on the other hand, valued ads that portrayed adventure and independence (FG1-02, 9:07), linking emotion to personal performance and autonomy.

FG2 participants also criticised spec-heavy advertising, advocating for storytelling that connects with audiences. FG2-04 (56:28) preferred ads that "tell stories" over those that throw numbers, while FG2-05 (57:40) praised Chicken Licken's humorous and culturally rich campaigns, contrasting them with automotive ads that lack character. Older participants especially valued complex narratives and cultural references as signs of quality advertising.

Among FG2's female participants, emotional resonance was tied to domestic life. FG2-04 (43:59) described her shift from a Cabriolet to a "mom car," arguing that ads should reflect real-life transitions rather than idealised youth. Male participants leaned toward

humor-driven storytelling, with FG2-02 (54:59) citing Nando's as a model for clever, context-aware advertising. These gendered preferences reveal different emotional logics, women favour relational and life-stage narratives, while men appreciate irony and wit.

FG3 participants linked emotional impact to cultural realism and aspirational authenticity. FG3-06 (22:38) argued that referencing everyday challenges like load shedding and potholes creates stronger connections, using humor as a tool for critique. FG3-05 (1:02:06) praised Subaru's LGBTQ+ family ads as "profound" and "affirming," showing how inclusive storytelling fosters recognition and belonging.

Generational differences were also evident. Younger participants (FG3-01, 09:24; FG3-02, 10:55) preferred influencer-led digital content over traditional TV ads, while older participants valued heritage campaigns for their emotional depth, criticising the loss of narrative richness in algorithm-driven advertising.

FG4 participants emphasised emotional authenticity as key to effective advertising, rejecting ads focused solely on specs and prices, arguing that emotional storytelling creates meaningful experiences. FG4-09 (13:04) stressed the importance of cultural and linguistic relevance, saying ads should "speak our language" both literally and symbolically. Male participants favoured narratives of freedom and control, reinforcing patterns seen in FG1 and FG2, women prioritise relational and cultural narratives, while men lean toward individualistic themes.

5.3.5.3. [Cross-case analysis: Emotional resonance and storytelling](#)

Emotional resonance was consistently identified across all focus groups as essential to effective advertising, though its meaning varied by race, gender, and generation. Black African female participants in FG2 and FG4 viewed emotional storytelling as a way to affirm cultural identity and everyday life, especially within family and domestic contexts. In contrast, Caucasian male participants FG2-02 (2:37) "Jeep as an example. A lot of people think Jeep as only a status symbol, but it is much more. It's a lifestyle", FG3-06(4:21) "where I live in everybody there has got a Toyota or VW, you obviously think, OK, that's the upper class, so obviously want a Toyota. So, I think if you are surrounded with a car a lot, then you'll most likely like the car more" emphasised emotional appeal through heritage and aspirational narratives, valuing continuity and rugged individualism.

Generational differences added further nuance. Older participants expressed nostalgia for iconic TV ads like Volkswagen's Kombi and Renault's "Va Va Voom," which they saw as emotionally rich and culturally grounded. Younger participants preferred digital-first content, criticising brands for failing to use influencers and data-driven targeting effectively. This supports that media platforms shape emotional engagement, highlighting the need for integrated storytelling across channels.

Gender also shaped how emotional content was received. Women across FG1, FG2, and FG4 favored relational and caregiving narratives, while men leaned toward themes of independence, adventure, and humour. Affirming advertising reflects and reinforces gender norms through its storytelling choices.

5.3.5.4. Conclusion of analysis: Emotional resonance and storytelling

The findings show that emotional resonance in advertising is not a one-size-fits-all concept, but rather shaped by race, gender, and age. For Black African female participants, emotional storytelling served as a way to affirm cultural identity and everyday experiences. Male participants from different races viewed it as a tool for expressing independence and personal achievement. These insights show that emotional engagement is shaped by intersecting social identities.

5.4. RQ2: How does diversity in marketing communication influence consumer decision-making in the South African automotive sector?

Four themes emerged under RQ2, brand heritage and generational loyalty, attitudes toward Chinese automotive brands, purchasing factors and decision-Making dynamics, homophily and social influence. These themes highlight the interplay between cultural embeddedness, social norms, and practical considerations in shaping consumer behaviour.

5.4.1. Frequency analysis and heatmap interpretation

Table 8 presents the distribution of theme mentions across all four focus groups, while the shading of the cells represents the intensity of the discussions.

Table 8: Themes, key topics and frequency of mentions (RQ2)

		3: Online Focus Group 3 237	5: Online Focus Group 4 217	6: Online Focus Group 1 246	7: Online Focus Group 2 370	Totals
(RQ2) Theme 5: Brand heritage and generational loyalty	3 64	18	20	17	9	64
(RQ2) Theme 6: Attitudes toward Chinese automotive brands	2 61	20	16	14	11	61
(RQ2) Theme 7: Purchasing factors and decision-making dynamics	8 216	71	37	49	59	216
(RQ2) Theme 8: Homophily and social influence	11 192	60	34	41	57	192
Totals		169	107	121	136	533

The darker colour shading indicates that purchasing factors and decision-making dynamics and homophily and social influence dominated discussions across all four FGs, underscoring the enduring influence of social influence and practical considerations. The frequency of brand heritage and generational loyalty in addition to attitudes towards Chinese automotive brands were also prevalent in FG1,3 and 4, this finding aligns with Institutional Theory, which suggests that established brands benefit from cultural embeddedness and historical trust.

FG3 recorded the highest mentions for attitudes toward Chinese brands, reflecting uncertainty, while participants acknowledged the value-for-money proposition, concerns about reliability and resale value persisted.

5.4.2. RQ2: Theme 5: Brand heritage and generational loyalty

5.4.2.1. Evidence of Brand heritage and generational loyalty

Participants repeatedly anchored trust and aspiration in brand heritage and family/community “what people like us drive”. These intergenerational narratives (e.g., VW in Uitenhage, “German engineering”, long-present SA incumbents) shape baseline attitudes and default consideration sets, providing clear within-case trajectories and cross-case contrasts between legacy marques and newer entrants.

(RQ2) Theme 5: Brand heritage and generational loyalty
<i>“I mean for myself personally, like growing up in in a small town of Uitenhage, for example, everybody in in in the small town, they work at Volkswagen, right? And everybody aspire to work there. So the cultural norm from my side was always influenced around that”. 6:222 ¶ 27 in Online Focus Group 1</i>
<i>“Bad news travel's better than good news. But when it's good news, sometimes you can live in that feeling that somebody had and you can get like, you know, want to give it a shot like that. That's the same experience I want. So word of mouth” 6:223 ¶ 107 in Online Focus Group 1</i>
<i>“I've only ever owned Jeep. Whether they were old or new or I've never ever bought any car in my life. And again, for me it just it comes down again. Heritage, value, something you resonate to. So yeah, I think those things. If you can align yourself with the brand, what they stand for, what you stand for, it also makes it much easier</i>

<i>to kind of pull the trigger and settle on your brand of choice". 6:224 ¶ 136 in Online Focus Group 1</i>
<i>"the ways I was growing up, you know, there was a certain preference of functionality then going for, you know, flashy stuff and stuff. So yeah, for me as I was growing up, it was generally in my family a preference of a Toyota because it's functional, it's reliable and all of that". 6:168 ¶ 23 in Online Focus Group 1</i>
<i>"like my dad has only ever driven a BMW and he'll drive BMW until BMW goes out of business, you know. So that's the kind of perception I had that you like you, you get a brand, it's reliable, you love the cars they make and that's what you keep buying" 7:357 ¶ 53 in Online Focus Group 2</i>
<i>"I mean, whatever there's a big decision to be made, you try and go and ask the people that's been there before. Ask your, ask my dad with his opinion about it". 7:358 ¶ 55 in Online Focus Group 2</i>
<i>"I guess we grew up with the German cars and they also symbolize something, right. So now it's like, I guess BMWs, all of the other cars. From a culture perspective, it just also symbolizes a bit of class a bit of like, OK, now you've made it in life" 3:215 ¶ 30 in Online Focus Group 3</i>
<i>"all my parents drive BMWs. That is something that can shape what cars seem desirable or acceptable. And another um uh example that I can use is the brand loyalty. If I see my parents and them buys BMW, you know at the end of the day I would also think, OK, you know I am familiar with a car. It is something that I've known for so long, so I'm loyal to that brand" 3:216 ¶ 141 in Online Focus Group 3</i>
<i>"I think the biggest thing in South Africa specifically is which brands stayed, which brands stuck it out". 5:176 ¶ 88 in Online Focus Group 4</i>
<i>"We've got to stop, and we've got to ask ourselves the question. Toyota never ran". 5:207 ¶ 92 in Online Focus Group 4</i>
<i>"there's a big Toyota fan base in my family". 5:208 ¶ 111 in Online Focus Group 4</i>

5.4.2.2. In-case analysis: Brand heritage and generational loyalty

Participants in FG1 consistently framed brand heritage as a determinant of trust and aspirational identity, with strong intergenerational undertones. FG1-01 (3:27) asserted "We've all kind of been conditioned to like halo car brands... Whether it's your dad that drove a Hilux or your grand that had a BM series". This narrative was echoed by FG1-02 (4:04), who recalled "idolising people who drove VW VR6 and like BMW gooshes" during his youth, framing brand loyalty as a cultural script of masculinity and status mobility. FG1-03 (6:29) localised this discourse by invoking Uitenhage's Volkswagen plant as a symbolic anchor of community identity, arguing that "nobody knows anything else besides um, the brand heritage that VW um actually holds". Female participants nuanced this heritage discourse by placing importance on functionality and reliability over status.

FG2 participants reinforced the salience of familial influence and cultural norms in shaping brand preferences. FG2-01 (7:24) articulated a distinctly Black African middle-class perspective, asserting, "In the black culture, we want to pay off a car and own it".

The expectation is “you’d buy a that last longer, buy a Toyota” FG2-01 (7:24). This narrative positions Toyota as a cultural signifier of economic prudence and social respectability, contrasting with FG2-07’s (9:25) observation that “in the younger coloured community, I think having a VW is almost like a status symbol”. These racialised discourses reveal how brand identities and values are differentially encoded across cultural geographies, with Toyota indexing stability and VW representing cool capital.

Male participants like FG2-05 (13:46) shared stories of brand loyalty shaped by personal growth, describing his move from Mercedes to Jeep as part of an aspirational journey. In contrast, female participants focused on practical needs, choosing brands that support family life and changing responsibilities (FG2-04, 43:59). This contrast highlights how advertising reflects and reinforces gendered expectations, shaping how different groups relate to brands.

FG3 participants described brand heritage as a symbol of status, safety, and family tradition. FG3-07 (2:48) stated, “BMW’s symbolize class a bit of like, OK, now you’ve made it in life”. While FG3-03 (5:17) shared, “I grew up my dad driving a Jeep. For instance, I’ll forever love a Jeep.” These reflections highlight how brand loyalty is often passed down through generations. Female participants emphasised safety and reliability, viewing heritage brands through a lens of care and responsibility (FG3-08, 26:23). The focus group revealed how emotional connections to brands are shaped by gendered values, men focus on performance and legacy, while women prioritise relational and practical concerns.

FG4 participants also valued heritage brands but brought a more critical perspective. acknowledging their emotional appeal but questioned their relevance in today’s competitive market, revealing heritage alone doesn’t justify the price anymore. FG4-08 (19:24) emphasised trust and cultural familiarity, more so because of their long-standing presence in South Africa. These views support Institutional Theory’s idea that brand legitimacy builds over time but also suggest a shift consumers are starting to evaluate heritage not just emotionally, but also economically.

5.4.2.3. Cross-case analysis: Brand heritage and generational loyalty

Across all focus groups, brand heritage consistently emerged as a dominant theme linked to trust and social status. However, how participants understood, and valued heritage varied by race, gender, and generation.

In FG2 and FG4, Black African participants often viewed brand heritage as a form of economic security. They favoured brands like Toyota, which they associated with long-lasting quality and good resale value. In contrast, Caucasian participants saw heritage more as a symbol of prestige, often praising German brands for their status appeal. Gender differences were also clear. Male participants in FG1 and FG3 described heritage as part of a masculine journey, connecting car ownership to independence and adventure. Female participants, however, focused on practical and ethical concerns. They valued brands that represented safety, reliability, and support for family needs.

Generational differences added another layer. Older participants often referred to earlier times TV ads and long-standing brand reputations as signs of authenticity. Younger participants were more skeptical. They questioned whether heritage still made sense in today's economy and whether it aligned with environmental values. This supports that traditional ideas of brand heritage are being challenged by newer concerns like sustainability and affordability.

5.4.2.4. Conclusion of analysis: Brand heritage and generational loyalty

The analysis shows that brand heritage acts as both a cultural memory and a system of symbolic value, influencing how people make buying decisions based on their race, gender, and age.

For Black African female participants, heritage was linked to feelings of safety and financial stability. For male participants across racial groups, it represented independence and the possibility of moving up in social status. So, while Institutional Theory doesn't equate credibility to history, it does support the idea that a brand's historical depth and continuity can contribute significantly to its perceived legitimacy, especially when aligned with current societal values. As such, these findings support Institutional Theory. They also expand on showing that heritage is not a fixed idea, it is open to different interpretations and debates.

For Chinese automotive brands, this means they need to rethink how they use heritage. Instead of relying on nostalgia, they should present heritage as something active and forward-looking, combining a sense of history with innovation and sustainability. This would help turn heritage into a valuable tool for building future brand identity, not just a reminder of the past.

5.4.3. RQ2: Theme 6: Attitudes toward Chinese automotive brands

5.4.3.1. Evidence of attitudes toward Chinese automotive brands

Attitudes to Chinese OEMs were hesitant and segmented, there was a strong pull-on value/spec and for some EV. There was also concern over after-sales depth, parts, resale and 'brand permanence'. This theme evidence revealed how attitudes and perceived behavioural control interact, explaining in-case hesitancy and cross-case differentiation between openness (value/EV) and resistance (risk/identity).

Pro Chinese:

(RQ2) Theme 6: Attitudes toward Chinese automotive brands
<i>"the GWM Tank it's a cool car like it really is and it's obviously the closest thing I could find to Jeep"</i> 6:228 ¶ 182 in Online Focus Group 1
<i>"I think it's because I was in China earlier this year and I think seeing them on the road really like changed my perspective about seeing so many of them on the road in one place. Really changed my perspective about them"</i> 6:229 ¶ 167 in Online Focus Group 1
<i>"BYD probably. That was probably the one I enjoyed the most"</i> 6:230 ¶ 169 in Online Focus Group 1
<i>"I would say yes, I'm going to use Jetour as a, you know, example again. You know the the people that I know that's driving the Jetours, they are super happy. You know the affordability is there, you know the specs are there, the you know the style. just the look of the car that really intrigued me".</i> 3:219 ¶ 162 in Online Focus Group 3
<i>"I think it's the Tigo or like Pro. And it had all the features. It had like adaptive cruise control. It was so comfortable. The ride was just amazing. It looked good. Like it was just a car that we would have never, ever considered. But after that trip, David, my husband was saying that it's a car that he would think he would buy. So yeah, a cherry"</i> 7:308 ¶ 106 in Online Focus Group 2
<i>"I would say yes, I'm going to use Jetour as a, you know, example again. You know the the people that I know that's driving the Jetours, they are super happy. You know the affordability is there, you know the specs are there, the you know the style. just the look of the car that really intrigued me".</i> 3:219 ¶ 162 in Online Focus Group 3
<i>"the only consideration of buying a Chinese car, if it's a EV, that's the only consideration"</i> 3:220 ¶ 194 in Online Focus Group 3
<i>"I think they they're not as bad, so I I probably would. So I'll probably look at a tank 300 or a Cherry Tiggo 8 Pro. That's what I would get maybe".</i> 5:203 ¶ 165 in Online Focus Group 4

Reservations / Barriers:

(RQ2) Theme 6: Attitudes toward Chinese automotive brands
<i>"I'd probably buy like a good second hand, good brand kind of a vehicle in a similar budget if I'm if I'm brutally honest with you and I can't, I can't hit the nail on the head on what it is, There's just maybe it's just that that essence and that feel as much as they look great, but there's no emotion for me that draws me to it. I think that's the biggest thing".</i> 6:232 ¶ 179 in Online Focus Group 1
<i>"so my husband's sister has a Jolion on and it's good, but there's the quality is lacking compared to the Opel. Like it drives great. The fuel economy is similar, but</i>

<i>there's just things missing compared to the Opal that you're like, uh, no, this is German" 7:362 ¶ 109 in Online Focus Group 2</i>
<i>"so I'd rather go and buy a second hand car, then buy a new a OMODA, Jaecoo, Jetour or Chery. I can't say anything about Tata or those brands, but on those ones I will never buy that. It's bad. Your after sales is poor and I can promise you, you can check on Facebook and all that". 7:363 ¶ 114 in Online Focus Group 2</i>
<i>"my daughter has been asking questions to people who own the Jetour and most of them are saying that the fuel consumption is just bad and I think it's because of a small engine and a big body" 7:313 ¶ 116 in Online Focus Group 2</i>
<i>"I've only driven company cars and should I obviously work for a Chinese company, I would drive the cars, but would I purchase? No". 3:221 ¶ 172 in Online Focus Group 3</i>
<i>"I think perhaps maybe in 3-4 years' time maybe I might consider it because then I would have been able to read the market and actually see what it is that it's or rather what they are doing in the market, but for now, no". 3:222 ¶ 187 in Online Focus Group 3</i>
<i>"I've heard that the resale is terrible" 5:211 ¶ 97 in Online Focus Group 4</i>
<i>"I just feel like the whole car itself is just too plastic too cheaply made for maybe the price that you're looking at. I'd rather go buy a different car, more reliable car, easier car to service to get parts for things like that" 5:201 ¶ 159 in Online Focus Group 4</i>
<i>"No, no, not yet. I don't have confidence in them as yet. I've had family members when Cherry came into the country the first time around, the aftermarket sales were horrible" 5:212 ¶ 173 in Online Focus Group 4</i>

5.4.3.2. In-case analysis: Attitudes toward Chinese automotive brands

FG1 participants expressed mixed feelings about Chinese car brands, balancing practical interest with emotional hesitation. FG1-04 shared how visiting China changed their view "Seeing them on the road really changed my perspective... I would buy one in the future, probably BYD". This shows how direct experience can shift uncertainty into openness. FG1-03 (51:32) added that constant exposure through marketing made Chinese brands more noticeable "the customer experiences that they are doing they in your face, get them anyway, billboards, you know you go on LinkedIn, they doing stuff. So I think it is more influence about the activations". However, some participants still preferred established brands. FG1-02 (29:02) said "I'd probably buy a good second-hand German car... there's no emotion for me with Chinese brands". This highlights how emotional connection often tied to brand heritage still influences decisions. FG1-05 (53:19) pointed to Jaecoo's "sleek" look and TikTok popularity as appealing, showing how social media aesthetics shape desire.

FG2's views were divided between positive experiences and concerns about reputation. FG2-04 (26:10) described a surprising shift after driving the Chery Tiggo 4 Pro, "It had all the features", "adaptive cruise control", "so comfortable", "we would have never considered it before that trip". This suggests that hands-on experience can change perceptions. In contrast, FG2-05 (28:51), who had worked for OMODA and

Jetour, criticised poor customer service recalling an incident where a customer's new vehicle had problems and remembers the customer being treated horrendously. This insider view reinforced distrust. FG2-01 added concerns about fuel efficiency, suggesting doubts about technological maturity. These concerns align with the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), which highlights how perceived control like service reliability affects buying decisions.

Participants admired the style and affordability of Chinese cars but worried about how owning one might affect their image. FG3-05 (48:44) said "the people that I know that's driving Jetours, they are super happy... You know the affordability is there, you know the specs are there, the you know the style". But FG3-03 (51:20) rejected the idea, saying "Image guys, please, I've got a reputation to maintain". This shows how car choices are tied to social status, especially among men. FG3-04 (52:35) added "also the influence of my husband as well. I don't think he would let me drive a Chinese car". These views support Homophily Theory, which suggests that social networks shape consumer preferences.

FG4 Participants were cautiously optimistic. FG4-03 (24:33) liked the design of Chinese cars but worried about resale value and parts "I've heard the resale is terrible". FG4 sentiments leaned toward wanting the Chinese automotive brands proving themselves, this shows how perceived risk delays adoption. Younger participants, like FG4-08, were more open, influenced by TikTok trends, suggesting that social media helps build cultural credibility.

5.4.3.3. Cross-case analysis: Attitudes toward Chinese automotive brands

Across all focus groups, participants' views on Chinese car brands were shaped by a mix of practical reasoning and concerns about image and identity, influenced by race, gender, and age.

Black African participants in FG2 and FG4 focused on affordability and value for money. They saw Chinese brands as smart financial choices that offer many features at a lower cost. In contrast, some Caucasian participants (e.g., FG2-02, FG2-05) were more concerned with status and image, rejecting Chinese brands as not fitting their aspirational identity.

Gender differences were also clear. Female participants across the focus groups appreciated the stylish design and social media presence of Chinese brands,

especially on TikTok, which they saw as a sign of trendiness and desirability. Male participants, however, were more focused on maintaining social status. They worried that buying a Chinese car might harm their image among peers, seeing it as a threat to their sense of masculine prestige.

Age also played a role. Younger participants were more open to Chinese brands, often trusting influencer endorsements and online content. Older participants were more cautious, citing concerns about reputation and reliability. These patterns support the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), which explains how attitudes, social pressure, and perceived control influence decisions. This also highlights that digital platforms are becoming new sources of trust in consumer decision-making.

5.4.3.4. Conclusion of analysis: Attitudes toward Chinese automotive brands

The analysis shows that people's attitudes toward Chinese car brands are shaped by more than just price and performance. These brands are also judged based on what they represent such as trust, status, and cultural acceptance.

For Black African female participants, Chinese brands symbolised affordable aspiration, offering style and features at a price they could manage. In contrast, male participants across racial groups saw these brands as a risk to their social image, associating them with lower status and potential reputational harm.

For Chinese carmakers, the challenge is to reshape how their brands are perceived. This means building trust through things like strong warranties and reliable service, while also using local influencers to connect with consumers culturally. By doing this, they can turn hesitation into real buying interest.

5.4.4. RQ2: Theme 7: Purchasing factors and decision-making dynamics

5.4.4.1. Evidence of purchasing factors and decision-making dynamics

Purchase decision-making factors included budget, TCO, insurance, fuel, hijacking risk, road conditions, with evaluative criteria including spec/technology, comfort, design, resale, parts and process driven features (pros/cons lists, research, reviews, test-drive experience).

RQ2: Theme 7: Purchasing factors and decision-making dynamics
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<i>"budget for sure and then like service plan and those things"</i> 6:187 ¶ 111 in Online Focus Group 1
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<p><i>“so within your affordability spectrum, that's obviously the I guess the first point for everybody, but the emotion for me, I've got to connect with a car. I'm not very specific on brand. I do have a few that I prefer that I look at and consider and depending also what I need at that particular point in time, you know. Yeah, but I think the emotion and just the connection. I'm the kind of person that connects with my car. I don't know if there's anyone else like that, but yeah, I connect with the drive of a car for a short period or a long period”</i> 6:236 ¶ 113 in Online Focus Group 1</p>
<p><i>“I know on the Chinese cars are coming in hot and heavy and they are fully speced. So, you can now for 500,000 rand buy a Chinese car that has got all the bells and whistles. That's gonna cost you like close to 1,000,000 rand If you have to get the same like equivalent in a Volkswagen for example. So I do think it's and especially the second you get bums in seats and get test drives and things that is where it's where it becomes tricky where we know our brands that we love but If you can get into a Haval or Cherry or OMODA and you know flip for the same amount of money that you're paying now 500K and you get less, but it's gonna cost you 1,000,000 bucks to get the same in a VW Tiguan, whatever the case”</i> 6:238 ¶ 118 in Online Focus Group 1</p>
<p><i>“It's a life phase definitely, as well as fuel economy and insurance prices”.</i> 7:327 ¶ 175 in Online Focus Group 2</p>
<p><i>“but vehicles in South Africa, the market prefers having a car with a sunroof. Some people will say I'm getting bold, it's going to burn my head or whatever. But still, I mean, the kids love it, the family loves it, the friends like it if the car's got a sunroof. And again, that's just, um, your immediate circle, people around you that you want to be able to resonate with and they.If your car's got a sun roof, you've done something right. You've made the right choice”</i> 7:305 ¶ 57 in Online Focus Group 2</p>
<p><i>“I think hijacking statistics also influence purchasing decision”.</i> 7:365 ¶ 184 in Online Focus Group 2</p>
<p><i>“For me, durability, I think as much as affordability and money comes into play, I think durability and longevity of it all because I don't think I would want to be having to pay for this car on a monthly basis and still be able and still have to do extra things on the side like paying for something that is broken or something that is needing to be serviced and so forth and so on”.</i> 3:218 ¶ 92 in Online Focus Group 3</p>
<p><i>“for me like just not only durability, but it needs to feel comfortable”</i> 3:168 ¶ 95 in Online Focus Group 3</p>
<p><i>“Just to add on that, to be honest, we are living in Cyril's economy”,</i> 3:228 ¶ 109 in Online Focus Group 3</p>
<p><i>“I wanted to mention the external factors that influence the type of car I would want. So living in a small town living very far funny enough, nobody mentioned the bad roads in South Africa. I'm always thinking, OK, you know, a durable car like a bakkie, a Ford Ranger, a Toyota Hilux, and also the type of areas I grew up living in, small mining towns, small industrial towns, that's predominantly the type of car you see”</i> 3:189 ¶ 154 in Online Focus Group 3</p>
<p><i>“I look at price and value for money in terms of like features and things that you can get for the money”</i> 5:177 ¶ 97 in Online Focus Group 4</p>
<p><i>“I think the biggest thing in South Africa specifically is which brands stayed, which brands stuck it out”.</i> 5:176 ¶ 88 in Online Focus Group 4</p>
<p><i>“External factors like budget, yes, but no, not really. I think some of some of the comments around like support after sales wise and you know those kind of things are obviously affecting the back of your mind”.</i> 6:195 ¶ 127 in Online Focus Group 1</p>
<p><i>“So I think word of mouth and reviews are very important for me. So if you go to the reviews and you hear lots of people complaining about a specific brand or specific model of car. That is something that does influence me quite a bit”.</i> 6:194 ¶ 120 in Online Focus Group 1</p>

5.4.4.2. In-case analysis: Purchasing factors and decision-making dynamics

FG1 participants emphasised both budget and emotional connection as key factors in choosing a car. FG1-01 (31:49) explained “budget for sure”, “what you can afford and kind of what evokes emotion from you”. This shows that car buying is not just practical, it’s also emotional. FG1-02 (32:29) added, “I’ve got to connect with a car. I’m not very specific on brand”, “ I connect to the vehicle you’ve got to feel it”. Female participants highlighted design and comfort. FG1-05 (33:24) said “For me, in all honesty, it’s how a car looks”, “I also think, comfort now”. FG1-03 (34:22) brought in family needs and support services “It needs to fit three car seats”, they also mentioned aftersales service as an important factor, “I don’t want when I am in a car crash stressing whether they have parts”. These views support the TPB, showing how service reliability and emotional fit influence buying decisions.

Participants considered multiple factors, budget, life stage, and safety. FG2-04 reflected on how life changes shape car needs, “It’s life phase”, “I used to drive an A3 Cabriolet”, “now I need a mom car”. FG2-06 (50:05) shared a similar shift, moving from a Fiat 500 to an Opel Mokka for family reasons. In contrast, male participants focused on standing out. FG2-05 (45:27) said “I like standing out”, “I like nice-looking car shapes”, “individuality matters”. FG2-01 (45:58) raised safety concerns, “hijacking statistics influence purchasing decision”. These insights highlight those perceptions of risk shape consumer behaviour, especially in high-crime contexts.

For FG3 durability, comfort, and image were key themes. FG3-08 (26:23) said “durability and longevity”, “I don’t think I want to be feeding this car like a baby every now and then paying for something”. FG3-01 (27:10) emphasised comfort “It needs to feel comfortable”... you really do feel the difference between one car versus another car”. Male participants linked car choice to social image. FG3-03 (28:43) noted “A certain demographic looks at image”, “they grew up knowing that or thinking that they’re going to drive German cars”. FG3-04 (29:11) added a political-economic angle, referencing “Cyril’s economy” (South African localised term to describe the struggling South African economy under President Cyril Ramaphosa’s tenure) as a barrier to buying aspirational brands. These views support Homophily Theory, which suggests that peer influence and social norms shape taste.

FG4 Participants were cautious, focusing on long-term value. Voicing how heritage alone doesn’t justify the price anymore, considerations of resale and parts were just as important. Female participants emphasised both personal identity and practicality

leaning into the practicality of a vehicle for family. Younger participants were more influenced by social media pointing out platforms like TikTok being a source of brand appeal. These findings reinforce TPB's idea that attitudes, social norms, and perceived control all shape consumer intentions.

5.4.4.3. Cross-case analysis: Purchasing factors and decision-making dynamics

Across all focus groups, car buying decisions were shaped by a mix of practical needs and emotional values, influenced by race, gender, and age. Black African participants focused on safety, durability, and resale value, especially in relation to their life stage and concerns about risk. In contrast, Caucasian participants placed more emphasis on how a car looks and performs, using these features to express personal style and status.

Clear gender differences also emerged. Women across the focus groups prioritised comfort, safety, and family needs, often choosing cars that supported caregiving roles. Men, on the other hand, focused on individuality and status, seeing cars as a way to express masculine identity and stand out. Age also played a role. Older participants valued tradition and brand heritage, often referencing nostalgic advertising as a sign of trust and quality. Younger participants were more influenced by digital trends, relying on influencers and social media to guide their choices. These findings illuminate that advertising is a space where ideas about modernity and tradition are constantly negotiated.

5.4.4.4. Conclusion of analysis: Purchasing factors and decision-making dynamics

The analysis shows that car buying decisions are shaped by more than just price and performance. They are also influenced by deeper meanings related to risk, care, and personal identity, shaped by race, gender, and age. Black African female participants' decisions were guided by practical life needs and concerns about safety and reliability. In contrast, male participants focused more on image and individuality, seeing cars as a way to express status and personal style.

For Chinese car brands, the challenge is to rethink how they present value. This means going beyond technical features and building trust through strong warranties, safety certifications, and comfort. It also means connecting with local so that Chinese brands feel both reliable and desirable. In doing so, they can shift consumer thinking from cautious risk assessment to confident, emotionally driven choices.

5.4.5. RQ2: Theme 8: Homophily and social influence

5.4.5.1. Evidence of Homophily and social influence

Participants showed how homophily (perceived similarity in identity, life-stage, language, lifestyle) and social influence (family, peer norms, influencers) shape attention and intention. Representation that feels like “people like me or us” boosts relatability, conversely, life-stage or cultural mismatches undermine relevance. This theme ties directly to the Homophily lens and the TPB.

RQ2: Theme 8: Homophily and social influence
<i>“If I see somebody who reminds me of me driving a **** ** car, of course. But God, it gives that relatability” 6:243 ¶ 74 in Online Focus Group 1</i>
<i>“I'm most deaf with FG1- 01: on that one. Its that relatability is the word I was looking for that you know that's yeah, definitely. So yeah, I'm I'm there”. 6:244 ¶ 77 in Online Focus Group 1</i>
<i>“I think particularly if we look at you know the role that influencers have begun to have you know where we follow these influences and we like some of the things that they're doing and they help us kind of shape what our aspirations might be as a result of seeing them, you know, in the kind of vehicles that we might be interested in and also just from a practicality perspective as well, looking at where you are, whether it's, you living with your parents or you are at the beginning stages of your career or somewhere else, you know, further ahead, their influence can help shape not only where you think you are now, but also where you aspire to be at some point. So I think because of that you find that these advertisements grow in terms of how much they factor into your lived experiences, aspirational or current”. 3:212 ¶ 44 in Online Focus Group 3</i>
<i>“like, let's say for instance, a few weeks back, you know, Bernice W, if you look at her social media, she was recently sponsored by Jetour and I didn't know more. I didn't really know a lot about the car.I saw she drive the car and you know you like the way the car looked. And now because of that I dont personally know her, but I follow her music and her social media. And then when I actually saw OK, she was sponsored by Jetour, you know that made me look more deeply into the Jetour brand.And because I know a lot of people that work for Jetour then you know you start asking questions. So there I can, you know, relate” 3:234 ¶ 62 in Online Focus Group 3</i>
<i>“I think what I just wanted to say was I think that has a big impact on how you view cars and how you see it. It obviously depends on in what area you live. For instance, where I live in everybody there has got a Toyota or VW, you obviously think, OK, that's the upper class, so you obviously want a Toyota. So I think if you're surrounded with a car a lot, then you'll most likely like the car more, even though you don't even really know what else is there or so on” 3:146 ¶ 32 in Online Focus Group 3</i>
<i>“So just to add to that, I think the influencers, I don't think they have that big of an impact on how I view the vehicle. Let's say they don't look or speak like me or so on. I think it's it goes more about about the influence they have on me. So it doesn't really matter if they're the same or do they talk the same or look the same or do the same. It's more the impact they have on me that I like associate myself with them” 3:156 ¶ 53 in Online Focus Group 3</i>
<i>“in the younger coloured community, I think having a VW it's almost like a status symbol and no matter the fact that it's high-risk vehicle of hijackings and all that, I think.I think it's still everybody wants to look cool” 7:360 ¶ 38 in Online Focus Group 2</i>

<p><i>"We know that South Africa we have multiple languages like for instance, I believe that we all can understand when a person starts saying I know it's not formal, but if someone comes and say words such as eish, oh, there was an ad Is it wimpy? No, no, I don't think it. I don't remember very well. But then where they're talking about the burger thing, mjojo, like that word, everyone can understand it"</i> 5:214 ¶ 58 in Online Focus Group 4</p>
<p><i>"So I do think that makes it more relatable for us when they use words like bakkie, 'cause that's a very typical South African word that I think most people in South Africa, doesn't matter their mother tongue, understand that word".</i> 5:215 ¶ 60 in Online Focus Group 4</p>
<p><i>"I heard the ad and it says the car has boot space, I know I am not the target market its almost kind of being excluded. So if I think of me, someone who doesn't have a family, let's say a car that's being advertised as like a family vehicle talking about a lot of space.I'm not looking for something that's got a lot of space that I can fit kids and bags and pets and stuff in. So it's not necessarily like I'm feeling excluded, but I know that that car's not being advertised towards me"</i> 6:246 ¶ 97 in Online Focus Group 1</p>
<p><i>"there has been a couple of ads, especially you know when you're listening to radio and then it's specifically like targeted to mothers and then you don't even want to visualize this car anymore or like.When you thinking of family, you don't even visualize it anymore because you're like, OK, it's targeted for mothers. So um, I think it was a Kia, one of those Kias. I heard it on radio and I was like, no.Even when I see that car and a male is driving it, I'm like, no, but it's not meant for you. You know, it's specifically cause of what that ad imprinted in my mind".</i> 5:171 ¶ 66 in Online Focus Group 4</p>
<p><i>Not necessarily friends and family on my side, RESEARCHER: I'd say more of what the media has to say about it, because I think that's a very powerful platform, but not friends and family to answer your question</i> 5:184 ¶ 113 in Online Focus Group 4</p>

5.4.5.2. In-case analysis: Homophily and social influence

Participants in FG1 highlighted the influence of family and peers on their car choices. FG1-04 (38:03) openly admitted "Yes, for me, I think they do, referring to friends and family influencing his vehicle choices. Interestingly, FG1-01(24:03) initially denied this influence, but earlier had praised heritage brands passed down through generations, revealing a hidden influence from family traditions "If I see somebody who reminds me of me driving a **** car", " it gives that emotion where it's achievable". This shows how seeing someone similar driving a certain car can make it feel more attainable and desirable.

Participants in FG2 discussed how peer groups and social settings shape their preferences. FG2-07 (47:04) said "Drag races or whatever the case may be those are sort of friend influences that you do have". This reflects how car choices can be shaped by male peer groups and performance culture. FG2-02 (47:27) added a gendered perspective, referencing "mommy clubs" at schools "If you want to be in at the mommy clubs", "it's either Toyota Fortuner or something". This shows how women's choices are

shaped by social expectations around family and respectability, while men's are shaped by performance and individuality.

Participants in FG3 expressed both trust in peer recommendations and concern about social image. FG3-05 (48:44) said "People I know driving Jetours are super happy", "affordability, specs, style", " I would absolutely go for it". But FG3-03 (51:20) rejected Chinese brands due to image concerns, "Image, guys", " I've got a reputation to maintain". This shows how peer pressure can discourage deviation from group norms. FG3-04 (52:35) added that even within households, car choices are influenced by others, "my husband as well. I don't think he would let me drive a Chinese car", FG3-04 (51:37) further adds "A Chinese vehicle says a lot about you." These examples extend Homophily Theory by showing how both peer groups and family members shape what is considered acceptable or desirable.

Participants in FG4 emphasised the role of social media and influencers. This highlights how digital platforms now shape what people see as trendy or trustworthy. FG4-02 agreed, saying influencers help build trust in uncertain markets. However, some male participants preferred real-world validation over online trends, showing a divide between digital and traditional sources of influence.

5.4.5.3. Cross-case analysis: Homophily and social influence

Across all focus groups, social influence, what scholars call homophily, played a key role in shaping car preferences. However, how this influence worked varied by race, gender, and age. Family and community norms influenced most black African participants. They tended to choose brands that signalled respectability and cultural value. In contrast, Caucasian participants emphasised peer pressure and group expectations, especially within male social circles, where cars were seen as symbols of status and belonging.

Gender differences were also clear. Women were influenced by other mothers and online influencers, often choosing cars that balanced style, comfort, and family needs. Men, on the other hand, were more influenced by their peers and performance culture.

Age added another layer. Older participants trusted face-to-face recommendations from people they knew, while younger participants relied more on social media and influencers. For them, platforms like TikTok helped shape what was seen as desirable or trustworthy. These findings argue that digital platforms shape how people aspire to

consume, and they expand Homophily Theory by showing how online networks now play a major role in shaping taste and trust.

5.4.5.4. Conclusion of analysis: Homophily and social influence

The analysis shows that social influence or homophily shapes car-buying decisions across multiple levels, from close relationships (like family and friends) to institutions (like schools and workplaces), to digital spaces (like social media). For Black African female participants, this influence was tied to ideas of respectability. They were drawn to brands that reflected cultural values and social standing. In contrast, male participants across racial groups saw car choices as part of maintaining status and reputation, where peer approval played a strong role. These findings show how digital platforms like TikTok and Instagram are reshaping how people are influenced by others.

For Chinese car brands, this means they should treat social influence as a strategic tool. They can do this by building trust through peer-based referral programs, using local influencers to boost credibility, and participating in community events like heritage festivals. This approach turns social influence from a challenge into a powerful marketing advantage.

5.5. Conclusion of analysis: FG1 to FG4

The findings presented for FG1 to FG4 reveal a complex interplay between cultural norms, diversity in marketing communication and consumer decision-making in the South African automotive sector. Across the two research questions, eight overarching themes emerged, each comprising multiple subthemes that illuminate the nuanced ways in which marketing strategies intersect with identity, social influence and behavioral intention.

For RQ1, the analysis demonstrated that inclusive marketing communication strategies must be anchored in localisation, authentic representation and emotional storytelling. Subthemes such as linguistic authenticity, cultural symbolism and progressive inclusivity underscore the imperative for Chinese OEMs to move beyond generic global templates toward contextually embedded creative architectures. The findings shows that emotional connection (how people emotionally respond to things like messages or brands) is not the same for everyone. Instead, it works differently depending on a

person’s race, gender and age. These factors shape how people interpret and feel about things emotionally.

For RQ2, the findings highlight that diversity in marketing communication influences consumer decision-making through symbolic, pragmatic and relational logics.

Subthemes such as heritage, status anxieties, risk imaginaries and digital homophily illustrate how purchasing decisions are embedded in intersectional subjectivities.

These insights corroborate Institutional Theory, Homophily Theory and the TPB, while extending them to account for infrastructures of influence in the digital age.

Table 9:Subthemes synthesis

Research Question / Construct	Theme	Subthemes Identified
RQ1: Inclusive marketing communication strategies	Theme 1: Localised marketing and cultural relevance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Linguistic authenticity (use of isiZulu, Afrikaans, colloquialisms) - Cultural symbolism (heritage cues, local landscapes) - Contextual realism (ads referencing load shedding, potholes) - Digital-first localisation (influencer-driven campaigns)
	Theme 2: Diversity in marketing and representation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Authentic inclusivity vs. tokenism - Intersectional representation (race, gender, LGBTQ+) - Relatability scripts (seeing “people like me”) -Generational divergence in diversity expectations
	Theme 3: Marketing exclusion and disconnect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Eurocentric aesthetics and global templates

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Linguistic erasure as symbolic marginalization - Life-stage misalignment (youth-centric vs. family-oriented ads) - Platform misalignment (TV vs. social media)
	Theme 4: Emotional resonance and storytelling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Nostalgic semiotics (heritage campaigns) - Humor and cultural wit (Nando's, Chicken Licken benchmarks) - Relational narratives vs. autonomy scripts - Digital-native storytelling (TikTok virality)
RQ2: Influence of diversity on consumer decision-making	Theme 5: Brand heritage and generational loyalty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Intergenerational transmission of brand loyalty - Heritage as cultural mnemonic (status, trust) - Gendered semiotics (performance vs. care ethics) - Generational ambivalence toward heritage
	Theme 6: Attitudes toward chinese automotive brands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Value rationality vs. symbolic capital - Aesthetic affordances and algorithmic desirability - Status anxieties and reputational risk - After-sales distrust as behavioral barrier

	Theme 7: Purchasing factors and decision-making dynamics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Budgetary pragmatics and affective economies - Life-stage contingencies (maternal provisioning) - Risk imaginaries (hijacking, resale value) - Individuality scripts vs. communal norms
	Theme 8: Homophily and social influence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Familial scripts and peer surveillance - Maternal publics and respectability politics - Masculine performance cultures (drag racing, prestige economies) - Digital homophily (influencer ecosystems, TikTok virality)

5.5.1. Interpretive summary of the table of analysis

The table above synthesises the subthemes that emerged under each theme, grouped by research question. For RQ1, the subthemes converge on the imperative of cultural embeddedness, revealing that localisation is not merely a creative choice but a socio-political act that mediates legitimacy and trust. For RQ2, the subthemes underscore the intersectionality of consumer decision-making, demonstrating that purchasing behaviors are structured by symbolic economies of status, care, and risk, as well as networked infrastructures of influence spanning familial, communal, and algorithmic publics.

This synthesis provides a diagnostic framework for strategic intervention, enabling Chinese OEMs to operationalize cultural codes, trust signals and social influence mechanisms as levers of market penetration and brand legitimation in South Africa.

5.6. Data saturation

Theme saturation was observed across FG1 to FG4. The eight core themes identified for RQ1 and RQ2 recurred in each successive group with FG4 contributing additional

quotations and nuance but not introducing new first-order codes or themes. By FG3, the theme set had stabilised. FG4 consolidated meaning and clarified boundaries between closely related subthemes such as brand heritage versus generational loyalty and added demographic colour rather than expanding the thematic domain some illustrative evidence is shared below in Table 10. Codebook convergence confirms this observation, the final theme set remained unchanged between FG3 and FG4, only code descriptions were refined and additional exemplars added. A full code list is shared in Appendix 5.

Table 10 illustrative evidence

<p>Value/affordability pull</p> <p><i>“budget is everything. And I think with the Chinese vehicles obviously coming into the market, you are seeing that a lot of them are a bit comfortable and are a bit more affordable”</i> 3:180 ¶ 129 in Online Focus Group 3</p>
<p>Risk/after-sales</p> <p><i>“Because of historic perception, I think you’d probably think of the after sales of this, right? Meaning should you have an accident. Is Jetour going to have parts for me in literally two days? Is Cherry going to have a certain part for me? So I think those are the kind of decisions that you can think of before making a purchase”</i> 3:191 ¶ 156 in Online Focus Group 3</p>
<p>Brand heritage inertia</p> <p><i>“I won’t jump onto the bandwagon for the Chinese vehicles. I’m still staunch on German, but that was embedded in me by external factors”</i> 5:222 ¶ 117 in Online Focus Group 4</p>
<p>Cultural localisation consistency</p> <p><i>“the second you come to South African soil, I feel like brands need to kind of take that and kind of incorporate it into the South African market and kind of bring more of a cultural element to it”</i> 6:175 ¶ 54 – 55 in Online Focus Group 1</p>
<p>Emotional resonance continuity</p> <p><i>“Where it’s a dad who’s driving and like funny things are happening, like there’s balloons kind of flying up and like there’s like a big robot or something. And at the end he’s driving to his house and the daughter’s having like a birthday party or something. And each element he was seeing was a part of the birthday party. So in that sense, you’re kind of asking like what’s going on here and then at the end. And you go, oh, OK, I see. But it’s a different take to like you’re saying we’re racing or we’re in the mountains or we’re driving by the beach, which is kind of boring”</i> 7:344 ¶ 292 in Online Focus Group 2</p>

5.7. Content analysis

Content analysis was also conducted. The content analysis helped complement and triangulate the primary qualitative evidence (FG1 to FG4) by examining how automotive brands, especially Chinese OEMs operating in South Africa communicate with consumers. The content analysis includes official South African automotive brand websites and social media platform (for example Facebook and Instagram) for GWM,

Chery, OMODA, Jetour, a legacy competitor such as Toyota, along with South African industry and consumer insight publications that benchmark media investments, digital engagement and market dynamics.

The analysis covers content and industry reporting during 2024 through 2025 to align with the time frame of the fieldwork and to ensure that the interpretive lens reflects the most recent market and platform conditions. This focus is agreeable with the study's overarching aim understanding marketing communication strategies of Chinese OEMs in South Africa and the role of diversity in shaping consumer decision making and is interpreted through the integrated theoretical lenses of Institutional theory, Homophily, and the TPB.

5.7.1. Content analysis and integration with FG themes

Localisation, risk reduction and community proof are decisive in South Africa and therefore legitimate foci for this content analysis. Digital discovery dominates the pre dealership journey. TransUnion's Q1 2025 Mobility Insights Report (MIR) shows the buying journey has become social first and online heavy research online before visiting a dealership illustration shown in Figure 5 below showing the adult advertising reach through online platforms versus global standards. This elevates the persuasive value of things, like short form explainer videos, creator content, and ongoing post purchase messaging. This cements the influence of social media on consumer purchasing behaviour.

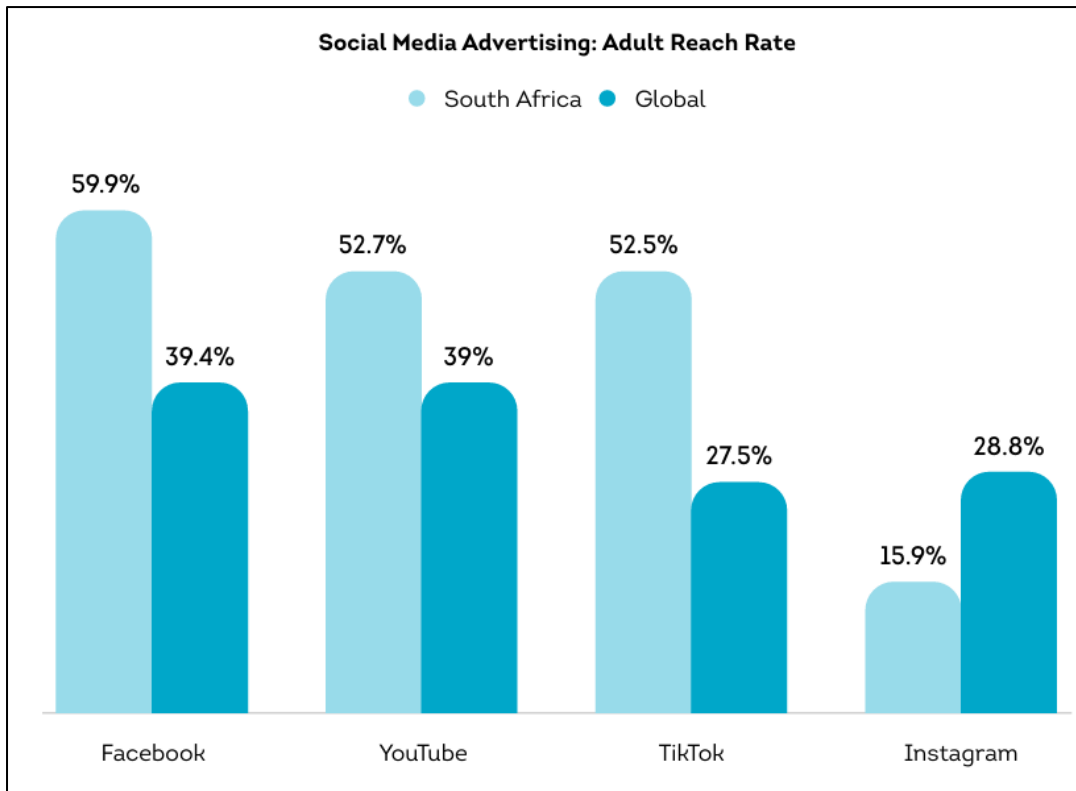


Figure 5: Social media advertising adult reach rate (source: Transunion MIR report 2025 Q1)

South African consumers display high levels of promotion seeking, brand switching and loyalty programmes, NIQ’s Guide to 2025 reported by Modern Marketing reveals 67% switch to lower priced products, 43% buy whatever is on promotion, making warranties, parts access and transparent finance salient creative levers. Edelman’s Collapse of the Purchase Funnel shows that the “purchase funnel” is a loop, recasting the journey as a trust loop, where post purchase content (service proof, owner communities) is central to sustained advocacy, a mechanism directly observable on OEM channels (owners’ clubs; aftersales narratives put proof).

Inclusive strategies must be “always on” (consistent), with locally coded storytelling and risk reducing proof distributed where South Africans research which includes social platforms and videos, sustaining trust after the sale.

5.7.2. Analytical approach for coding

A directed content analysis guided by the study’s macro–meso–micro lenses, Institutional fit (localisation, service legitimacy), Homophily (identity congruence), and TPB (attitudes, subjective norms, perceived control) was employed. Codes included localisation (local language, SA symbols, places, sports partnership, community

events, heritage). Homophily (inclusivity, women as deciders, fashion collaborations, family life). TPB (value for money, safety, quality, owners' clubs, testimonials, warranties, parts availability, finance clarity, service network).

These codes operationalise the eight FG themes and allow traceable co-occurrence between content cues and TPB constructs (for example 10 000 000 km warranty is linked to perceived control, partnerships with soccer clubs are linked to subjective norms).

5.7.3. RQ1: Theme 1: Localised marketing and cultural relevance

From a traditional brand heritage/ perspective, Toyota's "It's not a bakkie, it's a Hilux" a South African specific campaign centred on a vernacular term "bakkie" in a rural/South African town setting, cements Toyota Hilux's place in South African cultural memory. Their use of it has cultural cognitive legitimacy and emotional activation.

OMODA's Khosi Nkosi "Ndlovukazi" (Durban July) fashion culture collaboration tethered to iconic local events (Hollywoodbets Durban July) and African aesthetic narratives, anchoring a Chinese OEM sub brand in South Africa lifestyle circuits. This offered deep level homophily through language/symbols and identity pride.

Mamelodi Sundowns taking on Chery as an official vehicle partner offers how a Premier Soccer League (PSL) partnership can embed a Chinese brand in local fandom and community rituals, creating everyday contact points and signalling place-based legitimacy.

These executions translate "global" brands into "our" brands aligning to Institutional Theory and raise positive attitudes (linked to TPB) through recognition and relevance, consistent with the four FGs' calls for "ads that speak our language".

While some progress is evident such as OMODA teaming up with Khosi Nkosi fashion and Chery's PSL partnership, execution remains sporadic and lacks depth compared to legacy brands like Toyota, which deploy vernacular narratives and heritage storytelling consistently across channels, a benchmark providing a deep form of localised storytelling. Chinese OEM content often leans on global creative templates, diluting cultural resonance and homophily cues that South African consumers value.

OMODA South Africa’s website offers lifestyle positioning but unlike Toyota South Africa’s “it’s not a bakkie” commercial campaign which in addition to English and Afrikaans was launched in multiple language like isiZulu, Sepedi and isiXhosa, has limited vernacular variants. Chery South Africa portrays community partnerships, for example the PSL link to native South Africans , they declare “supporting local communities” but fall short as a challenger brand in showcasing where and how these supporting efforts are carried out in the public forum, creating a perception of a lack of micro-localisation (e.g., they do not create township-specific narratives, they focus on macro-specific narratives).

5.7.4. RQ1: Theme 2: Diversity in marketing and representation

OMODA’s “Ndlovukazi” narrative centres female leadership (identity) while styling vehicles within fashion and family contexts. The brand site features family fit testimonials “fits perfectly into my family”, representing women and household decision roles, speaking to surface and deep homophily. Jetour customer day and women focused events (and owners club content) position diverse audiences as co-creators of brand meaning, leaning into subjective norms through peer visibility.

The FG participants asked to “see people like me” and non-tokenistic inclusion, these artefacts display intersectional representation tied to real South African occasions, building relevance and esteem (TPB attitudes).

5.7.5. RQ1: Theme 3: Marketing exclusion and disconnect

OMODA naming Boitumelo “Boity” Thulo a brand ambassador was met with mixed reviews shared in Table 11 below. Critiques clustered around perceived irrelevance of a celebrity ambassador for influencing high-involvement purchase, there also seemed to be functional misalignment (where the fuel economy/ TCO and design aesthetics were questioned) and socio-economic tone-deafness (aspirational display versus affordability reality). These align with industry diagnostics that show search and sentiment penalise global-template or surface-level playbooks that do not resolve local value frictions or lived realities (Rogerwilco, 2025; Ornico, 2025).

Table 11: Boity ambassadorship public reactions

Exert	Theme	Sentiment
“Her heels are 6 months instalment of the Omoda”	Marketing disconnect Marketing exclusion	Reject

“Omoda is a nice car it’s just that the fuel consumption is crazy”	Apprehension to Chinese cars Vehicle attributes	Ambivalent
“I will never buy that car, it looks like RoboCop”	Apprehension to Chinese cars Vehicle attributes	Reject
“These cars are selling themselves, what good will Boity do to improve sales?”	Marketing disconnect	Reject
“From Range Rover, she needs to give an honest review”	Marketing disconnect Relatability Influence of family, friends & influencers	Reject
“Good news! I’m so happy for her”	Aspirational appeal	Approve

Institutional Theory predicts that informal norms (dignity, language inclusion, community-anchored values) set legitimacy thresholds. The negative replies to a celebrity ambassadorship announcement without parallel reassurances on ownership frictions signal perceived institutional misfit. At the meso level, Homophily posits that persuasion travels through “people like me”, users explicitly asked for relatability commenting, “Her heels are 6 months instalment of the Omoda” with a crying emoji face for exaggeration questioning how Boity (who is known for driving a Range Rover), her Gucci shoes and the OMODA which is positioned as a middle class affordable SUV relate to the everyday South African. At the micro level (TPB), the thread anchored attitudes (design/brand stigma), subjective norms (peer scepticism of celebrity efficacy) and perceived behavioural control (fuel economy/ cost anxieties), reinforcing that communication must reduce barriers, not only create “heat”.

Implications for Chinese OEMs is, invest in narrative localisation (vernacular, recognisable locales, current-affairs wit) and pair it with hard-edged TCO proofs (fuel/insurance; warranty, parts logistics). Elevate owners, service advisors, and get credible micro-creators instead of celebrities to design content that measurably shifts TPB levers (attitude, norms, control).

5.7.6. RQ1: Theme 4: Emotional resonance and storytelling

Toyota’s Hilux campaign “It’s not a bakkie” offers an intergenerational gift narrative (the story of a grandfather carving a Toyota Hilux for his grandson) offering specs in

favour of memory, pride, and vernacular, a story that encodes brand meaning offering an emotional route to strengthen attitude toward a brand.

Although OMODA's Durban July staging which was a fashion led spectacle combined with local celebrity presence engineered as shareable experiences provided a storytelling canvas across social platforms, their Boity ambassadorship announcement and Chery's Instagram and TikTok feeds lean heavily on influencer glamour, in some instances depicting left hand drive creative which gives off global aesthetics which the FG discussions flagged as "tone-deaf" and disconnected from everyday realities like potholes and load-shedding. While these brands excel in sleek visuals and tech-driven narratives, they lack contextual humour and cultural anchoring that South African consumers value.

Chinese OEMs must pivot from aspirational gloss to authentic micro-stories, owners navigating real-life challenges, township experiences and vernacular captions. FG participants explicitly said, "Stop throwing specs tell a story we live".

5.7.7. RQ2: Theme 5: Brand heritage & generational loyalty

Toyota Hilux heritage pages/articles amplify the "woven into South African fabric" narratives and decades of continuity, the same heritage scripts FG participants cited providing legitimacy through longevity reinforcing trust. This is aligned to the FG participants who linked loyalty to family scripts "My dad drove a Hilux", "I'll stick with Toyota".

Chery and GWM showcase futuristic design and advanced tech on Instagram and TikTok, signalling innovation but failing to address aftersales reassurance and resale value concerns voiced in FG3 and FG4 "Will I get parts in two days?" and "Resale is terrible". Their social feeds rarely spotlight service networks or long-term ownership benefits, leaving a gap in perceived permanence.

To compete with legacy brands, Chinese OEMs should use social platforms to normalise trust signals such as owner testimonials across generations, and transparent service commitments. Heritage for challengers must be reframed as "future-proof reliability", not just modern aesthetics.

5.7.8. RQ2: Theme 6: Attitudes toward Chinese automotive brands

Risk reduction signals are explicit and repeatable, OMODA C5 offers 10 year / 1,000,000 km engine warranty. Leaning into consumer PBC, Chery MyCheryCare and their 98% parts fill rate (in 2024) with a 99% target for 2025, integrated aftersales convenience. This addresses the precise FG anxieties about parts and service lead times. Jetour's 10 year/1,000,000 km engine warranty plus local parts warehouse cited on their South African website, additionally their Stormers partnership (Rugby team) all add to the norms and control cues. Warranty/parts discourse directly answers "Chinese risk" push factors noted in FG3 and FG4, combined with local partnerships, these cues shift attitudes and subjective norms toward.

Despite aggressive growth year on year for Chinese brands, consumer sentiment remains cautious. FG participants expressed apprehension about resale value, parts availability, and long-term reliability, echoing industry reports that highlight lingering trust deficits for newer entrants. This scepticism is reinforced by TransUnion Mobility Insights Q1 2025, which notes affordability pressures and risk-aversion as dominant purchase drivers, making institutional assurances critical for persuasion.

Chinese OEMs attempt to counter this through risk-reduction cues e.g., OMODA's 10-year/1 million km warranty and Chery's 98–99% parts fill rate but these signals are often buried in campaign bursts rather than sustained visibility. The Edelman Trust Barometer warns that trust is not a one-off achievement, it requires continuous reinforcement across the "Trust Loop." Without always-on proof of care, apprehension persists.

5.7.9. RQ2: Theme 7: Purchasing factors and decision making

TransUnion reports a rebound in new passenger sales, with younger buyers and value brands reshaping the landscape, buyers are doing more research and prioritising value/finance clarity, a market logic reflected in OEM messaging (pricing tiers, long warranties) a trend that also came across in the FG discussions, with FG2-03 mentioning they research compare vehicles side by side based on specs and prices to find the best fit for her and her budget.

Value behaviours (such as promo seeking/switching) increase responsiveness to guarantees and transparent terms, elevating planned behaviour and attitudes.

Omoda and Jaecoo's feeds emphasise luxury styling and influencer glamour but rarely address TCO realities (fuel economy, insurance, parts). FG2 and FG3 participants

criticise this gap “Budget is everything” and “I won’t buy if after-sales is poor”. While some Chinese OEMs post occasional finance offers, they lack interactive tools or localised cost breakdowns.

Chinese brands should pivot social content toward educational micro-content such as TikTok explainers on fuel efficiency, Instagram reels on insurance bundles, and WhatsApp Q&A for service coverage. FG narratives confirm that practical transparency drives trust more than aspirational aesthetics.

5.7.10. RQ2: Theme 8: Homophily and social influence

Jetour Owners Club launch and sports tie ins institutionalise peer to peer norms and recognition moments (VIP stadium experiences for owners) benefiting subjective norms pathway to intention. MIR highlights social video reach growth, with many OEMs running YouTube/shorts streams, this is consistent with FG reports of relying on influencers and short reviews prior to dealer visits.

5.7.11. Concise mapping table (FG themes, observed cues and theory link)

Table 12: Content analysis alignment to FG themes

FG theme	Representative public cue	Theoretical linkage
Localised marketing and cultural relevance	Toyota “It’s not a bakkie, it’s a Hilux”, OMODA & Khosi Nkosi at Durban July	Institutional fit; homophily via SA symbols, attitudes
Diversity in marketing and representation	OMODA family/women-centred storytelling and fashion collab	Homophily
Brand heritage and generational loyalty	Toyota South Africa’s Hilux campaigns that localise the “It’s not a bakkie, it’s a Hilux” trope across SA platforms & languages repeatedly foreground continuity, place, & family traditions	Institutional Theory (macro): Heritage & “made/assembled here” messaging operate as cultural-cognitive legitimacy cues lowers perceived “foreignness” Homophily (meso): Intergenerational stories & “what people like us drive” signal surface- and deep-level similarity TPB (micro): These cues nudge attitudes
Marketing exclusion and disconnect	OMODA Boity ambassadorship	Institutional Theory- Risks violating normative expectations of authenticity Disconnect undermines attitudes (scepticism toward brand sincerity)

		Erodes subjective norms (peer disapproval of perceived inauthenticity)
Emotional resonance & storytelling	Hilux heritage pages and range hub	Institutional legitimacy via longevity
Attitudes toward Chinese automotive brands	OMODA 10y/1m km warranty, Chery 98–99% parts fill-rate, Jetour warranties/Stormers sponsorship	Subjective norms via clubs
Purchasing factors & decision making	TransUnion: sales rebound, 92% research online, value brands rising NIQ: high promo seeking	Attitudes (value clarity, channel fit)
Homophily & social influence	Jetour Owners Club PSL activations; social reach growth	Subjective norms via communities

To enhance interpretive clarity, Table 12 summarises the alignment between FG themes, representative content cues analysed, and their theoretical significance. This table serves two purposes, to demonstrate how qualitative insights from the FGs converge with patterns in OEM marketing content, validating the triangulation approach and to operationalise the study’s conceptual framework by showing how Institutional Theory, Homophily, and TPB constructs underpin the observed strategies.

5.7.12. Content analysis conclusion

In South Africa’s super diverse, digitally mediated market, Chinese OEMs can design inclusive marketing by combining localised storytelling (language, places, SA events/teams) to earn institutional legitimacy. They can additionally include identity aligned representation that goes beyond tokens.

Where affordability is top of mind, risk reducing proof can be achieved through clear finance language, warranty/parts/service propositions to increase consumer perceived behavioural control. An “Always on” social first cadence is essential to operationalise the “Trust Loop” and leverage norms.

It’s essential to recognise that diversity in representation and cultural coding raises attitudes via recognition, community and club structures activate subjective norms, and warranties/service/finance proof raise perceived control. Together, these TPB

antecedents shift intention, mirroring FG participants' move from "I'd consider it" to "I'd test drive / request a quote" when risk and identity concerns are addressed.

Chinese OEMs are not yet fully embedded in South African cultural scripts. While warranty and price cues address functional risk, identity and trust levers, local language, heritage motifs, and community storytelling remain underutilised. This gap explains why focus-group participants still perceive these brands as "foreign" despite competitive specs.

6. CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This chapter integrates the empirical research results presented in Chapter 5 with the study's theoretical lenses and prior literature to answer the research questions on marketing communication strategies for Chinese automotive OEMs operating in South Africa and the role of diversity in consumer decision-making. The discussion is organised by research question and within each RQ by emergent themes, explicitly cross-walking the evidence to theory and prior studies, before presenting a revised conceptual framework and a brief conclusion.

The discussion is organised by research question and theme, using the same sequence (FG1–FG4 and content analysis synthesis). There is a recap of the empirical finding for each theme, as a reminder of what emerged from the data (FG narratives, cross-group contrasts, and triangulated content analysis).

A summary of the pertinent literature discussed in Chapter 2 (Institutional Theory, Homophily Theory, TPB, and related streams such as inclusive marketing and language framing) is evaluated to make the comparison transparent. Followed by a comparison and interpretation of theoretical examination of each theme, structured to clarify where the findings confirm, extend, or contradict prior scholarship.

There is a conclusion for each theme, indicating the degree of alignment with the literature and the implications for the study's integrated framework. There is then a synthesis across themes and an updated conceptual framework that incorporates the new nuances.

The two research questions revisited:

RQ1: What marketing communication strategies can Chinese automotive OEMs adopt to align with the preferences of South Africa's diverse consumer base?

RQ2: How does diversity in marketing communication influence consumer decision-making in the South African automotive sector?

6.1. RQ1: Strategies to align marketing communication in a superdiverse market

6.1.1. RQ1: Theme 1: Recap of findings on localised marketing and cultural relevance

Across FG1–FG4, participants described localisation as an indispensable precondition for taking Chinese OEMs seriously. Importantly, participants rejected a one-size-fits-all notion of localisation, they specified intersectional expectations that varied by race, gender, and generation. Black African females prioritised linguistic authenticity and depictions of everyday realities (e.g., school runs, multigenerational households, township shopping routes). Several Caucasian male participants emphasised heritage and ruggedness signifiers (e.g., outdoor lifestyle, duty-oriented narratives).

Younger participants across races insisted on digital-first localisation, where creative looks and sounds like the feeds they consume, short-form video, humour, music trends, and credible creators. This points to multiple localisations within one country, with cultural congruence achieved when brand speech resembles how communities speak about themselves. Content analysis aligned with these accounts with assets that coded local idioms, vernacular registers, and recognisable scenes generated more positive interpretations than globalised “template-like” executions. Overall, local fit was not only aesthetic, but participants also read it as respect and as evidence that a brand intends to belong, and not merely to sell.

6.1.2. RQ1: Theme 1: Recap of literature on localised marketing and cultural relevance

Institutional Theory proposes that legitimacy rests on conformance with normative and cultural-cognitive expectations, beyond mere regulative compliance (Scott, 2001). In South Africa, informal institutions, language inclusion, dignity, community values are salient determinants of what audiences deem appropriate (Kipnis et al., 2020).

Advertising research in South Africa documents that ethnic-language appeals and culturally congruent visuals improve attitudes and brand evaluations (Potgieter & Roux, 2024), global syntheses show that representation and authenticity drive identification and fairness perceptions (Campbell et al., 2023). Strategy literature in emerging markets cautions that standardised global campaigns frequently underperform unless adapted to local identity semantics (Paul, 2019; Park et al., 2022). Inclusive-marketing reviews emphasise context sensitivity and multidimensional diversity for effectiveness (Tuli et al., 2025). Thus, the literature positions localisation as institutional work, continuously earning fit in a plural environment (Kipnis et al., 2020).

6.1.3. RQ1: Theme 1: Discussion relating findings to literature on localised marketing and cultural relevance

The finding that localisation is intersectional adds granularity to the institutional-fit argument. Chapter 2 emphasised that informal norms gatekeep legitimacy. Chapter 5 narratives specify how these norms manifest differently across identity lines. For instance, Black African female's emphasis on language and relatable roles reflects a normative expectation for recognition and respect, aligning with the cultural-cognitive pillar (Scott, 2001) and with empirical evidence that language-fit increases perceived sincerity (Potgieter & Roux, 2024). At the same time, the preferences for "ruggedness" and heritage expressed by some Caucasian male participants suggest the presence of distinct cultural meanings within the same national setting. This shows that institutional alignment is not uniform but made up of different layers or segments (Paul, 2019).

The youth demand for digital-first localisation dovetails with the diffusion of social norms through creator ecosystems, in homophilous digital networks, similarity with endorsers increases engagement and downstream persuasion (Han & Balabanis, 2023; Leonhardt et al., 2020). The implication is managerial, emphasising that localisation is a portfolio and not a single master ad. Chinese automotive brands need to develop creative marketing versions that include shared national values like respect and dignity, while also adapting to specific audience preferences such as styles of humor, popular music, character roles, and familiar visual styles. This resolves the "over-diversification" concern raised in Chapter 2. The aim is not to chase endless micro-segments but to prioritise deep-level identity cues that travel across multiple surface segments (Saini et al., 2024; Wang, 2022; Tuli et al., 2025).

Content-analysis evidence that vernacularised assets were read more positively, affirmed language as an institutional signal. Aligning with Packard et al. (2023), subtle linguistic choices can reframe causality and perceived intent, in South Africa's post-apartheid context, tone and idiom are moral indicators. Misfit invites criticism as observed in the local crisis cases (Campbell et al., 2023). Localisation is therefore not a decorative add-on, it is simultaneous risk management and value creation (Kipnis et al., 2020; Paul, 2019).

Finally, the data extend Chapter 2 by making intersectionality explicit. The institutional-fit literature acknowledges plural audiences, this study's findings illustrates which identity dimensions mattered most and how they combine (race, gender, generation, platform). This provides practical rules for campaign architecture.

6.1.4. RQ1: Theme 1: Conclusion of the discussion and findings of localised marketing and cultural relevance

The findings confirm the centrality of institutional fit (Scott, 2001; Kipnis et al., 2020) and extend the literature by demonstrating that localisation must be intersectional to resonate across South Africa's plural public. Effective strategies are portfolios of identity-aware localisations that keep national norms constant while tailoring codes by subculture and generation. This strengthens the first stage of the integrated framework-institutional fit ,identity congruence and behavioural levers.

6.1.5. RQ1: Theme 2: Recap of findings on diversity in marketing and representation

Participants endorsed multidimensional representation including race, gender, age and lifestyle. Superficial inserts (e.g., a single Black African face in a global template) were read as tokenism. Users valued deeper alignment with roles (i.e. women as decision makers, men as caregivers too), contexts (township shopping, soccer practice, rural visits), and aspirations (safety, pride, mobility). Importantly, participants sought consistency between ad representation and dealership experience, for example, if the campaign celebrates women's agency, women should be visible and empowered in dealer showrooms and service centres.

6.1.6. RQ1: Theme 2: Recap of literature on diversity in marketing and representation

Diversity in marketing is not a slogan, it is a strategic design choice that affects outcomes through three repeatable mechanisms i.e. identification, authenticity, and perceived fairness. When people recognise "people like me/us" and feel fairly represented, they are more likely to engage, when representation is tokenistic or instrumental, diversity-washing can backfire and erode trust (Campbell et al., 2023; Park et al., 2022).

In South Africa, this risk is heightened because informal institutions, dignity, language inclusion and community values act as binding expectations for acceptable brand speech. In addition, misalignment has historically escalated to public sanction and operational disruption (Kipnis et al., 2020; Campbell et al., 2023).

Homophily Theory clarifies how representation works. People connect to brands via surface-level similarity (race, language, gender) and deep-level similarity (values, life stage, lifestyle). Both matter, but deep-level cues sustain authenticity over time (Lawrence & Shah, 2020; Han & Balabanis, 2023).

Recent evidence also shows that identity fit can alter economic responses, including price sensitivity because congruent identity cues activate a more forgiving, sacrifice-oriented mindset (Gao et al., 2019; Ao et al., 2023).

In multilingual contexts, language is a credibility signal rather than a mere execution detail. South African studies show that vernacular and ethnic-language cues raise ad attitudes and trust, while defaulting to English can be tolerated but not necessarily trusted by many consumers who strongly identify with their ethnic group (Potgieter & Roux, 2024; Vorster et al., 2019/2020).

At a strategic level, Institutional Theory explains why representation must align with local norms to earn legitimacy (Scott, 2001; Kipnis et al., 2020), while TPB explains how representative communications shift, subjective norms (social approval via relatable sources), and perceived behavioural control (signals of fair, accessible service) are the proximal drivers of intention (Ajzen, 1991; Fatoki, 2021). Systematic reviews on inclusive marketing therefore argue in favour of substantive inclusion, values, tone, and narratives that reflect lived community realities rather than cosmetic diversity (Tuli et al., 2025; Packard et al., 2023).

The field touches on three imperatives namely design for authentic identification, encode local legitimacy (language and norms) and carry representation beyond the ad into the customer journey to sustain TPB levers post exposure (Campbell et al., 2023; Kipnis et al., 2020; Ajzen, 1991).

6.1.7. RQ1: Theme 2: Discussion relating findings to literature on diversity in marketing and representation

FG participants repeatedly called for deep-level representation, everyday routines (school runs), life-stage accuracy (e.g., motherhood, first-time buyers) and respectful tone rather than just diverse faces. They also judged dealership reality (staff demeanour, language in service interactions, inclusive showroom cues) against the promise of the ad, signalling that representation is an organisational capability, not merely a creative decision (Paul, 2019; Tuli et al., 2025).

This extends the literature by making the operational dependency of representation visible, meaning if front-line practice contradicts inclusive imagery then credibility

collapses. Importantly, the discussions around role reversals were welcomed as accurate reflections of current South African households, not “forced progressivism”. That observation aligns with the view that norms evolve, and brands that mirror lived social change (rather than old stereotypes) earn legitimacy faster (Scott, 2001; Campbell et al., 2023).

The findings show that building durable connection requires layering, firstly, keep surface-level inclusion (race, language, gender) and secondly embed deep-level cues (safety, respect, family routines, aspirations for mobility). This dual-layer approach intensifies perceived similarity and supports price tolerance, matching evidence that identity congruence can soften strict price comparisons when values are shared (Lawrence & Shah, 2020; Gao et al., 2019).

Participants’ call for local language, vernacular use can also increase trust and ad effectiveness among non-native English audiences with strong ethnic self-identification (Potgieter & Roux, 2024; Vorster et al., 2019).

The data additionally connects representation to behavioural intention through concrete touchpoints. When dealership staff behaviour and processes match the ad’s respect cues, attitudes remain positive, when peers and credible local sources also endorse the brand, subjective norms strengthen and when service access and finance clarity are visible and fair, perceived control increases (Ajzen, 1991; Fatoki, 2021; Han & Balabanis, 2023). Conversely, if any link in this chain is weak (e.g., respectful ad, dismissive reception at a dealer), the intention effect collapses which is consistent with reviews that warn against cosmetic inclusion (Tuli et al., 2025; Campbell et al., 2023).

Representation was positioned as a brand to organisation scale depicted in Figure 6 which complements calls in literature for substantive inclusion (Paul, 2019; Tuli et al., 2025).

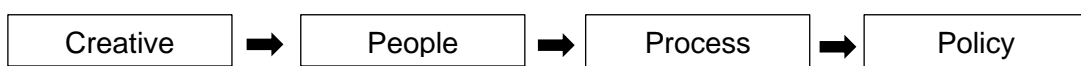


Figure 6: Brand to organisation scale

Participants didn’t merely want “diverse models”, they wanted accurate life-stage scripts (e.g., safety features shown in school runs). This extends homophily work by specifying everyday routines as effective deep-level signals in high-involvement categories (Lawrence & Shah, 2020; Ao et al., 2023).

6.1.8. RQ1: Theme 2: Conclusion of the discussion and findings of diversity in marketing and representation

The evidence confirms that authentic, multidimensional representation is necessary in South Africa and insufficient on its own unless it is delivered across the customer journey. Diversity that aligns with local informal institutions (language, dignity, community values), that encodes surface and deep-level homophily and that is enacted by staff and processes not just shown in ads, produces stronger attitudes, norms and perceived control, which together lift purchase intention (Ajzen, 1991; Kipnis et al., 2020; Lawrence & Shah, 2020; Potgieter & Roux, 2024).

Representation should be designed and managed as a brand to organisation continuum incorporating, creatives (local languages, realistic life-stage scenes), people (front-line staffing that reflects customer diversity and models respect) and process/policy (transparent finance, multilingual service scripts, and fair escalation paths). When these layers align, representation becomes a capability that sustains trust, reduces friction and supports price tolerance, when they diverge, perceived tokenism emerges and intention falls (Tuli et al., 2025; Gao et al., 2019).

6.1.9. RQ1: Theme 3: Recap of findings on marketing exclusion and disconnect

This theme captured when participants felt unseen, unheard, or misrepresented by automotive advertising in South Africa. Four clear patterns emerged which are:

1. Global templating and weak localisation

Participants frequently recognised creatives lifted from overseas (e.g., non-SA number plates, European streetscapes, generic voiceovers). These executions were decoded as “not for us”, even when end-frames carried a local logo. Participants used words like “lazy”, “bland”, and “irrelevant”, arguing that such ads fail to speak to local realities (e.g., loadshedding, potholes, township or peri-urban life, community humour). In short, audiences noticed when contextual cues (language, scenery, idiom, humour) were missing and penalised brands for it.

2. Language omission as a dignity issue

Black African participants, especially women, consistently framed vernacular use (even single phrases like “bakkie”) as a marker of respect and recognition. Where language

diversity was absent, people described a symbolic exclusion, as if their identities were not part of the imagined audience. Multilingual or colloquial registers signalled “you see us”, English-only templates did not.

3. Misfired identity casting and role scripts

Unrealistic family scenes (e.g., the “perfect family with a well-behaved child”, perfectly styled household), hyper-aspirational glam, or hard gender targeting (e.g., “for mothers”) created identity friction. Men, for instance, felt pushed out of a “mom-car” narrative and no longer visualised themselves as legitimate drivers of that model, mothers dismissed glamorous perfection as out of touch with everyday messiness. These reactions cut across race and age, but life-stage mattered, people wanted to see their current realities represented with dignity, not idealised clichés.

4. Platform and format misfit

Younger participants complained that TV-first, spec-heavy formats missed where they actually learn about cars which is from content creators, short-form video, user reviews. Conversely, some older participants wanted story-rich TV ads with cultural depth rather than fast-cut influencer posts. Exclusion therefore also meant channel fit “talk to me where I am, in a voice that feels natural for that space”.

Across the groups, “exclusion” was less about being offended and more about not being recognised, the wrong language, the wrong setting, the wrong roles, the wrong platform. Participants connected these mismatches to trust and control, asking “if a brand does not understand my world in communications, why should I trust its aftersales, parts, or promises?”. This links Theme 3 directly to perceived behavioural control (TPB) and aftersales trust as a binding constraint.

The content analysis showed that although Chinese OEMs attempted to localise their creative assets, some creative assets across various platforms rely on global assets, examples included Chery, OMODA, Jetour, the evidence revealed vehicles in the creatives depicting left hand drive vehicles while South Africa is a right-hand drive market, justifying the disconnect participants described.

6.1.10. RQ1: Theme 3: Recap of literature on marketing exclusion and disconnect

The literature frames marketing exclusion as what happens when brand communications fail to recognise, respect, or represent salient identities (e.g.,

language, culture, gender, life stage), or when they import creative cues that signal “outsider” status to local audiences. In diverse markets, exclusion typically shows up through, missing or misused language, narrow or stereotyped representation, and imported global templates that ignore local norms, each of which erodes perceived legitimacy (Kipnis et al., 2020; Park et al., 2022).

Studies on representation and authenticity argue that diverse portrayal improves response only when audiences perceive it as genuine and congruent, tokenistic or stereotype-reinforcing imagery produces backlash and distrust (Campbell et al., 2023; Park et al., 2022).

Research focused on South Africa shows that language fit (e.g., using indigenous languages and culturally familiar voice/visuals) measurably lifts ad attitudes, evidence that linguistic inclusion is not cosmetic but a credibility cue (Potgieter & Roux, 2024; Vorster et al., 2019).

From a theoretical lens, Institutional Theory explains that brand communications are judged against informal institutions (dignity, linguistic inclusion, community values). Misfit with these norms triggers social sanction and reputational risk, fit earns cultural legitimacy (Scott, 2001; Kipnis et al., 2020).

Homophily Theory adds the mechanism that people respond more positively to sources and stories that feel “like me/us” at both the surface level (race, gender, language) and deep level (values, lifestyles) (Lawrence & Shah, 2020; Han & Balabanis, 2023; Ao et al., 2023).

Finally, the TPB clarifies how exclusion disconnects attitudes (“this brand is not for me”), subjective norms (“people like me don’t buy it”), and perceived behavioural control (signals that the product/after-sales will not support me), thereby depressing intention (Ajzen, 1991; Fatoki, 2021).

Recent contributions also warn of two patterning risks managers face, the over-diversification effect (identity cues multiplied without strategy make markets look noisier than they are) and audience heterogeneity projection (people infer more difference than exists), both of which can paralyse creative decisions if not managed with evidence (Saini et al., 2024; Wang, 2022). Together, this literature sets a clear expectation for South Africa, brands must localise language, imagery and channel

voice, avoid tokenism and signal reliable, right-for-here support to prevent exclusion and disconnect (Kipnis et al., 2020; Potgieter & Roux, 2024; Campbell et al., 2023).

6.1.11. RQ1: Theme 3: Discussion relating findings to literature marketing exclusion and disconnect

The data shows that across the FGs, participants condemned exclusion but the markers of exclusion differed by race, gender and generation. Black African participants emphasised the downgrading of local languages and Eurocentric aesthetics as structural marginalisation, many women criticised ads that ignored life-stage realities (e.g., motherhood, everyday routines), men focused more on lifestyle/visual fit, older viewers preferred heritage TV storytelling, while younger viewers wanted localised digital content.

Content analysis reinforced these perceptions, for example several Chinese and non-Chinese OEM creatives used global master assets that inadvertently displayed left-hand-drive interiors in a right-hand-drive market, an instant “not made for us” cue that participants called out as disconnect.

The salience of language and everyday dignity in the data directly supports Institutional Theory’s claim that informal norms set the boundary of “appropriate” brand speech in South Africa (Scott, 2001; Kipnis et al., 2020). The gendered and generational splits observed neatly track surface-level (language, gender) and deep-level (values, lifestyles, nostalgia vs digital nativity) homophily. This aligns with evidence that perceived similarity with endorsers/portrayals mediates trust, engagement and willingness to act (Lawrence & Shah, 2020; Han & Balabanis, 2023; Ao et al., 2023).

Participants’ comments explicitly linked exclusion to weaker attitudes (“it doesn’t speak to me”), cooler norms (“people like me aren’t in it”), and especially lower perceived control (“if the ad gets basic local cues wrong, can I trust parts/aftersales?”). This is exactly how TPB predicts intention will drop (Ajzen, 1991; Fatoki, 2021). The FG participants’ insistence on vernacular correctness confirms that linguistic inclusion is a high-leverage credibility cue in South Africa (Potgieter & Roux, 2024; Vorster et al., 2019; Kipnis et al., 2020).

The FGs rejection of generic, transplanted creatives confirms global evidence that representation helps only when authentic, while tokenism backfires (Campbell et al., 2023; Park et al., 2022). Younger participants in the FGs called for ongoing digital

relevance maps to the “trust loop” view of loyalty, brands must earn fit continuously post-purchase (Edelman, 2023a).

Extending beyond the literature, micro-cues of foreignness were observed in left-hand-drive creatives which indicate a practical, falsifiable indicator of exclusion that the literature often treats abstractly extending institutional-fit work with a concrete executional test (“does every asset reflect local usage conditions?”).

Gendered salience showed up through data nuances of homophily through showing women prioritising life-stage realism while many men emphasised visual/lifestyle aesthetics, a useful segmentation refinement for high-involvement categories. Nostalgia versus algorithmic intimacy was present with older participants’ love of heritage narratives contrasting with younger participants’ demand for algorithm-tuned, local digital content, a platform-specific manifestation of homophily/fit that invites integrated planning (TV heritage + social micro-narratives).

Showing what works when brands localise, Toyota Hilux storytelling (“It’s not a bakkie, it’s a Hilux”) uses local family-heritage codes and avoids heavy spec-talk, an execution that participants described as emotionally resonant and “South African”. This campaign illustrates institutional fit and deep-level homophily in practice.

OMODA’s lifestyle localisation (e.g., Durban July fashion alignment on the OMODA SA site) signals cultural fluency to younger, trend-oriented audiences, addressing the norm and identity levers highlighted by the focus groups.

Chery parts-confidence messaging (98% fill-rate, parts warehouse post) directly targets the perceived control barrier that participants tied to Theme 3 (“If they don’t ‘get’ us here, can I trust aftersales?”).

Together, these examples illustrate how local stories, right-for-here visuals (including obvious details like right-hand-drive interiors), and service/parts signals convert exclusion risk into inclusion and intention. (Packard et al., 2023; Ajzen, 1991).

6.1.12. RQ1: Theme 3: Conclusion of the discussion and findings of Marketing exclusion and disconnect

This theme establishes that in South Africa's super-diverse market, marketing exclusion is both symbolic and functional, symbolic when language, faces and stories do not reflect lived realities, functional when execution errors (e.g., left-hand-drive shots) and global masters broadcast "not made for here". Both pathways lower attitudes, weaken social proof, and reduce perceived control, thereby depressing intention (Ajzen, 1991; Kipnis et al., 2020; Potgieter & Roux, 2024; Campbell et al., 2023).

This means Chinese OEMs need to localise every layer, not just the line. This includes treating language, voice, visuals, and even cockpit orientation as non-negotiable fit cues (Potgieter & Roux, 2024; Kipnis et al., 2020). Additionally Chinese OEMs should consider replacing global masters where necessary, building modular local masters per platform (Potgieter & Roux, 2024; Kipnis et al., 2020). Further they could better reflect who consumers are (race, gender, language) and how they live (values, lifestyles, life-stage scenes). They should further plan dual streams heritage/narrative for older cohorts and local digital micro-stories for youth (Lawrence & Shah, 2020; Han & Balabanis, 2023; Edelman, 2023).

Chinese OEMs should ideally design for TPB levers in-messaging. Pairing emotional/identity fit with control cues (e.g., transparent finance, parts/after-sales capacity like Chery's warehouse/98% fill-rate post), and norm cues (credible local ambassadors and communities) (Ajzen, 1991; Fatoki, 2021). They should guard against over-diversification. Use consumer evidence and ongoing testing to prioritise few powerful identity cues over scattered, uncoordinated inclusion. (Saini et al., 2024; Wang, 2022).

The bottom line is theme 3 confirms the literature's core claims and extends it with executional diagnostics (micro-cues of foreignness) and segment-specific salience (life-stage vs. lifestyle; nostalgia vs digital intimacy). For RQ1, the answer denotes that Chinese OEMs can avoid exclusion and build intention by grounding creative work in local informal institutions, designing for homophily (surface and deep), and embedding explicit TPB levers that speak to South African realities. (Kipnis et al., 2020; Lawrence & Shah, 2020; Ajzen, 1991).

6.1.13. RQ1: Theme 4: Recap of findings on emotional resonance and storytelling

The focus group data revealed that emotional resonance is not a generic “feel-good” factor but a culturally coded expectation. Participants repeatedly emphasised that stories must sound and feel South African, which means humour with local timing, idioms, and relatable scenarios. Humour was described as a “trust signal” because it demonstrates cultural fluency and reduces perceived distance between brand and audience. Beyond humour, participants valued relational narratives, stories anchored in family bonds, friendship networks, and community pride. These narratives were seen as authentic because they mirror everyday realities such as school runs, township gatherings, and milestone celebrations.

Interestingly, heritage tones, road trips across iconic landscapes and intergenerational rituals elicited mixed reactions. Older participants associated these cues with security, continuity, and pride, while younger participants often flagged them as dated or exclusionary if paired with narrow casting or nostalgic stereotypes. This tension suggests that heritage is not universally persuasive, its effectiveness depends on framing and inclusivity.

6.1.14. RQ1: Theme 4: Recap of literature on emotional resonance and storytelling

The literature positions storytelling as a strategic lever for persuasion, particularly in high-involvement categories like automotive. Emotional narratives influence attitudes (a core construct in the TPB) by shaping how consumers interpret brand warmth, care, and credibility (Ajzen, 1991; Packard et al., 2023). When stories evoke positive emotions and cultural familiarity, they increase processing fluency and reduce psychological distance, making the brand feel “like it’s for people like me”.

Research also shows that platform and language fit amplify emotional effects. Packard et al. (2023) argue that message framing and medium congruence enhance engagement, while Potgieter and Roux (2024) demonstrate that vernacular language use in South African advertising significantly boosts trust and perceived authenticity. This aligns with Homophily Theory, which explains that identity-based engagement works best when stories reflect both surface-level cues (race, language, gender) and deep-level cues (values, aspirations, everyday routines) (Lawrence & Shah, 2020; Campbell et al., 2023).

At the social norms level, storytelling becomes more persuasive when it incorporates visible peer endorsement. Featuring real owners, community figures, or relatable

influencers creates social proof, signalling that “people like me choose this brand” (Han & Balabanis, 2023; Gershon et al., 2024). For perceived behavioural control, longer-form content plays a crucial role, such as explainer videos on financing, warranties, and service networks reduce uncertainty and perceived risk, which are major barriers in automotive decision-making (Fatoki, 2021).

Finally, contemporary trust research reframes storytelling as a post-purchase loop rather than a pre-purchase burst. Edelman (2023a, 2023b) shows that loyalty and advocacy depend on ongoing content that sustains emotional connection and reinforces norms after the sale. This means brands must design story systems, multi-platform narratives that evolve with the customer journey, rather than isolated campaigns.

6.1.15. RQ1: Theme 4: Discussion relating findings to literature on emotional resonance and storytelling

Humour and warmth build favourable attitudes aligning with TPB’s architecture. Owner/creator recurrences supply ongoing social proof (norms) and feature-rich explainers increase perceived control by demystifying finance, warranties, parts, and safety (Ajzen, 1991; Packard et al., 2023; Fatoki, 2021; Gershon et al., 2024).

Consumers’ preference for relational everyday scenes mirrors deep-level homophily values (safety, care, pride), routines (school runs, shift work) and aspirations (mobility, status without pretence), create the dual alignment the literature associates with trust, engagement, and even more importantly price tolerance (Lawrence & Shah, 2020; Gao et al., 2019; Campbell et al., 2023). The FGs’ request for vernacular wit and South African comedic timing (Chicken Licken and Nando’s examples) also converges with language research showing that ethnic-language or culturally tuned cues raise ad attitudes and trust compared with generic English-only treatments, particularly among consumers with strong ethnic self-identification (Potgieter & Roux, 2024; Vorster et al., 2019).

The mixed reaction to heritage themes adds a useful boundary condition, which is that heritage can uplift or exclude depending on casting, tone, and frame. The safer design, consistent with inclusive-marketing guidance, is “heritage-aware modernity” retain pride and landscape signifiers, but centre contemporary, inclusive characters and avoid essentialising identities (Tuli et al., 2025; Park et al., 2022). This balances continuity

(which older cohorts value) with currency (which younger cohorts demand), without drifting into stereotype or nostalgia-lock.

6.1.16. RQ1: Theme 4: Conclusion of the discussion and findings of emotional resonance and story telling

The findings confirm the persuasive value of emotional, relational, platform-fit storytelling and extend TPB's application by specifying a story system that simultaneously targets the three intention levers, the first being attitude via locally tuned humour and warm recognisable narratives, second being the subjective norms via recurring owners/creators who supply credible social proof; and lastly perceived control via clear, long-form explainers that dissolve affordability and service anxieties (Ajzen, 1991; Gershon et al., 2024; Fatoki, 2021; Packard et al., 2023).

Execution should be heritage-aware but not heritage-bound, it should retain the pride and places South Africans love, while centering contemporary inclusive characters and everyday realities to avoid essentialising identities (Tuli et al., 2025; Park et al., 2022). For Chinese OEMs, the managerial takeaway is to treat storytelling as a capability that spans paid/owned/earned media and the dealership floor, so that message, medium, and service co-produce a coherent, trust-building narrative over time (Kipnis et al., 2020; Edelman, 2023a, 2023b).

6.2. Research question 2: Diversity in marketing and consumer decision making

6.2.1. RQ2: Theme 5: Recap of findings on brand heritage and generational loyalty

Across the FGs, heritage operated as a quick decision guide for many older participants. Several explicitly referenced family legacies “what my parents drove”, “what has always worked in our family” and translated those memories into present day expectations of engineering reliability, serviceability, and status security. Heritage here functioned as a risk-reduction heuristic, the longer the brand has been visible in South African roads, the lower the perceived risk of breakdowns, poor resale, or social embarrassment if things go wrong. The FGs often bundled heritage with service familiarity (knowing where to go, who to call) and parts predictability (having confidence spares will be available and fairly priced).

By contrast, younger participants treated heritage as respectable but not decisive factor. They were open to newer or challenger brands when three conditions converged, cultural fit (ads and touchpoints that “sound like us”, use local humour and

depiction of real life), aftersales reassurance (clear finance, visible service footprint, warranties and parts signals), and peer approval (owners/influencers they recognise). Price and features mattered, but trust and identity alignment filtered those evaluations. In short, heritage counted, yet story fit plus support proof could override it.

Gendered readings were visible but not rigid. Some participants still attached “ruggedness” to men and “care/safety” to women, however, several men welcomed caregiving-oriented features, and several women emphasised performance rather than aesthetics alone. This suggests a convergence around pragmatic reassurance with life-role portrayal more influential than old gender stereotypes.

6.2.2. RQ2: Theme 5: Recap of literature on brand heritage and generational loyalty

The literature documents intergenerational diffusion of brand preferences. People often inherit brand preference through family and community, with heritage serving as a proxy for quality and trust (Cunningham & Petzer, 2021; Leonhardt et al., 2020). At the same time, identity alignment moderates’ loyalty. When a brand’s stories, faces, language and values fit the consumer’s identity, loyalty strengthens, when fit is weak, even strong heritages can erode (Leonhardt et al., 2020; Campbell et al., 2023).

Homophily research explains the mechanism of how surface-level similarity (e.g., language, gender, race) attracts attention while deep-level similarity (values, life stage, lifestyle) sustains commitment. Under strong identity fit, price sensitivity can fall because people evaluate offers through a belonging/meaning lens as much as a transactional one (Gao et al., 2019; Lawrence & Shah, 2020).

Inclusive-marketing syntheses emphasise that in emerging markets, cultural legitimacy allows challenger brands to compete credibly with incumbents, provided their communications and experiences align with local informal institutions (language, dignity, community values) and reduce practical frictions (Tuli et al., 2025; Paul, 2019; Kipnis et al., 2020). Moreover, contemporary trust work shows that post-purchase content and service performance are central to maintaining loyalty, meaning heritage must be performed in today’s touchpoints, not only claimed in advertising (Edelman, 2023a, 2023b; Packard et al., 2023).

Where heritage is tied tightly to country-of-origin images, missteps can magnify backlash, conversely, well-managed localisation tempers with origin effects and rebuilds trust (Davvetas et al., 2024; Andéhn et al., 2019).

6.2.3. RQ2: Theme 5: Discussion relating findings to literature on brand heritage and generational loyalty

The data aligns with the literature's two-track picture of loyalty. For many older consumers, heritage acts as a default guide, a fast route to attitude stability and norm assurance ("people like us"), consistent with intergenerational dispersion (Cunningham & Petzer, 2021; Leonhardt et al., 2020). For younger consumers, the decision is comparative, heritage is respected, but identity fit and trust cues are pertinent deciders. This maps directly onto the TPB pathway where attitudes are shaped by credible, locally resonant narratives, where subjective norms are activated by visible peers/owners and perceived control rises when aftersales is explained with warranties, parts access, finance clarity, and dealer coverage (Ajzen, 1991; Fatoki, 2021; Gershon et al., 2024).

For Chinese OEMs, the implication is not to "mimic" legacy stories but to orchestrate legitimacy. The aim is to mobilise local owner voices and recurring community figures to normalise adoption, which is exactly where social contagion and influencer homophily are strongest (Gershon et al., 2024; Han & Balabanis, 2023). Make service network, parts availability, warranty terms and finance support hyper-visible at the dealership (Fatoki, 2021; Packard et al., 2023). Tell South African-coded stories that reflect contemporary roles so deep-level homophily lifts willingness to pay without a price war (Gao et al., 2019; Lawrence & Shah, 2020; Campbell et al., 2023).

Strategically, this reframes "heritage versus newness" as a false binary. Heritage remains useful for some segments, but cultural alignment plus aftersales proof lets challengers "borrow" trust and convert generational openness into adoption (Tuli et al., 2025; Paul, 2019).

6.2.4. RQ2: Theme 5: Conclusion of the discussion and findings of brand heritage and generational loyalty

The evidence confirms intergenerational effects while extending the literature by identifying generational openness as a practical window for challenger brands, conditional on identity alignment and aftersales trust. In TPB terms, the route to intention is a three-lever story, norms and control. For Chinese OEMs, success lies in

performing legitimacy today, not invoking heritage yesterday. (Ajzen, 1991; Tuli et al., 2025; Fatoki, 2021; Gershon et al., 2024).

6.2.5. RQ2: Theme 6: Recap of findings on attitudes toward Chinese automotive brands

FG insights revealed a clear attitude intention gap. Participants frequently expressed admiration for design aesthetics, interior technology, and feature-rich specifications offered at competitive prices. Many described Chinese vehicles as “stylish”, “modern” and “value-packed”, acknowledging that these brands often outperform legacy competitors on digital cockpit features, connectivity, and comfort options. However, this positive evaluation rarely translated into firm purchase intention because of trust deficits, particularly around aftersales support.

The dominant brake on intention was the fear of being stranded or poorly supported. Participants worried about service footprint coverage, parts availability, and warranty reliability, framing these concerns as both practical risks (“Where do I get parts if something breaks?”) and reputational risks (“What about my image?”). Even among those impressed by styling and tech, hesitation persisted on account of the reliability factors. Participants also highlighted communication gaps, while some OEMs claimed strong warranties and roadside assistance, these promises were not consistently visible or explained in advertising. In short, admiration for product attributes was real, but perceived behavioural control, the belief that ownership would be smooth and risk-free remained fragile.

6.2.6. RQ2: Theme 6: Recap of literature on attitudes toward Chinese automotive brands

The TPB posits that attitudes alone do not guarantee intention, they must be reinforced by subjective norms and PBC (Ajzen, 1991). In high-involvement categories like automotive, control beliefs, confidence in affordability, service access, and reliability are decisive predictors of purchase intention (Fatoki, 2021). South African studies confirm that service network visibility and finance clarity strongly influence adoption of new brands and technologies, including EVs (Fatoki, 2021).

Country-of-origin and brand transgression research adds another layer reputation spillovers matter. Brands associated with systemic weaknesses, poor service, opaque warranties can suffer amplified penalties, even for isolated failures (Andéhn et al.,

2019; Davvetas et al., 2024). These studies show that consumers interpret such gaps as institutional misfit, triggering distrust beyond the immediate product. Conversely, transparent performance metrics and localised service narratives can mitigate origin-based scepticism and reposition challenger brands such as Chinese OEMs as credible alternatives (Paul, 2019; Tuli et al., 2025).

Finally, trust literature underscores that post-purchase engagement, service updates, owner communities, and real-time support is now a strategic lever, not a back-office function (Edelman, 2023a, 2023b). Brands that operationalise trust through visible systems (e.g., downtime guarantees, multilingual support) outperform those relying on generic “quality” claims.

6.2.7. RQ2: Theme 6: Discussion relating findings to literature on attitudes toward Chinese automotive brands

Attitudes toward Chinese brands are favourable, but intention stalls because control beliefs are weak. This makes aftersales trust the critical mediator. To close the gap, Chinese OEMs must convert operational assets into communication assets, turning, parts logistics and warranty clarity into front-of-house narratives, not hidden details. Doing so directly strengthens the control pathway, while owner testimonials and community events reinforce subjective norms (Ajzen, 1991; Gershon et al., 2024; Han & Balabanis, 2023).

The reputational dimension demands pre-emptive transparency i.e. publishing loan car policies, 24/7 roadside assistance metrics, and average repair turnaround times. Integrate WhatsApp booking, multilingual service reminders, and clear repair quotes into both digital and physical touchpoints. This shifts the brand promise from “trust me” to “measure me”, aligning with Packard et al.’s (2023) emphasis on communication fit and Edelman’s (2023a) call for trust loops that persist beyond the sale.

Strategically, this reframes aftersales from a hygiene factor to a competitive differentiator. In markets where heritage incumbents trade on legacy trust, challenger brands like Chinese OEMs can borrow legitimacy by making service certainty hyper-visible and verifiable. This approach also mitigates country-of-origin bias by demonstrating institutional competence, not just product quality (Davvetas et al., 2024; Andéhn et al., 2019).

6.2.8. RQ2: Theme 6: Conclusion of the discussion and findings of attitudes toward Chinese automotive brands

The evidence confirms TPB predictions and extends application by elevating aftersales trust from a background hygiene factor to a strategic mediator. Admiration for design and price is necessary but insufficient, adoption depends on engineering control (service logistics, warranty clarity), norm reinforcement (owner advocacy, peer proof) and value-led attitudes. For Chinese OEMs, the actionable insight is clear, make trust tangible through transparent metrics, omnichannel service visibility, and culturally attuned communication so that intention can follow admiration. (Ajzen, 1991; Fatoki, 2021; Gershon et al., 2024; Edelman, 2023a, 2023b).

6.2.9. RQ2: Theme 7: Recap of findings on purchasing factors and decision-making dynamics

Participants described vehicle purchase as a multi-criteria negotiation, balancing budget constraints, life stage priorities, and risk imaginaries. Budget considerations extended beyond sticker price to TCO, including fuel efficiency, insurance premiums, maintenance costs, and projected resale value. Many participants used resale as a proxy for brand stability, signaling confidence in long-term support.

Life stage emerged as a strong differentiator. First-time buyers prioritised entry-level affordability, finance clarity, and peer validation, often seeking reassurance from friends or influencers who had purchased similar models. Family buyers, by contrast, emphasised safety technologies (like airbags, ISOFIX), reliability, guarantees, reflecting their heightened sensitivity to risk and responsibility.

Risk imaginaries were vivid and context-specific, participants worried about breakdowns on remote routes, crime exposure during roadside delays, and service gaps in peri-urban areas (Will they accommodate me if I am from out of town?). These fears shaped expectations for roadside assistance visibility, extensive dealer network coverage, and average response times. The women in the FGs consistently prioritised safety, reliability, and respectful service interactions, but several male participants converged on similar priorities suggesting that caregiving and security concerns are cross-gender norms in family contexts.

Finally, transparency in finance and warranty terms significantly reduced anxiety. Participants valued clear calculators for monthly instalments, insurance bundles, and resale guarantees, interpreting these as tangible signals of brand accountability. In

short, decision-making was not purely rational, it was risk-managed and socially negotiated, with trust and clarity acting as decisive levers.

6.2.10. RQ2: Theme 7: Recap of literature on purchasing factors and decision-making dynamics

The TPB anticipates that communications can reduce perceived barriers (control beliefs) and shape attitudes through benefit framing, while subjective norms operate via peer and family approval (Ajzen, 1991). In automotive contexts, studies confirm that affordability and service availability are robust predictors of purchase intention, especially for new entrants and EV adoption (Fatoki, 2021).

Life course research adds granularity, consumer priorities shift with role transitions from single adulthood to family roles, altering the weight of safety, convenience, and cost factors (Moschis, 2021). This underpins the call for lifecycle-sensitive segmentation, where marketing strategies adapt to evolving identity scripts and household dynamics (Tuli et al., 2025).

Inclusive marketing literature reinforces that contextual reassurance such as dealer network coverage to commuter corridors or tailoring finance narratives to income volatility enhances perceived control and accelerates adoption (Paul, 2019; Campbell et al., 2023). Moreover, risk perception studies show that situational cues (e.g., crime rates, infrastructure gaps) amplify the salience of safety and reliability, making visible guarantees (roadside assistance, uptime metrics) critical for trust formation (Packard et al., 2023).

6.2.11. RQ2: Theme 7: Discussion relating findings to literature on purchasing factors and decision-making dynamics

The findings validate TPB's predictive logic that attitudes, norms, and control beliefs are not abstract constructs they are activated through specific, lifecycle-sensitive messages. For first-time buyers, the pathway is clear, emphasise entry finance clarity, peer proof (owners and influencers), and low-barrier onboarding (e.g., bundled insurance, transparent instalment calculators). For family buyers, highlight safety tech, uptime guarantees, and convenient servicing, framing these as enablers of care and continuity.

The “risk imaginaries” were an emergent topic in the FG discussions citing concerns of crime exposure, breakdowns far from help demanding situated reassurance. Brands should map coverage onto high-traffic commute corridors, publish roadside assistance response times, and visualise help points in vulnerable zones. By indexing assurance to everyday routes, brands transform abstract promises into locally meaningful control cues.

Strategically, this reframes reassurance as contextual and measurable, not generic. Actions such as integrating WhatsApp booking, multilingual service reminders, and predictive maintenance alerts could further strengthen perceived control while signalling cultural fluency. These measures align with inclusive marketing’s emphasis on lifecycle and situational fit, converting latent anxiety into actionable confidence (Tuli et al., 2025; Moschis, 2021).

6.2.12. RQ2: Theme 7: Conclusion of the discussion and findings of purchasing factors and decision-making dynamics

The evidence confirms that life stage and risk management dynamics are central to automotive decisions and extends practical guidance by specifying situated reassurance tactics that lift perceived control and intention. For Chinese OEMs this means designing segmented narratives for first-time versus family buyers is a strategic imperative. Operationalising trust through visible service coverage, uptime guarantees, and finance transparency and embedding reassurance in platform-native content and dealer interactions, ensure that every touchpoint reduces uncertainty.

In TPB terms, success depends on engineering control beliefs, reinforcing norms through peer advocacy, and sustaining attitudes with culturally resonant, lifecycle-aware storytelling. When these levers converge, admiration for product features can translate into confident adoption. (Ajzen, 1991; Fatoki, 2021; Moschis, 2021; Tuli et al., 2025).

6.2.13. RQ2: Theme 8: Recap of findings on homophily and social influence

FG discussions revealed that purchase decisions are deeply social, flowing through family networks, peer circles, and local content creators. Maternal influence was particularly pronounced with mothers and older female relatives often being described as gatekeepers of household safety and budget discipline, shaping brand choices through advice and veto power. Women consistently emphasised respectability,

reliability, and care, while men in certain subgroups highlighted performance aesthetics and prestige cues such as sporty trims and advanced tech features.

Participants repeatedly cited “people like me” as the most persuasive evidence for reducing uncertainty. Seeing relatable owners, neighbours, colleagues, or influencers who share language, lifestyle and values being described as trust-building because it validated the brand through familiar social scripts. Peer recommendations were seen as more credible than dealer claims, and local creators who blended aspirational aesthetics with cultural authenticity were praised for making new brands feel “normal”. This dynamic positioned social proof as a risk-mitigation tool, especially for challenger brands lacking longstanding heritage.

6.2.14. RQ2: Theme 8: Recap of literature on homophily and social influence

The literature consistently affirms that homophily amplifies trust and willingness to act on recommendations (Lawrence & Shah, 2020). Influencer impact rises sharply when audiences perceive identity similarity, whether through language, cultural codes, or life-stage alignment (Han & Balabanis, 2023). Referral studies show that word-of-mouth effects are contagious along similarity lines, creating cascades of adoption within tightly knit networks (Gershon et al., 2024).

Identity-based endorsements strengthen ad evaluations and information-seeking behaviors, particularly when representation spans both surface-level cues and deep-level cues (Leonhardt et al., 2020; Campbell et al., 2023). Inclusive marketing reviews argue that community-rooted advocacy owners as storytellers and local influencers as cultural translators outperforms generic celebrity endorsements in emerging markets because it activates subjective norms and reduces perceived risk (Tuli et al., 2025).

6.2.15. RQ2: Theme 8: Discussion relating findings to literature on homophily and social influence

Homophily is the engine of social influence, the study extended it by identifying distinct norm engines, maternal publics and performance subcultures where females are positioned as guardians of household safety and financial prudence and act as powerful carriers of social norms. When females see themselves reflected in owners and brand creators, their advocacy spreads through extended family networks, reinforcing trust and accelerating adoption. For prestige-driven male cohorts, creators who signal performance values and aspirational aesthetics ignite a different but equally

strong influence stream. This duality suggests a two-track influencer strategy depicted below in Figure 7.

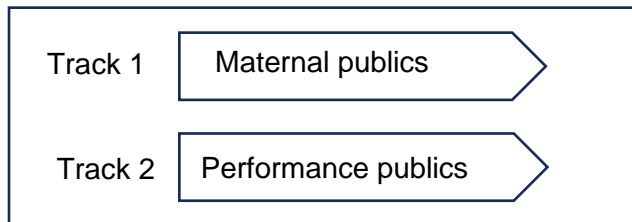


Figure 7: Two-track influencer strategy

Track 1 which is maternal publics who would emphasise safety, reliability, and respectful service through relatable female owners and community figures. Track 2 which are the performance publics would showcase tech sophistication and design flair via creators embedded in aspirational subcultures. Both tracks can coexist without diluting the message if anchored in shared cultural codes (local language, humour, everyday settings).

From a TPB perspective, these tactics reinforce subjective norms (“people like us choose this”) when paired with co-created educational content (finance offers, service demos) they lower control barriers (Ajzen, 1991; Fatoki, 2021). Some practical steps include formalising owner communities through local-language WhatsApp groups, township roadshows, and community service days. Additional steps include elevating owner-generated proof into paid media, ensuring authentic voices dominate the trust narrative using platform-native formats (short reels for aspirational cues, long-form tutorials for reassurance) to sustain influence loops.

6.2.16. RQ2: Theme 8: Conclusion of the discussion and findings of homophily and social influence

The findings confirm homophily’s centrality and extend the literature by spotlighting maternal publics and performance subcultures as distinct norm engines. Designing influencer and owner advocacy programs around these publics offers an efficient route to social diffusion, especially for challenger brands seeking legitimacy. In TPB terms, success depends on activating norms through identity-similar advocates, reinforcing attitudes with culturally resonant narratives and strengthening control beliefs via transparent, co-created content. When these levers meet, social influence becomes a multiplier of trust and intention turning “people like me” from a perception into a purchase driver (Ajzen, 1991; Han & Balabanis, 2023; Gershon et al., 2024; Lawrence & Shah, 2020).

6.3. Cross theme synthesis and updated conceptual framework

Across the themes, participants consistently used language inclusion, dignity/respect cues, and visible community presence as the first filter for whether a brand “belongs here”. This echoes Institutional Theory’s claim that legitimacy is co-created against informal institutions, unwritten norms around respect, voice, and local presence (Scott, 2001; Kipnis et al., 2020). A single mismatch (e.g., tone-deaf humour, incorrect local cues) can stall the entire persuasion process, regardless of product strength (Campbell et al., 2023).

Identity alignment then converts relevance into recognition and emotion. When surface-level cues (race, gender, language, locale) are layered with deep-level cues (values, aspirations, life-stage routines), participants reported stronger recognition and emotional connection. This is classic homophily in action perceived affirming similarity increases trust, information seeking, and willingness to act (Lawrence & Shah, 2020; Han & Balabanis, 2023). It also explains why vernacular wit and life-stage realism (e.g., school runs, intergenerational scenes) work because they operate as deep-level identity signals (Potgieter & Roux, 2024).

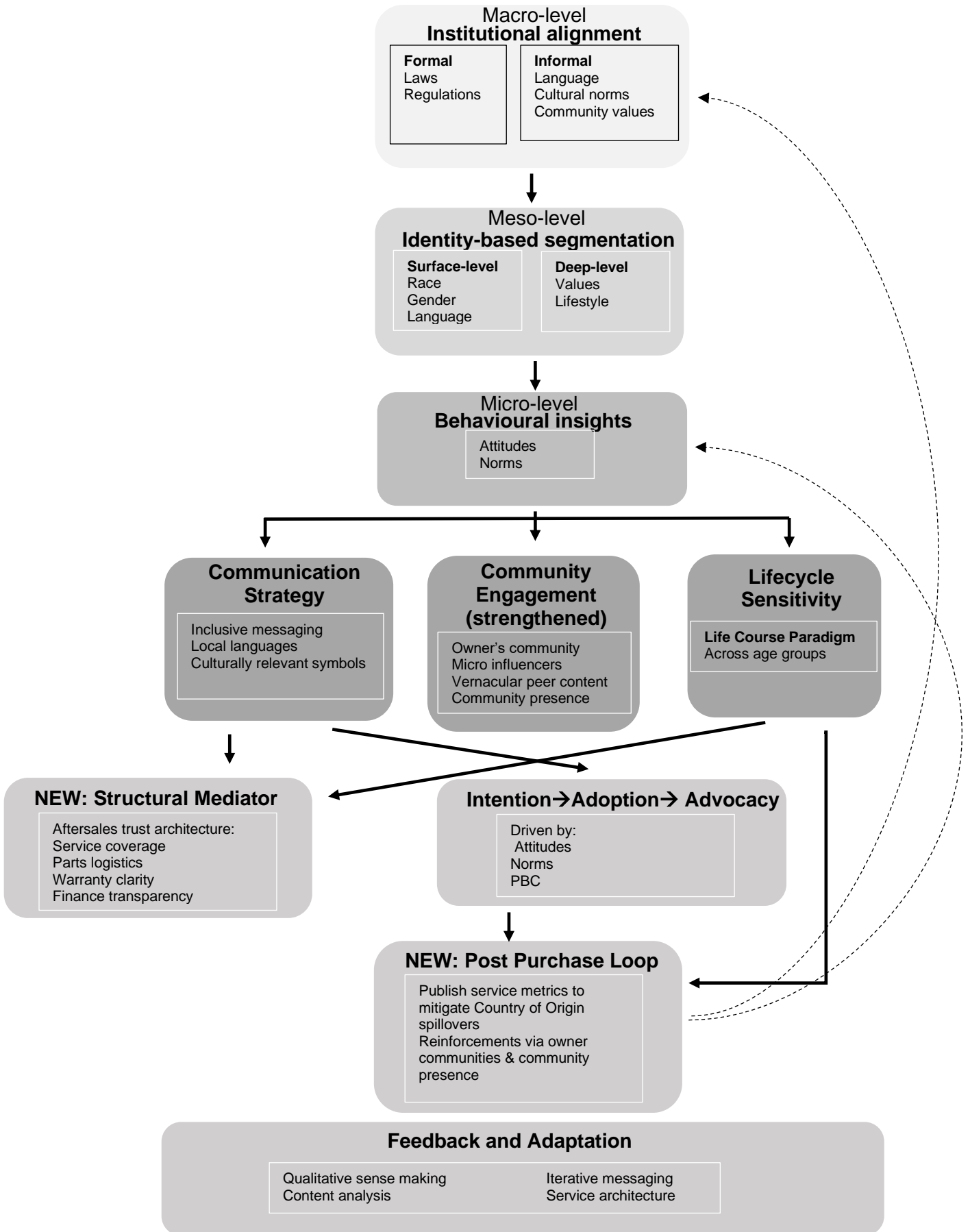
TPB posits people are more likely to act when three key factors work together, their attitudes, social influences and their sense of control. The data from this study aligns well with these three factors. Importantly, the intention to act increases significantly only when all three are activated at the same time, not just one (Ajzen, 1991; Packard et al., 2023).

Across themes, the single greatest friction point was aftersales trust. Dealer network coverage, parts logistics, warranty clarity and transparent pricing are not “hygiene factors”, they are the structural mediators that turn admiration into adoption by lifting perceived control (Fatoki, 2021). Given the strength of reputation spillovers in country-of-origin and transgression research, making aftersales visible and measurable is essential for challenger brands to neutralise latent bias (Andéhn et al., 2019; Davvetas et al., 2024). Finally, the “trust loop” requires ongoing content and community management, owner communities, service updates, and measurement dashboards to sustain advocacy and protect norms after the sale (Edelman, 2023a, 2023b).

The cross-theme synthesis revealed that while the initial conceptual framework formulated at the conclusion of Chapter 2 correctly anticipated the macro, meso, micro

integration of Institutional Theory, Homophily, and TPB, it underweighted one critical insight emerging from the empirical data, aftersales trust. Aftersales trust is not a peripheral hygiene factor but a structural mediator of perceived control (Fatoki, 2021). This finding necessitated an update to the framework depicted in figure 7 to reflect the operational depth and sequencing required to convert positive attitudes into actual purchase intention and sustained loyalty.

Figure 8: Revised conceptual framework



Source: Author's own work

The initial framework emphasised cultural legitimacy and identity congruence as prerequisites for marketing effectiveness. These remain foundational, but the data show that admiration for design and price collapses without visible, measurable service certainty. In other words, institutional fit and identity alignment open the door, but aftersales trust keeps the consumer inside. This insight extends TPB's application by specifying control beliefs as engineered outcomes, not assumed conditions, and by formalising trust architecture, dealer network footprint, warranty clarity, parts logistics, and finance transparency as communication assets rather than back-office details (Ajzen, 1991; Fatoki, 2021).

Figure 7 presents the revised conceptual framework that emerged from the cross-theme synthesis. The model retains the macro–meso–micro integration of Institutional Theory, Homophily, and the TPB but introduces critical refinements based on empirical findings.

At the macro level, institutional fit signaled through language inclusion, dignity/respect, and visible community presence functions as the legitimacy gate for brand communication (Scott, 2001; Kipnis et al., 2020). At the meso level, intersectional identity alignment operationalizes Homophily Theory, combining surface cues (race, gender, language) and deep cues (values, lifestyle) to build recognition and emotional resonance (Lawrence & Shah, 2020; Potgieter & Roux, 2024). These layers prime the micro level, where the three TPB levers, attitudes, subjective norms, and PBC translate connection into intention, adoption, and advocacy (Ajzen, 1991; Edelman, 2023a, 2023b).

Aftersales trust architecture is elevated as a structural mediator of PBC. This mediator bundles service coverage, parts logistics, warranty clarity, and finance transparency, addressing consumer concerns about ownership frictions and operational reliability. By strengthening PBC, this layer converts cultural and emotional fit into actionable confidence, reducing perceived risk and enabling high-involvement purchase decisions.

To sustain legitimacy beyond the point of sale, the model incorporates a feedback loop anchored in hard service metrics (e.g., parts availability rates, service turnaround times) and owner community engagement. Publishing these metrics mitigates country-of-origin spillovers and reinforces trust through transparent performance evidence and peer advocacy (Andéhn et al., 2019; Dawvetas et al., 2024; Packard et al., 2023). The post-purchase trust loop in the updated conceptual framework flows from the intention,

adoption, advocacy stage and connects back to both subjective norms (via owner communities and peer advocacy), reinforcing social proof and institutional fit (macro-level), by signaling ongoing legitimacy through visible community presence and transparent performance metrics.

This loop is designed to close the funnel and create a cycle, ensuring that trust is not only earned at the point of sale but sustained through aftersales engagement and hard service evidence (Andéhn et al., 2019; Davvetas et al., 2024; Packard et al., 2023).

In the original framework, Lifecycle Sensitivity was a distinct executional lever, applying the Life Course Paradigm (Moschis, 2021) to tailor strategies across age groups (e.g., digital engagement for youth, reliability messaging for older consumers). In the updated framework, it remains retained under the executional layer (alongside Communication Strategy and Community Engagement), but now it feeds into the structural mediator and trust loop. This means lifecycle considerations are not just about messaging, they also inform service architecture (e.g., finance transparency for younger buyers, warranty clarity for older segments) and post-purchase engagement, its influence is expanded beyond creative adaptation to include ownership experience design. Community engagement has been upgraded from campaign add-on to an always-on trust infrastructure leveraging micro-influencers, vernacular content, and peer networks.

The updated framework shifts from a message-centric model to a relationship architecture, where cultural legitimacy and identity alignment are necessary but insufficient without operational proof. By integrating institutional norms, identity cues, and behavioural levers with structural enablers and trust loops, the model offers a holistic pathway for Chinese OEMs to achieve sustainable market legitimacy in South Africa.

6.4. Implications for theory and practice

Theory confirms the macro–meso–micro integration and extends it by formalising intersectional localisation and aftersales trust as structural mediators of perceived control. In practice it is necessary to build a vernacular voice system, design representation-to-delivery continuity, deploy a story system that targets all TPB levers, and institutionalise owner communities to carry norms, while publishing hard service metrics to de-risk control beliefs.

6.5. Conclusion

The discussion demonstrates that winning in South Africa's superdiverse automotive market is not a matter of price or isolated localisation gestures. It is the coherent alignment of institutional fit (language, dignity, community), identity congruence (surface and deep), and behavioural engineering (attitudes, norms, control), with aftersales trust as the pivotal mediator. Theme-level analyses largely confirm the literature while extending it with actionable nuances, most notably intersectional localisation, voice-to-service continuity, representation-to-delivery alignment, maternal publics as norm engines, and the operationalisation of aftersales trust.

7. CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

7.1. Introduction

This chapter consolidates the findings of the study resulting from the analysis in Chapter 6, organising the findings in a structured and integrated manner. It moves beyond descriptive findings to articulate what the study ultimately concludes about marketing communication strategies for Chinese automotive OEMs operating in South Africa's super-diverse market.

The research was designed to explore how diversity influences consumer decision-making in a high-involvement category, using an interpretivist qualitative approach. The empirical setting was Gauteng province, South Africa's economic hub, chosen for its demographic heterogeneity and concentration of automotive activity (Statistics South Africa, 2025; GCIS, 2025). Participants were selected from varied consumer segments such as first-time buyers, repeat purchasers, and aspirational consumers reflecting heterogeneity in purchasing behaviour and life-stage characteristics (Moschis, 2021). Furthermore, these segments encompassed individuals with diverse linguistic and cultural affiliations, consistent with research on multicultural identity negotiation in consumer decision-making (Kipnis et al., 2020). They were engaged through four online focus groups (FG1–FG4) and supplemented by a content analysis of OEM marketing assets, ensuring triangulation and depth (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Krippendorff, 2022).

The research was anchored on two central research questions:

RQ1: What marketing communication strategies can Chinese automotive OEMs adopt to align with the preferences of South Africa's diverse consumer base?

RQ2: How does diversity in marketing communication influence consumer decision-making in the South African automotive sector?

These questions were anchored in three theoretical lenses Institutional Theory, Homophily Theory, and the TPB to capture macro-level legitimacy dynamics, meso-level identity congruence and micro-level intention formation (Scott, 2001; Lawrence & Shah, 2020; Ajzen, 1991).

In this chapter, the findings are organised by research question, with each section presenting principal theoretical conclusions that synthesise the discussion in Chapter 6.

These conclusions explain how institutional signals, identity-based cues and behavioural levers interact to shape consumer responses.

To enhance clarity, tables are used to summarise similarities and differences identified between the study's conclusions and existing literature, highlighting where this research confirms, extends, or challenges prior work.

The chapter then introduces the final conceptual framework, which combines the study's outcomes into a unified model that explains the pathway from communication fit to behavioural intention and post-purchase trust loops.

Subsequently, this chapter presents theoretical, methodological, and practical contributions, offers guidance for management and ecosystem actors, acknowledges study limitations, and suggests avenues for future inquiry.

7.2. Principal theoretical conclusions

This section crystallises the research outcomes synthesised in Chapter 6 into theory-anchored conclusions, organised by the two research questions (RQ1 and RQ2). For each RQ, there are expanded conclusions, similarities with the literature, surface nuanced differences and refinements relative to prior work. The section closes with a final conceptual diagram that integrates both questions into a coherent pathway from communication design to intention and the post-purchase trust loop.

7.2.1. Conclusion on RQ1

How can Chinese automotive OEMs develop inclusive marketing communication strategies that align with the preferences of South Africa's diverse consumer base?

Treat institutional fit as a non-negotiable entry condition for inclusivity

Inclusive communication begins with legitimacy, which is earned through respecting language (vernacular variants, code-switching), dignity-affirming micro cues (greetings, forms of address) and community-centred framing (family, neighbourhood, small enterprise mobility). In South Africa's multilingual, post-apartheid context, these choices function as institutional indicators demonstrating that the brand comprehends and honours local normative and cultural-cognitive expectations (Scott, 2001; Kipnis et al., 2020; Vorster et al., 2020). Where such cues are absent (e.g., English-only,

universal tonality), audiences frequently tolerate but do not trust the message, diminishing persuasion (Potgieter & Roux, 2024; Tuli et al., 2025).

Build identity congruence with both surface-level and deep-level homophily

Representation alone is insufficient. Messages that combine surface similarity (race, language, gender) with deep value congruence (reciprocity, dignity, local mobility realities) are perceived as recognising audiences rather than merely depicting them. This dual layer intensifies identification and message credibility, extending homophily beyond visible similarity to value-coded narratives and vernacular idiom (Lawrence & Shah, 2020; Kipnis et al., 2020). In South Africa's multicultural context, such cues activate emotional authenticity and cultural competence, increasing consumer affinity and trust (Hu et al., 2023). Sustained, identity-sensitive engagement through multilingual service content, community activation, and transparent communication is how trust and loyalty are earned, especially in the ownership phase (Edelman, 2023a; Tuli et al., 2025).

Make the post-purchase “trust loop” part of the communication strategy (not an operational afterthought)

Owner communities (e.g., WhatsApp groups in local languages), TCO/warranty explainers and service transparency are communication assets in their own right. In a high-involvement category, purchase is the start of the relationship. Ongoing local-language touchpoints convert first-time adoption into retention and advocacy, consistent with the Trust Loop replacing the linear funnel (Edelman, 2023a; Packard et al., 2023; Davvetas et al., 2024).

Engineer inclusive diffusion by designing referrals for social appropriateness

Referral programmes should foreground recipient benefit (“help a friend save”) and norm-salience reminders (e.g., “you were referred by ...”), making the act feel socially appropriate. Large-scale evidence shows referred customers make 31–57% more referrals, and reminders of referral origin increase referral behaviour (Gershon et al., 2024). Framing referrals as mutual/community benefit (rather than self-gain) aligns with dignity norms and fuels homophilous diffusion (Kipnis et al., 2020; Lawrence & Shah, 2020).

7.2.1.1. Similarities with extant literature for RQ1

The research outcomes resonate with theoretical positions that were laid out in Chapter 2, revealing points of convergence that validate the integrated framework.

First, the emphasis on language and dignity as preconditions for message acceptance mirrors the logic of Institutional Theory, which asserts that legitimacy formed socially and shaped by situational factors aligned with normative and cultural-cognitive expectations (Scott, 2001). In the South African context, where informal institutions such as linguistic inclusion and respect for cultural norms govern perceptions of appropriateness, the study confirms that communication fit is not merely aesthetic but a boundary condition for persuasion (Kipnis et al., 2020; Potgieter & Roux, 2024). Similarly, the role of identity congruence in strengthening message processing aligns with Homophily Theory's proposition that perceived similarity, whether in surface-level markers such as race and language or deeper value orientations facilitates trust and openness to persuasion (Lawrence & Shah, 2020). This study's evidence that consumers respond more favourably to campaigns reflecting both visible diversity and authentic cultural narratives reinforces the literature's claim that homophily operates as a relational mechanism in multicultural markets (Han & Balabanis, 2023).

The findings also echo contemporary trust research, particularly the collapse of the linear purchase funnel into a Trust Loop, as documented by Edelman (2023a; 2023b). The study corroborates that loyalty and advocacy are no longer secured at the point of sale but through sustained engagement in the ownership phase via multilingual service content, community activation and transparent communication. This convergence underscores that post-purchase engagement goes beyond operational concerns to serve as a core strategic requirement for trust-building (Packard et al., 2023; Davvetas et al., 2024).

Finally, the observation that referral contagion amplifies reach through social norms is consistent with empirical evidence on peer-driven diffusion. Gershon et al. (2024) demonstrate that referred customers exhibit a higher propensity to refer others, validating the study's insight that norm-salience prompts, and community-benefit framing can activate social proof within identity clusters. In a collectivist and dignity-conscious society such as South Africa, these mechanisms are particularly potent, reinforcing the prevailing focus within literature on social contagion as a multiplier of marketing effectiveness.

7.2.1.2. Nuanced differences and refinements contributed by this study (RQ1)

While these similarities affirm the robustness of existing theories, the study introduces refinements that extend their explanatory power in a super-diverse, emerging market context. First, it elevates textual homophily, language and idiom as the primary trust

filter, challenging the visual bias in homophily research. Even fluent English speakers expressed distrust toward English-only ads when cultural recognition was absent, signalling that linguistic cues are not peripheral but foundational to perceived authenticity (Potgieter & Roux, 2024).

The study operationalises institutional sensitivity at the micro-executional level, showing that greetings, address forms, and idiomatic choices act as institutional signals within creative assets. This nuance extends Institutional Theory beyond macro structures to the granular craft of message design, revealing how legitimacy is enacted through everyday communication (Scott, 2001; Kipnis et al., 2020).

While prior work acknowledges the effectiveness of prosocial referral incentives (Gershon et al., 2024), this study ties that mechanism to South African dignity norms, arguing that community-benefit framing is not merely effective but normatively necessary for inclusive diffusion. This cultural anchoring reframes referral design as an ethical as well as strategic choice.

Finally, the study advances the practice of Trust Loop design by specifying which assets, owner groups, TCO explainers and multilingual service updates function as media channels for post-purchase engagement. This moves beyond endorsing engagement in principle to detailing its architecture, offering actionable guidance for brands seeking to embed trust-building in their communication strategies (Edelman, 2023a; Tuli et al., 2025; Packard et al., 2023; Davvetas et al., 2024).

7.2.2. Conclusion on RQ2

How does diversity in marketing communication influence consumer decision-making in the South African automotive sector?

Attitudes are shaped by identity alignment and cultural relevance

Consumers respond positively to marketing messages that reflect their lived identities through language, representation and values. However, in high-involvement categories like automotive, attitudes alone are insufficient unless paired with credible product evidence (e.g., safety, reliability, service coverage). This dual requirement reflects the TPB, which posits that attitudes are formed through beliefs about outcomes and evaluations of those outcomes (Ajzen, 1991). In South Africa, where identity is politically and emotionally salient, culturally resonant messaging is a prerequisite for positive brand attitudes (Kipnis et al., 2020; Potgieter & Roux, 2024). This is further

supported by Packard et al. (2023), who show that culturally and psychologically attuned communication rather than generic or transactional messaging drives intention and behaviour in diverse markets.

Subjective norms are activated through community endorsement and peer influence

In collectivist and community-oriented contexts, social proof especially from relatable sources plays a decisive role in shaping consumer norms. Peer recommendations, community ambassadors and local influencers serve as norm carriers, reinforcing perceived approval and appropriateness of brand choices. This aligns with TPB's construct of subjective norms and is supported by South African evidence that consumer decisions are strongly influenced by community endorsement (Leonhardt et al., 2020; Kipnis et al., 2020). Gershon et al. (2024) demonstrate that peer-driven diffusion is amplified when norm-salience and community-benefit framing are present, while Han & Balabanis (2023) show that perceived similarity and authenticity of local influencers enhance norm activation in multicultural markets. Cunningham & Petzer (2021) further confirm that community endorsement significantly influences intention formation in high-involvement categories like automotive.

PBC is the binding constraint in automotive decision-making

Even when attitudes and norms are favourable, intention stalls if consumers perceive barriers such as limited-service access or unclear warranty terms. Fatoki (2021) confirms that PBC especially around affordability and aftersales support acts as a key predictor of buying intentions in the South African automotive market. This underscores the need for marketing communication to reduce perceived barriers through transparent messaging (Ajzen, 1991; Fatoki, 2021). Packard et al. (2023) further show that culturally and psychologically attuned messaging such as inclusive language and clarity around service terms enhances perceived control. Gershon et al. (2024) add that feature-rich explainers and community-based content increase consumer confidence by demystifying finance and warranty structures. Cunningham & Petzer (2021) also confirm that affordability and service transparency are decisive levers in intention formation for high-involvement purchases.

Post-purchase engagement consolidates intention into loyalty and advocacy

The traditional funnel has evolved into a Trust Loop, where post-purchase experiences such as service quality, owner communities and multilingual support shape long-term brand equity. Edelman (2023a; 2023b) shows that Gen Z and Millennials expect ongoing engagement and that trust is earned through continuous, culturally relevant

communication. In South Africa, this means that marketing must extend beyond acquisition to include relationship-building content that reflects local norms and values (Kipnis et al., 2020; Tuli et al., 2025). Packard et al. (2023) and Davvetas et al. (2024) substantiate this perspective showing that transparent service messaging and community activation reinforce trust and mitigate reputational risk. Andéhn et al. (2019) adds that publishing service metrics and engaging owner communities creates visible legitimacy, completing the Trust Loop and sustaining advocacy.

7.2.2.1. Similarities with extant literature for RQ2

The findings under RQ2 strongly reflect the theoretical principles reviewed in Chapter 2, confirming the explanatory power of the integrated framework. The study validates the TPB as a robust lens for understanding intention formation in high-involvement categories. Attitudes, subjective norms and PBC emerged as decisive antecedents of purchase intention, echoing Ajzen's (1991) proposition that these constructs jointly shape behavioural outcomes. Evidence from the focus groups reinforces this logic, namely that identity-congruent messaging and culturally relevant narratives enhanced positive attitudes toward brands, while peer endorsements and community validation activated subjective norms, consistent with TPB's emphasis on perceived social approval (Cunningham & Petzer, 2021; Kipnis et al., 2020; Han & Balabanis, 2023).

The study also corroborates prior research on the salience of social proof and homophily in collectivist contexts. Participants repeatedly referenced how family, friends and community figures influenced their decisions, aligning with Leonhardt et al. (2020) and Gershon et al. (2024), who argue that perceived similarity amplifies trust and accelerates diffusion. Similarly, the role of finance clarity and aftersales access in reducing perceived risk resonates with Fatoki's (2021) findings that PBC is a critical determinant of automotive purchase intention in South Africa. This is strengthened by Packard et al. (2023), who reveal that transparent messaging around service and finance enhances perceived control, and by Davvetas et al. (2024), who elevate the role of post-purchase performance in mitigating reputational risk and reinforcing trust.

Finally, the study's emphasis on post-purchase engagement as a trust-building mechanism mirrors Edelman's (2023a; 2023b) observation that the purchase funnel has evolved into a Trust Loop. The findings extend this by detailing how multilingual owner communities and transparent finance messaging function as media channels for sustained engagement. Publishing service metrics and activating peer advocacy further

reinforce legitimacy and brand equity (Andéhn et al., 2019; Packard et al., 2023; Davvetas et al., 2024).

7.2.2.2. Nuanced differences and refinements contributed by this study (RQ2)

While the foundational relevance of established theories is confirmed, this study introduces critical refinements that enhance their explanatory power in super-diverse, emerging markets such as South Africa. These refinements respond to contextual complexities that traditional models often understate.

Firstly, the research repositions PBC from a co-equal antecedent in the TPB to a decisive constraint in high-involvement purchase decisions. Findings reveal that even when attitudes toward a brand are positive and subjective norms are supportive, intention formation stalls if consumers perceive barriers related to affordability, financing clarity, or aftersales accessibility. This insight recalibrates TPB for automotive contexts, positioning PBC as the pivotal lever for converting intention into action (Ajzen, 1991; Fatoki, 2021; Packard et al., 2023). In practical terms, transparency in financial terms and service architecture emerges as a strategic communication priority rather than a back-office function.

Secondly, the study nuances the construct of subjective norms by demonstrating their layered and localised nature in South Africa's plural society. Norms do not operate uniformly, they vary across race, language, and geography and are mediated by micro-sources of influence. Township-based influencers, community leader and peer networks outperform national celebrities in shaping perceptions and activating behavioural conformity. This finding refines the operationalisation of Homophily Theory, underscoring that perceived similarity is not only visual but also socio-cultural and relational (Lawrence & Shah, 2020; Kipnis et al., 2020; Han & Balabanis, 2023).

Thirdly, the research advances TPB's attitudinal pathway by specifying a dual-proof requirement for positive evaluations. Identity resonance achieved through inclusive representation and cultural framing must be complemented by credible demonstrations of functional trust, particularly product quality and safety. Emotional fit alone is insufficient in high-stakes categories such as automotive, where consumers demand both cultural legitimacy and technical assurance before committing to purchase (Davvetas et al., 2024; Cunningham & Petzer, 2021). This insight challenges reductive assumptions that inclusivity alone drives favourable attitudes, highlighting the interplay between symbolic and functional value.

Finally, the study moves beyond endorsing post-purchase engagement as a principle to operationalising it as a structured trust-building mechanism. The proposed Trust Loop reframes aftersales communication as a strategic media layer rather than an ancillary service function. Assets such as multilingual service updates, owner communities and transparent finance content are identified as critical channels for sustaining trust and converting initial adoption into loyalty and advocacy. This contribution offers action orientated guidance for brands striving to embed relational continuity into their communication strategies, reinforcing trust as a dynamic and co-created resource (Edelman, 2023a; Tuli et al., 2025; Andéhn et al., 2019; Packard et al., 2023; Davvetas et al., 2024).

7.2.2.3. From strategy (RQ1) to behaviour (RQ2)

The synthesis of findings from RQ1 and RQ2 reveals a sequential pathway that explains how inclusive marketing communication strategies translate into consumer behaviour within South Africa's super-diverse automotive market. This pathway moves from strategic design to psychological activation and ultimately to behavioural outcomes.

At the strategic level, RQ1 demonstrates that effective localisation begins with institutional fit. This is not a superficial adjustment but a deliberate alignment with informal norms that govern legitimacy in the South African context. Respectful language use, culturally resonant framing and community-oriented narratives serve as institutional signals, enabling brands to earn credibility and avoid the reputational risks associated with tone-deaf global templates (Scott, 2001; Kipnis et al., 2020; Potgieter & Roux, 2024). Once legitimacy is established, identity congruence becomes the next lever. Here, representation operates beyond demographic optics to encompass deep-value homophily shared aspirations, lifestyles and cultural codes ensuring that messages are decoded as authentic rather than tokenistic (Lawrence & Shah, 2020).

At the behavioural level, RQ2 confirms that these inclusive strategies activate the psychological mechanisms articulated in the TPB. Identity-congruent messaging strengthens positive attitudes toward the brand, while endorsements from trusted peers and community figures amplify subjective norms, reinforcing social approval as a driver of intention. Crucially, clarity around financing options, warranty coverage and aftersales support enhances PBC, reducing uncertainty and perceived risk in a high-involvement category. The study underscores that PBC is not a peripheral factor but

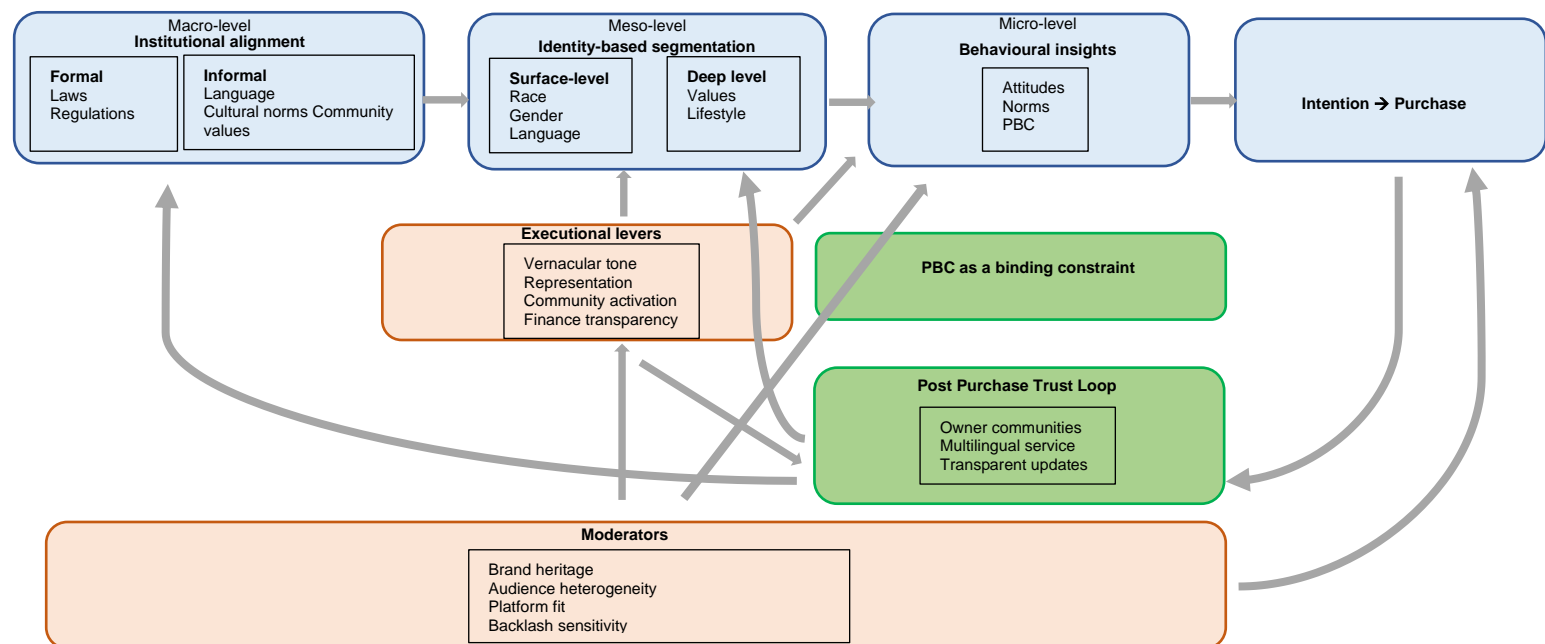
often the binding constraint in automotive decision-making, making transparency and service architecture central to intention formation (Ajzen, 1991; Fatoki, 2021; Cunningham & Petzer, 2021; Packard et al., 2023).

Beyond the point of purchase, the consumer journey does not conclude with intention. The findings align with Edelman’s Trust Loop, which reframes post-purchase engagement as a strategic media layer rather than an operational afterthought. Multilingual service content, owner communities and transparent updates institutionalise trust and convert initial adoption into loyalty and advocacy. This cyclical dynamic reinforces brand equity and embeds the brand within consumer networks, creating a feedback loop that sustains competitive advantage in a market where trust and cultural legitimacy are continuously negotiated (Edelman, 2023a; Tuli et al., 2025; Davvetas et al., 2024; Andéhn et al., 2019).

In summary, the convergence of RQ1 and RQ2 illustrates that inclusive marketing is not just a creative exercise but a behavioural architecture. It begins with institutional alignment, flows through identity-based resonance and culminates in psychological activation and relational continuity transforming diversity from a symbolic gesture into a strategic engine of consumer choice.

7.3. Final conceptual framework

Figure 9: Final conceptual framework



Source: Author’s own work

Above is the final conceptual framework that integrates both RQ1 and RQ2.

Evolution of the conceptual framework

The final conceptual framework represents the culmination of three iterative stages:

1. Chapter 2 (Initial conceptual framework): Theory-driven, based on Institutional Theory, Homophily Theory and the TPB.
2. Chapter 6 (Revised conceptual framework): Evidence-driven, incorporating insights from FG1–FG4 and content analysis.
3. Chapter 7 (Final conceptual framework): Synthesising theoretical foundations, empirical refinements and strategic implications.

The blue blocks represent the core theoretical pillars. Institutional fit (far left) and identity congruence (next block) remain from Chapter 2, but their operationalisation evolved. Initially, these were abstract constructs, the final framework specifies language, dignity norms and community values as institutional signals and distinguishes surface-level (race, language) and deep-level (values, lifestyle) homophily (Scott, 2001; Kipnis et al., 2020; Lawrence & Shah, 2020).

TPB mechanisms (third blue block) are retained, but the final model elevates PBC from a co-equal antecedent to a binding constraint, reflecting empirical evidence that affordability and service access dominate intention formation in high-involvement purchases (Ajzen, 1991; Fatoki, 2021). Intention, purchase (last blue block) remains the outcome but now explicitly links to moderators and feedback loops.

The orange block which are executional levers are absent in Chapter 2 and were introduced in chapter 6 and formalised in chapter 7. This block translates theory into managerial action points, vernacular language, authentic representation, community activation, storytelling and finance transparency (Campbell et al., 2023; Packard et al., 2023). Its central position signals that these levers mediate between macro/meso constructs and micro-level TPB drivers.

The green blocks represent empirical refinements, PBC as binding constraint (top green block) was not visually separated in earlier frameworks. Its elevation reflects FG evidence that even strong attitudes and norms fail when perceived affordability or service access is low (Fatoki, 2021; Packard et al., 2023).

Post-purchase Trust Loop (bottom green block) is a major addition. Earlier frameworks treated trust as an outcome, the final model reframes it as a strategic media layer sustaining loyalty and advocacy through multilingual service content, owner communities, and transparent updates (Edelman, 2023a; Tuli et al., 2025).

The orange block represents moderators. Moderators were implicit in Chapter 2 but now explicitly visualised, they include brand heritage, audience heterogeneity, platform fit and backlash sensitivity. These contextual factors explain variance in how strategies perform across segments and channels (Cunningham & Petzer, 2021; Davvetas et al., 2024).

The final conceptual framework works because it is integrative and multi-levelled. It preserves the macro, meso, micro logic of Chapter 2 while embedding executional and relational layers identified in Chapter 6. This ensures theoretical rigor and empirical validity. By adding the orange and green blocks, the framework moves beyond abstract constructs to specify what managers can control (language, representation, transparency) and where risks lie (PBC, backlash).

The Trust Loop introduces feedback, acknowledging that post-purchase engagement shapes future norms and institutional fit, a critical insight for loyalty in emerging markets (Edelman, 2023a; Tuli et al., 2025). The moderators reflect South Africa's socio-cultural complexity, ensuring the model is not a generic global template but tailored to super-diverse environments (Statistics South Africa, 2025; Kipnis et al., 2020).

The final framework advances inclusive marketing scholarship by localising global theories (Institutional, Homophily, TPB) to an African context. It recasts PBC as a binding constraint in high-involvement decisions. It operationalises trust as a media layer, not a passive outcome. It provides a managerially actionable blueprint for culturally complex markets.

7.4. Research contributions

This study contributes to scholarship and practice through three interrelated dimensions: theoretical advancement, methodological refinement and contextual application. Each contribution reflects the study's aim to bridge global marketing frameworks with the socio-cultural complexity of South Africa's automotive market.

7.4.1. Theoretical contributions

Integration of multi-level lenses in an African context

The research offers a novel integration of Institutional Theory, Homophily Theory and the TPB within a super-diverse emerging market. This multi-level approach demonstrates how macro-level legitimacy conditions such as language inclusion and dignity norms intersect with meso-level identity congruence, expressed through both surface cues (race, gender, language) and deep-value homophily (shared aspirations and lifestyles). These dynamics ultimately cascade into micro-level behavioural drivers, where attitudes, subjective norms and PBC shape purchase intentions in high-involvement categories like automotive (Scott, 2001; Lawrence & Shah, 2020; Ajzen, 1991). By sequencing these lenses, the study provides a theoretically coherent pathway from institutional expectations to consumer action, addressing a gap in global marketing literature that often treats these levels in isolation.

Refinement of TPB for automotive markets

The study extends TPB by reframing PBC as more than a co-determinant of intention. In the automotive context, PBC emerges as a binding constraint, where clarity on financing, warranty coverage and aftersales service is not merely supportive but decisive in shaping behavioural outcomes. These findings position finance transparency and service architecture as engineered levers of intention rather than assumed background conditions, offering a more granular operationalisation of TPB in high-stakes purchase environments (Fatoki, 2021; Cunningham & Petzer, 2021).

Institutional fit as executorial craft

While Institutional Theory traditionally foregrounds macro structures, this research demonstrates that legitimacy is also signalled through micro-level executorial choices. Elements such as vernacular language, respectful address and community-oriented framing function as institutional cues embedded in advertising, shaping consumer judgments of appropriateness and trust. This insight reframes inclusive marketing as institutional work an ongoing process of aligning creative and communicative choices with normative and cultural-cognitive expectations in a pluralistic society (Kipnis et al., 2020; Potgieter & Roux, 2024).

7.4.2. Methodological contributions

Context-sensitive qualitative design

By combining focus groups and content analysis, the study surfaces lived meanings and informal norms that quantitative surveys often miss. This approach captures

intersectional identity dynamics and informal institutional expectations critical for inclusive marketing in emerging markets (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Flick, 2022).

Triangulation for validity

The integration of consumer narratives with document analysis strengthens interpretive depth and credibility, offering a replicable model for researching cultural fit in marketing communication (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

7.4.3. Practical contributions

This study advances a practice-oriented blueprint for Chinese automotive OEMs seeking legitimacy and sustained growth in South Africa's superdiverse market. Rather than treating inclusivity as a peripheral gesture, the findings position it as a strategic architecture embedded across the communication lifecycle. Four interdependent imperatives emerged from this study.

First, language strategy must transcend tokenistic translation and embrace vernacular authenticity. Evidence from focus groups underscores that linguistic cues operate as cultural signifiers, shaping perceptions of respect and belonging. Campaigns that integrate indigenous languages and colloquial expressions signal institutional alignment and foster emotional resonance, whereas generic global templates risk alienation (Potgieter & Roux, 2024; Kipnis et al., 2020).

Second, representation strategy should move beyond surface-level diversity to incorporate deep-value congruence. Consumers decode inclusivity not only through visible markers such as race and gender but also through narratives that reflect everyday realities and aspirational identities. Authentic representation rather than symbolic tokenism emerges as a trust-building mechanism, particularly among historically marginalised groups (Campbell et al., 2023; Lawrence & Shah, 2020).

Third, community activation is critical for amplifying subjective norms and social proof. Peer networks and credible local voices function as persuasive levers in collectivist contexts, where endorsement by "people like me" accelerates diffusion and strengthens behavioural intention. This insight aligns with Homophily Theory and social contagion dynamics observed in South African consumer discourse (Gershon et al., 2024; Han & Balabanis, 2023).

Finally, trust must be institutionalised through transparent post-purchase architectures. In high-involvement categories such as automotive, PBC hinges on clarity around financing, warranties and aftersales support. The research reframes aftersales communication from an operational necessity to a strategic media layer a trust loop that sustains loyalty and advocacy over time (Edelman, 2023a; Tuli et al., 2025). For Chinese OEMs, this means designing communication ecosystems that integrate service narratives, multilingual support and owner community engagement as core brand assets rather than ancillary functions.

Collectively, these imperatives operationalise the study's integrated theoretical lens: institutional legitimacy (macro), identity congruence (meso) and intention levers (micro). They offer a roadmap for transforming inclusive marketing to move beyond mere compliance to becoming a catalyst for market advantage in South Africa's plural consumer landscape (Scott, 2001; Ajzen, 1991; Kipnis et al., 2020).

7.5. Limitations of the study

While the research offers significant contributions into inclusive marketing strategies for Chinese automotive OEMs in South Africa, several limitations warrant acknowledgment. First, the findings are derived from a purposive sample of 29 participants located in Gauteng province. Although this approach enabled rich, context-sensitive insights, the results are analytically transferable rather than statistically generalisable to the broader South African population (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Gauteng's socio-cultural diversity provides a useful microcosm; however, the exclusion of other provinces such as KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape limits the ability to capture regional variations in cultural norms, linguistic practices, and consumer expectations (Statistics South Africa, 2025).

Secondly, a cross-sectional design was adopted for the study with data collection occurring at a single point in time. Consumer attitudes, identity markers and normative expectations are dynamic and may evolve in response to socio-economic shifts, technological adoption and brand strategies. Longitudinal research would therefore be necessary to trace these changes and assess the durability of inclusive marketing effects over time (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Thirdly, a qualitative inquiry, while well-suited for exploring complex identity negotiations and informal institutional norms, demands intensive data collection and

interpretive analysis. This inevitably constrains breadth and limits the ability to quantify behavioural pathways (Flick, 2022).

Additionally, the researcher's positionality and reliance on online focus groups may have influenced interactional dynamics and interpretive frames. While reflexive journaling and peer debriefing helped mitigate potential biases, subjectivity persists as a fundamental feature of interpretivist research (Tracy, 2010)

7.6. Recommendations for management and stake holders

The study demonstrates that inclusive marketing is positioned as a core strategic requirement for Chinese OEMs operating in South Africa's superdiverse market, not as a secondary tactic. On this note, five actionable recommendations emerged and are as follows:

1. Institutional fit as a strategic priority

Embed vernacular language and dignity cues across all communication assets to signal cultural legitimacy. Avoid global templates that disregard local norms and symbolic codes, as these risk institutional misalignment and consumer backlash (Kipnis et al., 2020; Potgieter & Roux, 2024).

2. Representation beyond tokenism

Move beyond surface-level diversity to incorporate deep-level values including family, community and aspirational lifestyles. Authentic identity congruence fosters trust and emotional resonance, reducing the risk of perceived tokenism (Lawrence & Shah, 2020).

3. Community activation and social proof

Leverage micro-influencers, owner communities and referral programs framed as mutual benefit exchanges to activate subjective norms and accelerate adoption. Peer endorsement within homophilous networks amplifies credibility and diffusion (Gershon et al., 2024).

4. Transparency in finance and aftersales

Treat financing clarity and service accessibility as communication levers rather than operational details. Publishing service metrics, warranty terms, and multilingual support

content can strengthen perceived behavioural control and reduce risk perceptions (Fatoki, 2021).

5. Post-purchase engagement as a media layer

Institutionalise owner communities, multilingual service content, and transparent updates to sustain trust beyond the point of sale. This approach aligns with Edelman's trust loop, positioning aftersales engagement as a strategic asset rather than a back-office function (Edelman, 2023a; Tuli et al., 2025).

7.7. Suggestions for future research

While this study offers a context-sensitive framework for inclusive marketing in South Africa's super-diverse automotive market, its scope was geographically limited to Gauteng province and focused on Chinese OEMs. Future research should address several extensions. Scholars should empirically test the Generalisable Inclusive Marketing Strategy Model (GIMSM) developed in this study in other "super-diverse" emerging markets such as India or Nigeria. These contexts share similar institutional complexity and cultural heterogeneity but differ in linguistic structures, informal norms and consumer identity dynamics. Testing the model across these markets would strengthen its external validity and generalisability, providing comparative insights into how institutional alignment, identity congruence and behavioural intention mechanisms operate beyond South Africa.

Applying the model to other high-involvement sectors (e.g., financial services, healthcare) or to non-Chinese automotive OEM brands could reveal whether the observed mechanisms are category-specific or broadly applicable.

Longitudinal designs are recommended to track how attitudes, subjective norms and PBC evolve as Chinese OEMs consolidate their market presence. Intersectional identities such as religion, disability, and LGBTQ+ representation remain underexplored and merit focused investigation to deepen understanding of inclusivity in automotive marketing.

Methodologically, complementing qualitative insights with quantitative models would enable measurement of the relative weight of TPB constructs in high-involvement decisions, thereby quantifying behavioural pathways. Additionally, examining digital ecosystems is critical. Studies should analyse how algorithmic targeting, influencer

homophily, and social contagion dynamics shape consumer perceptions in South Africa's rapidly digitising market (Leonhardt et al., 2020; Han & Balabanis, 2023).

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Appendix 1: Interview protocol

Research question	Interview guide
<p>RQ1: What marketing communication strategies can Chinese automotive OEMs adopt to align with the preferences of South Africa's diverse consumer base?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How do cultural norms and community expectations influence your perception of car brands? 2. Do you feel that car advertisements reflect your lived experiences and values? 3. How important is it for a brand to use your home language or cultural symbols in its marketing? 4. Have you ever felt that a brand was culturally disconnected or tone-deaf? Can you explain? 5. Do you feel more connected to brands that reflect your identity or lifestyle? 6. How does seeing people who look or speak like you in ads affect your brand perception? 7. Can you recall an ad that made you feel represented or excluded? 8. Do you trust brands more when they align with your values or community?
<p>RQ2: How does diversity in marketing communication influence consumer decision-making in the South African automotive sector?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 9. What factors influence your decision to consider or purchase a vehicle? 10. How do your friends or family influence your vehicle choices? 11. Do you feel you have control over your vehicle choices, or are they shaped by external factors? 12. How do your attitudes toward a brand affect your purchase intent? 13. How have your vehicle preferences changed over time or with life events (e.g., starting a family, career changes)?

	<p>14. Do you think your current life stage influences the type of vehicle you prefer?</p> <p>15. Have you seen any recent car advertisements that felt inclusive or exclusive to you? Can you describe them?</p> <p>16. Do you think car brands are improving in how they represent diversity in their marketing?</p> <p>17. Do you currently own a vehicle? (Yes/No)</p> <p>18. If yes, what brand?</p> <p>19. Have you considered purchasing a Chinese automotive brand? (Yes/No) and why?</p>
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Appendix 2: Informed consent form

Informed consent letter

I am conducting research on **“Marketing communication strategies for Chinese automotive OEMs operating in South Africa: The role of diversity in consumer decision-making”**. Our online focus group is expected to last between **20 to 30 minutes** and will help us understand **What marketing communication strategies can Chinese automotive OEMs adopt to align with the preferences of South Africa’s diverse consumer base?**

Your participation is voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time without penalty. By signing this letter, you are indicating that you have given permission for:

- The online focus group to be recorded
- The recording to be transcribed by the researcher using an audio transcriber application
- Verbatim quotations from the interview to be used in the report, provided they are not identified with your name or that of your organisation
- The data to be used as part of a report that will be publicly available once the examination process has been completed
- All data to be reported and stored without identifiers.

If you have any concerns, please contact my supervisor or me. Our details are provided below.

Researcher name: [REDACTED] Research supervisor name: [REDACTED]
Email: 26346983@mygibs.co.za Email: [REDACTED]

Phone: _____ Phone: _____

Signature of participant: _____

Date: _____

Signature of researcher: _____

Date: _____

Appendix 3: Demographic form

Demographic information

(For contextual analysis only; responses will remain confidential)

Demographic category	Sub-category	Mark with x where applicable
Age	18 – 30 years	
	31 – 43 years	
	44 – 56 years	
	+57 years	
Gender	Male	
	Female	
	Other	
Race and ethnicity	Black African	
	Coloured	
	Indian/Asian	
	Caucasian	
	Other	
Occupation	Rather not say	
Income range	R8 000 - R20 000	
	R20 000 - R30 000	
	+R30 000	
	Rather not say	

Appendix 4: Ethical clearance approval

**Gordon Institute
of Business Science**
University of Pretoria

**Ethical Clearance
Approved**

Dear

Please be advised that your application for Ethical Clearance has been approved.

You are therefore allowed to continue collecting your data.

We wish you everything of the best for the rest of the project.

[Ethical Clearance Form](#)

Kind Regards

This email has been sent from an unmonitored email account. If you have any comments or concerns, please contact the GIBS Research Admin team.

Appendix 5: List of codes from ATLAS.ti

	Code
1	Advanced technology
2	Affordability
3	Age group 18 - 30
4	Age group 31 - 43
5	Age group 44 - 56
6	Apprehension to Chinese cars
7	Asian/Indian
8	Aspirational appeal
9	Attitudes towards a brand
10	Black African
11	Brand country of origin
12	Brand heritage/loyalty
13	brand preference
14	Brand uncertainty
15	Brand values/trust
16	Brands that left and came back
17	Car comparisons
18	Caucasian
19	Chinese vehicle considerations
20	Coloured
21	Comfort
22	Community expectation
23	Consistent marketing
24	Country of origin persuasion
25	Country specific marketing
26	Cultural norms
27	Current market relevance
28	Customer testimonials
29	Cybil's economy
30	Demographic appeal
31	Discovery patterns _whatsapp
32	Diversity in marketing
33	Emotional resonance
34	Evolution of marketing
35	Female participants
36	FG1- 01
37	FG1- 02
38	FG1- 03
39	FG1- 04
40	FG1-05
41	FG2-01
42	FG2-02
43	FG2-03
44	FG2-04
45	FG2-05

46	FG2-06
47	FG2-07
48	FG2-08
49	FG3-01
50	FG3-02
51	FG3-03
52	FG3-05
53	FG3-06
54	FG3-07
55	FG3-08
56	FG4-01
57	FG4-02
58	FG4-03
59	FG4-04
60	FG4-05
61	FG4-06
62	FG4-07
63	FG4-08
64	FG4-09
65	Futuristic design
66	GenZ
67	Global templates fail
68	Halo brands
69	High risk brands
70	Impact of external factors
71	Increased vehicle visibility
72	Influence of family, friends & influencers
73	Life events change preferences
74	Lived experiences
75	Local country humour
76	Localised South African context
77	Made for Mzansi
78	Male participants
79	Marketing disconnect
80	Marketing exclusion
81	Marketing target audience
82	Negative brand legacy
83	Negative brand perception
84	Online Focus Group 1 cleaned
85	Online reviews
86	Online/Social media search
87	Peace of mind
88	Peer pressure
89	People know what they want
90	Price & aftersales
91	Purchase decision making factors
92	Relatability
93	Representation

94	Respect based on language
95	Risk reduction
96	Sea of sameness
97	Sense of global aesthetics
98	Sentiment & engagement
99	Social media
100	Status symbol
101	Target market
102	Tone deaf influencer glam
103	Trust loop
104	Use of vernacular
105	Value for money
106	Vehicle attributes
107	When in Rome
108	Word of mouth