

# **Gordon Institute of Business Science**

University of Pretoria

**The Moderating Effect of Social Presence on Consumer Brand Trust and Purchase Intention in SMEs.**

**Nature of the study: Quantitative**

**22014714**

**[22014714@mygibs.co.za](mailto:22014714@mygibs.co.za)**

A research project submitted to the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Business Administration.

**March 2025**

## **Abstract**

Small to medium enterprises (SME's) are not immune to the pressure to digitise and build an online presence. A primary challenge faced is the need to build trust and increase consumer purchase intention, to drive sales which is imperative for their long-term growth. Literature on the tangible benefits of online presences for SMEs in emerging markets remains limited.

This South African study used social presence theory to investigate the moderating role of online presence on brand trust and consumer intentions to purchase in SMEs. Utilising a quantitative survey design, with 216 participants were randomly surveyed using an online questionnaire. Descriptive and Inferential statistical methods like multiple linear regression were used to test the Hypotheses. The results showed that social presence, through website and social media presence, positively influence brand trust, with social media having a stronger effect. Additionally, SME brand trust has a positive relationship with consumer purchase intention, however online presence was not found to moderate the relationship between brand trust and purchase intention.

The study extends the understanding of the role of social presence, brand trust and consumer purchase intention in the context of SMEs in South Africa. These findings provide SME owners and marketers with insights on how to leverage an online presence for successful business outcomes.

## **Keywords**

Social Presence, Online Presence, Social Media, Small Medium Enterprise (SME), Brand trust, Purchase Intention

## **Declaration**

I declare that this research project is my work. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the Master of Business Administration degree requirements 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.

# Contents

Abstract .....	i
Keywords.....	i
Declaration .....	ii
List of Tables .....	viii
List of Figures .....	ix
Chapter 1: Research Problem .....	1
1.1. Introduction.....	1
1.2. Context of the Study .....	1
1.3. Problem Statement .....	3
1.4. Purpose Statement .....	4
1.5. Significance of the Study .....	5
1.6. Limitations.....	6
1.7. Structure of the Research .....	6
Chapter 2: Theory and Literature Review .....	8
2.1. Introduction to the Literature Review .....	8
2.2. Social Presence Theory .....	8
2.2.1. Online Presence.....	10
2.2.2. Social Presence in Social Media .....	11

2.2.3.	Social Presence in Websites .....	11
2.2.4.	Social Presence Multidimensional Constructs.....	12
2.3.	Social Presence and Brand Trust .....	13
2.4.	Social Presence of Web and Brand Trust .....	15
2.5.	Social Media Presence and Brand Trust.....	16
2.6.	Brand Trust and Purchase Intentions.....	17
2.7.	Social Presence, Brand Trust and Purchase Intention .....	20
2.8.	Conclusion of Literature Review .....	23
Chapter 3.....		24
3.1.	Research Questions and Hypothesis Formulation .....	24
3.2.	Research Model.....	25
Chapter 4: Research Methodology and Design .....		27
4.1.	Introduction .....	27
4.2.	Research Methodology .....	27
4.2.1.	Purpose of Research Design.....	27
4.2.2.	Research Philosophy.....	27
4.2.3.	Research Approach.....	28
4.2.4.	Methodological Approach .....	28
4.3.	Research Strategy .....	28

4.3.1 Time Horizon .....	29
4.3.2 Population .....	29
4.3.3. Unit of Analysis.....	29
4.3.4. Sampling Method and Size.....	29
4.3.5. Measurement Instrument.....	30
4.3.6. Data Gathering Process .....	31
4.3.7. Analysis Approach.....	32
4.3.8. Quality Control.....	33
4.3.9. Ethical Considerations.....	34
4.3.10. Limitations.....	34
Chapter 5: Findings .....	36
5.1. Introduction .....	36
5.2. Data Preparation.....	36
5.3. Data Coding.....	36
5.4. Missing Data .....	37
5.5. Descriptive Results and Analysis .....	37
5.5.1. Demographic Descriptive Analysis .....	38
5.5.2. Reliability of Data and Validity .....	40
5.5.3. Descriptive Statistics of the Constructs .....	41

5.5.4.	Social Media Presence in SMEs.....	42
5.5.5.	Brand Trust in SMEs based on Online Presence.....	44
5.5.6.	Purchase Intention in SMEs based on online presence.....	45
5.6.	Hypothesis Testing .....	46
5.6.1.	Hypothesis 1.....	46
5.6.2.	Hypothesis 2 & 3 .....	48
5.7.	Summary of Results.....	53
5.8	Updated Conceptual Model with Results .....	54
5.9.	Chapter Summary.....	54
Chapter 6: Discussion of Results.....		55
6.1.	Introduction .....	55
6.2.	Demographic Findings Discussion.....	55
6.3.	Discussion of Findings .....	56
6.3.1.	Hypothesis 1: Social Presence and Brand Trust .....	56
6.3.2.	Hypothesis 1a: Website Presence and Brand Trust .....	57
6.3.3.	Hypothesis 1b: Social Media Presence and Brand Trust.....	58
6.3.4.	Hypothesis 2: Brand Trust and Purchase Intention.....	61
6.3.5.	Hypothesis 3: Social Presence, Brand Trust and Purchase Intention .....	63
6.4.	Conclusion.....	64

Chapter 7: Conclusions and Recommendations .....	66
7.1. Introduction .....	66
7.2. Summary of Findings .....	66
7.3. Theoretical Contributions .....	67
7.4. Managerial Implications .....	69
7.5. Limitations.....	71
7.6. Recommendations for Future Research .....	72
References .....	73
Annexure A: Draft Questionnaire .....	94
Appendix B: Ethical Clearance .....	101
Appendix C: Multiple Linear & Moderated Regression SPSS Outputs.....	102

## List of Tables

Table 1: Survey Coded Questions.....	37
Table 2: Constructs of the Questionnaire .....	40
Table 3: Importance of SME Website Presence .....	41
Table 4: Importance of SME Social Presence .....	42
Table 5: Brand Trust in SMEs .....	44
Table 6: Purchase Intention in SMEs .....	45
Table 7: Model Summary and ANOVA Results .....	47
Table 8: Regression Coefficients and Collinearity Diagnostics .....	47
Table 9: Regression Results for Model 1.....	49
Table 10: Model Summary and ANOVA Results .....	50
Table 11: Regression Results for Model 2.....	51
Table 12: Regression Coefficients for Model 2.....	52

**List of Figures**

Figure 1: Research Model .....25

Figure 2: Time Series Data Collection .....32

Figure 3: Response Rate .....38

Figure 4: Respondent Ages.....38

Figure 5: Respondent Genders .....39

Figure 6: Social Media Preference .....43

Figure 7: Model with Results .....54

# **Chapter 1: Research Problem**

## **1.1. Introduction**

The world has evolved into a digital era, defined by digital interactions where consumers increasingly spend hours on the internet, in search of goods and services provided by brands (Sembiring et al., 2024). Accelerated by COVID-19, online purchase planning has grown in influence as the preferred mode of consumer engagement (IPSOS, 2021), with decision-making heavily influenced by online interactions (Makhitha & Ngobeni, 2021; Manzoor et al., 2020). Despite this rapid growth, e-commerce continues to lag as many customers still prefer to finalise purchasing in physical stores.

The internet provides enhanced possibilities for businesses to build trust, engage with and acquire a large base of customers. Deloitte 2020 as cited in BusinessTech (2022), report that over 70% South African consumers browse the internet when shopping. According to McInnes (2023) over 26 million South Africans use social media, actively seek out brands on social media, engaging with and following their content (Osei-Frimpong & McLean, 2018).

However, the digital sphere continues to be dominated by larger established firms (Telukdarie et al., 2023). Meanwhile, online presence is confirmed to increase competitiveness, broaden access to customers and increase sustainability for both small and large enterprises (Jadhav et al., 2023; Lanyi et al., 2021).

The struggles that Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) face in adopting effective marketing strategies are well documented (Ritz et al., 2019), particularly in establishing a robust online presence. Having a website has become crucial step when creating a brand presence, customers increasingly go online to validate companies and their offerings however many SMEs still do not have an online presence or fail to maintain it. (Suryani et al., 2022).

## **1.2. Context of the Study**

SMEs are crucial for economic growth and employ 60% of South Africa's workforce, promoting income distribution and supporting overall socioeconomic progress (Viswanathan

& Telukdarie, 2021). SMEs are not only key to reducing poverty and promoting inclusive economic growth, but they also play an essential role in advancing innovation and economic development (Gherghina et al., 2020). Beyond economic contribution, these firms are a vital driver of innovation and industry development, critical for reaching the targeted United Nation's sustainable development goals (SDG's) being goal 8: sustainable economic prosperity and goal 9, focused on industry, driving innovation and securing infrastructure (United Nations, 2025).

SMEs in South Africa require urgent assistance in strategies that help them boost growth and secure their survival. The 2030 South African National Development Plan outlines SME growth as a crucial contributor to achieving economic growth (National Planning Commission, 2011). Although identified as a critical contributor, their contribution is low when compared to other economies at 39% versus 57% in developed economies. (Rajagopaul et al., 2020). Business Tech (2021) states that, even more concerning is that 70% of SMEs do not survive beyond the first year. SMEs need to pursue investment into online technology as this can help them achieve business sustainability (Attar et al., 2023).

A study by OECD (2022) found that over 80% of SMEs in developing countries had an online presence. A study in the Middle East and Africa found that only 55% of SMEs had a website, and only 46% had a social media presence (IPSOS, 2021). Similarly, Jeza & Mpele Lekhanya (2022) examined South African SMEs in KwaZulu-Natal and found that despite the propensity to capture significant improvements in customer relations and ease of accessibility, however only 60% of surveyed SMEs had an online presence.

Trust is a fundamental component of consumer behaviour. Consumers tend to place greater trust in well-known brands when trying new products. For SMEs, dependability hinges on their ability to interact with consumers (Manfredi & Capik, 2022). This is important because many SME brands often suffer from the liability of newness and require strategies to accelerate awareness, build trust and nurture long-term relationships for positive business outcomes (Mukti & Isa, 2024).

One way that SMEs can build trust online is through social presence. An online presence supports enterprises in establishing social connectivity with a wide range of new and existing

consumers. Social presence is the extent to which a communication medium conveys a sense of psychological closeness and human connection (Gefen & Straub, 2004). It explains how the perceived realness and warmth conveyed by online platforms can affect user behaviour and trust (Vijayakumar & Sadasivan, 2021). For SMEs, social presence through websites and social media platforms increases consumer perceptions of trust and satisfaction, specifically in e-commerce, where this can also be leveraged to drive sales (Chen et al., 2023).

While we know that digital has emerged as an in-demand channels to access customers and that e-Commerce provides various benefits for large enterprises (Suryani et al., 2022). What is not yet fully understood, is how resource-constrained SMEs can establish and leverage a basic online presence, which includes websites and social platforms, to enhance brand trust and ultimately influence consumer purchase intentions. While digital channels are widely recognised for business growth in the modern marketplace, the extent to which these yield tangible benefits for SMEs remains relatively unanswered (Jadhav et al., 2023).

The variety of platforms available also creates prioritisation tensions in SMEs, who because of their resource limitations, may struggle to determine, which channels to invest in, to drive desired return on investment (ROI) (Dumitriu et al., 2019; Pires et al., 2022). Business owners must not only strengthen an online footprint but also determine which digital channels yield the highest returns in consumer trust and purchase intent (Dumitriu et al., 2019; Perez-Orozco et al., 2024).

### **1.3. Problem Statement**

Brand trust is an extensively researched concept, particularly within the context of e-commerce, where it has been identified as a key mediator in driving usage and influencing consumer purchase intention (Ilsha et al., 2024). However, there is a skew of research attention towards digitally mature economies with advanced web optimisation capability (Lucas et al., 2023).

In contrast, developing economies like South Africa face structural and resource limitations that hinder the ability of SMEs to invest in and maintain advanced digital infrastructure. For

many SMEs, the challenge lies here in establishing a basic online presence, a foundational step in the digital evolution (Jeza & Mpele Lekhanya, 2022; Makhitha & Ngobeni, 2021).

The impact of online presence (website and social media) on consumer trust and purchase intention in developing countries has not been well researched. Meanwhile, purchase intention: defined as the probability that a consumer will buy a product or service in the future (Dam, 2020), is linked to consumer brand trust, especially in digital environments (Checchinato et al., 2024; Chen et al., 2023; Dastane, 2020). The role of social presence in influencing this relationship requires deeper exploration.

SMEs are plagued by constraints in resources, time and expertise (Gligorijevic & Leong, 2021), limiting their ability to compete with larger firms, especially in the digital sphere. SMEs must make prudent digital investments, ensuring that such efforts yield maximum business benefits. This study addresses a critical gap by investigating whether a basic online presence contributes to SME growth and, more importantly, understanding how online presence enhances consumer trust and purchase intent.

#### **1.4. Purpose Statement**

This research problem is motivated by large contribution that SMEs make to economic development, especially in Africa where SME struggles are amplified by barriers to accessing markets, and low digital adoption, making it imperative for SMEs to make mindful investment decisions (Viswanathan & Telukdarie, 2021). As internet access and smartphone penetration continue to increase and the pressure mounts on SMEs to invest in digitalisation for business growth, the primary concern for SMEs remains customer acquisition and revenue generation, which are vital for their growth and sustainability (Dabbous et al., 2020; Jeza & Mpele Lekhanya, 2022). SMEs require assurance that their investment in an online presence will yield returns; otherwise, SMEs operating with limited resources may find it challenging to justify the investment (Faisal & Ekawanto, 2022).

Examining growth avenues for SMEs in emerging markets is particularly pressing given the economic importance of SMEs and yet high failure rates. The lack of digital competency and competitiveness is critical to solve for sustainability and long-term success. An online

presence presents an opportunity for SMEs to increase visibility, engage customers, reduce operational costs and build a competitive advantage (Bruce et al., 2023; Lanyi et al., 2021). By examining the role of online presence in SME growth, this study bridges the knowledge gap and offers actionable recommendations for SMEs navigating the digital landscape.

### **1.5. Significance of the Study**

The theoretical gap that is addressed by this study is in understanding how social presence theory can inform the interaction of brand trust and purchase intention in consumers through SME online presence. The primary problem this research intended to address was how social presence plays a moderation role in the direct link between brand trust and consumer purchase intention in SMEs. Although online presence has attracted extensive examination by scholars, the focus has largely been on e-commerce and social media, with studies emphasising the mediating role of brand trust (Chahal & Rani, 2017; Haudi et al., 2022; Manzoor et al., 2020; Ong & Salleh, 2015).

In the South African context, existing research has focused on the barriers to technology adoption and digitalisation in SMEs. However, how online presence can assist SMEs with customer acquisition has not been adequately researched (Jeza & Mpele Lekhanya, 2022; Raji et al., 2024; Tan et al., 2010). While we know that social presence can increase consumer perceptions of trust and satisfaction in e-commerce settings (Ilsha et al., 2024; Sembiring et al., 2024), the role of social presence in influencing consumer brand trust and purchase intention for SMEs is not clear.

Jeza & Mpele Lekhanya (2022) examined how digital technologies impact SME's business performance. While the study highlights the importance of leveraging online platforms for SME's, it lacked clarity on which digital channels should be prioritised and what specific benefits SMEs can anticipate. Similarly, through quantitative analysis, Urban & Maphathe (2021) found that social media increases customer engagement among SMEs. However, this was based on self-reported data from SME owners, creating the risk of bias.

This research extends the social presence theory by applying it to SMEs in a developing economy. Specifically, it examines the moderating role of social presence on the correlation

of brand trust and consumer purchase intention. The study also contributes to digital marketing literature, offering insights into how different levels of SME online presence influence consumer behaviour.

Practically, the study provides guidance through actionable insights for SMEs to make informed decisions about investing in an online presence. It demonstrates how this visibility can be leveraged to engage customers and increase sales (Manzoor et al.; 2020). It enables firms to capitalise on digital strategies befitting the operating landscape before committing to more advanced capabilities, making digital adoption more accessible. Given chronic resource constraints, SME owners and marketers are guided in prioritising marketing efforts on platforms that will yield a return on investment. Policymakers and SME support organisations can leverage these findings to design targeted interventions to enhance SME competitiveness.

## **1.6. Limitations**

The potential limitations of this study are the research focused on South African consumers limiting the generalisability of the findings and its relevance to other populations. Cultural differences which may influence perceptions of social presence were not attended. The study also does not examine specific website design & feature elements that may influence consumer perceptions. It also does not assess content quality or engagement levels, which impact customer response.

Despite these limitations, this research fulfils business needs including addressing theoretical gaps. It offers insights into how social presence can enhance SME success in a competitive digital economy.

## **1.7. Structure of the Research**

The rest of the research paper is put together as such: chapter 2 delves into a literature review of social presence theory, brand trust and consumer purchase intention. Chapter 3 outlines the research objectives, conceptual model including hypotheses. Chapter 4 details the research methodology, including data collection and analysis techniques. Then chapter 5

presents the statistical results of the study, leading to chapter 6 which discusses the findings and lastly chapter 7, culminates with the theoretical contributions, managerial implications, study limitations and lastly recommendation for future researchers.

## **Chapter 2: Theory and Literature Review**

### **2.1. Introduction to the Literature Review**

This Chapter reviewed existing literature relating to Social Presence theory and the relationship between the constructs. The following main sections were applied:

1. Social presence and brand trust
2. Brand trust and purchase intention
3. Social Presence, brand trust and purchase intention

Using existing literature this review began by evaluating the definitions of Social Presence Theory and its dimensions. Then the constructs were defined, and the key interrelationships were assessed and described. Finally, all the constructs were reviewed in the context of social presence theory describing the relationships between them.

### **2.2. Social Presence Theory**

The use of digital platforms has increased over the years with growth in online interactions by consumers (Ritz et al., 2019) giving rise to the need to explore online brand consumer relationships. Social presence theory (SPT) is a measure of how much an online medium enables users to perceive the platform or others as being psychologically present or real; the salience, quality or state of being (Song et al., 2019; Gunawardena, 1995; Chen et al., 2023). An online platform's ability to create a connection with users determines the level of consumer engagement it receives.

The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital mediums, forcing many businesses online as they attempted to reach consumers (Ritz et al., 2019). Understanding how SMEs can effectively use social presence has become relevant. Meanwhile, much of the research has explored social presence in e-commerce and large business. The implications

for SMEs in developing economies are still under researched hence the motivation for this study.

There is consensus on the importance of social presence, however, there have been varied descriptions provided and it has been broadly characterised. Researchers hold varied opinions on how it manifests online. Song et al. (2019) describe social presence as an inherent characteristic of the platform meaning that some platforms innately have the ability to elicit a strong presence. Contradictory to this, Oh et al. (2018) posit that social presence is dependent on a platform's ability to engage opposed to the inherent platform properties, suggesting that even basic text-based platforms can create engagement.

Lu et al. (2016) take a middle ground proposing that various online platforms inherently have an ability to portray different levels of social presence, which can be optimised through engagement features, such as social presence of the web. Alternatively, Vijayakumar & Sadasivan (2021) assert that social presence is the ability to use technology to interact with and nurture relationships with new and existing customers, however this particular study was limited to clarifying post purchase behaviours.

The internet and related technologies have evolved and that has amplified the use of digital platforms in consumers, leading to increased consumer trust in online platforms. (Lu et al., 2016). This trend has sparked interest in researchers to further examine how social presence shapes trust, especially in online settings where it has been found to play a pivotal role. Hou et al. (2023) emphasise that understanding how consumers perceive and respond to social presence is critical for predicting online purchasing behaviour, with several online studies confirming its positive influence on online trust (Oh et al., 2018).

In India, Dash & Saji (2008) discovered that website presence increases trust, resulting in enhanced user online purchase intention. However, this was mainly examined within online shopping (e-commerce). Similarly, Ye et al. (2024) discovered that social presence in websites influences purchase intention in the context of peer-to-peer accommodation. This also suggests that the connection is mediated through trust, however the research focused on the post consumption stage thus limiting generalisability to broader contexts. Furthermore, in contrast to similar online studies the researchers emphasise the need for businesses to

integrate digital strategies along with traditional methods to influence customer trust and purchase intention.

Online presence particularly through websites and social media significantly impacts trust. These digital platforms are a key component of social presence because of their ability to bridge the gap between offline and online commerce, by introducing human warmth and sociability to the online environment (de Vries, 2006). Studies suggest that online presence is a fundamental channel in influencing a business's ability to effectively market itself online and influence customer behaviour. The trust that is garnered online directly impacts how consumers view the brand and determines how they will engage with it in the future (Vijayakumar & Sadasivan, 2021).

While we know that social presence positively impacts consumer brand trust and purchase intention within e-commerce, what is still unclear is what value it holds for SMEs in developing countries where mature capabilities like e-commerce may not be accessible.

### **2.2.1. Online Presence**

Online presence can be described as the presence and visibility of a business online, although due to the dynamic evolution of the internet and online spaces over the years, there isn't a consistent definition of online presence (Cioppi et al., 2019; Stuart et al., 2017). With a wide range of channels, online presence can vary significantly, from simply having an existing website to having a complementary social media account (George et al., 2023).

The exploration and analysis of online presence should include the numerous channels available to businesses, also considering their co-existence to ensure adequate analysis (Kim and Lennon, 2013). When establishing a digital presence, a website is foundational (Checchinato et al., 2024). In contrast, Stuart et al. (2017) propose that a website and social media are equally important as primary platforms when building business digital maturity.

Given that consumers browse through various online platforms when making purchase decisions, it's important that enterprises know the channels that influence them the most (Sembiring et al., 2024). Choosing the right online platforms to create a presence on, can

boost sales and performance for SMEs (Dumitriu et al., 2019; Pires et al., 2022). As a part of this study, the following platforms constitute an online presence:

1. Social media e.g., Facebook, Instagram, X formerly known as Twitter (Kano et al., 2022; Kim & Ko, 2012; Kurdi et al., 2022)
2. Website (Kurdi et al., 2022; Pires et al., 2022).

### **2.2.2. Social Presence in Social Media**

Social Media has increased in popularity over the years, especially within SMEs, because they provide a cost-effective way to engage their target audiences, also presenting an opportunity to increase brand awareness. (Ellitan, 2022; Faisal & Ekawanto, 2022). According to Osei-Frimpong and McLean (2018), consumers are highly engaged with brands online, proactively seeking them out and engaging with their pages and content.

Studies have shown that social media increases brand trust, consumer awareness of the brand and influences purchase intention in SMEs (Kim & Ko, 2012; Kumar & Sharma, 2022; Manzoor et al., 2020). However, the studies had limitation due to the fact that they focused on a specific geographic area and population, which affects generalisability. Additionally, they focused only on marketing metrics and did not evaluate the social presence effectiveness of the relevant platform.

Social Media marketing has the highest adoption in SMEs (Peter & Vecchia, 2021) and this may aid SMEs since it has a positive influence on customer engagement (Urban & Maphathe, 2021). Guesalaga (2016) proposes that social media can impact user engagement when managed skilfully to inject the right level of presence. Although we know that social media is highly used by SMEs, its benefits in the context of social presence remain under-researched in emerging market contexts.

### **2.2.3. Social Presence in Websites**

Businesses use websites to convey their product and service offerings, serve as customer communication tool and serves as a digital storefront. An organisation's website can shape consumer perceptions and influence its brand image (Gao & Li, 2019).

Dash & Saji (2008) define website social presence as the website features and or technical capability that engage consumers. Conversely, Gefen & Straub (2004) argue that a platform's social presence is defined by its ability to create a perception of others and infuse a sense of being present beyond just the technical capabilities.

In contrast, Corritore et al. (2003) suggest that websites themselves could be objects of trust, contradicting studies upholding that trust levels are determined by the consumer's perceived level of website engagement and content richness (Galati et al. 2021; Rahman & Hossain, 2022; Widagdo & Roz, 2021). Moreover, the absence of website or a low quality website can result in negative customer perceptions, for that reason a website presence is an important consideration in an SME's online presence (Suryani et al., 2022; Gao & Li 2019).

#### **2.2.4. Social Presence Multidimensional Constructs.**

Social Presence has been conceptualised and measured in various ways across different studies, highlighting its multidirectional nature. Various lenses and angles have been applied in exploring social presence over the years (Lu et al., 2016; Tseng et al., 2019). Some of these include awareness and "cognitive social presence" (Shen and Khalifa, 2008), Lu et al. (2016) reviewed "social presence of the web" and "perception of others" while Hassan et al. (2018) suggested the "social presence of interaction" and the "social presence of others." These different definitions and measurement approaches show the varied understanding and application of social presence in online environments.

Naylor et al. (2012) suggested that social presence perception can be created through images of consumers engaging with brand products, while Pongpaew et al. (2017) rather recommends that brands need to enable direct engagement with consumers to build trust and loyalty. However, Attar et al. (2023) and Chen et al. (2011) argue that interaction among customers impacts social presence perceptions the most.

This differs from social presence created by user-generated reviews and perceptions of other shoppers, which Nadeem et al. (2020) argue may function as a separate construct. Consumers tend to favour social presence elements that actively facilitate engagement rather than passive information sharing. Further, some scholars have examined the role of support

agents in establishing a social presence. Tan & Liew, (2020) emphasise that live customer support, chatbots, or other AI-driven assistance features contribute to social presence by creating an interactive and responsive environment.

The subjectivity and multidimensional nature of social presence highlight its significant role in digital interactions. Prior research identifies various constructs that shape consumer perceptions and engagement. (Lu et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2019; Zhou, 2019). Researchers have also emphasised that certain forms of media may be more effective in promoting social presence than others (Oh et al., 2018).

In contrast, this study adopted a single construct adapted from (Cioppi et al. 2019; Song et al., 2019) to focus on the impact of a brand page, being a website or social media page, as a key construct of social presence. This brand presence is posited to validation in the consumers mind of the realness of the brand, adapted from Lombard and Ditton (2006) and Oh et al. (2018) where through presence realism, consumers view online brand representations as real.

### **2.3. Social Presence and Brand Trust**

Research has shown that brand trust plays a key role in the relationship between enterprises and consumers. Consumers require confirmation that enterprises are reliable and credible (Forrester, 2023; Tong & Chan 2022). Trust is especially important in online interactions where traditional face-to-face interactions are absent (Gefen & Straub, 2004).

Omar et al. (2020) define brand trust as the confidence consumers have in a brand's integrity, regarded as the ability to deliver on its promises, once establishes this brand trust results in long term consumer relationships. Brand trust is considered a brands most valuable asset because of its ability to improve relationships and drive positive consumer perceptions (Omar et al., 2020).

Trust plays a crucial role for SMEs who do not have the track record of large enterprises. Having effective trust strategies can help SMEs differentiate themselves in the market (Manzoor et al., 2020) which is also especially useful for SMEs considering their limited

resources and constrained budgets. A strong social presence can help SMEs build credibility and increase consumer confidence in their offering (Kabadayi & Kocak Alan, 2012).

Social presence has the ability to replicate in person and real-life interactions online, which interaction can influence consumers perceptions of authenticity and connection (Lombard and Ditton 2006). Effective brand interaction makes the brand seem socially present, more accessible, engaging, and trustworthy to consumers (Chen et al., 2023; Gunawardena, 1995). Wu et al. (2010) defined online trust as the level at which an individual believes that the brand/seller is authentic and realistic during the first online interaction.

Social presence is key to building online brand trust and loyalty (Lu et al., 2016; Gefen & Straub, 2004). Numerous studies have examined its impact on brand trust in websites, social media, e-commerce, and social commerce, which merges social interactions with shopping (Nadeem et al., 2020; Vijayakumar & Sadasivan, 2021). A high social presence enhances consumer trust by creating a perception of authentic engagement (Lu et al., 2016). Consumers associate higher levels of social presence with increased brand reliability, which reduces feelings of uncertainty in consumers.

Consumers trust brands after evaluating their offerings online (Kabadayi & Kocak Alan, 2012). However, Nosi et al. (2022) argue that a physical retail presence is still the most imperative for building brand trust with existing and potential customers. Further, Sharif et al. (2005) suggests that SMEs can build trust with existing and potential customers through well considered online tactics that influence how customer view and interact with the brand.

However, while studies have demonstrated that a social presence and brand trust interact positively, there has been notable differences in contextual and methodology approaches. Some studies focused on direct consumer interactions on the platform e.g. peer recommendations and influencer endorsements, whereas others studied explored brand-generated content and customer service interactions. The methodology approaches include self-reported survey data (Lu et al., 2016) sentiment analysis and behavioural tracking (Vijayakumar & Sadasivan, 2021). These differences show how intricate social presence is as construct.

## 2.4. Social Presence of Web and Brand Trust

Outside of a physical retail presence, websites have become the central point that consumers use to engage with brands. A well designed and maintained website can build and enhance trust with consumers whereas consumers do not trust brand who have a poorly designed website or worse yet, none (Gao & Li, 2019). Websites can influence social presence by creating a sense of human interaction and presence on the platform, thus building trust with the user (Lu et al., 2016; Vijayakumar & Sadasivan, 2021).

However, George et al. (2023) argue that a brand simply having an online presence via a website creates certainty in a consumer's mind, which leads them to trust and engage more with the brand. This aligns with Lombard and Ditton (2006) stance on presence realism: an online presence of a brand embeds a perception of realness for the brand in a consumer's mind.

Nonetheless, studies differ greatly on how social presence is perceived in web environments. Some researchers have defined social presence through the levels perceived by consumers. These are categorised as high or low depending on the level of human presence determined by users (Lu et al., 2016; Oh et al., 2018). A quantitative study by George et al. (2023) using a multi-construct format of social presence theory in India found that social presence achieved through consumer-generated content increases brand trust.

Evaluating social presence in the food and beverage industry prompted Attar et al. (2023) to posit that social presence in e-commerce websites in the UK positively impacts consumer trust and loyalty. However, the study only found a partial mediating influence between social presence and customer loyalty, indicating further elements should be examined.

In online shopping, research has shown that trust influences consumer brand perceptions positively, increasing their preference to buy from it. In contrast, little is known of the applicability of social presence to brand trust for SME firms (Lu et al., 2016; Vijayakumar & Sadasivan, 2021).

## 2.5. Social Media Presence and Brand Trust

Social Media use has increased over the years making it highly relevant for SMEs because Pongpaew et al. (2017) suggest that social presence through social media enhances product knowledge which drives repeat visits, and thus building brand trust and loyalty. Social media marketing has a positive effect on brand trust, while this in turn uplifts SME performance (Haudi et al., 2022; Sohaib & Han, 2023). The sustainability of a business is dependent on its ability to capitalise on trust built through various social media platforms (Zheng et al., 2022).

A Saudi Arabian study by Sohail et al. (2020) concluded that social media presence has a significant positive effect on brand trust, further stating that brand trust mediates the relationship between brand trust and loyalty. Similarly, in a study limited to the McDonalds brand Puspaningrum, (2020) found that social media marketing has a positive impact on brand trust and brand loyalty with additional congruency on the mediation assertions of Sohail et al. (2020) Additionally Chahal & Rani (2017) and Ebrahim (2020) found in established brands that trust moderates the relationship with social media and brand equity, point out the ability for SMEs to leverage it.

The ability for social media to support a high level of social presence, makes social media a very attractive platform for SMEs to engage with consumers. Through functionality likes, user comments and engaging content the channel supports a high level of social presence (George et al., Sohail et al., 2023). Additionally, social media can facilitate brand trust transference, where other parties separate to the brand, like social media influencers promote brands and their products leading to increased brand trust in their followers (Jin et al., 2019). However, Lin (2021) cautions that this method of social presence via influencers can also lead to negative effects in consumers.

Ming et al. (2021) explored the impact of social presence on brand trust in social media platforms that support live streaming. This work found that when brand trust increases, it prompts impulsive behaviour in loyal consumers. However, this was limited to e-retailers.

Social commerce trust has been found to mediate the relationship between social presence and customer commitment in online brand communities (Nadeem et al., 2020). Trust building

methods in online environments are not only dependent on direct brand interactions but also on the users' perceptions of social presence and engagement. (Hajli et al., 2017, Kim & Kim 2021).

In contrast, Leong et al. (2020) found no significant link between social presence on the web and trust in social commerce, thereby challenging previous studies. The scholars further posit that there isn't a straight-line relationship that exists between the variables. Divergent to previous studies, the research applied a hybrid SEM-ANN analysis method incorporating more than one theory to evaluate the relationships.

Gefen & Straub (2004) found that building consumer trust in the brand is more important than technical features on the website, which means that SMEs should leverage social presence to influence consumers, and thus enhancing their competitiveness and growth. Lu et al. (2016) recommend that SMEs integrate digital touchpoints like websites, social media, direct messaging, and online customer service to build trust across their platforms.

A website and social media are essential resources and highly relevant for SMEs. However, many lack the resources to build highly interactive capabilities. However, literature suggests that a basic, well-maintained platform can create much-needed trust and connection with consumers. This leads to the first hypotheses in this study:

*H1: Social presence has a positive effect on brand trust in SME's.*

*H1a: Website presence has a positive influence on brand trust.*

*H1b: Social media presence has a positive influence on brand trust.*

## **2.6. Brand Trust and Purchase Intentions**

This section explores the dynamics in the relation of brand trust and consumer purchase intention. Brand trust is acknowledged as a fundamental drive of consumer decision-making, especially within an online environment where physical engagement with product or brand representatives is not accessible (Haji et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2022). In e-commerce, it anticipates the products or brands that consumers will most likely purchase (Kian et al., 2017).

Purchase intention refers to an inclination to paying for goods or services in consumers (Alkaabi, 2021). Trust significantly affects consumer confidence and influences purchase decisions.

Purchase intention is important in SMEs because it impacts potential sales, customer conversion rates and long-term business sustainability (Alkaabi, 2021). Studies have shown that high consumer confidence in a brand, leads them to want to purchase from that brand (Gefen & Straub, 2004; Manzoor et al., 2020). Although this relationship has been well-researched in the context of e-commerce, it requires further examination in context of SMEs (Hu et al., 2019; Nosi et al., 2022).

In e-commerce research shows that trust influences consumer purchase intention (Hou et al., 2023). On social media, trust significantly influences consumer perceptions of brands, a high degree of trust drives increased intent to purchase (Hajli et al., 2017). Because of their lower brand awareness, SMEs must invest in trust building tactics for them to effectively compete against large businesses (Manzoor et al., 2020).

Online, trust plays a key role in determining whether consumers will make a purchase, thus making an even bigger impact than website usability or brand familiarity (Gefen & Straub, 2004). However, the extent to which brand trust influences purchase decisions in social media contexts remains unclear, particularly in emerging countries with low digital literacy and requires customised trust strategies from sophisticated e-commerce settings (Nosi et al., 2022; Puspaningrum, 2020).

While brand trust is an asset to businesses, SMEs face unique challenges in garnering consumer trust due to a lack of market presence, poorly established brands with low brand equity (Mehmood & Hamid, 2024). Trust is even more influential for purchase intention in SMEs versus large retailers because consumers consider it higher risk when engaging with unknown brands (Wang et al., 2022). G discovered that brand trust in women-led SMEs in Sri Lanka significantly influenced consumer confidence which resulted in higher conversion rates. Hassan et al. (2018) highlight that outside of brand reputation, consumers evaluate seller trustworthiness, product quality, and online engagement before making a purchase making trust building initiatives crucial to SME success.

Brand trust poses many advantages for businesses, its positive influence results in increase sales for enterprises (Wang et al., 2022). This sentiment is also supported by Wu et al. (2010) and Nosi et al, (2022) who suggest that even trust built with customers offline can be transferred online leading to a positive purchase intent. This effect of brand trust transference is consistent with Wang & Chan-Olmsted, (2024) findings, where they suggested that trust created by social media influencers can be extended to trust in the brand, that they are promoting to their audience.

Research suggests that there are various ways that SMEs can build trust by leveraging social presence online (Zhou 2019). Wang et al. (2022) suggest that clear, detailed and consistent brand communication by the seller is what builds trust. However, George et al. (2023) differs stating that trust, requires sellers to use social presence realism, where sellers actively engage consumers to create a sense of authenticity. On the contrary, Lu et al. (2016) posit that the social presence of others generated through customer testimonials and peer recommendations builds confidence and perceived reliability in the seller. While Hajli et al. (2017) assert that a sense of online safety is what determines a consumer's intention to purchase.

Driving a positive customer sentiment and influencing customers toward their brand offering, is the goal for SMEs when establishing an online presence. Online brand trust and purchase intention have been extensively researched and the consensus is that elevated levels of brand trust have a positive influence in customers' intention to purchase online (Gefen & Straub, 2004).

Scholars have however debated that online trust and brand trust are not the same stating that the latter is trust in the holistic brand and therefore it can also be leveraged offline. (Puspaningrum, 2020; Hu et al., 2019; Nosi et al., 2022). Mehmood & Hamid, (2024) advise that building brand trust can be beneficial for SMEs, helping consumers overcome any doubts they have, when deciding to purchase from an unknown brand.

Wang et al. (2022) further postulate that trust in a vendor has an even bigger influence on consumer purchase intention than other trust inputs. Hassan et al. (2018) found that the trust disposition of a seller affects the chances of users purchasing from any e-commerce

offerings. Other contributing factors, such as the integrity and competency of the seller, also come into play. Although customers may trust the brand, a lack of trust in the seller's online presence can negatively impact the intention to purchase online, encouraging users to seek other methods to complete the transaction with the vendor (Hajli et al., 2017).

Although research indicates that trust enhances purchase behaviour, there isn't clarity on strategies that are suited for SMEs, especially in developing economies (Hu et al., 2019; Nosi et al., 2022). Large enterprises have the benefit of reputation, brand equity and long-standing relationships while SMEs must find ways to establish trust through online presence and customer interactions (Hassan et al., 2018).

Social Media is an integral channel when considering online presence strategies, George et al. (2023) posit that businesses should focus on social media to build trust however, Lu et al. (2016) argued that integrating social activities across various online channels is the most effective way for brands to positively influence purchase behaviour, given these gaps, this study proposes the following:

*H2: Brand trust has a positive influence on consumer purchase intention in SMEs*

## **2.7. Social Presence, Brand Trust and Purchase Intention**

Researchers posit a positive relationship between social presence, consumer purchase intention and brand trust in online relationships (Cheng et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2019). Research has explored a wide range of antecedents and influences and evidently, social presence and trust significantly influence online purchase intention in social commerce.

Studies have shown that social presence has an influence on purchase intention, both directly and indirectly, through trust; social presence enhances brand trust, which positively affects purchase intention (Botha & Reyneke, 2016; Hassan et al., 2018; Pratama et al., 2017). There isn't consensus on the moderation role that social presence plays versus that of trust in the relationship between these constructs. Some researchers have suggested that social presence directly influences purchase intention whilst others suggest that trust plays a

mediation role (Chen et al., 2023; Dabbous et al., 2020; Hassan et al., 2018; Zheng et al. 2022).

Although the importance of social presence in influencing purchase intention is widely recognised, most research has centred on e-commerce and eLearning, with little attention to platform approaches in emerging market contexts. This section explores how social presence affects the link between brand trust and purchase intention, noting conflicting findings and suggesting areas for further study within SMEs.

Research has shown a perceived high level of social presence builds consumer trust, strengthens brand connection, and drives purchase decisions (Gefen & Straub, 2003). However, Lu et al. (2016) caution that brand trust alone may not be enough, they need to trust both the brand and the online platform to be persuaded.

However, the effect on purchase intention differs depending on the product type (Botha & Reyneke, 2016). Major purchase items that require deeper consideration, like luxury goods, benefit more from increased social presence. However, Hassan et al. (2018) argue that customer experience acts as a mediator, meaning that social presence only strengthens purchase intention when consumers have history of positive brand engagements.

Contradictory results have also been reported with regards to these constructs, Hossain et al. (2023) reported that social presence is not meaningfully connected to purchase intention suggesting that factors like price sensitivity and brand recognition may be more influential on purchase decisions. This is supported by Sindhu & Bharti (2024) whose study noted that social presence had a moderate influence on purchase intention, challenging earlier research on drivers of online purchases. However, Rajput & Gandhi (2024), argue that a meaningful connection exists between, social presence, brand trust and purchase intention because customers at pre-purchase stage rely on social presence through platforms like social media to build trust and assist them in making a decision to purchase.

Studies have also shown social presence to positively influence other consumer behaviours such as product comparison and repurchase decisions, demonstrating its effectiveness in

driving positive results (Dabbous et al., 2020). However, Attar et al. (2023) caution that social presence can also have a negative impact on brand trust and reduce purchase intention.

Scholars propose that social presence cannot impact purchase intention directly but only rather through trust (Dabbous et al., 2020; Khwaja et al., 2019; Pratama et al., 2017). Focusing on a single brand, Weisberg et al. (2011) found that trust mediates the relationship between past purchasing experiences and purchase intention, meaning that even if social presence is high, it is only effective when there is a history of trust. Within the e-commerce context, Liu et al. (2019) demonstrated that for site members, social presence does in fact enhance the impact of trust on consumer intention to purchase, however, this particular study was limited to students and confined to a single website brand, making generalisability difficult.

Zhu et al. (2020) found that trust was a stronger determinant of purchase behaviour than social presence. However, the study tested hypotheses utilising stimulus-organism-response and was limited to Chinese students. Alternatively, Hayes et al. (2020) propose that using engaging alternative forms of text like emojis and emoticons on social platforms, enhances the brand's social presence, improving consumer brand perceptions and enhancing purchase intention.

Lu et al. (2016) advocate that SMEs should integrate engagement features, that drive social presence, across multiple digital platforms, to influence consumer behaviour however, Gefen & Straub (2003) argue that social presence in a single platform is enough to influence brand trust in consumers. Similarly, Imtiaz et al. (2019) in evaluating the influence of engagement on consumers, found that female driven engagement in social media, leads to increased purchase intention in Sri Lankan consumers.

In contrast, Botha & Reyneke (2016) argue that social presence cannot impact purchase intention directly, stating that other factors like brand reviews, product guarantees and customer service play an influencing role. In e-commerce, social presence significantly affects trust and purchase intentions in consumers. However, further investigations are required within the SME context (Botha & Reyneke; Hou et al., 2023; Weisberg et al., 2011).

Given these varying insights and findings, further research is needed to explore how social presence influences brand trust and purchase intention which leads to a final hypothesis:

*H3: Social presence has a moderating effect on brand trust and purchase intention, such that, the higher level of social presence, the stronger the relationship.*

## **2.8. Conclusion of Literature Review**

The literature review provided comprehensive insight on social presence and its relationship with brand trust and purchase intention. It is evident that more research is required in SME contexts. While these constructs been examined in a variety of contexts, research has centred on e-commerce contexts, with the role of social presence as a moderator in the relationship being underexplored.

This is of particular concern in developing markets where SME's face unique challenges. Further to this, although literature has evaluated social presence in various multi-dimensional constructs, this study provides a different angle through evaluating a basic social realism presence, covering a gap that is applicable to developing countries.

To remain competitive and effectively utilise limited resources, SMEs must develop digital strategies that leverage social presence to build brand trust and drive purchase behaviour. However, there is no one-size-fits-all approach, continued exploration is required to establish which online channels yield the highest trust and conversion rates for SMEs.

This study seeks to bridge the knowledge gaps by providing empirical insights into how SMEs can optimise social presence across multiple digital platforms to enhance brand trust and motivate consumer purchasing.

## Chapter 3

### 3.1. Research Questions and Hypothesis Formulation

The study aimed to answer the research question “What is the relationship between Social Presence, brand trust (independent variable) and consumer purchase intention (dependent variable) in SMEs.”

Gefen & Straub (2004) suggest that the depth of social presence can enhance user trust. This is because social presence not only facilitates other trust-building signals but also serves as an independent contributor to trust development, social presence may promote trust by creating the impression that the website offers a personal connection leading to a positive relationship (Choi et al., 2009). The affinity that consumers experience online significantly impacts their brand trust (Manzoor et al., 2020). Considering that a physical presence offline is a precursor of trust, a web and social media presence likely influences building trust online (Lu et al., 2016). In online live streaming, social presence positively predicts consumer trust and trust positively influences users’ intent to purchase (Hou et al., 2023). In e-commerce, social presence has shown it play a pivotal role in influencing brand trust. Therefore, the researcher proposes the following research hypotheses:

*H1: Social presence has a positive influence on brand trust in SMEs.*

*H1a: Website Presence has a positive influence on brand trust in SMEs*

*H1b: Social Media presence has a positive influence on brand trust*

Online trust acts as a bridge to creating connections and driving consumer behaviour. When evaluating purchase intention and its determinants, trust plays a crucial role, in various online studies, trust has been found to significantly affect consumer purchase intentions (Manzoor et al., 2020, Isha et al., 2024; Nosi et al., 2022; Zheng et al., 2022), trust is known to deter or encourage a consumer’s. (Basha & Lal, 2019). In online settings, brand trust has been found to be a primary prerequisite for purchase intention (Lu et al., 2016). When a consumer trusts a brand, it has been frequently found to positively influence purchase (Hou et al., 2023).

*H2: Brand trust has a positive influence on consumer purchase intention in SMEs*

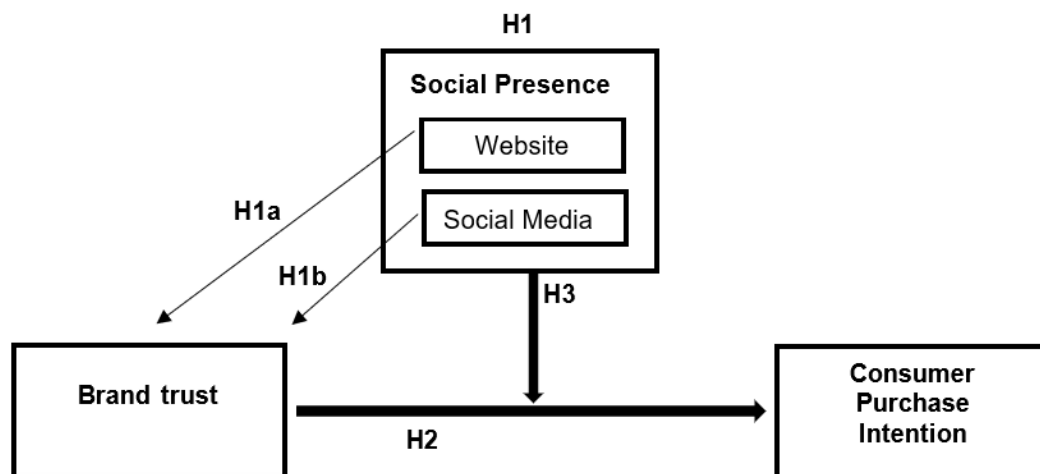
**Q2: To what extent does online presence moderate the relationship between brand trust and consumer purchase intention in South African SMEs?**

*H3: Social presence has a moderating effect on brand trust and purchase intention, such that, the higher level of social presence, the stronger the relationship.*

Social Presence and trust have influential roles in e-commerce, affecting consumer behaviour, studies have shown that social presence significantly impacts purchase intention both directly and indirectly through trust. (Botha & Reyneke, 2016; Hassan et al., 2018; Pratama et al., 2017) A perception of high social presence is likely to increase trust and influence consumers towards the brands (Liu et al., 2016).

### 3.2. Research Model

- **Independent Variable:** Brand Trust
- **Dependent Variable:** Consumer Purchase Intention
- **Moderator:** Social Presence



*Figure 1: Research Model*

*Source: Author compilation*

The model depicted in figure 1 shows that while brand trust enhances purchase intention, but its impact depends on consumers perceived social presence. A perceived high social presence through website and social media presence strengthens this effect, making an online presence a crucial factor for SMEs to consider in their digital strategies.

## **Chapter 4: Research Methodology and Design**

### **4.1. Introduction**

The chapter covers the methodology and research design used this study. It details the statistical analysis approaches taken, the population and sampling methods, and the choice of statistical techniques used to examine the hypotheses outlined in Chapter 3. The chapter concludes by discussing the limitations of the study.

Chapter 3 outlines this study's aim to investigate how social presence and brand trust (independent variables) influence consumer purchase intention (dependent variable) in SMEs. Secondly to assess the moderating effect of social presence on the relationship between brand trust and purchase intention.

### **4.2. Research Methodology**

#### **4.2.1. Purpose of Research Design**

This primary research study adopted a quantitative approach, which was appropriate given the aim to confirm the nature of the relationship between constructs (Creswell, 2014).

A survey format was used to capture quantitative data and measure social presence, brand trust, and consumer purchase intention. A cross-sectional approach to data captured insight into the behaviour of variables at a point in time, enabling in-depth review of relationality. Gathering data from a large sample supports the computation of descriptive statistics such as mean, median, mode, and standard deviation (Cooper & Schindler, 2013). Using the lens of social presence theory, the research examined how social media presence moderates the relationship between brand trust and consumer purchase intention in SMEs.

#### **4.2.2. Research Philosophy**

The study was grounded in positivism, a philosophy that foregrounds the ability to measure constructs as essential to valid relationship testing (Saunders et al., 2023). This stance was chosen as it facilitated a structured and systematic process empirical data collection and

analysis, allowing an objective analysis of the construct relationships (Creswell, 2014; Masakale & Pooe, 2022). It also aligned with the study's goal of deriving clear, empirical insights and identifying patterns in consumer behaviour. Positivist worldview is effective for research that tests hypotheses and seeks to determine nature and the direction of the relationship between constructs.

#### **4.2.3. Research Approach**

The study began with an exploration of established theory being social presence theory to determine prevailing debate over pertinent constructs. Opportunity to advance scholarship entailed hypothesising the relationship between brand trust - the independent variable and purchase intention – as the dependent variable with social presence as a moderator. Hypotheses (H1-H3) were framed, and a deductive assessment strategy was developed to test and validate outcomes. This provided a reliable design to explore the research questions and draw objective conclusions (Saunders et al., 2023).

#### **4.2.4. Methodological Approach**

The study used a mono-method approach, being a survey supported by a questionnaire as the primary tool for data collection. This approach is consistent with similar studies in the field, which had successfully used questionnaires to gather data on consumer behaviour and social presence (Hassan et al., 2018; Nadeem et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2019). A mono-method approach was suited to this study due to the fact that the constructs used have previously been defined and tested.

### **4.3. Research Strategy**

The primary data for the study was collected through a self-administered structured survey questionnaire, which was created and distributed online using Survey Monkey. The online survey format was particularly suitable for statistical analysis, enabling the researcher to identify trends, correlations, and relationships between variables. As noted by Aramburu et al. (2021), online surveys offer the convenience and broad reach necessary for effectively gathering data from a diverse participant pool. They enable faster response turnaround for respondents encouraging participation. This approach aligned with similar studies, which

used internet-based questionnaires to explore similar constructs (Anantharaman et al., 2023; George et al., 2023). Large samples build confidence for generalisations about behaviour or attitudes to be made across a population (Cooper & Schindler, 2013; Creswell, 2014).

#### **4.3.1 Time Horizon**

The cross-sectional design was suitable for this study to explore correlations and determine relationship without needing to track changes over time. Additionally, the short time period available for this study rendered a cross-sectional study pragmatic approach (Creswell, 2014). In keeping with the design, data was captured at a single point in time giving a snapshot of the constructs being studied (Saunders et al., 2019). Focusing on a specific period, sets timeframes that assist the researcher to carry out the sequence of tasks required to frame reliable outcomes (Creswell, 2014).

#### **4.3.2 Population**

Greener (2008) defines population as the total set of individuals or items from which a sample is taken. The target population for this study consisted of all adult consumers (18+) who had interacted with SMEs in South Africa across various industries. This broad population base was expected to provide a diverse range of insights, enhancing the generalisability and relevance of the findings (Creswell, 2014). According to Statistics South Africa (StatsSA), in 2019 there were 40 million+ adults in South Africa.

#### **4.3.3. Unit of Analysis**

The unit of analysis for this study was the individual consumer. The study explores how customers interacted with SMEs' social presence and how these interactions affect intention to purchase. By analysing individual responses, the study identified trends and patterns describing how social presence influences brand trust and purchase intention by consumers towards SMEs (Creswell, 2014).

#### **4.3.4. Sampling Method and Size**

The study employed a non-probability sampling approach using convenience sampling to identify respondents and capture data. Consequently, not all consumers had an equal chance

of being sampled (Creswell, 2014; Saunders & Lewis, 2018). Although not desirable convenience sampling allowed the researcher to access sufficient individuals to reach the targeted volume of response within the required timeframes (Etikan & Bala, 2017; Greener, 2008). The study did not involve stratification of the population, meaning that efforts were not made for the sample to be representative of the proportions of the larger population.

A link was posted to the researchers' social platforms (Facebook, LinkedIn and WhatsApp), allowing anyone with access to participate. Respondents were encouraged to share the link in their networks. This snowball sampling method was suitable for the study as it ensured access to a wider community of participants representing the target population. Utilizing social media to distribute the survey was fitting as it aligned with the aims the study to examine perceptions of online presence as it ensured access to individuals already active online (Greener, 2008).

The target sample size was a minimum of 200 valid responses, providing an acceptable margin of error while avoiding the point of diminishing returns (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988) as cautioned by similar studies (Lu et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2019; Sohail et al., 2020). To ensure basic eligibility, a screening question was included to verify that respondents were at least 18 years old, those who did not meet this criterion were automatically disqualified from completing the survey. Additionally, participants were asked whether they had previously purchased from SMEs in South Africa. While this question wasn't used to exclude respondents, it was included to assess consumer engagement with SMEs.

Targeting to reach 2000 potential participants to realise a sample of 200+, an online survey was created using SurveyMonkey and distributed online using the following methods:

- Social Media: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn
- Instant messaging: WhatsApp.

#### **4.3.5. Measurement Instrument**

The survey, was distributed via online channels, using a link that was posted to social media platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and WhatsApp. The post encouraged potential participants to share the survey with their personal contacts. Using the SurveyMonkey

platform allowed the researcher the ease of questionnaire design including ease of distribution via a shareable link (Creswell, 2014).

The questionnaire with closed-ended questions, utilising 5-point Likert scales, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree (Chen et al., 2023; Lu et al., 2016; Manzoor et al., 2020), which is frequently used for capturing respondents' feelings and levels of satisfaction (Cooper & Schindler, 2013). The questionnaire was anonymous, thus allowing more accurate answers and reduction in bias in respondent feedback (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

To suit this study, the constructs measured in the survey were adapted from the following studies:

- Social Presence: (Gefen & Straub, 2004; Kreijns et al., 2011),
- Brand Trust: (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Dam, 2020; Pavlou & Gefen, 2004),
- Purchase Intention: (Dam, 2020; Gefen & Straub, 2004).

The first part of the survey included an introduction of the study and the researcher and supervisor details, an overview on the key definitions was provided. The first two questions confirmed whether participants had previously purchased from an SME. Then participants were asked for their gender and age, participants who indicated that they were below the age of 18 were not able to proceed. Question five to nine, explored SME website presence, Social media questions were tested from question 10 to 15, brand trust was tested from question 16 to 19 and finally purchase intention questions were covered from question 20 to 24. Participant were able to skip questions, except for Question one and two.

#### **4.3.6. Data Gathering Process**

Primary data collection entailed administering the survey to the a sample via online platforms. The survey was distributed through email, social media, and other digital channels to expand and accelerate reach to a broad audience (Chen et al., 2023). Respondents were allowed to complete the survey at their convenience, follow-up reminders were sent to encourage participation. This approach offered a practical method for reaching a large sample and gathering responses efficiently, without requiring significant resources or logistical support. A

total of 216 responses were received and of the total responses 93% of them fully completed the survey. The typical time spent on the survey was 3 minutes and 42 seconds.

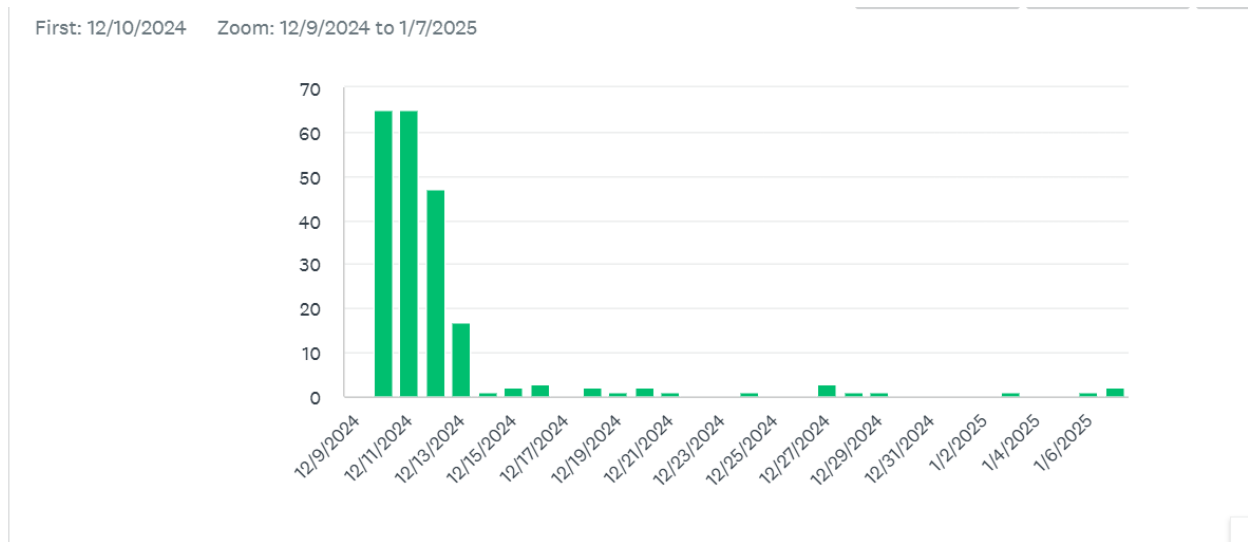


Figure 2: Time Series Data Collection

Source: Author compilation

#### 4.3.7. Analysis Approach

Using SPSS statistical software, the analysis approach for this study involved using various statistical techniques to examine the data collected from the survey (Lu et al., 2016; Dabbous et al., 2020). This included descriptive statistics to summarise the data and consumer perceptions and inferential statistics to evaluate the relationship between constructs (Allua & Thompson, 2009). Multiple regression analysis was used to test the impact of online presence on brand trust and finally moderated regression analysis tested whether social presence moderates the trust-intention relationship. The analysis focused on the study's hypotheses, intent on drawing meaningful conclusions (Cooper & Schindler, 2013).

Regression techniques aligned with the study objectives and hypotheses were applied to analyse the data and test hypotheses. Multiple linear regression and moderated linear regression were used for inferential analysis. These techniques are effective at examining and testing the relationship between a dependent variable and independent variable, as well as moderating effects (Allua & Thompson, 2009; Kian et al., 2017; Eberly, 2007). To ensure

internal consistency, reliability tests using Cronbach's alpha were run (Lu et al., 2016; Mehmood & Hamid, 2024).

These methods are frequently used to explore relationships between variables in studies related to consumer behaviour, brand trust, and social presence. For instance, Kian et al. (2017) utilised regression analysis to investigate relationships between similar variables.

#### **4.3.8. Quality Control**

Quality control measures for this study included pilot testing the survey instrument, ensuring randomisation in the sampling process, and implementing data validation techniques to guarantee the accuracy and consistency of responses (Saunders et al., 2019). Pilot testing involved administering the survey to a small, representative group to identify and rectify concerns such as the clarity of questions and the structure of the tool (Cheung & Lee, 2000). This process led to necessary adjustments before full-scale data collection began, ensuring the survey instrument was both clear and effective (Creswell, 2014).

The survey was pretested through a pilot study distributed through SurveyMonkey and sent to 15 friends and colleagues to identify areas of improvement, ease of understanding, logical flow, and length of the survey:

- Question 15 was added requesting platform preference due to six respondents indicated that it would be helpful. (AlSharji et al., 2018).
- Question 19 was revised to improve clarity by adding the word 'generally'.
- A question about trust was removed due to the perceived duplication from respondents. Seven test participants did not respond to the initial version of the question. Instead, a negative based question was used. While negatively worded items are not favoured, Hinkin, (1995) argued that negatively worded items did not pose a problem in the analysis stage.
- Definitions were provided to ensure clarity for respondents.
- Feedback was received on grammar with five respondents highlighting duplicated questions. These were reviewed and updated to provide clarity.

- Question 23 was updated due to perceived repetition from five participants, a negative-based question was used to replace (Hinkin, 1995).
- The final version of the survey was grouped and themed, with a tracker to completion added for participants to monitor progress.

To minimise bias, it was essential to recognise and mitigate the possibility of biased interpretations. Standardised procedures were used during all the stages of the research process to ensure uniformity and objectivity. These quality control measures ensure validity and reliability of the study's results. Data validation techniques were key to collecting representative and accurate data. Clear definitions of key terms were also provided to ensure that participants understood the questions, further enhancing the quality of the data collected.

#### **4.3.9. Ethical Considerations**

Ethical clearance was confirmed by the Gordon Institute of Business Sciences (GIBS) Ethical Clearance Committee on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of December 2024, this allowed the researcher to move on to the data collection stage.

Consistent with the ethical parameters, survey participation was voluntary, users were alerted of the freedom to withdraw at will. Participants were also advised that the survey was intended for academic use and assured that confidentiality would be upheld. No personal information was stored within the data and participant IP addresses were deleted. As stated previously, the survey was created on SurveyMonkey which avails a link for distribution to potential participants. Respondent data was stored on Google Cloud Storage to maintain the requirement for research data to be preserved for the minimum period of 10 years post the study.

#### **4.3.10. Limitations**

While quantitative methodology offers the benefits of large-scale data collection and generalisation, it has limitations. These include potential response bias and the inability to capture more in-depth respondent feedback that is possible when a qualitative design is used (Cooper & Schindler, 2013).

The study's geographical focus on SMEs in South Africa might limit the applicability of findings to other regions (Greener, 2008). Respondents who participated didn't reflect the general population of South Africa, with a skew towards females 61% and age group 30-49. Furthermore, although the study was based on SMEs in South Africa, the researcher cannot be certain that participants were all citizens, limiting generalisability to South African consumers.

The negatively worded survey questions may have introduced method bias into this study and resulted in a low Cronbach alpha score of 0.582 in the test for brand trust (Podsakoff et al., 2003; Hinkin, 1995).

The risk of using online surveys included the possibility of respondents completing the survey multiple times or providing habitual responses (Berinsky et al., 2012).

## **Chapter 5: Findings**

### **5.1. Introduction**

This chapter describes the data analysis as well as the results from the survey. Descriptive analysis was done using graphs and tables to summarise the data. Inferential analysis was conducted to generalise the finding to the broader population using regression techniques.

The findings are presented in the sections that follow. The chapter begins with analysing the response rate and reliability scores, followed by demographic characteristics of the respondents. Descriptive statistics, analysing the constructs in the study are presented. Inferential analysis outcomes including multiple linear regression and moderated regression results based on the hypothesis discussed in Chapter 2, consolidate the analysis reporting. A closing summary concludes the chapter.

### **5.2. Data Preparation**

Consistent with quantitative information processing approach, the data was first cleaned to ensure completeness, accuracy and reliability of inputs. This entailed checking the data for inconsistencies and/or errors that may have occurred, such as missing data or mistyping. If not corrected, errors or missing values could cause potential issues can skewing the outcomes (Kotronoulas et al., 2023)

### **5.3. Data Coding**

Response surveys were first coded in MS Excel before transferring the data to SPSS which automatically integrates Excel data into its platform. SPSS provides many advantages during the analytics processes as it supports the processing of all critical steps from data preparation to reporting. Additionally, the analysis environment is equipped with functionalities that offer automated techniques for anomaly detection and statistical adjustments to manage outliers (Suresh, 2015). As per Table 1 below, the survey question responses were coded with numbers 1 to 5, representing categories such as Strongly Disagree, Disagree, neither agree nor disagree, Agree and Strongly Agree.

Table 1: Survey Coded Questions

Likert	Code
Strongly disagree	1
Disagree	2
Neither agree nor disagree	3
Agree	4
Strongly agree	5

Source: Author compilation

#### 5.4. Missing Data

Where respondents did not complete the entire survey, resulting in missing data, their partial responses were included in the analysis where applicable.

#### 5.5. Descriptive Results and Analysis

Descriptive analysis was used to get an overview of the sample. Computing these statistical checks provides insight into the sample characteristics. Hypothesis testing applied on H1 – H3 and inferential statistics were used to test relationships (Allua & Thompson, 2009; Kotronoulas et al., 2023).

The survey was sent to 2323 individuals via WhatsApp, Facebook, LinkedIn. The researcher had targeted a sample size of 200 and obtained 216 survey responses, which is considered an acceptable sample size (Lu et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2019; Kline, 2018). This indicated a response rate of 9,3% as shown in Figure 3.

The sample consisted of individuals, 18 or older with 93% having a track record of purchasing items from an SME. Only gender and age were requested as demographic markers as per similar previous studies (Kline, 2018; B. Lu et al., 2016; Lin 2021). Some participants did not complete the survey (7%) but these partial responses were included in the analysis where applicable.

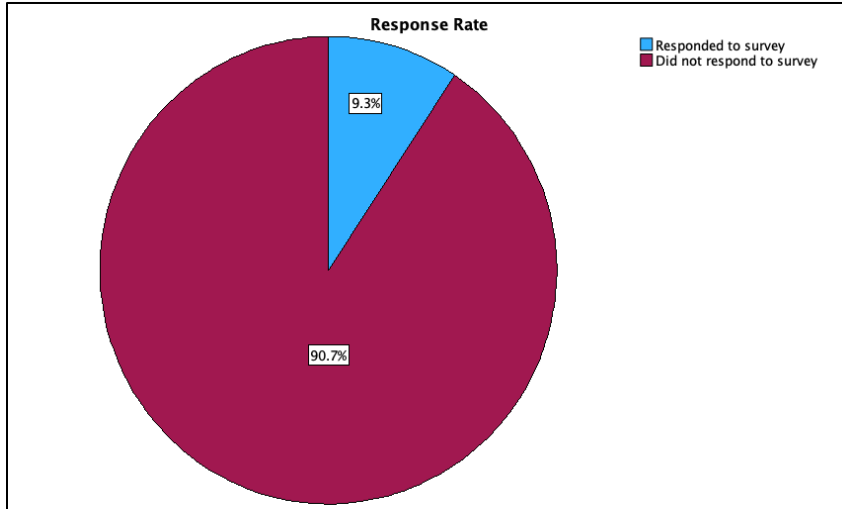


Figure 3: Response Rate

Source: Author compilation

### 5.5.1. Demographic Descriptive Analysis

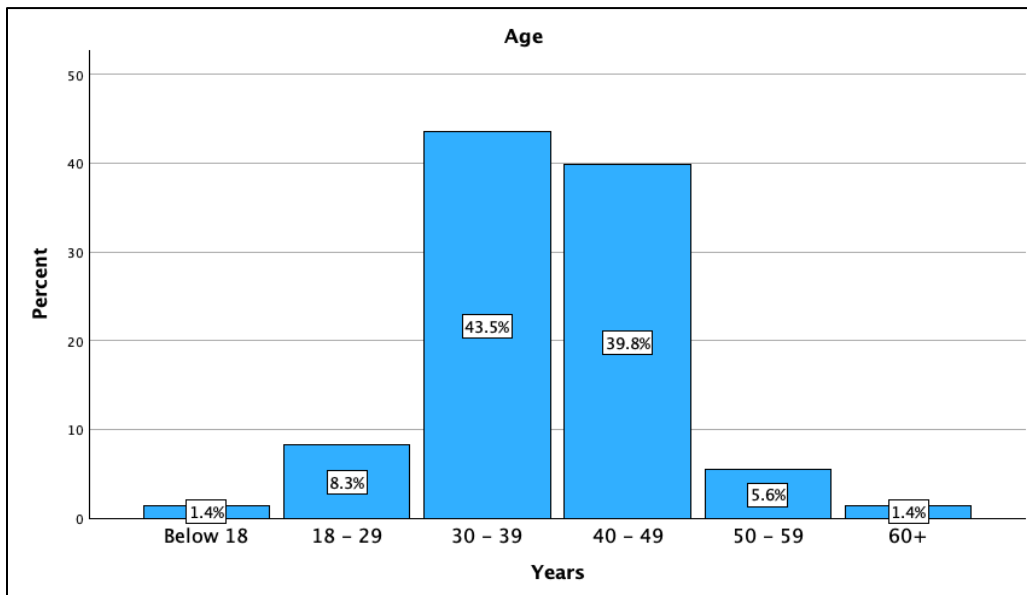


Figure 4: Respondent Ages

Source: Author compilation

The largest proportion of participants fell within the 30-39 age range, with 43.5% being 30-39 years old and 39.8% being 40-49 years old. The 50-59 group made up 5,6% and those 60+ accounted for just 1.4% while those below 18 were only 1.4% of the sample.

Compared to the general population, the survey overrepresented individuals aged 30-49, who made up 83,3% of the sample, whereas national statistics from Statista (2023) show that these groups only make up about 32% of the adult population. The 50-59 age group was underrepresented at 5,6% in the survey vs 10% in the national population. The 60+ age group is significantly underrepresented at 1,4% in the survey compared to 9% in the general population. These differences could be because middle-aged respondents are more likely to be engaged in SME related activities.

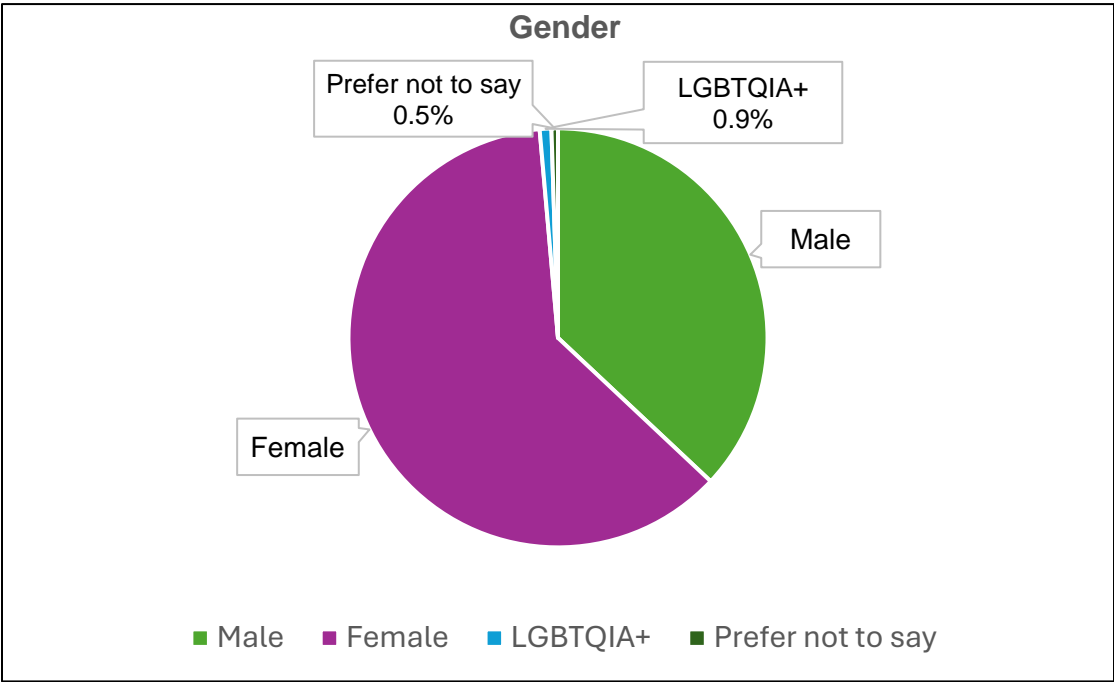


Figure 5: Respondent Genders

Source: Author compilation

Most respondents were female at (61.6%) while males accounted for 37%, 0,9% identified as 0.9% LGBTQIA+ and 0.5% preferred not to disclose a gender. Compared to the general SA

population, there was an overrepresentation of females in the sample, nationally females make up 51,5% and males 48,5% respectively.

### 5.5.2. Reliability of Data and Validity

This section examines the Cronbach Alpha coefficient for the survey questionnaire. This measure indicates the internal reliability and consistency of the items in the survey questionnaire. Internal consistency provides a view of how similar items were measured, while validity is the ability of the measure to sufficiently evaluate the realm of concern (Hinkin, 1995). These measures are utilised to assess and evaluate measurement instruments.

Cronbach's Alpha ( $\alpha$ ) and composite reliability (CR) were employed to test the internal consistency of each construct confirming reliability (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). The Cronbach measure confirms whether the survey items effectively assessed key constructs as intended. A score of 0.7 is acceptable. The high Cronbach's Alpha value attained indicates that the responses to the survey questions were consistent and reliable across participants (Hinkin, 1995).

*Table 2: Constructs of the Questionnaire*

<b>Constructs of the Questionnaire</b>	<b>Cronbach's alpha</b>	<b>N of items</b>
<b>Website Presence</b>	0.811	5
<b>Social Media Presence</b>	0.872	5
<b>Brand Trust</b>	0.582	4
<b>Purchase intention</b>	0.850	5

*Source: Author compilation*

Table 2 summarises the Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient for the constructs. The overall Cronbach alpha for the 19-item survey was 0.908. The results show that all the constructs were higher than the acceptable threshold of 0.70, except for "Brand Trust" which had a negatively coded item, known to occur in a lower score (Hinkin, 1995).

Hair et al. (2014) state that consensus for the lower limit is 0.70 to classify an instrument as internally consistent and reliable, the lower values of .60 to .70 deemed the lower limit of acceptability. The brand trust construct scored within the lower acceptable limit of 0.58 to~ 0.60, this could be because of the limited items used to test this construct, at only 4 (Hair et al., 2014). Schmitt (1996) cautions against the universal threshold of 0.70, at which alpha is considered acceptable, instruments below this value can still be useful.

### 5.5.3. Descriptive Statistics of the Constructs

This section analyses the descriptive statistics of the participants perceptions on the presence of an SMEs website and its importance. This will include an analysis of the means and standard deviations.

*Table 3: Importance of SME Website Presence*

Item	N	Mean	SD
<b>Importance of SME Website Presence</b>			
1. I find it helpful when an unknown brand/SME has a website	207	4.66	.58
2. When deciding to buy from an SME or relatively unknown brand, I look at their website	207	4.43	.80
3. I expect SME's to have a website.	207	4.20	.95
4. The SME's website, validates that the brand/company is real	207	4.04	1.03
5. The SME's website makes me feel connected to the brand	207	3.95	.90

*Source: Author compilation*

As per Table 3, the respondents mostly agreed with item 1 on the importance of an SME Website Presence: *I find it helpful when an unknown brand/SME has a website.*

This item had an average score of 4.66 and a standard deviation of 0.58 where the survey questions were based on the Likert scale with 5 possible responses. Strongly disagree was given a score of 1 and strongly agree was given a score of 5.

Item 5: *The SME’s website makes me feel connected to the brand* had the lowest average score of 3.95 and standard deviation of 0.90 which indicates slightly less agreement with the statement “The SME’s website makes me feel connected to the brand”.

#### 5.5.4. Social Media Presence in SMEs

This section will analyse the descriptive statistics of the participants perceptions on the social media presence of an SME and its importance. This will include an analysis of the means and standard deviations.

*Table 4: Importance of SME Social Presence*

Item	N	Mean	SD
<b>Importance of SME Social Media Presence</b>			
1. When deciding to buy from an SME or relatively unknown brand I look at their social media page.	202	4.32	.90
2. I find it helpful when a brand/SME I do not know well, has a social media page.	202	4.49	.74
3. I expect SMEs to have social media presence.	201	4.38	.81
4. SME/brands social media presence, validates the brand/company being real.	202	4.13	.97
5. The SME’s social media page, makes me feel connected to the brand.	207	4.04	.89

*Source: Author compilation*

As per Table 4, the respondents mostly agreed with item 2: *I find it helpful when a brand/SME I do not know well, has a social media page*. Item 2 gave an average score of 4.49 and a standard deviation of .74. Item 5: *The SME’s social media page, makes me feel connected to the brand*, had the lowest average score of 4.04 and standard deviation of 0.89 which points to relatively lower agreement relatively with the statement.

To analyse participants’ preferences, the survey asked for feedback on the social media platforms on which SME’s should be represented. Facebook and Instagram with 60,9% and

75,7% respectively emerged as preferred. Only 38,6% of participants mentioned TikTok, making it the least preferred platform. This data is illustrated in Figure 6.

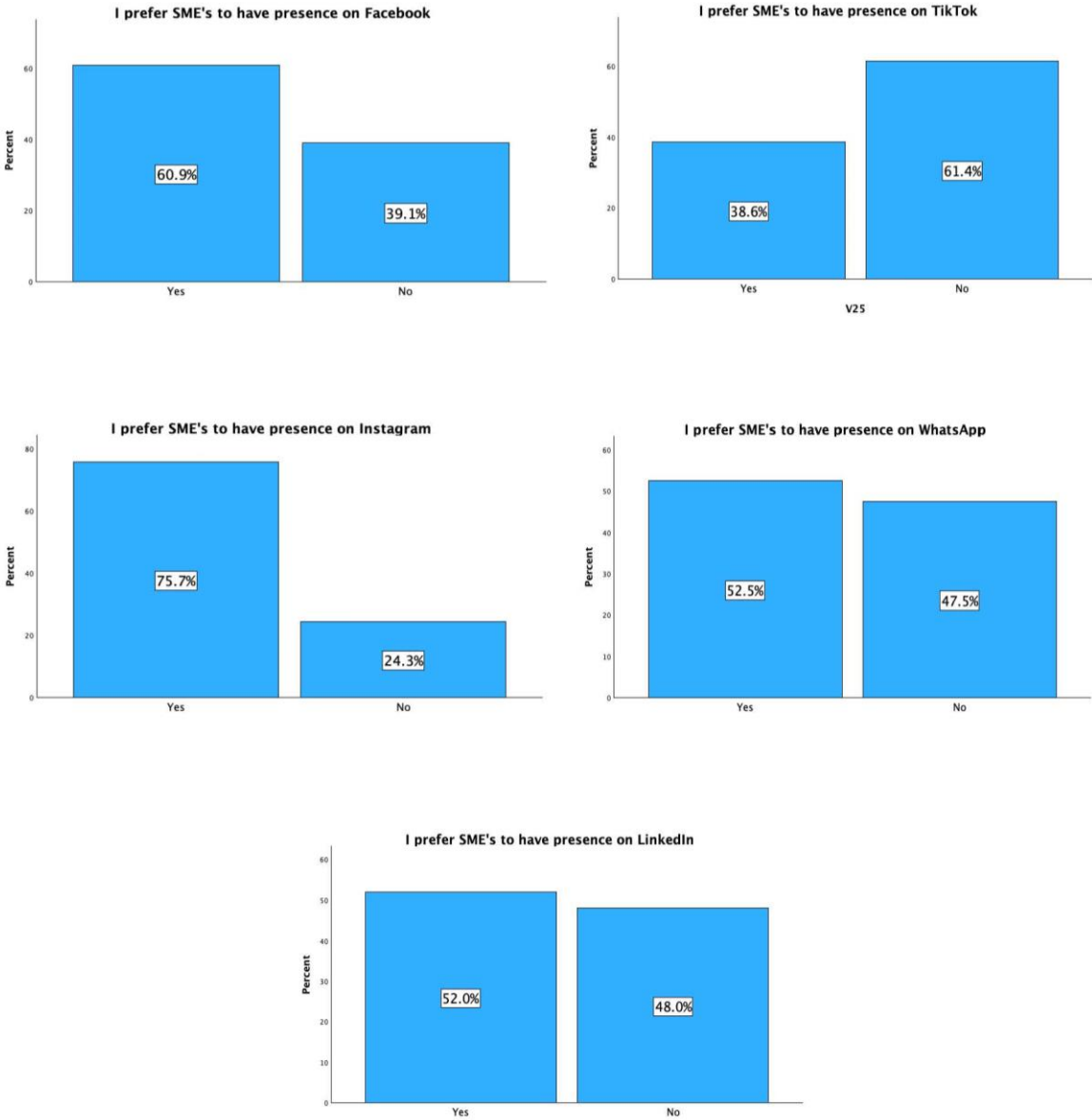


Figure 6: Social Media Preference

Source: Author compilation

### 5.5.5. Brand Trust in SMEs based on Online Presence

This section will analyse the descriptive statistics of the participants trust based on the presence of an SME online. This will include an analysis of the means and standard deviations.

Table 5: Brand Trust in SMEs

Item	N	Mean	SD
<b>Brand Trust in SMEs</b>			
1. I generally trust buying from SMEs/relatively unknown brands.	200	3.13	.96
2. I find it easier to trust SMEs that have an online presence.	200	4.27	.77
3. I feel safer buying from an SME that has an online presence.	200	4.25	.83
4. I do not trust SME's/relatively unknown brands that do not have an online presence (Website/social media).	199	4.04	.95

Source: Author compilation

The response with strongest response on table 5, corresponded to the statement, “*I find it easier to trust SMEs that have an online presence*”, with a mean score of 4.27 and a standard deviation of .77. The statement with the lowest scores and highest disagreement was “*I generally trust buying from SMEs/relatively unknown brands*” (Mean = 3.13, SD = .77). This means that participants tend to distrust SME's with relatively unknown brands.

### 5.5.6. Purchase Intention in SMEs based on online presence

Table 6: Purchase Intention in SMEs

Item	N	Mean	SD
<b>Purchase intentions in SMEs based on online presence</b>			
1. I would certainly purchase from an SME with an online presence.	198	4.26	.79
2. I am more likely to buy from an SME if they have an online presence.	198	4.35	.72
3. I would intend to purchase from an SME in future because of their online presence.	198	4.29	.78
4. I am unlikely to consider an SME that does not have an online presence.	198	3.80	1.09
5. I prefer to purchase from SMEs who have an online presence.	196	4.29	.78

Source: Author compilation

*“I am more likely to buy from an SME if it has an online presence”*

Participants strongly agreed with higher likelihood for patronage when an SME is visible online with a score of 4.35 and a standard deviation of .72 as seen on table 6.

*“I would intend to purchase from an SME in future because of their online presence”*

Participants also strongly agreed that they would purchase from an SME in future because of its online presence (Mean = 4.29, SD = .78) and that there would be preference to purchase from SMEs encountered online (Mean = 4.29, SD = .78).

An area with a low score was related to the statement “I am unlikely to consider an SME that does not have an online presence.” (Mean = 3.80, SD = 1.09). This means participants are still somewhat likely to buy from an SME even if it does not have an online presence.

## 5.6. Hypothesis Testing

Inferential analysis was conducted using multiple linear regression and moderated regression analysis to test the research hypotheses. Inferential analysis supports the evaluation of sample data to make assumptions that can be used to generalise to the broader population. Multiple linear progression was used to examine the relationships between the dependent variable and various independent variables, assessing how the different variables impacted the dependent variable (Allua & Thompson, 2009). In this study, multiple linear regression was applied to test *Hypotheses 1a and 1b*, evaluating the direct effects of website presence and social media presence variables on brand trust. Extending on the multiple regression, moderated regression analysis was used to examine the moderating role of social presence on brand trust and purchase intention (Allua & Thompson, 2009).

### 5.6.1. Hypothesis 1

#### Hypothesis 1a

Null hypothesis: *Website presence does not have a positive influence on brand trust.*

Alternative hypothesis: *Website Presence has a positive influence on brand trust.*

#### Hypothesis 1b

Null hypothesis: *Social media presence does not have a positive influence on brand trust*

Alternative hypothesis: *Social media presence has a positive influence on brand trust.*

A multiple linear regression with brand trust as the dependent variable and social media presence & website presence as the independent variables was modelled in SPSS. Statement 1 under “SME website presence” and Statement 2 under “SME social media presence” were the statements with the highest scores in each section. These were used for the regression analysis for website presence and social media independent variables respectively. Statement 2 under “Brand Trust” was used for the regression analysis for the brand trust variable in the model.

$$\text{Brand trust}_i = \alpha + \beta_1 \times \text{Social Media presence}_i + \beta_2 \times \text{Website presence}_i + \varepsilon$$

The Durbin Watson value = 2.177 in SPSS, which was between 1.5 and 2.5, indicating that the model had no significant autocorrelations. The variance inflation factors (VIF) associated with each independent variable in SPSS was close to 1 indicating that there was no collinearity. The error terms of the residuals were also plotted and found to be normally distributed in a normal PP-plot. A scatter plot of the residuals also shows that the assumption of homoscedasticity was not violated.

*Table 7: Model Summary and ANOVA Results*

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
<b>Regression</b>	32.669	2	16.334	38.178	<.001 <sup>b</sup>
<b>Residual</b>	84.286	197	.428		
<b>Total</b>	116.955	199			

*Source: Author compilation*

**Durbin Watson = 2.177**

*Table 8: Regression Coefficients and Collinearity Diagnostics*

	Beta Coefficient	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistic Tolerance   VIF	
<b>Constant</b>	.769	1.837	.068		
<b>Social Media Presence</b>	.392	6.090	<.001	.940	1.064
<b>Website Presence</b>	.373	4.584	<.001	.940	1.064

*Source: Author compilation*

The combined regression model was found to be statistically significant (F = 38.178 and p-value < 0.001 was less than a significance level of 5%). It was observed that both social media preference (t – test statistic = 6.090, p-value < 0.001) and website presence (t – test statistic = 4.584, p-value < 0.001) do have a positive influence on brand trust at the 5% significance level. We therefore do not reject both null hypotheses, **Hypothesis 1a and**

**Hypothesis 1b**, and we conclude that both independent variables have an influence on the trust conferred on a brand by customers when assessing an SME.

Table 8 shows the coefficients of .392 for social media presence and .373 for website presence can be interpreted as follows: for a unit increase in the perceived 'realness' of an SME due to social media presence, consumers general trust levels of the brand of an SME tend to go up by .392 units and for a unit increase in the perceived 'realness' of an SME due to website presence the general brand trust levels of the SME tend to go up by .373.

The findings support the researcher's H1 hypotheses that, social presence has a positive influence on brand trust, through both website presence (H1a) and social media presence (H1b) positively influence brand trust in SMEs.

### 5.6.2. Hypothesis 2 & 3

#### **Hypothesis 2**

Null hypothesis: *Brand trust does not have a positive influence on consumer purchase intention.*

Alternative hypothesis: *Brand trust has a positive influence on consumer purchase intention.*

#### **Hypothesis 3**

Null hypothesis: *There is no significant moderating impact of social presence on brand trust and purchase intention, such that, the higher level of social presence, the stronger the relationship.*

Alternative hypothesis: *H3: Social presence has a moderating effect on brand trust and purchase intention, such that the higher level of social presence, the stronger the relationship.*

Two moderated linear regression models were estimated to test these hypotheses. **Model 1** included website presence and **Model 2** included social media presence as the moderator.

### Model 1: Moderation effect of website presence

Model 1 moderated linear regression model with purchase intention as the dependent variable. The independent variables were brand trust, website presence and an interaction moderator term between brand trust and website presence. The standardised value of the interaction term was used to remove multicollinearity. The statements previously discussed were used for brand trust and SME website presence. For the purchase intention variable, statement 2 in the “purchase intention” section of the questionnaire was used.

#### **Model 1:**

Purchase Intention<sub>i</sub>

$$= \alpha + \beta_1 \times \text{Brand trust}_i + \beta_2 \times \text{Website presence}_i + \beta_3 \times (\text{Website presence}_i \times \text{Brand trust}_i) + \varepsilon$$

The Durbin Watson value = 2.041 which is between 1.5 to 2.5 indicates that the model does not have any significant autocorrelations. The VIF (Variance Inflation Factors) associated with each independent variable are close to 1 indicating that there is no collinearity. The error terms of the residuals were also plotted, and the error terms were found to be normally distributed from a normal PP-plot. A scatter plot of the residuals also showed that the assumption of Homoscedasticity was not violated.

*Table 9: Regression Results for Model 1*

<b>Model</b>	<b>Sum of Squares</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>Mean Square</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
<b>Regression</b>	44.378	3	14.793	48.745	<.001 <sup>b</sup>
<b>Residual</b>	58.874	194	.303		
<b>Total</b>	103.253	197			

*Source: Author compilation*

Table 10: Model Summary and ANOVA Results

**Durbin Watson = 2.041**

	<b>Beta Coefficient</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>Sig.</b>	<b>Collinearity Statistic Tolerance   VIF</b>	
<b>Constant</b>	1.140	2.851	.005		
<b>Brand Trust</b>	.519	9.276	<.001	.829	1.206
<b>Website Presence</b>	.216	2.662	.008	.674	1.483
<b>Interaction Term</b>	-.015	-.515	.607	.700	1.428

Source: Author compilation

In table 9, the combined regression model was found to be statistically significant ( $F = 48.745$  and  $p\text{-value} < 0.001$  which is less than a significance level of 5%), confirming that both independent variables influenced purchase intention.

Both brand trust ( $t$  – test statistic = 9.276,  $p\text{-value} < 0.001$ ) and website presence ( $t$  – test statistic = 2.662,  $p\text{-value} = 0.008$ ) have a positive influence on purchase intention at the 5% significance level.

The interaction moderating term was found to be not statistically significant ( $t\text{-test statistic} = -.515$ ,  $p\text{-value} = .607 > .05$ ), meaning that website presence has no significant moderating impact on brand trust and purchase intention.

As per table 10, the coefficients of .519 for brand trust and .216 for website presence in table 10 can be interpreted as follows:

For a unit increase in the brand trust that a consumer has in an SME, their general purchase intent levels from the SME tend to go up by .519 units and for a unit increase in the brand ‘realness’ that a consumer perceives in website presence, their general purchase intent levels from the SME tend to go up by .216 units.

Website presence does not appear to have significant moderating impact on brand trust affecting purchase intention.

Therefore Hypothesis 2 was supported, while hypothesis 3 in the context of website presence was rejected in this model.

**Model 2:**

The second model tested the moderating effect of Social Media Presence instead of Website Presence.

Purchase Intention<sub>i</sub>

$$= \alpha + \beta_1 \times \text{Brand trust}_i + \beta_2 \times \text{Social Media presence}_i + \beta_3 \times (\text{Social Media presence}_i \times \text{Brand trust}_i) + \varepsilon$$

The Durbin Watson value = 2.081 which is between 1.5 to 2.5 indicating that there are no significant autocorrelations. The VIF outcome for each independent variable was close to 1, indicating no collinearity. Homoscedasticity and normality of errors checks were also done. The normal P-P plot and scatter plot confirmed that the assumptions were met.

Table 11: Regression Results for Model 2

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	44.741	3	14.914	49.447	<.001 <sup>b</sup>
Residual	58.512	194	.302		
Total	103.253	197			

Source: Author compilation

**Durbin Watson = 2.041**

Table 12: Regression Coefficients for Model 2

	<b>Beta Coefficient</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>Sig.</b>	<b>Collinearity Statistic Tolerance   VIF</b>	
<b>Constant</b>	1.420	4.776	<.001		
<b>Brand Trust</b>	.499	8.690	<.001	.782	1.279
<b>Social Media Presence</b>	.182	2.976	.003	.739	1.353
<b>Interaction Term</b>	-.034	-.944	.347	.852	1.173

Source: Author compilation

As shown in Table 11, the combined regression model was found to be statistically significant ( $F = 44.741$  and  $p\text{-value} < 0.001$  which is less than a significance level of 5%).

It was observed that both brand trust ( $t$  – test statistic = 8.690,  $p\text{-value} < 0.001$ ) and social media presence ( $t$  – test statistic = 2.976,  $p\text{-value} = 0.003$ ) have a positive influence on purchase intention at the 5% significance level.

The interaction moderating term was also found to be not statistically significant ( $t\text{-test statistic} = -.944$ ,  $p\text{-value} = .347 > .05$ ) meaning that social media presence has no significant moderating impact on brand trust and purchase intention.

As per table 12, The coefficients of .499 for brand trust and .182 for social media presence can be interpreted as follows:

For a unit increase in the brand trust that a consumer has in an SME, their general purchase intent levels to go up by .499 units. A unit increase in social presence results in perceived SME ‘realness’, the general purchase intent levels tend to go up by .182 units. Social media presence does not have a significant moderating impact on brand trust affecting purchase intention. Therefore, perceived realness does not influence the strength of the relationship between brand trust and purchase intention.

Given the regression outputs from Model 1 and Model 2, the null hypothesis for Hypothesis 2 is not rejected. However, the null hypothesis for Hypothesis 3 in the context of social media presence is rejected.

## 5.7. Summary of Results

The study explored the relationship between the variables of 'social presence, website presence, social media presence, brand trust and consumer purchase intention with a focus on the moderating effect of social presence. Related hypotheses were tested using multiple linear regression and moderated regression analysis, while descriptive statistics provided insights into the sample.

Both website presence and social media presence had a significant positive influence on brand trust ( $p < 0.001$ ) with social media having a stronger influence. Hypothesis 1a and 1b were supported, concluding that SMEs with a digital presence are more likely to be trusted by consumers.

Brand trust had a strong positive impact on purchase intention ( $p < 0.001$ ,  $\beta \approx 0.5$ ). Respondents are more likely to buy from an SME with an online presence (Mean = 4.35, SD = .72). Hypothesis 2 was supported, meaning that purchase intention is higher when consumers perceive the SME as trustworthy.

Website presence and social media presence did not significantly moderate the relationship between brand trust and social media; ( $p = .607 > 0.05$ ) and ( $p = .347 > 0.05$ ) respectively. While respondents preferred a SME to have an online presence, this preference does not necessarily amplify the impact of brand trust on consumer purchasing behaviour. Hypothesis 3 was rejected. Although website and social media presence directly impact brand trust and purchase intention, they do not moderate the strength of this relationship.

## 5.8 Updated Conceptual Model with Results

Figure 7 provides a view of the updated model with the results.

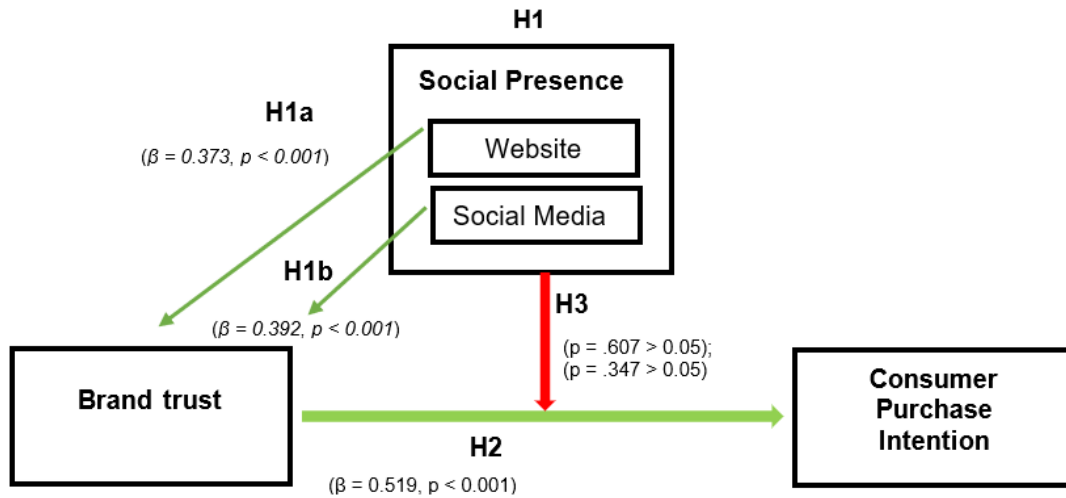


Figure 7: Model with Results

Source: Author compilation

## 5.9. Chapter Summary

This chapter provided an analysis of the survey responses, it began with the response rates and reliability testing. Descriptive statistics highlighted key trends in respondent demographics and perceptions of an SME online presence. Utilising inferential statistics, the results showed that Hypothesis 1a and 1b were supported meaning that both website and social media enhance brand trust with social media having a slightly stronger effect. Additionally, brand trust was found to significantly influence consumer purchase intention in SMEs meaning that H2 was also supported. However, Hypothesis 3 examining the moderating effect of social presence on the trust and consumer purchase direct relationship was not supported.

The next chapter discusses these results in depth, interpreting them in relation to existing research.

## **Chapter 6: Discussion of Results**

### **6.1. Introduction**

This chapter provides a summary of the results from Chapter 5, with a discussion on the findings of the hypotheses test outcomes, with these presented in the context of existing literature.

The study intended to confirm the moderating role of social presence on the dynamics between brand trust and purchase intention. Using social presence theory as a foundation, the study explored how a website and social media presence in SMEs influence brand trust and subsequently purchasing behaviour in consumers. The findings are relevant to SMEs who want to embark on their digital journey or looking for ways to maximise their current digital footprint.

The chapter consists of an in-depth analysis of the relationship between online presence and brand trust, followed by an examination of how brand trust influences purchase intention. Lastly, it examines social presence as a moderator in this relationship. These discussions will use the results from Chapter 5 and the theoretical framework from Chapter 2.

### **6.2. Demographic Findings Discussion**

The sample demographics were used to gain insights into the respondents and additionally for generalisability over the South African population. Although the demographic characteristics of the respondents were not analysed in relation to the study's constructs, there are notable data points which emerged.

83.3% of the respondents were aged 30-49, which is more than the numbers in the general South Africa population. Jeza & Lekhanya (2022) suggest that this may be due to their purchasing power. On the other hand, older adults (50+) were underrepresented.

From a gender perspective, the respondents consisted of 61% females compared to South Africa's national average of 51,5% female and 48.5% male (Statista, 2023). Urban &

Maphathe (2021), suggested that this could be because women are more likely to engage with SMEs online, particularly through social media platforms. The demographics were not assessed in relation to the constructs, but they provide good insights into the sample characteristics (Chahal & Rani, 2017).

### **6.3. Discussion of Findings**

**“What is the relationship between Social Presence, brand trust (independent variable) and consumer purchase intention (dependent variable) in SMEs.”**

The following sections discuss the relationship between the constructs of brand trust, social presence and purchase intention. Hypothesis 1 to 3 intended to explore the relationship between all the constructs providing insights into the benefit of a online presence for SMEs.

#### **6.3.1. Hypothesis 1: Social Presence and Brand Trust**

*H1: Social presence has a positive influence on brand trust in SMEs.*

*H1a: Website Presence has a positive influence on brand trust.*

*H1b: Social Media presence has a positive influence on brand trust*

The test results confirmed that website presence positively influences Brand Trust ( $\beta = 0.373$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), therefore the researcher concludes that Social Presence through website and social media presence have a positive effect on brand trust in SMEs meaning that H1 hypothesis that social presence has a positive influence on brand trust in SMEs is confirmed (George et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2019). Additionally, social media presence was found to have an even stronger effect on Brand Trust ( $\beta = 0.392$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) than website presence.

The findings confirm that SMEs with a website or social media presence are more likely to be trusted by customers, this aligns to Social Presence Theory (Song et al., 2019), which states that elevated social presence can create real life connections and validations of authenticity therefore enhancing brand trust. In support, Kabadayi & Kocack Alan (2012) confirm that a strong social presence effectively builds consumer trust in SMEs, consistent with George et al. (2023); Anantharaman et al. (2023) and Nadeem et al. (2020) who found that the

multidimensional constructs of social presence which include, awareness of others, social presence of website and social presence through interaction, impact brand trust positively.

The results indicate that consumers find it easier to trust SMEs that establish a clear and visible online presence. This is consistent with the findings of Vijayakumar and Sadasivan (2021), who argue that social presence strengthens the emotional connection between businesses and their customers. Similarly, Gefen and Straub (2004) asserted that social presence reduces uncertainty in online transactions, therefore increasing trust.

While this study found that website presence alone positively impacts trust this is contradictory to the findings of George et al. (2023) who stated the mere online presence of a website may not be sufficient to maximising trust with consumers, and that SME need to ensure that extend their online presence by having a complementary social media presence to yield results. Consumers expect a high level of engagement from brands and platforms like social media are able to facilitate this through active engagement like comments, content generation and interactive features (Habibi et al., 2014). This supports the work of Lu et al. (2016), who found that a passive online presence, may not significantly impact trust unless it includes high engagement initiatives, this however contradicts Oh et al. (2018) who argued that even basic text-based platforms can present a high level of social presence thereby driving consumer engagement and trust.

### **6.3.2. Hypothesis 1a: Website Presence and Brand Trust**

*H1a: Website Presence has a positive influence on brand trust.*

This hypothesis was supported ( $\beta = 0.373$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), consistent with previous literature which also that found website presence increases brand trust (George et al. 2023) Websites have become increasingly relevant because in the digital environment websites essentially serve as storefront for SMEs, which then plays a key role in building consumer trust and brand credibility. This study found that having website significantly enhances consumer trust in SMEs. Survey participants conveyed a strong preference for SMEs with websites, which made them perceive them as more legitimate and reliable. This aligned with research by Dash

and Saji (2008) and Anantharaman et al. (2023), who also found that website social presence led to stronger trust perceptions among consumers.

However, other studies have built on social presence and brand trust, suggesting that the quality of the website impacts trust, the design, usability and security features built into a website were also found to impact consumer levels of trust.

When evaluating the impact that website quality has to social media presence, Gao and Li (2019) and Qalati et al. (2021) advised that the quality of a website increases brand trust in consumers, additionally, George et al. (2023) proposed that trust in a brand is built through the social perception of others in websites. They found that websites through features like customer testimonials and third-party verifications enhances brand trust, suggesting that SME should not rely on a basic website presence and should enhance the platform capabilities over time.

The study found that website presence positively impacts brand trust, but it also confirmed that social media had a greater influence, Sohail et al. (2020) suggest that this can be attributed to consumer behaviour, where the website is used to validate the brand and product offerings but then to make the final purchasing decision, consumers turn to social media to provide more recent insights and community validation through likes and reviews. Congruent with Nosi et al. (2022) who proffered that websites play the role of enhancing consumer trust at the product investigation stage, rather than being the primary platform that users use to engage. As a result, Wang et al. (2022) suggest that integrating social media capabilities in websites can help drive better sales conversion, due to the increased customer engagement features.

### **6.3.3. Hypothesis 1b: Social Media Presence and Brand Trust**

*H1b: Social media presence has a positive influence on brand trust*

The results showed that social media has a positive influence on brand trust, H1b (null) was rejected and the alternative supported, the study confirm that social media presence has a positive influence on brand trust (Sohaib & Han, 2023).

The results also showed that social media presence has an even stronger effect on Brand Trust ( $\beta = 0.392, p < 0.001$ ) than website social presence, indicating that social media plays an even bigger role than a website in impacting consumer trust. This aligns with previous studies that have also found the same (Sohail et al., 2020, Puspaningrum, 2020; Ming et al., 2021).

Respondents showed a clear preference for SME's that have a social media page with Instagram (75.7%) and Facebook (60,9%) having the highest preference followed by WhatsApp (52,5%) and LinkedIn (52%) and lastly TikTok (38,6%). This also probably impacted by the skewed demographic to an older more mature consumer, which is most likely why LinkedIn is preferred over TikTok targeted at a younger generation (Chahal & Rani, 2017).

Previous studies by Sohail et al. (2020) and Puspaningrum (2020) have highlighted the significance of the relationship between social media presence and brand trust, concluding that a positive relationship exists, and that brands can leverage this to their advantage, also asserting that it has additional benefits like positively impacting brand loyalty. Further to this, these studies also revealed that acts a bridge in the relationship between social presence and brand loyalty.

Chahal & Rani (2017) and Ebrahim (2020) put forward that trust moderates the relationship between social media and brand equity, with Chahal & Rani (2017) however finding that this effect is amplified in long standing brands versus SMEs. This highlight's the potential of social media, when leveraged by SMEs to impacting consumer behaviour in ways that truly embed consumers thereby increasing their sustainability.

Social Media engagement has also been found to be a catalyst for trust building through its ability to facilitate real time interaction and engagement (Habibi et al., 2014) the high engagement increases social presence and perceived authenticity resulting in increased brand trust and loyalty (Pongpaew et al., 2017). Additionally social media allows SMEs to increase their direct engagement, allowing them to timeously address concerns and provide more information to consumers, this interaction as confirmed by businesses in the study

allowed them to build better relationship and trust with existing and potential consumers (Haudi et al. 2022; George et al. 2023).

Moreover Geoge et al. (2023) and Anantharaman et al. (2023) found that social presence through interaction, such as consumer comments on brands social media page have the strongest impact in enhancing brand trust. Haudi et al. (2022) further adds that different social media platforms, have the ability to enhance brand trust than others, this aligns with respondent feedback on this study where they indicated that they preferred SMEs to have a presence on Facebook and Instagram, this most likely due to the fact that these platforms have more visually engaging content and capability versus WhatsApp and LinkedIn (George et al., 2023).

For SMEs in South Africa, because social media is low cost and easily accessible, this allows them the important opportunity to build brand trust. Given the constraints that South African SMEs face a channel like social media can be an equaliser and the first step in their digital journey.

The results show that social media presence is an important consideration for SME, especially for SMEs in developing economies where resources are limited, social media provides an array of opportunities whilst having the benefit of being easily accessible and low cost.

These findings suggests that for SMEs to benefit from the highest impact on trust they should invest in a website and social media presence. Both platforms may play a crucial role in building trust, but it seems that a website presence only is not sufficient to build trust. The website may legitimise the business with consumers, but social media through providing consumers with real time engagement and community validation may further enhance their trust.

#### **6.3.4. Hypothesis 2: Brand Trust and Purchase Intention**

*H2: Brand trust has a positive influence on consumer purchase intention*

The study examined whether brand trust has a positive influence on consumer purchase intention, assuming that when trust is established with a brand, consumers are more likely to then purchase from said brand. The findings supported the researchers H2 assumptions.

The study's results confirmed that brand trust has a strong positive influence on purchase intention ( $\beta = 0.519$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), consistent with previous studies that emphasised the fundamental role that trust plays in influencing consumer behaviour (Haudi et al., 2022; Zheng et al., 2022; Anantharaman et al., 2023). Influencing this relationship is critical for SMEs to reduce perceived customer risk due to their unestablished brands, this positive relationship between these constructs means that consumers are likely to buy from an SME they perceive as reliable and trustworthy (George et al. 2023).

Brand trust has consistently shown a positive relationship with brand trust even when examined in different contexts, in a study that evaluated trust and purchase intention in branded phones (Dam, 2020) found a brand trust positively impact purchase intention in Vietnamese consumers, similarly Hajli et al. (2017) discovered that social media brand trust predicted purchase intent in online platforms. In the case of influencing consumer behaviour on social media, through their findings Kian et al. (2017) assert that when consumers have confidence and trust in the seller it drives them to make a purchase.

In the context of e-commerce where brand trust has been extensively studied, Hassan et al. (2018) consumer trusted brands, results in sales in their online platforms, however Liu et al. (2019) cautions that brand trust is not the only influence and that other trust factors like trust in website reviewers and commenters should be considered as their study found them to also positively impact purchase intention. Further to this, in the case of e-commerce where online transactions can be facilitated for a purchase Ming et al. (2021) also suggested that trust building strategies like secure payment capabilities and customer service responses features should be integrated into the platform to enhance trust and convert purchase intent.

In further studies the multidimensional constructs of trust have also been found to positively affect purchase intention in the various forms that SMEs can leverage, this includes trust in the brand, trust in the brand website or platform and trust in other users on the platform (Lu et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2019; Zhou, 2019) whereas Hassan et al. (2018) explored four determinants of trust, also finding them positive predictors of trust and purchase intention, namely., “trust disposition, integrity of the seller, competency of the seller including benevolence of the seller, meaning that there are various stages that trust can be built with consumers during the purchase journey and SMEs should infuse trust elements at all stages to influence and drive consumer intentions.

In support of influencing consumer behaviours, Nosi et al. (2022) posit that through “trust transfer” both offline and online brand trust influences consumer intention positively, elaborating that even trust in a brands physical presence can lead to online trust. Further to this in social media, Wang & Chan-Olmsted, (2024) found that trust can be leveraged through third parties in social media, where using social influencers to promote brands led to brand trust in consumers resulting in increased purchase intention, though Wang et al. (2022) differed, concluding that trust in a brand has the strongest effect in purchase intent versus transference through third parties.

In the context of social commerce Trust also plays a mediating role with factors like customer engagement and brand awareness in influencing purchase intention (Dabbous et al., 2020) Customer engagement from a behavioural aspect is closely linked to how brand trust and purchase intention interact, Haudi et al., (2022) in exploring this dynamic noted that active online engagement with users online increases brand trust leading to higher sales. On social media trust can also be enhanced through encouraging users to engage with comments, reviews and likes on the platform (Nadeem et al., 2020; Song et al., 2019).

The results align with existing literature which also confirm that brand trust serves as a powerful predictor of trust. Trust can also be enhanced through leveraging social media influencers and encouraging consumer reviews to boost sales. Furthermore, the engaging features in social media should be leveraged across platforms by SMEs.

### 6.3.5. Hypothesis 3: Social Presence, Brand Trust and Purchase Intention

*H3: Social presence has a moderating effect on brand trust and purchase intention, such that, the higher level of social presence, the stronger the relationship.*

The study investigated whether social presence moderates the relationship between brand trust and consumer purchase intention, assuming that a higher social presence enhances trust and therefore making the effect of brand trust on purchase intention stronger.

The results showed that social presence boosts brand trust ( $\beta = 0.392$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), however its direct impact on the trust-purchase intention link is not significant. Therefore, the H3 hypothesis that social presence has a moderating effect on brand trust and purchase intention is rejected. From the results, the researcher concludes that although social presence builds consumer trust, a higher social presence it doesn't necessarily enhance the trust's effect on purchase behaviour. This aligns with similar findings from Liu et al. (2019) and Gao & Li, (2019) who found the same in trust towards website and purchase intention, Dabbous et al. (2020) also found the same asserting that SMEs should rather focus on integrating trust building elements into their social platforms.

In contrast Wang et al. (2022) in evaluating the moderating role of social presence constructs in social commerce found that “website types” have a significant moderating impact on trust and purchase intention. With websites that have social elements infused having a stronger impact than a brand page that is integrated with e-commerce functionality.

Hajli et al. (2017) suggest that social presence and purchase intention are mediated by trust, with quality of product information, communication and user engagement also playing a role, consistent with Hassan et al. (2018) who posit that social presence through product images leads to sales conversion in e-commerce.

In driving e-commerce sales and consumer trust online, researchers have also found that social presence has a positive direct relationship with purchase intention (Hassan et al., 2018). Consumers often refer to social media comments, reviews and seek out influencer opinions when making a purchasing decision (Rajput & Gandhi, 2024). Similarly, a study carried out by Zhu et al. (2020) found that social presence through customer reviews,

enhanced purchase intention, affirmed by Wang et al. (2022) who however further assert that user forums and communities however have a stronger effect.

Husnain & Toor (2017) discovered that social media presence significantly influences purchase intention in consumers, with a partial mediation by engagement, supporting previous research that suggested that user generated content and community engagement can build trust and influence purchasing decisions.

In contrast to this study, in the context of online streaming Hou et al. (2023) concluded that social presence increases consumer trust and intention to purchase, especially when moderated by self-construal and brand familiarity, highlighting the need for brands to increase their brand visibility online. Similarly, Lin (2021) in their study found that social presence strengthened the relationship between trust and user intention to donate to online streamers. They however cautioned that social presence can also have negative impacts in consumers if brands are perceived as inauthentic.

Additionally, Hassan et al. (2018) also found that social presence positively impacts consumers intention to purchase facilitated by customer experience.

The study may not have found a significant moderating effect of social presence on the constructs of brand trust and purchase intention, but the importance of social presence in enhancing trust, and purchase intention is evident through existing literature. Although Social presence may not intensify the relationship between the constructs, it is evidently crucial in trust formation.

#### **6.4. Conclusion**

The study examined the role of social presence in moderating the relationship between brand trust and purchase intention in South African SMEs. It also explored how the constructs impact each other and if social media and website presence can influence the relationship between brand trust and purchase intention.

The study found that online presence through a website and social media positively impacts brand trust and purchase intentions in SMEs. Social media showed a stronger influence, implying that it is an essential channel for SMEs looking to improve performance. The findings

on social presence moderation were insignificant, meaning that while a social presence can assist an SME appear trustworthy with customers, it does not amplify the brand trust and purchase decision relationship.

It is evident that SMEs need to pay attention to their digital strategy, ensuring that they nurture their online presence to build brand recognition and build trust. SMEs should also consider an integrated channel approach, considering tailored engagement strategies for each.

The next chapter concludes the study, covering practical insights for SME owners and their marketing teams, also outlining the study's contributions to theory. It provides detail on what limitations may have impacted the quality of this study and offers recommendations for future research.

## **Chapter 7: Conclusions and Recommendations**

### **7.1. Introduction**

A digital presence is a key SME consideration, studies have shown that it plays a beneficial role in influencing consumer behaviour towards business goals. Social media has proven to be an especially important platform for SMEs to leverage, as it offers a cost-effective way to access and interact with customers, allowing them to nurture their relationships.

However, what remains unclear is the extent to which SME website presence influences brand trust in South African consumers, whether social media presence plays a more significant role than a website in building consumer trust and lastly, whether social presence moderates the relationship between brand trust and purchase intention. This study aimed to fill these gaps by empirically analysing consumer perceptions and behaviours regarding SMEs' online presence.

Through quantitative analysis, these questions were systematically addressed. This study was conducted using a quantitative research approach, focusing on consumers who had interacted with SMEs in South Africa. A structured survey was used to collect data from 216 respondents, measuring their perceptions. The data was analysed using SPSS, using descriptive statistics, and regression analysis to test the relationships between variables. The study offers empirical evidence on the factors influencing SME trust-building online.

This chapter summarises the conclusions of the study, theoretical contributions, research limitations, and future research directions are discussed. This chapter aims to offer actionable insights for SME stakeholders and contribute to literature on consumer trust, online presence, and digital engagement in the South African SME sector.

### **7.2. Summary of Findings**

The study explored SME online presence, using social presence theory to examine the relationship with brand trust and consumer purchase intention, it aimed to understand the relationship between the variables in order to first determine whether an SME's website or

social media increase brand trust in customers, secondly, whether brand trust influences consumer purchase intention and lastly whether social presence plays a moderating role in the relationship between brand trust and purchase intention, such that when consumers perceive a high level of social presence in SMEs it increases the brand trust impact on purchase intention.

The results from chapter 5 show that both website presence and social media presence influence brand trust, this aligns with finding from (Nadeem et al., 2020; Lu et al., 2016). Social Media was found to have a stronger influence than website presence, suggesting that the engagement features of social media enhance trust in consumers (Jin et al., 2019; George et al., Sohail et al., 2023).

Brand trust and purchase intention showed a significant positive relationship, affirming that consumers are most likely to purchase from SME they trust, supporting past research that highlighted trust as a fundamental driver of purchase behaviour (Liu et al., 2019; Dam, 2020; Haudi et al., 2022).

The study however, found that moderating effect of social presence on brand trust and purchase intention was not statistically significant, meaning that although online presence builds trust in SMEs, it however does not strengthen the relationship between trust and purchase intention, consistent with findings from (Liu et al., 2019; Dabbous et al., 2020; Gao & Li, 2019). However, this contradicted previous findings by Wang et al. (2022) and Hassan et al. (2018) that social interactions enhance consumer confidence in purchase decisions due to elevated levels of trust.

The results provide guidance to SMEs, demonstrating the importance of building a presence online and its benefits in influencing consumer behaviour towards brand affinity and driving sales.

### **7.3. Theoretical Contributions**

Prior research has shown the benefits that large enterprises can derive from digital transformation but not enough is known about how SMEs in South Africa can leverage digital

platforms to build trust. The specific role of website presence versus social media presence in influencing trust levels remains underexplored in an SME context. Additionally, while social presence is believed to strengthen the relationship between consumers and brands its impact on the relationship between trust and purchase intention in SMEs has not been adequately tested. This study addressed these gaps by providing empirical evidence on how South African consumers perceive SME digital presence and how it influences their trust and purchasing behaviour.

The study contributes to the growing literature on Marketing, digital marketing and SME digital transformation through evaluating the constructs of social presence, brand trust and consumer intention. Adding the context of developing economies like South Africa, where there is limited literature on online presence and the potential it holds for under resourced SMEs.

This study adds to previous literature through evaluating the impact of website presence versus social media presence. Both platforms were found to enhance brand trust (Sembiring et al., 2024), with social media having a stronger effect, suggesting that a social media presence is an integral consideration for SMEs as a website may not be enough. Nadeem et al. (2020) and Anantharaman et al. (2023) suggest that social medias ability to build higher levels of trust can be attributed to its high engagement features.

Additionally, this study extends social presence theory through the evaluation of a basic brand presence in a developing country context, versus previous studies that applied the theory in the lens of e-commerce capability, website engagement and level of engagement (Pongpaew et al., 2017). Further to this, this study was able to validate that a basic brand presence can validate an SMEs realness with consumers, as posited by Cioppi et al. (2019) and (Song et al., 2019). Brand presence online can perceptions of authenticity, building trust, even a basic website can create a sense of social presence (Oh et al., 2018).

Consistent with extensive existing literature on consumer behaviour, the study confirms that brand trust predicts purchase intention, affirming findings from Gefen & Straub (2004) and Hajli et al. (2017), this study extends these findings to the South African SME context. SME online presence influences consumer trust leading to purchase intention, similar to the

findings of Dabbous et al. (2020) and Liu et al. (2019) who found the same within social commerce.

Extending social presence theory, the study explored the role website and social media presence play in moderating the relationship between brand trust and purchase intention in SMEs, this hypothesis was rejected leading to the conclusion that although social presence a significant role in building trust with consumers, it does not necessarily enhance the impact of trust on purchasing behaviour (Liu et al., 2019; Leong et al., 2020). In contrast to Wang et al. (2020) and Hou et al. (2023) but aligned with findings by Hassan et al. (2018) and Rajput & Gandhi (2024) this study posits that while both website and social media presence have a direct positive influence on purchase intention, they do not have a moderation impact on the dynamics of brand trust and purchase intention in SMEs.

Although social presence has been widely studied, this study contributes by examining the SME angle and providing insights from a South African perspective, which has limited research on this subject.

#### **7.4. Managerial Implications**

Many South African SMEs still struggle to establish and maintain an online presence. Research shows that over 50% of the SMEs in the country do not have a website and lack the expertise to manage digital platforms, limiting their ability to attract and retain customers (IPSOS, 2021). Given the rising importance of digital platforms in consumer decision-making, understanding how online presence influences brand trust and purchase behaviour is essential for SME sustainability and growth.

Online presence is critical for SME's looking to effectively compete. This study highlights the need for SMEs in South Africa to ensure that they have an online presence. They need to ensure that this presence includes a website and social media to strengthen customers confidence and trust in their brand. South African consumers respond positively to SME's who have an online presence and do not trust SME's who do not, making an online presence an imperative for SMEs. Having an online presence will not only build trust with new customers but also assist in retaining existing customers.

The practical insights that this study offers to SME owners and their marketing teams: Establishing and maintaining an online presence is crucial to building trust and gaining awareness with consumers, however a website alone is not enough, SMEs need to consider an integrated online presence that includes both a website and social media brand page (Dabbous et al., 2020).

Social Media is an integral platform and presents a great opportunity when first establishing an online presence. Social media drives elevated levels of brand trust and for resource constrained SMEs, it is a cost-effective and affordable channel that they can leverage (Sembiring et al., 2024; Haudi et al., 2022). Additionally, it is important for SMEs to establish a presence across various social media platforms, with Facebook and Instagram being a priority, especially for SMEs targeting market the 25+ age group.

Pay attention to the website quality, while online presence can help to build trust, a low quality and poorly maintained presence can have the opposite effect, which is why SMEs must note and attend to the quality of the presence, content is key SMEs should keep their platforms updated, focusing on design, content, and quality of information (Suryani et al., 2022; Pongpaew et al., 2017; Gao & Li, 2019).

To enhance trust, SMEs should integrate capabilities that enhance social presence into their websites, which include customer reviews, and product ratings (Nadeem et al., 2020; Song et al., 2019).

Prioritise driving consumer engagement through interacting with consumers and creating interactive content over static brand content. Social Media management requires active engagement which include interacting with users, encouraging likes, and promptly responding to queries (George et al., 2023; Nadeem et al., 2020; Sembiring et al., 2024).

SMEs should consider other trust building strategies, like trust transference through utilising social media influencers to market their products (Wang & Chan-Olmsted, 2024; Kim & Kim 2021; Kurdi et al., 2022).

Lastly, SME development programs in South Africa should focus on driving SME digital adoption and digital literacy. Connectivity and telecommunications companies should offer affordable data and connectivity options to SMEs with preferred pricing and bundled packages that include, hardware connectivity and digital access.

## **7.5. Limitations**

This section provides considerations on factor that may have impacted the study. Firstly, the Cronbach's alpha for brand trust (0.582) fell below the suggested 0.7 threshold, limiting its reliability, this may be due to a negatively worded question in the survey. The study focused on South African SMEs, limiting generalisability to other countries.

Since the survey was accessible on social platforms and anyone could access it, the researcher cannot confirm if all respondents were only from South Africa, impacting generalisability to South African consumer behaviour. The screening question however ensured that respondents had interacted with a South African SME since they were the primary objective of the study.

The sample skewed towards middle-aged consumers (30-49 years old) and women (61,6%) meaning findings may not reflect the broader South African consumer base. The response rate was also low at 9,3% which may have impacted moderation measurement.

The study used self-reported data, which may include recall errors and recall bias impacting the accuracy of the findings (Weisberg et al., 2011; Podsakoff et al., 2003). Other factors which may also influence perceptions of social presence, such as engagement, website capability, and website quality, were not considered (Lombard & Ditton, 2006; Song et al., 2019).

The study however still provides practical insights for SMEs and organisations looking to enhance their current online presence or embark on their digital journey.

## **7.6. Recommendations for Future Research**

While the study provided insights on the relationship between online presence, brand trust and purchase intention in SMEs, building on this study in the future, scholars can explore extending it to other developing market contexts to understand dynamics across markets. In South Africa researchers can further review the impact of demographic factors such as regional location, income levels and employment status to determine the impact that they have on the constructs. Studies can also explore other trust impacting elements such as customer reviews, likes, and comments. Finally, the role of third-party trust transference in SMEs can be examined, particularly focusing on the use of social media influencers to enhance SME brand trust.

## References

- Alkaabi, K. A. (2021). Customers' purchasing behavior toward home-based SME products: evidence from UAE community. *Journal of Enterprising Communities People and Places in the Global Economy*, ahead-of-print(ahead-of-print).  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/jec-11-2020-0187>
- Allua, S., & Thompson, C. B. (2009). Inferential statistics. *Air Medical Journal*, 28(4), 168–171. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amj.2009.04.013>
- AlSharji, A., Ahmad, S. Z., & Abu Bakar, A. R. (2018). Understanding social media adoption in SMEs: Empirical evidence from the United Arab Emirates. *Journal of Entrepreneurship in Emerging Economies*, 10(2), 302–328.  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/jeee-08-2017-0058>
- Anantharaman, R., Prashar, S., & Vijay, T. S. (2023). Uncovering the role of consumer trust and bandwagon effect influencing purchase intention: an empirical investigation in social commerce platforms. *Journal of Strategic Marketing*, 31(6), 1199–1219.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0965254x.2022.2070526>
- Anderson, J. C., & Gerbing, D. W. (1988). Structural equation modeling in practice: A review and recommended two-step approach. *Psychological Bulletin*, 103(3), 411–423.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.103.3.411>
- Aramburu, N., North, K., Zubillaga, A., & Salmador, M. P. (2020). A digital capabilities dataset from small- and medium-sized enterprises in the basque country (Spain). *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, 587949. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.587949>

- Attar, R. W., Amidi, A., & Hajli, N. (2023). The role of social presence and trust on customer loyalty. *British Food Journal (Croydon, England)*, 125(1), 96–111.  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/bfj-11-2021-1218>
- Bao, Z., & Wang, D. (2021). Examining consumer participation on brand microblogs in China: perspectives from elaboration likelihood model, commitment–trust theory and social presence. *Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing*, 15(1), 10–29.  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/jrim-02-2019-0027>
- Basha, M. B., & Lal, D. (2019). Indian consumers' attitudes towards purchasing organically produced foods: An empirical study. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 215, 99–111.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2018.12.098>
- BCG. (2018, June 12). *Digital maturity drives superior performance*. BCG.  
<https://www.globenewswire.com/news-release/2018/06/12/1519993/0/en/Digital-Maturity-Drives-Superior-Performance.html>
- Berinsky, A. J., Huber, G. A., & Lenz, G. S. (2012). Evaluating online labor markets for experimental research: Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk. *Political Analysis: An Annual Publication of the Methodology Section of the American Political Science Association*, 20(3), 351–368. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pan/mpr057>
- Botha, E., & Reyneke, M. (2016). The influence of social presence on online purchase intention: An experiment with different product types. In *Looking Forward, Looking Back: Drawing on the Past to Shape the Future of Marketing* (pp. 180–183). Springer International Publishing.
- Bruce, E., Shurong, Z., Ying, D., Yaqi, M., Amoah, J., & Egala, S. B. (Eds.). (2023). The Effect of Digital Marketing Adoption on SMEs Sustainable Growth: Empirical Evidence from Ghana. *Sustainability, MDPI*, 15(6), 1–24.

- BusinessTech. (2021, May 3). *South Africa has one of the highest business failure rates in the world: analysts*. BusinessTech.Co.Za.  
<https://businesstech.co.za/news/business/487503/south-africa-has-one-of-the-highest-business-failure-rates-in-the-world-analysts/>
- BusinessTech. (2022, March 16). *4 Reasons why SA businesses need e-commerce websites in 2022*. BusinessTech.Co.Za. <https://businesstech.co.za/news/industry-news/568404/4-reasons-why-sa-businesses-need-e-commerce-websites-in-2022/>
- Chahal, H., & Rani, A. (2017). How trust moderates social media engagement and brand equity. *Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing*, 11(3), 312–335.  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/jrim-10-2016-0104>
- Chaudhuri, A., & Holbrook, M. B. (2001). The chain of effects from brand trust and brand affect to brand performance: The role of brand loyalty. *Journal of Marketing*, 65(2), 81–93. <https://doi.org/10.1509/jmkg.65.2.81.18255>
- Checchinato, F., Finotto, V., & Mauracher, C. (2024). Exploring the online presence of food SMEs: a study on configurations and determinants in the north-east of Italy. *Cogent Business & Management*, 11(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311975.2024.2398190>
- Chen, L.-R., Chen, F.-S., & Chen, D.-F. (2023). Effect of social presence toward livestream E-commerce on consumers' purchase intention. *Sustainability*, 15(4), 3571.  
<https://doi.org/10.3390/su15043571>
- Choi, J., Lee, H. J., & Kim, Y. C. (2009). The influence of social presence on evaluating personalized recommender systems. In *Paper presented at 13th Pacific Asia Conference on Information Systems: IT Services in a Global Environment*.

- Cioppi, M., Curina, I., Forlani, F., & Pencarelli, T. (2019). Online presence, visibility and reputation: a systematic literature review in management studies. *Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing*, 13(4), 547–577. <https://doi.org/10.1108/jrim-11-2018-0139>
- Cooper, D., & Schindler, P. (2013). *Business Research Methods* (12th ed.). McGraw-Hill Professional.
- Corritore, C. L., Kracher, B., & Wiedenbeck, S. (2003). On-line trust: concepts, evolving themes, a model. *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies*, 58(6), 737–758. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s1071-5819\(03\)00041-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/s1071-5819(03)00041-7)
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Dabbous, A., Aoun Barakat, K., & Merhej Sayegh, M. (2020). Social commerce success: Antecedents of purchase intention and the mediating role of trust. *Journal of Internet Commerce*, 19(3), 262–297. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15332861.2020.1756190>
- Dam, T. C. (2020). Influence of brand trust, perceived value on brand preference and purchase intention. *Journal of Asian Finance Economics and Business*, 7(10), 939–947. <https://doi.org/10.13106/jafeb.2020.vol7.no10.939>
- Dash, S., & Saji, K. B. (2008). The role of consumer self-efficacy and website social-presence in customers' adoption of B2C online shopping: An empirical study in the Indian context. *Journal of International Consumer Marketing*, 20(2), 33–48. [https://doi.org/10.1300/j046v20n02\\_04](https://doi.org/10.1300/j046v20n02_04)
- Dastane, O. (2020). Impact of digital marketing on online purchase intention: Mediation effect of customer relationship management. *Journal of Asian Business Strategy*, 10(1), 142–158. <https://doi.org/10.18488/journal.1006.2020.101.142.158>

- de Vries, P. (2006). Social presence as a conduit to the social dimensions of online trust. In *Persuasive Technology* (pp. 55–59). Springer Berlin Heidelberg.
- Dumitriu, D., Militaru, G., Deselnicu, D. C., Niculescu, A., & Popescu, M. A.-M. (2019). A perspective over modern SMEs: Managing brand equity, growth and sustainability through digital marketing tools and techniques. *Sustainability*, *11*(7), 2111. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su11072111>
- Eberly, L. E. (2007). Multiple linear regression. *Methods in Molecular Biology (Clifton, N.J.)*, *404*, 165–187. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-59745-530-5\\_9](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-59745-530-5_9)
- Ebrahim, R. S. (2020). The role of trust in understanding the impact of social media marketing on brand equity and brand loyalty. *Journal of Relationship Marketing*, *19*(4), 287–308. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15332667.2019.1705742>
- Ellitan, L. (2022). The role of Social Media Marketing, Brand Awareness and e-Wom to increase purchase decision. *EKOMA : Jurnal Ekonomi, Management, Akuntansi*, *2*(1), 115–122. <https://doi.org/10.56799/ekoma.v2i1.882>
- Etikan, I. (2017). Sampling and sampling methods. *Biometrics & Biostatistics International Journal*, *5*(6). <https://doi.org/10.15406/bbij.2017.05.00149>
- Faisal, A., & Ekawanto, I. (2022). The role of social Media Marketing in increasing Brand Awareness, Brand Image and Purchase Intention. *Indonesian Management and Accounting Research*, *20*(2), 185–208. <https://doi.org/10.25105/imar.v20i2.12554>
- Fornell, C., & Larcker, D. F. (1981). Evaluating structural equation models with unobservable variables and measurement error”. *Journal of Marketing Research*, *18*(3), 39–50.

- Forrester. (2023, June 29). *Consumer trust: A key driver for business growth in 2023*. Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forrester/2023/06/29/consumer-trust-a-key-driver-for-business-growth-in-2023/>
- Galati, A., Thrassou, A., Christofi, M., Vrontis, D., & Migliore, G. (2023). Exploring travelers' willingness to pay for green hotels in the digital era. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 31(11), 2546–2563. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2021.2016777>
- Gao, W., & Li, X. (2019). Building presence in an online shopping website: the role of website quality. *Behaviour & Information Technology*, 38(1), 28–41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0144929x.2018.1509127>
- Gefen, D., & Straub, D. W. (2004). Consumer trust in B2C e-Commerce and the importance of social presence: experiments in e-Products and e-Services. *Omega*, 32(6), 407–424. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.omega.2004.01.006>
- George, A., Joseph, A., Abraham, M., & Joseph, E. T. (2023). Brand trust and engagement in social commerce. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 47(5), 1791–1809. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijcs.12947>
- Gherghina, Ștefan C., Botezatu, M. A., Hosszu, A., & Simionescu, L. N. (2020). Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs): The engine of economic growth through investments and innovation. *Sustainability*, 12(1), 347. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12010347>
- Gligorijevic, B., & Leong, B. (2021). Trust, reputation and the small firm: Building online brand reputation for SMEs. *Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media*, 5(1), 494–497. <https://doi.org/10.1609/icwsm.v5i1.14166>
- Greener, S. (2008). *Business research methods*. Bookboon.

- Guesalaga, R. (2016). The use of social media in sales: Individual and organizational antecedents, and the role of customer engagement in social media. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 54, 71–79. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2015.12.002>
- Gunawardena, C. N. (1995). Social presence theory and implications for interaction and collaborative learning in computer conferences. *International Journal of Educational Telecommunications*, 1, 147–166.
- Habibi, M. R., Laroche, M., & Richard, M.-O. (2014). The roles of brand community and community engagement in building brand trust on social media. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 37, 152–161. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2014.04.016>
- Hair, J., Jr, Sarstedt, M., Hopkins, L., & G. Kuppelwieser, V. (2014). Partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM): An emerging tool in business research. *European Business Review*, 26(2), 106–121. <https://doi.org/10.1108/eb-10-2013-0128>
- Hajli, N., Sims, J., Zadeh, A. H., & Richard, M.-O. (2017). A social commerce investigation of the role of trust in a social networking site on purchase intentions. *Journal of Business Research*, 71, 133–141. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2016.10.004>
- Hassan, M., Iqbal, Z., & Khanum, B. (2018). The Role of Trust and Social Presence in Social Commerce Purchase Intention. *Pakistan Journal of Commerce and Social Sciences*, 12(1), 111–135.
- Haudi, H., Handayani, W., Suyoto, M. Y. T., Prasety, T., Pitaloka, E., Wijoyo, H., Yonata, H., Koho, I. R., & Cahyono, Y. (2022). The effect of social media marketing on brand trust, brand equity and brand loyalty. *International Journal of Data and Network Science*, 6(3), 961–972. <https://doi.org/10.5267/j.ijdns.2022.1.015>

- Hayes, J. L., Britt, B. C., Applequist, J., Ramirez, A., Jr, & Hill, J. (2020). Leveraging textual paralinguage and consumer–brand relationships for more relatable online brand communication: A social presence approach. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 20(1), 17–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15252019.2019.1691093>
- Hinkin, T. R. (1995). A review of scale development practices in the study of organizations. *Journal of Management*, 21(5), 967–988. <https://doi.org/10.1177/014920639502100509>
- Hossain, M. A., Yesmin, N., Jahan, N., & Reza, S. M. A. (2023). Effect of social presence on behavioral intention to social commerce through online social capital. *International journal of e-collaboration*, 19(1), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.4018/ijec.315779>
- Hossain, M. S., & Rahman, M. F. (2021). Website quality, perceived flow, trust, and commitment: Developing a customer relationship management model. In *Impact of Globalization and Advanced Technologies on Online Business Models* (pp. 202–226). IGI Global.
- Hou, J., Han, B., Chen, L., & Zhang, K. (2023). Feeling present matters: effects of social presence on live-streaming workout courses' purchase intention. *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 32(7), 1082–1092. <https://doi.org/10.1108/jpbm-03-2022-3926>
- Hu, H., Zhang, D., & Wang, C. (2019). Impact of social media influencers' endorsement on application adoption: A trust transfer perspective. *Social Behavior and Personality*, 47(11), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.2224/sbp.8518>
- Husnain, M., & Toor, A. (2017). The impact of social network marketing on consumer purchase intention in Pakistan: Consumer engagement as a mediator. *Asian Journal of Business and Accounting*, 10(1), 167–199.

- Isha, M., Malviya, C., & Vidani, J. (2024). Evaluating the Influence of Social Media Advertising on E-Commerce Sales. *J Adv Res HR Organ Mgmt*, 11(1 & 2), 52–58.
- Imtiaz, R., Kazmi, S. Q. ul A., Amjad, M., & Aziz, A. (2019). The impact of social network marketing on consumer purchase intention in Pakistan: A study on female apparel. *Management Science Letters*, 1093–1104. <https://doi.org/10.5267/j.msl.2019.3.015>
- IPSOS. (2021). *Mastercard MEA SME Confidence Index 2021*.  
<https://www.mastercard.com/news/media/x4ofhhtq/mastercard-mea-sme-confidence-index-2021-web1.pdf>
- Jadhav, G. G., Gaikwad, S. V., & Bapat, D. (2023). A systematic literature review: digital marketing and its impact on SMEs. *Journal of Indian Business Research*, 15(1), 76–91. <https://doi.org/10.1108/jibr-05-2022-0129>
- Jeza, S., & Mpele Lekhanya, L. (2022). The influence of digital transformation on the growth of small and medium enterprises in South Africa. *Problems and Perspectives in Management*, 20(3), 297–309. [https://doi.org/10.21511/ppm.20\(3\).2022.24](https://doi.org/10.21511/ppm.20(3).2022.24)
- Jin, S. V., Muqaddam, A., & Ryu, E. (2019). Instafamous and social media influencer marketing. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, 37(5), 567–579.  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/mip-09-2018-0375>
- Kabadayi, E. T., & Koçak Alan, A. (2012). Brand trust and brand affect: Their strategic importance on brand loyalty. *Journal of Global Strategic Management*, 1(6), 80–80.  
<https://doi.org/10.20460/jgsm.2012615788>
- Kano, K., Choi, L. K., Riza, B. S., & Dinda Octavyra, R. (2022). Implications of digital marketing strategy the competitive advantages of small businesses in Indonesia. *Startupreneur Business Digital (SABDA Journal)*, 1(1), 44–62.  
<https://doi.org/10.34306/sabda.v1i1.72>

- Khawaja, M. G., Jusoh, A., & Nor, K. M. (2019). Does online social presence lead to purchase intentions. *International Journal of Economic Policy in Emerging Economies*, 12(2), 198. <https://doi.org/10.1504/ijepee.2019.099730>
- Kian, P., Tan Boon, G. H., Wee, L., & Fong Stany Ai, Y. J. (2017). Factors that influence the consumer purchase intention in social media websites. *International Journal of Supply Chain Management*, 6, 208–214.
- Kim, A. J., & Ko, E. (2012). Do social media marketing activities enhance customer equity? An empirical study of luxury fashion brand. *Journal of Business Research*, 65(10), 1480–1486. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2011.10.014>
- Kim, D. Y., & Kim, H.-Y. (2021). Trust me, trust me not: A nuanced view of influencer marketing on social media. *Journal of Business Research*, 134, 223–232. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2021.05.024>
- Kim, J., & Lennon, S. J. (2013). Effects of reputation and website quality on online consumers' emotion, perceived risk and purchase intention: Based on the stimulus-organism-response model. *Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing*, 7(1), 33–56. <https://doi.org/10.1108/17505931311316734>
- Kline, R. B. (2018). Response to Leslie hayduk's review of principles and practice of structural equation modeling, 4th edition. *Canadian Studies in Population*, 45(3–4), 188. <https://doi.org/10.25336/csp29418>
- Kotronoulas, G., Miguel, S., Dowling, M., Fernández-Ortega, P., Colomer-Lahiguera, S., Bağçivan, G., Pape, E., Drury, A., Semple, C., Dieperink, K. B., & Papadopoulou, C. (2023). An overview of the fundamentals of data management, analysis, and interpretation in quantitative research. *Seminars in Oncology Nursing*, 39(2), 151398. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.soncn.2023.151398>

- Kreijns, K., Kirschner, P. A., Jochems, W., & van Buuren, H. (2011). Measuring perceived social presence in distributed learning groups. *Education and Information Technologies*, 16(4), 365–381. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-010-9135-7>
- Kumar, A., & Sharma, N. K. (2022). Impact of social media on consumer purchase intention: A developing country perspective. In *Research Anthology on Social Media Advertising and Building Consumer Relationships* (pp. 1501–1518). IGI Global.
- Kurdi, B. A., Alshurideh, M., Akour, I., Tariq, E., AlHamad, A., & Alzoubi, H. M. (2022). The effect of social media influencers' characteristics on consumer intention and attitude toward Keto products purchase intention. *International Journal of Data and Network Science*, 6(4), 1135–1146. <https://doi.org/10.5267/j.ijdns.2022.7.006>
- Lányi, B., Hornyák, M., & Kruzslicz, F. (2021). The effect of online activity on SMEs' competitiveness. *Competitiveness Review Journal*, 31(3), 477–496. <https://doi.org/10.1108/cr-01-2020-0022>
- Leong, L.-Y., Hew, T.-S., Ooi, K.-B., & Chong, A. Y.-L. (2020). Predicting the antecedents of trust in social commerce – A hybrid structural equation modeling with neural network approach. *Journal of Business Research*, 110, 24–40. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.11.056>
- Lin, L. C.-S. (2021). Virtual gift donation on live streaming apps: the moderating effect of social presence. *Communication Research and Practice*, 7(2), 173–188. <https://doi.org/10.1080/22041451.2021.1889190>
- Liu, C., Bao, Z., & Zheng, C. (2019). Exploring consumers' purchase intention in social commerce: An empirical study based on trust, argument quality, and social presence. *Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics*, 31(2), 378–397. <https://doi.org/10.1108/apjml-05-2018-0170>

- Lombard, M., & Ditton, T. (2006). At the heart of it all: The concept of presence. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication: JCMC*, 3(2), 0–0. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.1997.tb00072.x>
- Lu, B., Fan, W., & Zhou, M. (2016). Social presence, trust, and social commerce purchase intention: an empirical research". *Computers in Human Behavior*, 56, 225–237.
- Lucas, G. A., Lunardi, G. L., & Dolci, D. B. (2023). From e-commerce to m-commerce: An analysis of the user's experience with different access platforms. *Electronic Commerce Research and Applications*, 58.
- Makhitha, K. M., & Ngobeni, K. (2021). The influence of demographic factors on perceived risks affecting attitude towards online shopping. *South African Journal of Information Management*, 23(1). <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajim.v23i1.1283>
- Manfredi, E., & Capik, P. (2022). A case of trust-building in the supply chain: Emerging economies perspective. *Strategic Change*, 31(1), 147–160.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/jsc.2488>
- Manzoor, U., Baig, S. A., Hashim, M., & Sami, A. (2020). Impact of social media marketing on consumer's purchase intentions: The mediating role of customer trust. *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Research*, 3(2), 41–48.  
<https://doi.org/10.31580/ijer.v3i2.1386>
- Masakale, A. M., & Poe, D. (2022). The relationship between personal entrepreneurial competencies, dynamic capabilities and SME performance. *Journal of Contemporary Management*, 19(2), 729–755. <https://doi.org/10.35683/jcm22017.187>
- McInnes, K. (2023, July 3). South African digital & social media statistics 2024. *Meltwater*.  
<https://www.meltwater.com/en/blog/social-media-statistics-south-africa>

- Mehmood, S., & Hamid, M. (2024). Online brand attachment, experience, and sales promotion leads to purchase intention: Moderating role of online brand trust. *Journal of Management Practices, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 8(1).  
<https://doi.org/10.33152/jmphss-8.1.5>
- Ming, J., Jianqiu, Z., Bilal, M., Akram, U., & Fan, M. (2021). How social presence influences impulse buying behavior in live streaming commerce? The role of S-O-R theory. *International Journal of Web Information Systems*, 17(4), 300–320.  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/ijwis-02-2021-0012>
- Mukti, F. O. D., & Isa, M. (2024). The effect of digital marketing, word of mouth, brand trust and image on the purchase decision. *Jurnal Ilmiah Manajemen Kesatuan*, 12(4), 1317–1324. <https://doi.org/10.37641/jimkes.v12i4.2739>
- Nadeem, W., Khani, A. H., Schultz, C. D., Adam, N. A., Attar, R. W., & Hajli, N. (2020). How social presence drives commitment and loyalty with online brand communities? the role of social commerce trust. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 55(102136), 102136. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2020.102136>
- National Planning Commission. (2011). *National Development Plan 2030*.
- Nosi, C., Pucci, T., Melanthiou, Y., & Zanni, L. (2022). The influence of online and offline brand trust on consumer buying intention. *EuroMed Journal of Business*, 17(4), 550–567. <https://doi.org/10.1108/emjb-01-2021-0002>
- OECD. (2022). *Share of businesses with a web presence*. OECD Going Digital Toolkit.  
<https://goingdigital.oecd.org/en/indicator/26>
- Oh, C. S., Bailenson, J. N., & Welch, G. F. (2018). A systematic review of social presence: Definition, antecedents, and implications. *Frontiers in Robotics and AI*, 5, 114.  
<https://doi.org/10.3389/frobt.2018.00114>

- Omar, A. R. C., Ishak, S., & Jusoh, M. A. (2020). The impact of Covid-19 movement control order on SMEs' businesses and survival strategies. *Geografia-Malaysian Journal of Society and Space*, 16(2), 90–103.
- Ong, C. H., & Salleh, S. M. (2015). Brand experience, trust components, and customer loyalty: Sustainable Malaysian SME brands study. *Asian Social Science*, 11(26), 252–266. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ass.v11n26p252>
- Osei-Frimpong, K., & McLean, G. (2018). Examining online social brand engagement: A social presence theory perspective. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 128, 10–21. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2017.10.010>
- Pavlou, P. A., & Gefen, D. (2004). Building effective online marketplaces with institution-based trust. *Information Systems Research : ISR*, 15(1), 37–59. <https://doi.org/10.1287/isre.1040.0015>
- Pérez-Orozco, A., Leiva, J. C., & Mora-Esquivel, R. (2024). The mediating role of marketing management in the relationship between online presence and product innovation among SMEs. *Journal of Economics, Finance, and Administrative Science*. <https://doi.org/10.1108/jefas-04-2022-0087>
- Peter, M. K., & Dalla Vecchia, M. (2021). The digital marketing toolkit: A literature review for the identification of digital marketing channels and platforms. In *New Trends in Business Information Systems and Technology* (pp. 251–265). Springer International Publishing.
- Pires, P. B., Santos, J. D., Brito, P. Q. de, & Marques, D. N. (2022). Connecting digital channels to consumers' purchase decision-making process in online stores. *Sustainability*, 14(21), 14392. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su142114392>

- Podsakoff, P. M., MacKenzie, S. B., Lee, J.-Y., & Podsakoff, N. P. (2003). Common method biases in behavioral research: a critical review of the literature and recommended remedies. *The Journal of Applied Psychology, 88*(5), 879–903.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.88.5.879>
- Pongpaew, W., Speece, M., & Tiangsoongnern, L. (2017). Social presence and customer brand engagement on Facebook brand pages. *Journal of Product & Brand Management, 26*(3), 262–281. <https://doi.org/10.1108/jpbm-08-2015-0956>
- Pratama, M. O., Meiyanti, R., Noprisson, H., Ramadhan, A., & Hidayanto, A. N. (2017). Influencing factors of consumer purchase intention based on social commerce paradigm. *2017 International Conference on Advanced Computer Science and Information Systems (ICACISIS)*.
- Puspaningrum, A. (2020). Social media marketing and brand loyalty: The role of brand trust. *Journal of Asian Finance Economics and Business, 7*(12), 951–958.  
<https://doi.org/10.13106/jafeb.2020.vol7.no12.951>
- Qalati, S. A., Vela, E. G., Li, W., Dakhan, S. A., Hong Thuy, T. T., & Merani, S. H. (2021). Effects of perceived service quality, website quality, and reputation on purchase intention: The mediating and moderating roles of trust and perceived risk in online shopping. *Cogent Business & Management, 8*(1), 1869363.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/23311975.2020.1869363>
- Rahman, A., & Muktadir, M. G. (2021). SPSS: An imperative quantitative data analysis tool for social science research. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science, 05*(10), 300–302. <https://doi.org/10.47772/ijriss.2021.51012>

- Rahman, M. F., & Hossain, M. S. (2022). The impact of website quality on online compulsive buying behavior: evidence from online shopping organizations. *South Asian Journal of Marketing*. <https://doi.org/10.1108/sajm-03-2021-0038>
- Rajagopaul, A., Magwentshu, N., & Kalidas, S. (2020). *How South African SMEs can survive and thrive post COVID-19*.
- Raji, M. A., Olodo, H. B., Oke, T. T., Addy, W. A., Ofodile, O. C., & Oyewole, A. T. (2024). The digital transformation of SMEs: A comparative review between the USA and Africa. *International Journal of Management & Entrepreneurship Research*, 6(3), 737–751. <https://doi.org/10.51594/ijmer.v6i3.884>
- Rajput, A., & Gandhi, A. (2024). The branding power of social media influencers: an interactive marketing approach. *Cogent Business & Management*, 11(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311975.2024.2380807>
- Ritz, W., Wolf, M., & Mcquitty, S. (2019). Digital marketing adoption and success for small businesses: The application of the do-it-yourself and technology acceptance models. *Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing*, 13(2).
- Saunders, M. N. K., Lewis, P., & Thornhill, A. (2023). *Research methods for business students* (9th ed.). Pearson Education.
- Schmitt, N. (1996). Uses and abuses of coefficient alpha. *Psychological Assessment*, 8(4), 350–353. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1040-3590.8.4.350>
- Sembiring, B. K. F., Hasibuan, B., Sugiharto, S., & Maas, L. (2024). Brand Trust In Social Media Marketing: The Role Of Brand Engagement. *Proceedings of the 3rd Economics and Business International Conference, EBIC 2022, 22 September 2022, Medan, North Sumatera, Indonesia*.

- Sharif, K. J., Kalafatis, S. P., & Samouel, P. (2005). Cognitive and behavioural determinants of trust in small and medium-sized enterprises. *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development*, 12(3), 409–421.  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/14626000510612312>
- Shen, K., & Khalifa, M. (2008). Design for Social Presence in Online Communities: a Multi-Dimensional Approach. . . *University of Wollongong in Dubai - Papers*, 1.
- Sin Tan, K., Choy Chong, S., Lin, B., & Cyril Eze, U. (2010). Internet-based ICT adoption among SMEs: Demographic versus benefits, barriers, and adoption intention. *Journal of Enterprise Information Management*, 23(1), 27–55.  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/17410391011008897>
- Sindhu, P., & Bharti, K. (2024). Influence of chatbots on purchase intention in social commerce. *Behaviour & Information Technology*, 43(2), 331–352.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0144929x.2022.2163188>
- Sohaib, M., & Han, H. (2023). Building value co-creation with social media marketing, brand trust, and brand loyalty. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 74(103442), 103442. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2023.103442>
- Sohail, M. S., Hasan, M., & Sohail, A. F. (2020). The impact of social media marketing on brand trust and brand loyalty: An Arab perspective. *International Journal of Online Marketing*, 10(1), 15–31. <https://doi.org/10.4018/ijom.2020010102>
- Song, J., Moon, H., & Kim, M. (2019). When do customers engage in brand pages? Effects of social presence. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 31(9), 3627–3645. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ijchm-10-2018-0816>
- Statista. (2025, January). *South Africa: Total population from 2013 to 2023, by gender*. Statista. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/967928/total-population-of-south-africa-by->



- Communication Management*, 26(3), 271–293. <https://doi.org/10.1108/jcom-08-2021-0094>
- Tseng, F.-C., Cheng, T. C. E., Yu, P.-L., Huang, T.-L., & Teng, C.-I. (2019). Media richness, social presence and loyalty to mobile instant messaging. *Industrial Management + Data Systems*, 119(6), 1357–1373. <https://doi.org/10.1108/imds-09-2018-0415>
- United Nations, *The 17 goals*. (n.d.). Sdgs.un.org. Retrieved 29 January 2025, from <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>
- Urban, B., & Maphathe, T. L. (2021). Social media marketing and customer engagement : a focus on small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in South Africa. *Journal of Contemporary Management*, 18(1), 48–69. <https://doi.org/10.35683/jcm20065.96>
- Vijayakumar, K., & Sadasivan, M. A. (2021). SOCIAL PRESENCE INFLUENCE ON PURCHASE BHAVIOUR - A THEORETICAL GO THROUGH. *Turkish Online Journal of Qualitative Inquiry (TOJQI)*, 12(7), 10179–10183.
- Viswanathan, R., & Telukdarie, A. (2021). A systems dynamics approach to SME digitalization. *Procedia Computer Science*, 180, 816–824. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.procs.2021.01.331>
- Wang, J., Shahzad, F., Ahmad, Z., Abdullah, M., & Hassan, N. M. (2022). Trust and consumers' purchase intention in a social commerce platform: A meta-analytic approach. *SAGE Open*, 12(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440221091262>
- Wang, K., Wu, J., Sun, Y., Chen, J., Pu, Y., & Qi, Y. (2023). Trust in human and virtual live streamers: The role of integrity and social presence. *International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction*, 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10447318.2023.2279410>

- Wang, R., & Chan-Olmsted, S. (2024). Brand communication through social media influencers: Trust building and trust transfer mechanisms. *International Journal of Business Communication*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23294884241255911>
- Weisberg, J., Te'eni, D., & Arman, L. (2011). Past purchase and intention to purchase in e-commerce: The mediation of social presence and trust. *Internet Research*, 21(1), 82–96. <https://doi.org/10.1108/10662241111104893>
- Widagdo, B., & Roz, K. (2021). Hedonic shopping motivation and impulse buying: the effect of website quality on customer satisfaction. *The Journal of Asian Finance, Economics and Business*, 8(1), 395–405.
- Wu, G., Hu, X., & Wu, Y. (2010). Effects of perceived interactivity, perceived web assurance and disposition to trust on initial online trust. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication: JCMC*, 16(1), 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2010.01528.x>
- Ye, S., Lei, S. I., Shen, H., & Xiao, H. (2020). Social presence, telepresence and customers' intention to purchase online peer-to-peer accommodation: A mediating model. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, 42, 119–129. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhtm.2019.11.008>
- Zheng, Q., Zhou, H., & Li, X. (2022). The influence mechanism of social interactions on online purchasing intention of mobile social users in a low-trust business environment. *IEEE Access: Practical Innovations, Open Solutions*, 10, 73190–73203. <https://doi.org/10.1109/access.2022.3189152>
- Zhou, T. (2019). The effect of social interaction on users' social commerce intention. *International Journal of Mobile Communications*, 17(4), 391. <https://doi.org/10.1504/ijmc.2019.100501>

Zhu, L., Li, H., Wang, F.-K., He, W., & Tian, Z. (2020). How online reviews affect purchase intention: a new model based on the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) framework. *Aslib Journal of Information Management*, 72(4), 463–488.  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/ajim-11-2019-0308>

## Annexure A: Draft Questionnaire

### SME Online Presence and its Effect on Brand Trust and Consumer Purchase Intention

**Thank you for accepting this survey. I am currently a student at the University of Pretoria's Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS), and I am completing my research in partial fulfilment of an MBA.**

**I am interested in:**

**The Moderating Effect of Social Presence on Consumer Brand Trust and Purchase Intention in SMEs.**

**The questionnaire will take approximately 5 minutes to complete. Your participation is voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time without penalty.**

**All data collected will be kept anonymous and confidential. By completing the survey, you indicate that you voluntarily participate in this research.**

**If you have any queries or concerns, please don't hesitate to contact me.**

**Researcher name: Buhle Vilakazi: 22014714@mygibs.co.za**

**Supervisor: Professor Manoj Chiba: ChibaM@gibs.co.za**

**This survey is intended for anyone over 18 years old residing within the Republic of South Africa and has used the services or products of a small/medium enterprise.**

- **Online Presence in this regard refers to a website or social media presence.**
- **SME refers to Small, Medium Enterprises that have less than 250 employees as per Government classification.**
- **Unknown brand/Brands refers to an SME.**

\* 1. I have previously bought/paid for an item/service from an SME (small or medium sized business) in South Africa

Yes

No

**Researcher name: Buhle Vilakazi: 22014714@mygibs.co.za**

**Supervisor: Professor Manoj Chiba: ChibaM@gibs.co.za**

**This survey is intended for anyone over 18 years old residing within the Republic of South Africa and has used the services or products of a small/medium enterprise.**

- **Online Presence in this regard refers to a website or social media presence.**
- **SME refers to Small, Medium Enterprises that have less than 250 employees as per Government classification.**
- **Unknown brand/Brands refers to an SME.**

\* 1. I have previously bought/paid for an item/service from an SME (small or medium sized business) in South Africa

- Yes  
 No

\* 2. I have paid for/bought an item/service from a South African brand that isn't well known.

- Yes  
 No

3. Gender

- Male  
 Female  
 LGBTQIA+  
 Other  
 Prefer not to say

4. Age

- Below 18  
 18 - 29  
 30 - 39  
 40 - 49  
 50 - 59  
 60+

SME Online Presence and its Effect on Brand Trust and Consumer Purchase Intention

SME Website Presence

5. I find it helpful when an unknown brand/SME has a website.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

6. When deciding to buy from an SME or relatively unknown brand, I look at their website.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

7. I expect SME's to have a website.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

8. The SME's website, validates that the brand/company is real.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

9. The SME's website makes me feel connected to the brand.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

SME Online Presence and its Effect on Brand Trust and Consumer Purchase Intention

SME Social media presence

**Social media presence is (Facebook, Tiktok, Instagram etc)**

10. When deciding to buy from an SME or relatively unknown brand I look at their social media page.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

11. I find it helpful when a brand/SME I do not know well, has a social media page.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

12. I expect SMEs to have social media presence.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree

13. The SME/brands social media presence, validates the brand/company being real.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

14. The SME's social media page, makes me feel connected to the brand.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

15. I prefer SME's to have presence on these social platform/s

- Facebook
- TikTok
- Instagram
- WhatsApp
- LinkedIn

SME Online Presence and its Effect on Brand Trust and Consumer Purchase Intention

Trust

16. I generally trust buying from SMEs/relatively unknown brands.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

17. I find it easier to trust SMEs that have an online presence.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

18. I feel safer buying from an SME that has an online presence.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

19. I do not trust SME's/relatively unknown brands that do not have an online presence (Website/Social media.)

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Purchase Intention

**Online presence refers to: Website or social media presence.**

20. I would certainly purchase from an SME with an online presence.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

21. I am more likely to buy from an SME if they have an online presence.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

22. I would intend to purchase from an SME in future because of their online presence.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

---

23. I am unlikely to consider an SME that does not have an online presence.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

---

24. I prefer to purchase from SMEs who have an online presence.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

# Appendix B: Ethical Clearance

**Ethical Clearance Approved** External Inbox x

**Masters Research** <MastersResearch@gibs.co.za> Tue, 3 Dec 2024, 08:06 ☆ ↶

GIBS to me, Masters ▾

**Gordon Institute of Business Science**  
University of Pretoria

**Ethical Clearance Approved**

Dear Cabangubuhle Vilakazi,

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

## Appendix C: Multiple Linear & Moderated Regression SPSS Outputs

### Model Summary<sup>b</sup>

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics	
					R Square Change	F Change
1	.656 <sup>a</sup>	.430	.421	.551	.430	48.745

### Model Summary<sup>b</sup>

Model	Change Statistics		Sig. F Change	Durbin-Watson
	df1	df2		
1	3	194	< .001	2.041

a. Predictors: (Constant), WEBSITEPRESENCETRUST, I find it easier to trust SMEs that have an online presence., I find it helpful when an unk2wn brand/SME has a website.

b. Dependent Variable: I am more likely to buy from an SME if they have an online presence.

### ANOVA<sup>a</sup>

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	44.378	3	14.793	48.745	< .001 <sup>b</sup>
	Residual	58.874	194	.303		
	Total	103.253	197			

a. Dependent Variable: I am more likely to buy from an SME if they have an online presence.

b. Predictors: (Constant), WEBSITEPRESENCETRUST, I find it easier to trust SMEs that have an online presence., I find it helpful when an unk2wn brand/SME has a website.

### Model Summary<sup>b</sup>

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics	
					R Square Change	F Change
1	.658 <sup>a</sup>	.433	.425	.549	.433	49.447

### Model Summary<sup>b</sup>

Model	Change Statistics			Durbin-Watson
	df1	df2	Sig. F Change	
1	3	194	<.001	2.081

a. Predictors: (Constant), SOCIALMEDIAPRESENCETRUST, I find it easier to trust SMEs that have an online presence. brand/SME I do 2t k2w well, has a social media page.

### ANOVA<sup>a</sup>

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	44.741	3	14.914	49.447	<.001 <sup>b</sup>
	Residual	58.512	194	.302		
	Total	103.253	197			

a. Dependent Variable: I am more likely to buy from an SME if they have an online presence.

b. Predictors: (Constant), SOCIALMEDIAPRESENCETRUST, I find it easier to trust SMEs that have an online presence., I find it helpful when a brand/SME I do 2t k2w well, has a social media page.

### Coefficients<sup>a</sup>

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t
		B	Std. Error	Beta	
1	(Constant)	1.421	.298		4.776
	I find it easier to trust SMEs that have an online presence.	.499	.057	.531	8.690
	I find it helpful when a brand/SME I do 2t k2w well, has a social media page.	.182	.061	.187	2.976
	SOCIALMEDIAPRESENCETRUST	-.034	.036	-.055	-.944

**Coefficients<sup>a</sup>**

Model		Sig.	Correlations			Collinearity Statistics Tolerance
			Zero-order	Partial	Part	
1	(Constant)	<.001				
	I find it easier to trust SMEs that have an online presence.	<.001	.631	.529	.470	.782
	I find it helpful when a brand/SME I do 2t k2w well, has a social media page.	.003	.445	.209	.161	.739
	SOCIALMEDIAPRESENCETRUST	.347	-.272	-.068	-.051	.852

**Collinearity Diagnostics<sup>a</sup>**

Model	Dimension	Eigenvalue	Condition Index	(Constant)	Variance Proportions	
					I find it easier to trust SMEs that have an online presence.	I find it helpful when a brand/SME I do 2t k2w well, has a social media page.
1	1	3.119	1.000	.00	.00	.00
	2	.853	1.912	.00	.00	.00
	3	.017	13.717	.07	.95	.34
	4	.011	16.682	.92	.05	.66

**Collinearity Diagnostics<sup>a</sup>**

Variance ...

**Model Summary<sup>b</sup>**

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.529 <sup>a</sup>	.279	.272	.654

a. Predictors: (Constant), I find it helpful when an unk2wn brand/SME has a website., I find it helpful when a brand/SME I do 2t k2w well, has a social media page.

b. Dependent Variable: I find it easier to trust SMEs that have an online presence.

**ANOVA<sup>a</sup>**

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	32.669	2	16.334	38.178	<.001 <sup>b</sup>
	Residual	84.286	197	.428		
	Total	116.955	199			

a. Dependent Variable: I find it easier to trust SMEs that have an online presence.

b. Predictors: (Constant), I find it helpful when an unk2wn brand/SME has a website., I find it helpful when a brand/SME I do 2t k2w well, has a social media page.

**Coefficients<sup>a</sup>**

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t
		B	Std. Error	Beta	
1	(Constant)	.769	.419		1.837
	I find it helpful when a brand/SME I do 2t k2w well, has a social media page.	.392	.064	.380	6.090
	I find it helpful when an unk2wn brand/SME has a website.	.373	.081	.286	4.584

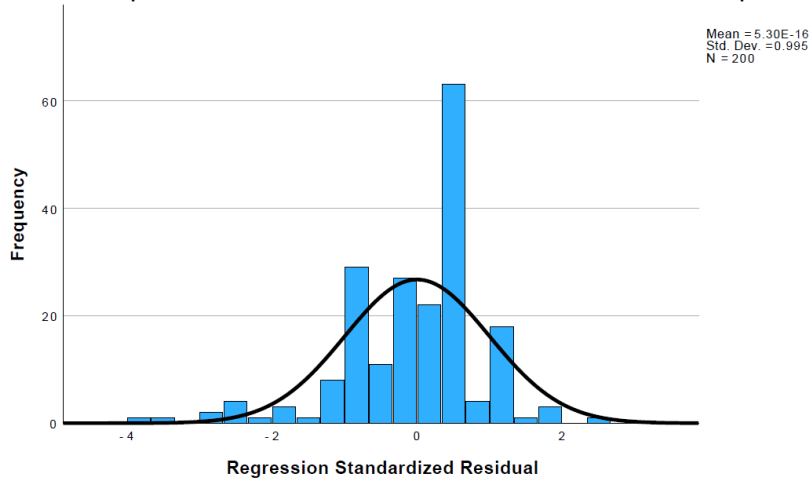
**Coefficients<sup>a</sup>**

Model		Sig.
1	(Constant)	.068
	I find it helpful when a brand/SME I do 2t k2w well, has a social media page.	<.001
	I find it helpful when an unk2wn brand/SME has a website.	<.001

a. Dependent Variable: I find it easier to trust SMEs that have an online presence.

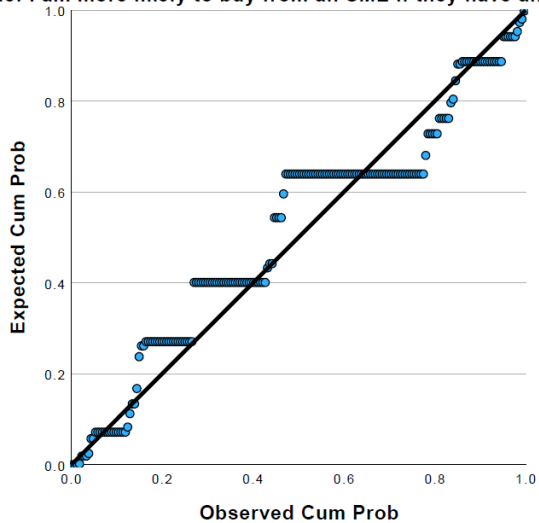
**Histogram**

Dependent Variable: I find it easier to trust SMEs that have an online presence.



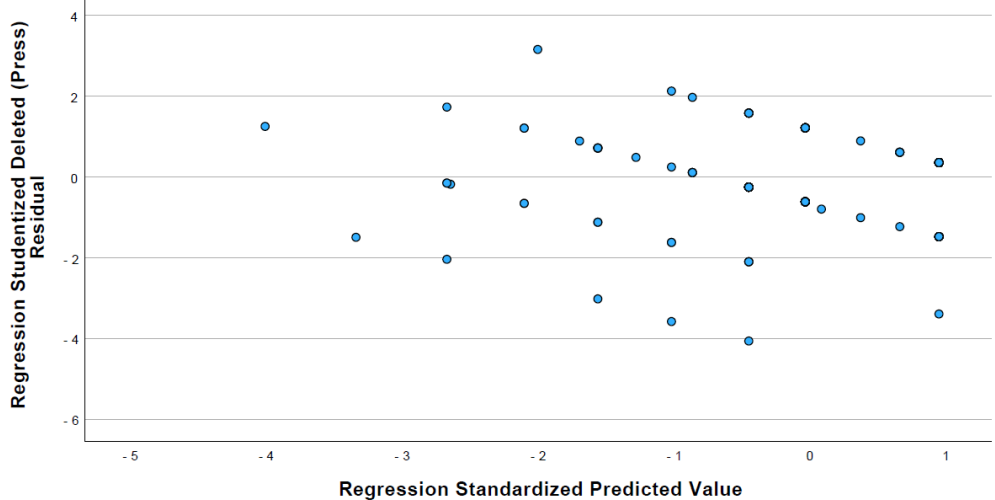
Normal P-P Plot of Regression Standardized Residual

Dependent Variable: I am more likely to buy from an SME if they have an online presence.

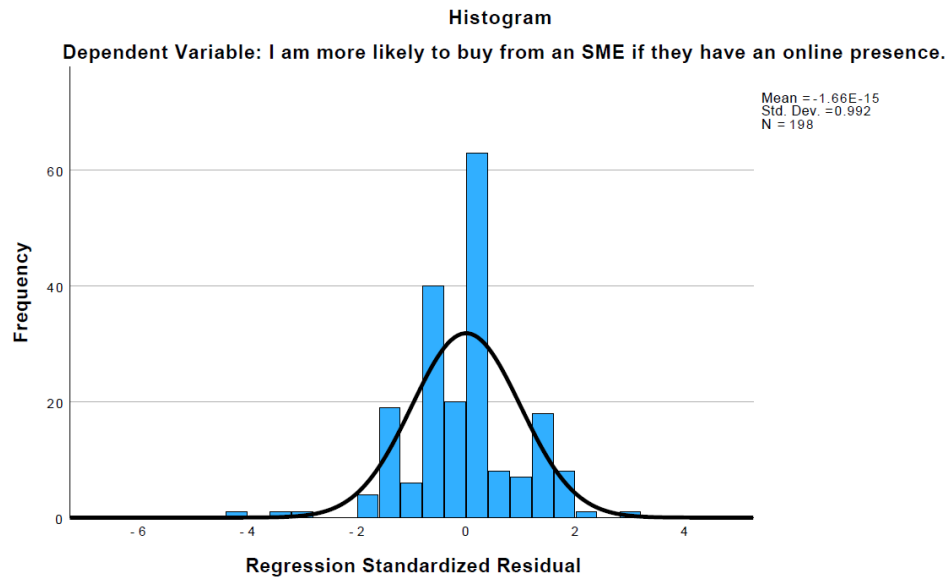


Scatterplot

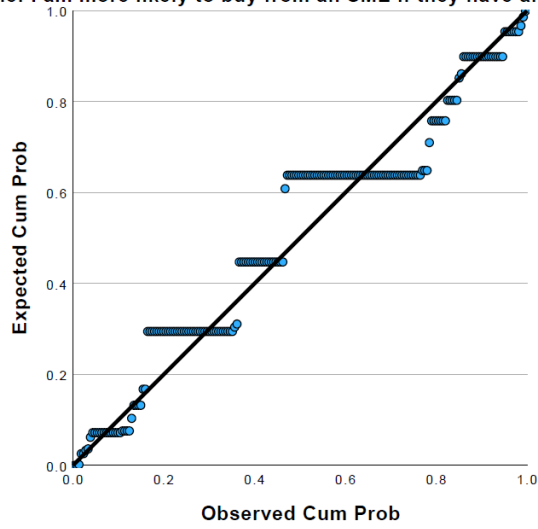
Dependent Variable: I am more likely to buy from an SME if they have an online presence.



## Charts



**Normal P-P Plot of Regression Standardized Residual**  
 Dependent Variable: I am more likely to buy from an SME if they have an online presence.



Scatterplot

