

***When media matters: examining the effects of media richness  
and naturalness on parasocial interactions and purchase  
intentions within influencer marketing***

**David Chidiac**

**42874882**

B.A. Psychology, Macquarie University 2016

B.C. Marketing, Macquarie University 2016

M.C. Marketing, Macquarie University 2018

**Supervisor**

**Dr. Jana Lay-Hwa Bowden**

Associate Professor in Marketing

Macquarie University

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### **Abstract**

This study examines the effectiveness of social media influencers by assessing the roles of media richness and media naturalness, in driving parasocial interactions and developing perceptions of authenticity and purchasing intentions. Two online surveys were administered via Qualtrics based on a Social Media influencer's YouTube and Instagram posts. They were distributed to members of a local university, and social media groups on Reddit and Facebook yielding 221 responses. Findings indicate that parasocial interactions were the largest driver of purchasing intent. This suggests that consumers who interact with influencers are more likely to engage in a purchase based on the influencer's recommendation and their own underlying opinions of the influencer. Additionally, media richness played a statistically significant role in driving perceived parasocial interactions, resulting in increased purchase intentions. However, media naturalness and authenticity were revealed to be necessary but not sufficient drivers of the parasocial interaction and purchasing intent processes. This suggests that whilst rich media is an important factor in predicting purchasing intent behaviours in a digital marketing context, consumers do not place as much importance in the authenticity and naturalness of a social media influencer's message. Therefore, managers should spend time utilising influencers who employ rich and detailed media within their published content and rely on a variety of media types when active in an online space. This study contributes to the understanding of the distinct drivers of parasocial interactions that specifically affect purchasing intentions and influencer effectiveness. (239 words)

### Statement of Originality

*This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.*

(Signed) \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_30/05/2020\_\_\_\_\_

Candidate's name: David Chidiac

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***Chapter One: Introduction, Research Justifications and  
Objectives***



## 1.0 Introduction

Social media and social networking have irreversibly changed the landscape of branding and branded communications (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2013). Social media offers brands a platform within which to interactively provide consumers with opportunities to engage with brands and other like-minded constituents and consumers (Muniz and Schau, 2005, Breidbach et al., 2014).

Active social media users make up an approximate 45% of the global population or roughly 3.484 billion people, enabling brands to reach large numbers of active daily users of social media and to engage in instantaneous and interactive brand dialogue (Newberry, 2019). As a result, digital marketing now accounts for approximately \$333.25 billion or 50% of total organisational spending on advertising (Enberg, 2019). Because of such high traffic and volume, the top three content tactics employed include social media posts (83%), written and video blogs (80%) and email newsletters (77%) (Smith, 2019).

Media platform design and media content play a crucial role in this expanded perspective by exploring how consumers access and consume information, as the platform chosen impacts the way in which information is packaged, influencing its final value to the consumer (Vithayathil et al., 2017, Wang and Sun, 2016). Platform design enables social media influencers to not only tailor content relevant to their audience, but also provide it in a form factor most appropriate and genuine to them, resulting in a message that is much more easily understood and authentic to the target audience (Munnukka et al., 2019, Maity et al., 2018). This area of research has remained an important realm of investigation in recent years, and has provided insight into understanding consumer interaction and engagement in online platforms (Dolan et al., 2019, Hall, 2019, Ferchaud et al., 2018, VanMeter et al., 2018). Additionally, the value placed on the type of media being chosen cannot be ignored, as each media type (e.g., videos, images, audio) conveys information with varying degrees of clarity and effectiveness. The quality of information that media is able to convey is referred to as a media's richness and naturalness (Kock et al., 2008, Ferry et al., 2001).

The most widely accepted definition of *media richness* comes from Daft and Lengel (1986, p. 560) who define information richness, and by extension media richness as

“the ability of information to change understanding within a time interval”.

The literature surrounding communications and information processing theorise that information is processed based on the needs of the recipient (Ishii et al., 2019, Sheer and Chen, 2004, Ferry et al., 2001, Carlson and Zmud, 1999). When engaging in communications, individuals have different needs and the media they choose to communicate through will impact their need fulfillment. Media, by design, varies in its ability to carry information from one point to another, and richer, more detailed forms of media, such as videos, offer greater levels of

innate value and understanding, allowing for ambiguous or equivocal information to be understood with ease (Maity et al., 2018, Lipowski and Bondos, 2018, Fernandez et al., 2013).

When media is rich and filled with detail, the recipient can translate the message faster whilst applying less cognitive effort. This results in physiological stimulation that benefits the recipient of the message. In social media contexts, this results in consumers who want to repeatedly engage the publisher of new materials and consume as much of their content as possible, resulting in the formation of illusory or parasocial interactions and relationships (Munnukka et al., 2019).

Similarly, the most widely used definition of *media naturalness* comes from Kock (2005b), who defines it as the degree to which an e-communications technology suppresses or selectively incorporates the following five key characteristics of face-to-face communications.

1. Proximity
2. Feedback
3. Facial expression
4. Body language
5. Speech

The naturalness of media is a necessary condition towards supporting the development of close relationships between influencers and followers (Kock, 2008, Kock, 2007). This is because a media's naturalness ensures that communication is a seamless and engaging experience between the content creator and their audience (Schulze et al., 2017). Furthermore, a lack of naturalness in media results in interactions that feel exhaustive and unpleasant (Verhulsdonck, 2007).

The most widely accepted definition of parasocial interactions come from Horton and Wohl (1956, p. 215) who define it as a

*“simulacrum of conversational give and take... one-sided, nondialectical, controlled by the performer, and not susceptible of mutual development.”*

The majority of literature explores parasocial interactions or PSI as one-sided illusory interactions, that when cultivated through repeated consumption of a social media influencer's offerings, resulting in a feeling of connectedness and trust (Ferchaud et al., 2018, Stern et al., 2007). Furthermore, these interactions, if cultivated through repeated exposure, will result in parasocial relationships or PSR (Horton and Wohl, 1956). This occurs when consumers view the influencer's content and resonate with it in a personal manner, creating the impression of a two-way interaction. Whilst traditional PSIs and PSRs were limited to radio and television, modern parasocial experiences form through social media platforms that allow users an unprecedented

amount of access to social media influencers and their content (Hou, 2019, Rasmussen, 2018, Voorveld et al., 2018b).

When parasocial experiences exist, consumers feel drawn to and compelled to engage with the influencer in whatever they publish or offer (Hwang and Zhang, 2018), leading to an increased perception of *authenticity* on the part of the influencer and increased likelihood of *purchase intention* on the part of the consumer (Munnukka et al., 2019, Maity et al., 2018).

***The focus of this thesis is on the examination of media richness and naturalness in a digital marketing context. This framework examines the operation of rich and natural media in the formation of authenticity and parasocial interactions within social networking platforms. It explores this framework within a social networking context, being the social networking sites YouTube and Instagram. In addition, this thesis quantitatively examines how the factors of parasocial interactions and perceptions of authenticity drive purchase intention.***

The present chapter introduces the research problem guiding this enquiry and outlines the contributions that this thesis makes to the literature. Research objectives are then proposed. The chapter then concludes with a summary of the structure of the thesis.

## **1.1 Research Justification and Contributions**

Three of the largest and most prominent social media platforms by daily usage numbers are Facebook, with over 1.59 billion daily active users (Noyes, 2019), Instagram, which registers 500 million daily active users (Aslam, 2019a), and YouTube, with 30 million daily users streaming over 5 billion videos per day (Aslam, 2019b). These platforms combined reach over 2 billion people and allow for the formation and development of new and existing interactions and relationships. Because of the volume of social media usage, social media platforms have become a hub for consumer information search, with 54% of social browsers using social media platforms to research products and services (Beer, 2018). Additionally, 49% of these consumers rely on the opinions of influential, social media figures known as “social media influencers” to make purchasing decisions (Osborne, 2019). These figures often act as either affiliates or brand sponsors and provide a mixture of scripted and unscripted insights into a brand’s services and products in an effort to increase brand awareness and product sales (Osborne, 2019, Munnukka et al., 2019). Influencer marketing is defined as “*promoting brands through use of specific key individuals who exert influence over potential buyers.*” (Audrezet et al. 2018, p. 1). Social media influencers are viewed as authentic since they enhance “*message receptivity, enhances perceived quality and increases purchase intentions*” (Audrezet et al. 2018, p. 3)

However, some significant concerns exist with regard to the effectiveness of branded communications within social media. For example, whilst 90% of consumers felt that authentic

content defined whether they liked or felt positively towards a brand, only 51% felt that branded content is actually created with the intent of being authentic (DeGruttola, 2019). This is compounded by the fact that only 0.07% of consumers engage with brands on Facebook, and only 4.21% of Instagram users engage with brands (Saleh, 2016). There is therefore a need to ensure that branded content within these platforms is authentic, engaging and impactful.

In addition to user generated content on YouTube, social media influencers also demonstrate a tendency to engage in multichannel usage by providing fans with opportunity to physically interact with them at panel sessions or live events, or engage them across other social media platforms (Ferchaud et al., 2018). This cross-channel interaction leads to increases in engagement and consumer perceptions of authenticity and value (Brown, 2015, Stern et al., 2007, Rubin et al., 1985), as the consumer feels connected to a figure that would normally be distanced by media channels and time (Voorveld et al., 2018a).

These opportunities for interaction allow these influencers to engage in self-disclosure through different mediums. Self-disclosure is defined as a transactional, informative, rewarding, and socially acceptable exchanging of private and personal information between two or more individuals (Greene et al., 2006). Self-disclosure and active engagement work towards enhancing feelings of authenticity and provide a more natural and rich communications experience, allowing the audience to feel as though they are a part of the show as opposed to feeling like they are distanced viewers with no sense of connection to the performer or their work (Labrecque, 2014).

High levels of self-disclosure support the cultivation of parasocial interactions and relationships (Rasmussen, 2018). Parasocial interactions are defined as experiences where the audience feels as though the performer is communicating directly to them as a friend, and not an impersonal figure who is separated by a medium such as radio or tv (Horton and Wohl, 1956). By providing opportunities to engage with their audience across multiple platforms, these personalities make conscious attempts to develop long lasting relationships (Ferchaud et al., 2018). This is an important factor in understanding the influence of parasocial interactions, as striving to capture the audience's attention and maintain an engaged and purposefully interaction is ultimately what dictates perceptions of authenticity and behavioural commitments on the part of the audience.

An important issue that affects the development of parasocial interactions are the characteristics of synchronicity and feedback which inherently shape the authenticity of communications between influencers and their audience (Lei et al., 2017). These media characteristics vary by media type. For example, rich and naturally detailed media like videos have been found to ensure a cohesive transferal of information (Voorveld et al., 2018b), whereas leaner media types like text and imagery tend to relay ambiguous or equivocal information

(Dennis and Kinney, 1998). Social media, by design, relies on several media types in an effort to encapsulate the holistic nature of communications, however each platform is limited in scope and purpose as to what media types are used. For example, YouTube allows for the sending of video, audio, imagery, and text, making it a significantly richer platform than Instagram, or Twitter, which limit content to imagery, text, and highly condensed video clips.

The theories of media naturalness and media richness are important elements to consider for a number of reasons. Firstly, the requirements of both the influencer and the platforms should be to make the communications process as transparent and direct as possible, and as such, the implementation of media types that permit flexible communications procedures are considered most important. Secondly, the importance of natural and unambiguous information transferal helps foster and form long-term mutually beneficial relationships. Influencers and platforms seek to make the interaction process as seamless and direct as possible, as the audience want to feel as though they are directly engaging with the influencer in a personal manner, regardless of whether the influencer directly replies to their audience members. Both media naturalness and media richness impact upon the extent to which influencer communications are considered authentic and this in turn directly effects consumers' propensity to purchase products or services they recommend (White et al., 2017, Ishii et al., 2019, Maity et al., 2018).

## **1.2 Research Gaps and Objectives**

Research is required to examine how varying rich and naturalistic media types influence the consumer preference and value perception of the mediated figure, thus leading to the creation of a parasocial experience. Whilst the literature is replete with work on the effect of social media influencers or celebrities on the impact of parasocial interactions (Ferchaud et al., 2018, Hwang and Zhang, 2018, Chung and Cho, 2017, Munnukka et al., 2019), research is yet to examine the extent to which the content delivered by social media celebrities and influencers is both rich and natural in presentation and influences purchasing intentions. Media richness is needed as it ensures the content is easily understood whilst avoiding ambiguity of the message (Daft et al., 1987), natural content is needed as it ensures the communications process is not an unappealing experience which leaves the audience bored and overworked (Kock, 2007).

Furthermore, research has yet to explain how rich and media naturalness lead to feelings of authenticity and its influence on purchase intention. Rather, existing organisational literature details how the need for valid media selection is paramount to effective workplace management and productivity (Daft and Lengel, 1986). Dennis et al. (2008) explain that this is because rich and naturalistic media types don't always send the best messages, because the content may be objectively clear without the need for additional subtext. This can result in a dilemma for individuals who need to find the right media type to signal intention and true opinion. The right

media type can influence how genuine or believable the message is, and this can lead to individuals responding in a less-than-optimal manner if the media type does not align with the message contents. Furthermore, this paper aims to identify whether rich and natural media types drive authentic online behaviour, particularly when examining influential persons and their ability to dictate patterns of behaviour in large consumer groups.

Whilst much of the literature into influencer marketing has explored the effects of purchase intentions based on customer satisfaction and experience quality (Hwang and Zhang, 2018), purchase intention based on the effectiveness of rich and natural media as a key driver of parasocial interactions has not been explored.

This paper aims to fill these theoretical gaps by examining the impact that rich and natural media types have on a parasocial interaction's ability to influence authenticity and increase consumer purchase intentions.

The focus of this thesis is on the development of an expanded framework of digital content marketing. This framework examines the operation of parasocial interactions. This thesis quantitatively examines how rich and natural media drives the formation of parasocial interactions, and authenticity and the subsequent impact of these constructs on purchase intentions. The present chapter introduces the research problem guiding this enquiry and outlines the contributions that this thesis makes to the literature. Research objectives are then proposed. The chapter then concludes with a summary of the structure of the thesis.

### **1.3 Research Objectives and Conceptual Model**

The research model guiding this study is underpinned by two research themes. The first of these themes focuses on exploring media richness and media naturalness in a digital content marketing (DCM) context. The second theme examines how parasocial interactions form from the varying media types employed in DCMs and the subsequent impact of this upon authenticity and purchase intentions. The broad research themes guiding this study include:

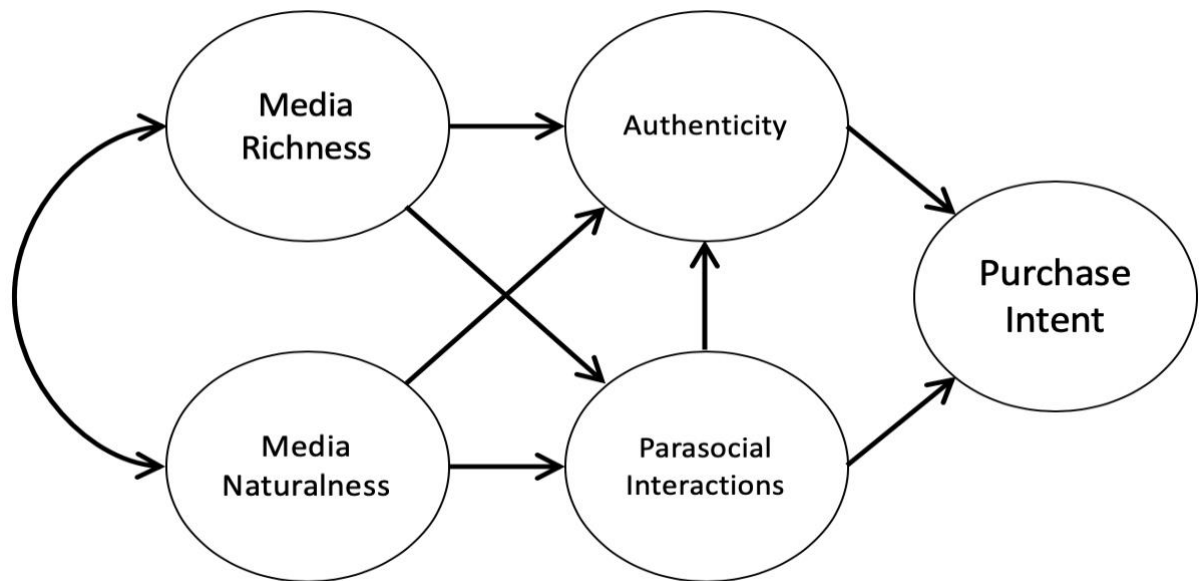
**Research Theme One:** Identification of rich and natural media types as a positive driver of parasocial interactions and authenticity within a social media digital content marketing (DCM) context

**Research Theme Two:** Identification of parasocial interactions as a positive driver of authentic influencer behaviour and purchasing intentions within a social media digital content marketing (DCM) context

- Examine the nature of parasocial interactions in the formation of perceptions of authenticity and purchase intentions within an influencer context
- Examine the role of authenticity on purchase intentions within an influencer context

Thus, these research themes, and the research model as a whole, put forth a set of propositions and form the conceptual model that will guide the enquiry of this paper's research. This model is presented in Figure 1, and the research propositions are detailed within Chapter 2.

**Figure 1. Conceptual Model**



#### **1.4 Structure of Thesis**

This thesis is structured in four chapters. Chapter 1 presents the introduction, research objectives and justifications of this study. Chapter 2 outlines theoretical foundations of digital content marketing. Chapter 3 presents the preliminary data analysis, purification, confirmation and validation of measures. Chapter 4 presents the integrated results of the model and provides a discussion of the theoretical and managerial implications of the study.

## ***Chapter Two: Theoretical Foundations of Digital Content Marketing***



Chapter One introduced the research problem and the research objectives of this study. This chapter aims to provide a theoretical foundation for the conceptual model. To begin, the concept of parasocial interactions and relationships are discussed, and a critical review of their development within the literature, including their place within Digital Content Marketing literature, is presented. A discussion on media richness and media naturalness will follow, followed by an examination of authenticity and purchasing intentions. Finally, research concerning the role of media naturalness, media richness, parasocial interactions, authenticity, purchasing intent within a social networking framework is discussed in Chapter Two. Throughout this chapter, the knowledge gaps identified in the literature are synthesised. These gaps form the foundation of the conceptual model and research propositions developed in Chapter One, and the research hypotheses presented and empirically tested in Chapter Three, before being critically analysed and discussed in Chapter Four.

## **2.0 The Social Media Landscape**

YouTube is the largest video-sharing platform and the second most visited website on the internet today, trailing behind only its parent company Google in terms of global pageviews and daily visitors (Khan, 2017, Alexa, 2019). Over 1.9 billion registered users access the site each month consuming and generating over 1 billion hours of content (Chi, 2019). It is the most popular application on iPhone, and the second largest search engine on Earth (Chi, 2019). It reaches more people in America than any television prime-time cable programme and is watched by 90% of people between the ages of 18 and 44 (Chi, 2019), making it the ideal platform to reach as many people as possible. Furthermore, 68% of people visit YouTube to help make a purchasing decision, and 80% of those same consumers say they visit YouTube at the start of their search (Chi, 2019). Because of such high volume and traffic, YouTube ads receive 83% of viewership attention, when compared to traditional television commercials (Cooper, 2019). In 2018 alone, 73% of American adults accessed YouTube (Center, 2018a). Furthermore, 17% of U.S. adults use the site at least once per day, with a further 29% accessing content on YouTube several times per day (Center, 2018b). YouTube is classified as a content rich medium as a result of its focus on video and image distribution, and interactive design elements. For example, registered users can rate (through liking/disliking), upload videos, images, and text-based blogs, comment, share, and subscribe to a content creator's channel to receive updates when new content is made available (Ferchaud et al., 2018). This invitation to engage helps foster a sense of co-creation of value whilst offering a rich interactive experience (Ferchaud et al., 2018).

YouTube has become the home of many influential content creators who aim to connect with viewers worldwide (Munnukka et al., 2019, Rasmussen, 2018). As a result of the platform's ability to allow interaction, in conjunction with its design characteristics, YouTube has provided

content creators with an opportunity to rapidly generate followers, and create strong, uniquely defined media personalities (Hwang and Zhang, 2018). There now exist numerous instances of YouTube personalities, such as Lewis Hilsenteger (Unbox Therapy) and Felix Kjellberg (PewDiePie), who are now viewed as popular stars or psudeo-celebrities, capable of generating millions of dollars through views and sponsorships (Ferchaud et al., 2018, Munnukka et al., 2019). Kjellberg, in particular, earned a reported \$15.5 million from video views and sponsorships in 2018, ranking him 6th amongst all content creators on YouTube (Robehmed and Berg, 2018). This is important because by publishing their own content and encouraging repeated or returning viewership, individuals like Kjellberg and Hilsenteger actively engage their audience and look to increase their bond in an effort to influence their behaviour and attitudes (Munnukka et al., 2019).

## **2.1 The Importance of Digital Content Marketing (DCM)**

The rapid change in digital technologies has necessitated a more fine grained understanding of how consumer-brand relationships are created through content derlivery online (Ashley and Tuten, 2015). This process occurs through Digital Content Marketing (DCM), and is defined by Hollebeek and Macky (2019, p. 27) as *“the management process responsible for identifying, anticipating, and satisfying customer requirements profitably through relevant digital content”*. The goal of DCMs is to make the processes involved in marketing products and services online as simple, efficient, and effective for both the company and the customer. This involves moving away from the classical, financially motivated need to satisfy a customer and towards a distinct and radical paradigm shift, opting for a more genuine and sincere long-term customer perceived-value optimisation approach (Hollebeek and Macky, 2019).

DCM observes the customer less as a reserve of money which can be accessed freely, and instead focuses on them more directly as a functional part of the organisation’s existence (Holliman and Rowley, 2014). It places significant focus and energy on their long-term happiness and satisfaction whilst ensuring the organisation can still operate at a profit (Jefferson and Tanton, 2015). This is done through extensive in-depth knowledge of the customer base, learning about what motivates and excites the customer, whilst acknowledging the shared values of the firm and customer base in a distinctly non-opportunistic fashion (Peppers and Rogers, 2011). The content is, in effect, tailored to the customer in such a way that they do not feel like they are being sold to or manipulated into making a purchase, rather, they appear generally more emotionally entertained and educated in an effort to financially engage the brand on an equitable level (Järvinen and Taiminen, 2016). Furthermore, because digital channels provide higher reach at a relatively low cost, they have become one of the fastest growing content marketing channels,

enabling brands and consumers alike access to a wealth of interactive knowledge and value (Hollebeek and Macky, 2019)

Because DCM encapsulates activities performed through digital (online) platforms, content is therefore easily disseminated across a range of media including blogs, social media posts, live-streamed and pre-recorded videos, images, and long-form podcasts (Hollebeek and Macky, 2019). As a result of the wide array of options available to them, content creators seek the most optimal media to ensure their content is effectively marketed and positioned in the digital space. As a result, video, both live-streamed and in pre-recorded form presents a number of DCM-related benefits. Firstly, an emphasis on the depth and dynamism of content as provided by videos provides consumers with an opportunity to consume large amounts of informative information in an easily deliverable package made up of imagery, text, and audio (Holliman and Rowley, 2014). Secondly, video encapsulates a number of communicative properties that make it ideal for delivering ambiguous or complex amounts of information, such as visual body language cues and vocal intonations (Ishii et al., 2019).

Despite the increasing reliance on social media by brands, one of the challenges faced by social media content creators is the ability to create authentic and rich content. Authentic content is defined as content which is original and sincere, created in part by the consumer of the content (Cornelis and Peter, 2017). Face-to-face communications allow individuals to deliver the largest amount of processable information when engaging in formal and interpersonal communications (Daft and Lengel, 1984). However, within Social Networking sites (SNS), the key characteristics of face-to-face communications such as speech, body language, and facial expressions are rarely present. Therefore, content creators rely on a variety of media types across many channels of interaction to ensure an authentic and active level of engagement is achieved (Kock et al., 2008). When content creators post to SNS, they rely on a number of media types such as audio and imagery in an effort to convey meaning and further engage their audience (Maity et al., 2018, Dibbble et al., 2016, Rubin et al., 1985). This results in a selection process where these creators will pick the richest and most natural combinations of imagery, audio, video, or text to convey the message (Kock, 2005b). The intention becomes clear, these creators use the most appropriate mix of media types to attract consumers to their content, in an effort to appear the most genuine and authentic (Munnukka et al., 2019). This is done so that consumers feel willingly compelled to engage the content creators at future points in time, resulting in the formation of parasocial interactions (Hwang and Zhang, 2018).

### **2.1.1 User Generated Content (UGC)**

One way in which content creators achieve viewer engagement is by encouraging user-generated content. User-generated content is defined as the generation and consumption of content by the users of a platform or website (Cha et al., 2007), or the “*electronic word-of-mouth*

*buzz*” generated by consumers in an online space (Goh et al., 2013 p. 90). Social media influencers represent a trend of self-publishing consumers who generate content on social platforms like YouTube and Instagram (Cha et al., 2007). Influencers rely on techniques such as personal disclosure and natural, and often informal set designs and language (Rasmussen, 2018), they are viewed by consumers as much more authentic and persuasive when compared to their traditional print, television, and radio celebrity counterparts (Ferchaud et al., 2018). Consumers identify with influencers and form perceived interactions with them due to the “just like me” effect (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017). Influencers are seen as more credible than celebrity endorsers as consumers view them as more relevant, approachable and credible (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017). This perceived authenticity leads to an increase in the likelihood that audience members will repeat their consumption of the creator’s content and will lead to further investment in their future endeavours across platforms and programs (Brown, 2015, Stern et al., 2007, Rubin et al., 1985). Furthermore, when compared to traditional media, social media and specifically, user-generated content blurs the boundaries between unidirectional advertising messages, consumer interaction and broader social activities (Nicholls, 2012).

### **2.1.2 Synthesis of Knowledge Gaps for DCM**

Despite the advancements made within the literature, the conceptualisations of parasocial interactions remain disparate and further research is needed to clarify the importance of media richness and media naturalness on the development of parasocial interactions, particularly within a digital marketing context. The majority of studies examine DCM on single social networking platforms (Kim et al., 2014), or through the importance on one single media type (i.e. video or imagery)(Munnukka et al., 2019), with few studies considering how DCM manifests within multiple social networking sites, or, how its operation may vary across several social media contexts.

## **2.2 Parasocial Interactions (PSI) and Parasocial Relationships (PSR)**

Parasocial interactions are defined by Horton and Wohl (1956, p. 215) as a “*simulacrum of conversational give and take... one-sided, nondialectical, controlled by the performer, and not susceptible of mutual development.*”. Within social media contexts, these interactions occur as the by-product of social media usage, whereby users actively and repeatedly consume as much of a person of interest’s content as possible (Ferchaud et al., 2018).

### **2.2.1 Characteristics of PSI and PSR**

Researchers distinguish between PSRs and the experiences of PSI by how long the sense of connection lasts between PSRs and PSIs (Ferchaud et al., 2018, Quintero Johnson and Patnoe-Woodley, 2016, Labrecque, 2014, Stern et al., 2007, Rubin et al., 1985). PSIs are best understood as an illusory interaction that occurs whilst the media is processed by the consumer

(Hall, 2019). This suggest that PSIs are most likely to be strongest when the audience are directly spoken to by the mediated figure, as is the case with YouTube and Instagram vloggers and influencers who look into the camera and “break the fourth wall” by addressing their audience directly (Hall et al., 2019, p. 89). PSRs by comparison, are experiences that last beyond the time period of media consumption, and form as the result of a longer-term association that develops outside of the media-viewing context (Dibble et al., 2016). These experiences can vary in strength based on the regularity of the interaction and the level of ideological compatibility the mediate figure shares with their audience, with stronger, more routinely developed PSIs leading to more predictable behaviours and attitudinal consequences such as higher levels of brand or figure loyalty, and positive purchasing behaviours (Ferchaud et al., 2018, Hu, 2016).

PSR are a perceived relationship between the audience and the performer in media such as television, radio, and Social Networking sites (Chung and Cho, 2017) . PSI are psychologically-derived, illusory experiences where the spectator of media develops the associated feelings of being in a relationship with the mediated character or celebrity on display (Labrecque, 2014). Rubin et al. (1985) found that interactions with newscasters and tv presenters mirrored elements of physical communications, through the use of informal language, settings, non-verbal gestures and behavioural cues. This results in feelings of comfort and attraction, as though the celebrity were engaged in personal, and reciprocal communications with them, reinforcing positive views of the figure (Stern et al., 2007). Perse and Rubin (1989) argued that these engagements and experiences create the perceptions of interpersonal relationships with viewers. This allows viewers to apply associated beliefs and values such as openness and informality to the relationship (Perse and Rubin, 1989). These mediated figures must therefore understand their audience and their chosen platform before they can successfully foster relationships.

Additional research has indicated that mediated celebrities, such as SNS personalities foster interpersonal interactions with their viewers through engagement across multiple social networking platforms (Chung and Cho, 2017). For example, Quintero Johnson and Patnoe-Woodley (2016) found that the presence of parasocial exchanges and interactions with radio disc jockeys (DJs) were strong enough to draw audiences back to the content, allowing them to spend an increased amount of time consuming additional content beyond the serialised audio. This relationship extends across other media platforms as in 2019 over 70% of American adults with access to the internet used social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram (Chaffey, 2019), further driving DJs and other radio personalities to branch out to these social platforms in an effort to remain connected with their audience and maintain a feeling of attachment and connectedness (Quintero Johnson and Patnoe-Woodley, 2016).

Within human communications research literature, Dibble et al. (2016) explain that PSI occur during momentary, discrete viewing processes, and emphasise the informal nature of conversation between viewers and tv presenters, stating the following:

*“cues provided by a media performer (e.g., eye-gazing, bodily addressing cues) effectively trigger automatic mindreading activities in users that...give rise to a parasocial experience, understood as a user’s intuitive (gut) feeling of taking part in a normal social interaction.” (p.23).*

Conversely, marketing literature emphasise the short- or long-term emotional engagements with the celebrity endorser or social media character as the differentiator between the interaction and the relationship (Munnukka et al., 2019). Dibble et al. (2016) explains that whilst Horton and Wohl (1956) emphasise the momentary exposure to the figure as the interaction process, the relationship aspect of the parasocial experience is derived from repeated exposure over time, accentuating that extended periods of exposure are more impactful than individual or singular instances of exposure to the performer or their content. Similarly, Hu (2016) explains that the parasocial experience that forms between the creator and the audience extends beyond the boundaries of the platform they communicate on, much in the same way a normal relationship would continue outside the realms of direct interaction. This means that the audience, upon repeated exposure through their regular outlets or platforms, looks to further their experience with the creator via other means, including attempting to directly contact the mediated figure or imitating their behaviours around others.

### **2.2.2 Applications of PSI**

PSI research initially focused on mass media such as television and radio and was crucial in understanding the voluntary, socially constructed relationship that developed between newscasters and their audience, however recent literature has highlighted the concept’s importance when exploring social media. The distinction lies in social media’s approach and levels of interaction, as whilst more traditional forms of media such as television and radio relied almost exclusively on a distanced communications approach, social media emphasises an interactive approach that allows the audience to, at the very least, attempt to send a message or establish direct communications with the presenter (Lee and Watkins, 2016, Munnukka et al., 2019, Chen, 2013).

Significant research has been conducted to examine the operation of PSI within different media environments. Ferchaud et al. (2018) found that video bloggers (vloggers), through their video blog (vlog) are capable of evoking parasocial experiences in their audiences by blurring the lines between the creator’s often fictionalised and exaggerated output and their real-life exploits. This is significant, as whilst vlogs are a form of rich media, engagement and interaction is primarily partisan, as audience members know a lot about the performer, but the vlogger

knows very little about their audience (Munnukka et al., 2019). This suggests that the audience needn't be directly present nor engaged in reciprocal interactions for a connection to occur between the performer and their audience, and rather the audience becomes engaged with and linked to the performer's output and content (Hwang and Zhang, 2018). Brown (2015) for example, found that parasocial experiences occurred during, and following, the experience of viewing the performer. Within a social media context, this means users spend time consuming a vlogger's output, learning about them, and developing the foundations of a relationship. This strengthens the authenticity and credibility of the vlogger, as they develop stronger attachments with their audience and perceive significant value in their output (Ferchaud et al., 2018, Munnukka et al., 2019).

Research has examined ways in which PSI may be enhanced by the bi-directional nature of social networking sites. Labrecque (2014) found that because multiple channels of social media communications exist, such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, personalities on these platforms can directly address their audience through instant messaging or replying to individual comments either via text, imagery or through the content they post on these platforms. Users of social networking platforms utilise the vast array of opportunities to engage their favourite influencers and brands in a way that previous technology did not afford them (Kim et al., 2014). This engagement leads to feelings of information and opinion leadership on the part of the user, as they actively seek information about their favourite brand, and in turn can have information provided to them directly by the influencer or brand or even by users who also feel connected to the brand or influencer (Kim et al., 2014, Khan, 2017). This removal of prototypical, unidirectional communications found in older media such as television and radio provide viewers with additional outlets to develop, reinforce, and cultivate a more powerful PSI. Munnukka et al. (2019) further explains that this is because media platforms allow for varied engagement which is coupled with the consistency and regularity of engagement and exposure to the figure. This repetition of exposure reinforces the strength of a parasocial relationship (Ferchaud et al., 2018). In addition, when viewers engage with vloggers on richer, content-heavy platforms such as YouTube, where they may directly interact, they experience greater levels of parasocial interaction and more rewarding and authentic engagement (VanMeter et al., 2018).

Research suggest that PSI is also supported through media richness. Media richness theory (MRT) (Daft and Lengel, 1986) asserts that media selection is a critical variable in ensuring information transferral and communicative success (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). That is, if information is easy to receive and interpret, it is likely to result in an increase in platform usage, and positive message association, resulting in increased attitudinal responses (Voorveld et al., 2018a, Voorveld et al., 2018b). However, research is yet to examine how MRT contributes to the formation of PSI. This is an important contribution since media selection and platform

engagement invariably work together to ensure messages can be delivered effectively to their intended audience.

## **2.3 Media Richness Theory (MRT)**

Media richness is defined by Daft and Lengel (1986, p. 560) as “*the ability of information to change understanding within a time interval*”. Media richness theory (MRT) posits that all communications mediums vary in their ability to effectively communicate and change what we understand and know (Dennis and Valacich, 1999). The extent of this ability is referred to as a medium’s richness (Daft and Lengel, 1984). Carlson and Zmud (1999) explain that MRT classifies all communications media by placing them along a continuous scale, based on their ability to convey a complex message. Media which is capable of clarifying ambiguity and overcomes multiple points of view and frames of reference are considered richer, whilst media which requires additional cognitive effort to convey and extrapolate meaning are deemed less rich or “lean” (Daft and Lengel, 1986).

### **2.3.1 Characteristics of media richness**

In order to determine the richness of media, Lengel and Daft (1988) explain that the greater the amount of learning that can be delivered through a medium, the richer it is seen to be. Therefore, media richness is operationalised by a set of four characteristics which focus on a medium’s ability to deliver meaning (Ferry et al., 2001).

Firstly, the medium must contain multiple cues and multiple channels of information. Multiple channels are the main senses of communication including sight, sound, and touch whilst multiple cues are the various ways through which communication can occur via a channel (e.g., verbal language and facial expression). A medium which incorporates many channels and in turn relies on many cues within said channel of communication (e.g. face-to-face communications and video conferencing) is considered rich, whilst mediums which incorporate fewer channels and cues (e.g. text documents and still imagery) are considered lean (Ferry et al., 2001).

Secondly, a medium must incorporate a mechanism for immediate feedback. Immediacy of feedback focuses on the need for rapid and instantaneous responses in an effort to ensure communication is synchronous, thus facilitating engagement and increasing interaction speeds, making the overall experience of communicating smooth and naturally intuitive. Modern social platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram allow for on-demand and delayed interaction between users, as messages or comments can be sent and users can choose to reply instantly or at a later date (Ishii et al., 2019).

Thirdly, the ability to personalise the message results in reflections of the tone and nature of the sender are required to create a feeling of human interaction and engagement. The literature describes this feature as the need to appear warm and personal, as if human by intention and



nature (Osei-Frimpong and McLean, 2018). This is based closely around the theory of social presence (Lombard and Ditton, 1997). Social presence theory focuses on the psychological limitations of computer mediated communications (CMC) and emphasises the role that media selection plays in creating a warm and personal experience through limited technological means (Lu et al., 2016). The importance of maintaining a sociable and sensitive presence on CMC platforms is necessary for both individuals and brands. Their presence on a platform, in conjunction with the types of media a person or brand chooses to communicate through will often dictate how they are perceived and what value they attain from the interaction (Osei-Frimpong and McLean, 2018).

Finally, a medium's ability to provide unique and varied language capacity is paramount to ensuring the effectiveness of communication with multiple sources or recipients. For example signs, symbols, images, and non-word utterances with established meanings all hold significant value to different groups (Ferry et al., 2001). The reliance on one method of communications, (e.g. spoken word) limits the audience who can receive or interpret the message (Voorveld et al., 2018b). Thus, a message that is more widely understood would rely on at least several variations of language, prompting the sender to incorporate variety in their message to ensure clear reception (Voorveld et al., 2018b). For example, a symbol or image could be coupled with hand motions or vocal gestures like "umm-ing" and "ahh-ing" to add a layer of meaning that words or language could not clarify or explain accurately (Lipowski and Bondos, 2018).

### 2.3.2 Applications of media richness theory

In applying these characteristics, the foundational literature (Daft and Lengel, 1984) scaled the five most prominent forms of communication at the time from richest to leanest as highlighted by Table 1 below:

**Table 1. Ordering of communications from richest to leanest (Daft and Lengel, 1984)**

(1) Face-to-face	Seen as the richest form of communication as it allows for an abundance of visual and auditory cues and gestures to be interpreted and understood (Kock, 2009)
(2) Telephone and by extension two-way audio communications	Provide no visual feedback but allow for oral and auditory cues to emerge from the conversation (Kock, 2007)
(3) Personal documents such as letters	Offer unique written cues and language variation in line with the third and fourth communications characteristics: message personalisation and language variety (Daft and Lengel, 1986)

(4) Impersonal written documents such as notices/company-wide memos and billboards	The leanest forms of communication, they serve to deliver generic, concise, and unambiguous messages to the reader (Lengel and Daft, 1988, Daft and Lengel, 1986).
(5) Numerical documents	

Whilst the foundational literature was limited in scope and technological opportunity, the recency of modern digital marketing literature has highlighted the unique design of social media as a tool for both the audience and the brand (Kim et al., 2015, Osei-Frimpong and McLean, 2018). Underpinning the move away from more static forms of media and communication like television and radio, social media incorporates live and on-demand video conferencing and messaging through services and applications such as Skype and FaceTime, and online video and photo streaming utilities like YouTube and Instagram (Ferchaud et al., 2018). Research into this emergent field has shown that video messaging/conferencing and on-demand video services contain high levels of richness and fall in between face-to-face communications and telephone/two-way audio as an information-rich source of communications (Marlow et al., 2017). This is because they provide immediate feedback for both the sender and receiver but lack many innate cues and gestures present in physical and direct communication, such as extended reliance on visual body language and synchronous, often tactile and intimate, feedback (Walther et al., 2015, Klitmøller and Lauring, 2013). This disparity between methods of communications forces users to weigh up their options and make judgements based on the most effective tool required for successful communication. In other words, individuals will weigh up the advantages and disadvantages of using a particular service to send or receive information based on its appropriateness for the task (Munnukka et al., 2019).

Furthermore, it is explained by Fernandez et al. (2013) that channel expansion theory, an extension on MRT, provides clarity in understanding an individual's media preferences. Channel Expansion Theory (CET) literature explains that the length of time spent by a consumer using an information medium and the depth of presentation provided by the medium informs a consumer's perception of the richness of media (Maity et al., 2018, Carlson and Zmud, 1999). In both organisational settings (Killian and McManus, 2015, Lengel and Daft, 1984) and consumer decision making literature (Maity et al., 2018, Labrecque, 2014), it has been shown that the extent of engagement with the communications medium and the medium's overall intuitiveness to the needs of the user influence adoption and usability. Individuals who perceive a medium as being high in richness will rely more so on it as a source on information, and perceive it to have higher value when compared with leaner mediums (Maity et al., 2018). CET helps provide

explanation for the impact of duration of exposure to a medium (Fulk and Yuan, 2017, Fulk, 1993) and frequency of usage (Rice and Love, 1987).

In addition, recent research has found that knowledge-building experiences have been found to play a significant role in determining the perceived richness of a medium, and ultimately its value as a communicative tool for the individual (Fernandez et al., 2013). This suggests that the medium which provides access to the most amount of information possible and is easy to use and understand is likely to be relied upon as a main source of information transferral. Therefore, it is important to consider the inherent design of the media as it influences message richness (Hollebeek and Macky, 2019, Ishii et al., 2019). Given the inherent size and prevalence of SNS as the preferred means of interaction between individuals in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Ferchaud et al., 2018, Center, 2018b, Vithayathil et al., 2017), further research is needed to explore the relationship between media richness and the development of PSI within differing SNS as a means to foster positive interactions.

### **2.3.4 Media richness within social media**

Within Social Media literature, media richness theory intertwines heavily with the creation and delivery of content, and its residual parasocial impact on the consumer (Tseng et al., 2017, Ferchaud et al., 2018). As previously noted, the richness of the content is determined by the quality and quantity of information provided by a medium across four characteristics (Lengel and Daft, 1988). When brands communicate online, consumers rely on these four characteristics being present within the chosen medium of communication. The extent to which the medium can replicate high levels of richness determines consumer perceptions of value and willingness to pursue further engagement with the brand or endorser (Maity et al., 2018). Research conducted by both Chen (2013) and Munnukka et al. (2019) into personal branding and social media influencers notes further, that this has direct implications for the perceived value and presentation of branded figures in online spaces, as brands and figures who employ richer media when communicating appear significantly more authentic and genuine. Tseng et al. (2017) explains that consumers develop an increased perception of brand trust and perceived loyalty to those who employ richer media in their services and communications. This in turn supports the formation of parasocial interactions (PSI), asynchronous, illusory interactions, between a consumer and the brand or influencer in an online space (Labrecque, 2014). Research is however required to examine how naturalistic media types contribute to the formation of PSI. This is an important contribution as a platform's need to deliver media in a naturalistic manner ultimately impacts its success as a method of delivering messages effectively. This therefore leads to this paper's first research proposition:

## **RP1: Media richness is positively related to PSI**

### **2.4 Media Naturalness Theory (MNT)**

Media naturalness is defined as the degree to which an e-communications technology suppresses or selectively incorporates five key characteristics of face-to-face communications (Kock, 2009, Kock, 2002, Kock, 2004). These five key characteristics are as follows:

1. high co-location, implying that individuals would have to be close enough when communicating to both see and hear one another;
2. high levels of synchronicity, allowing for quick exchanges of information and stimuli;
3. the capability to perceive and display facial expressions;
4. the capacity to perceive and display body language cues and
5. the ability to listen to, and emote, speech.

Media naturalness suggests that a communication medium's naturalness is its degree of similarity to face-to-face communications (Kock, 2005b, DeRosa et al., 2004). Media naturalness theory argues that because face-to-face information carries the largest amount of information possible and results in a reduction in cognitive load when processing information, all communication should attempt to imitate these characteristics to ensure communication is effectively achieved. This is because, from a biological and evolutionary perspective, face-to-face communications occur most regularly in daily life and result in the immediate transfer of information between two individuals.

#### **2.4.1 Face-to-Face Communications**

Face-to-face communications are defined as the mutual and direct interactions between two or more individuals who are operating within a collocated space, capable of visual, verbal, and/or physical interaction (Asheim et al., 2007). It functions on a psychological level, filling in the aforementioned five key biological and evolutionary developments that media richness fails to factor in when assessing communicative quality (Kock, 2009). As a processing method, media naturalness presumes that face-to-face interactions carry a natural biological underpinning, a set of innate characteristics, that have developed to navigate channels of discourse and expression (Kock, 2002).

Media naturalness theory suggests that digital forms of media should replicate the richness of face-to-face communications for maximum effectiveness of communications. This is because rich media should result in less cognitive load, a reduction in ambiguity, and increased arousal in communications and engagement (Byron, 2008, Kock, 2005b, Rhoads, 2010, Ellwart et al., 2015, Savolainen, 2015). Richness and Leanness of media is explained by Lengel and Daft (1984) as the variations in a particular media's ability to clarify and resolve ambiguous transferal

of information. Rich media should result in less cognitive load processing and arrive at a conclusion to an ambiguous situation or problem faster than lean media could, meaning that the characteristics of the media itself influence the information processing phase (Kiesler et al., 1984, Trevino et al., 1987, Schmitz and Fulk, 1991). Different forms of media each have different levels of effectiveness in terms of being able to replicate the five key characteristics of natural media, which are colocation, synchronicity, perception of facial expression and body language, and speech. Consequently, face-to-face communications, which offer immediacy of feedback and instantaneous transferral of information, are seen as the richest form of personal communication, and the benchmark of communications standards (Daft and Lengel, 1986, Dennis et al., 2008). This subsequently means that other forms of media, such as social media, by design, lack a sense of immediacy, gesturing and speech ability (Minami et al., 2016, Kafetsios et al., 2017). As a result of this, any medium which either delivers less useful information per interaction (E-Mail, Books, Images) or excess information than would be expected (Virtual Reality, Augmented simulations) result in several information processing problems. Namely, this results in cognitive processing issues, fluctuations in physiological arousal, and communicative ambiguity, resulting in an unappealing and uninviting conversation or interaction where no beneficial information is transferred, leading to an increased likelihood that repeated or future interactions will not occur. In other words, the more the communications experience veers away from an acceptable level of both cognitive and communicative arousal and clarity, the greater the likelihood the experience of communicating becomes cognitively exhausting to the point that future interactions in this manner become less likely to occur (Kock, 2004, Kock, 2009, Dennis et al., 2008).

#### **2.4.2 Social Networking Site Naturalness**

This has several implications for media naturalness and its applicability in an SNS and CMC context. Firstly, hyper rich media, which encompasses platforms such as Virtual and Augmented Reality technologies, provides an experience that lacks the wholistic experience and consistency of face-to-face interactions and requires additional cognitive effort to process the changes in the experience (Kock, 2005b, Kock et al., 2008, Schulze et al., 2017), whilst a focus on two-dimensional visual interactions such as YouTube videos and online video conferencing programs are more effective (Verhulsdonck, 2007). Videos offer several advantages and disadvantages for the individual and their audience. Whilst the incorporation of speech and visible body language provide social cues and benefits to those involved, the lack of physical closeness to the audience make basic speech courtesies and spatial awareness considerations difficult (Schulze et al., 2017). The problem arises because, whilst they can see each other and can pick up basic visual cues, the mediated nature of the platform or medium restricts the amount of social information transferral that normally exists in traditional face-to-face communications

(Verhulsdonck, 2007). However, videos overcome these limitations by having the individual or character on screen “break the fourth wall” by addressing the audience directly, as if communicating with the viewer in a personal and informal manner (Hall et al., 2019, p. 89). This is most commonly seen in YouTube videos where the presenter provides product or service reviews or detailed guides on new and upcoming makeup products. The presenter looks directly into the camera and addresses the audience, using friendly and warm tones, whilst also gesturing to the camera as if engaged in a two way reciprocal exchange (Hall et al., 2019, Munnukka et al., 2019).

Secondly, media which is viewed as lean, including text-based communications such as emails, status updates on Twitter, or still-image posts to Instagram and Facebook, result in a lack of physiological arousal, increased cognitive load, and an increase in the ambiguity of the message (Kock, 2002, Kock, 2005b). This reduction in arousal forces users to compensate and adapt to their current communications limitations through what Kock (2008) refers to as compensatory adaptation theory. Compensatory Adaptation theory explores how the limitations of lean, two-dimensional mediums provide avenues for adaptation and allow for the incorporation of linguistic proxies like emojis and stylised language to bridge the gaps in CMC (e.g. LOL, ☺) (Schulze et al., 2017, Kock, 2007, Kock, 2005a). These adaptations make CMC based interactions significantly different to face-to-face interactions, resulting in a set of core competencies that form as a result of the inherent design of the platform, resulting in a reliance on synthesised language, and a drive to select the most natural media types to convey information.

Media naturalness theory suggests that;

A decrease in the naturalness of a medium should result in an increase in cognitive processing, an increase in communicative ambiguity, and a decrease in physiological arousal (Kock, 2005b, White et al., 2017).

Electronic communications, either by design or technical limitations, suppress key elements of face-to-face interaction (DeRosa et al., 2004, Kock, 2005b). This means that feedback may be received asynchronously (time-delayed/disconnected) in media such as blogs, forums, and comment sections. This disjointed and inconsistent timing parameter often results in exhaustion and frustration as individuals expect immediacy (Savolainen, 2015).

The degree to which a computer-mediated communications medium (CMC) support the ability to express and hear speech, is much more important than colocation, synchronicity, expressions of body language and facial gestures. This means that because speech is an evolutionary skill, it holds the most authentic value when communicating.

Finally, Compensatory Adaptation Theory states that given enough time and experience with the medium of communication, humans develop the requisite skills to effectively overcome

many of the limitations found within the medium (Kock, 2005a, Kock et al., 2006). Individuals develop ways of overcoming these limitations through the development of “meta-languages”. Meta-languages include the increased use of particular grammatical constructions, such as first person pronouns, or through increased cognitive effort (Kock, 2008, p. 16).

Currently, much of the focus of MNT is found within the organisational domain, with much work needed to understand the importance of natural and rich media as a vehicle for parasocial interactions through networking platforms (Munnukka et al., 2019). As a result of lack of focus on social media platforms, a gap exists in the literature regarding the prominence of rich and natural media types as predictors of parasocial involvement and interactions in these domains.

This, therefore, leads to this paper’s second research proposition:

## **RP2: Media naturalness is positively related to PSI**

In addition to media naturalness, research is required to examine the prominence of authentic communicative behaviours as indicators of parasocial relationship success. Authentic communications behaviours, such as self-disclosure and immediacy of feedback through speech and body language play a prominent role in understanding the impact of highly natural communications in computer-mediated contexts (Lewandowski et al., 2011, Maity et al., 2018), however further research is needed to understand the influence that natural media has on perceptions of authenticity of SNS personalities as a means of creating parasocial interactions and in ultimately fostering purchase intentions. Research into the authenticity of content creators in SNS contexts is currently limited, with most research focusing on the celebrities as brands and representatives of the brand, rather than a separate, and equally valuable, socially influential entity (Kowalczyk and Pounders, 2016). Further research is needed to understand how these influencers dictate consumer opinion through the cataloguing of their own experiences across multiple SNS platforms, and this is critical since SNS platforms differ in their ability to provide consumers with a variety of media types, creating a fragmentation in the usage and purpose of each platform (Booth and Matic, 2011, De Veirman et al., 2017) Importantly, research has found that whilst these influencers might have large followings (Freberg et al., 2011) some evidence suggest that their perceived authenticity may be variable (Kowalczyk and Pounders, 2016), as their content can often appear fake or scripted (Hou, 2019). This is problematic since a lack of authenticity can act to compromise follower trust, loyalty, and recommendation (Fritz et al., 2017, Ilicic and Webster, 2016, Beverland, 2006, Palmatier et al., 2006).

## 2.5 Authenticity (AUTH)

Authenticity is broadly defined by Ilicic and Webster (2016, p. 411) as “*what is genuine, unique, real, and true*”. Beverland (2006) further argues that it is a socially constructed interpretation by consumers, based on observation and experience. As a result, consumers are seen as co-creators of authenticity (Leigh et al., 2006). The ability for individuals and brands to provide something authentic, be it an experience or a product, has become a powerful competitive advantage in the marketplace (Luoma-aho et al., 2019). Consumers can either perceive an object, brand, or experience to be real and genuine, or artificial and fabricated (Beverland et al., 2010). Psychology and sociology literature define authentic individuals as those who are true to self (Kernis and Goldman, 2006). Conversely, inauthentic behaviours are understood as those which are fallacious (Enli, 2015), externally motivated and inconsistent (Moulard et al., 2015), as if being scripted or dictated by an external source (Tolson, 2010). Consequently, celebrity authenticity is understood as “*the perception that a celebrity behaves according to his or her true self*” (Moulard et al., 2015, p. 175), often incorporating amateurish, non-professional language in an effort to circumvent prototypical perceptions of elevated social presence (Enli, 2017).

Freberg et al. (2011) define social media influencers as “*a new type of independent third party endorser who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media.*” (p. 90). This implies that the variation between traditional celebrities and influencers comes from their prominent and active engagement with audiences primarily on social platforms. Djafarova and Rushworth (2017, p. 6) support this explanation of their value, stating that influencer prominence and popularity is “*based upon elements such as admiration, association, aspiration or recognition*”. As a result, social media influencers vary from the prototypical model of celebrity in a number of ways. Firstly, their platform of communications, social media, provides them with access to a worldwide pool of potential followers, accessible on demand, from anywhere in the world (Dolan et al., 2019, Hou, 2019). Secondly, unlike traditional celebrities who gain fame through mass media-based exploits (i.e. film, television, radio) (Hwang and Zhang, 2018), these figures often develop their large audience based on their willingness to repeatedly engage in topics of shared interest with the audience through the social media content they generate (Freberg et al., 2011). Accordingly, the metrics for determining influencer value differ when compared to traditional celebrities. Through platforms like YouTube and Instagram, the influencer’s reliance on metrics such as online likes and subscriptions or “follows” can indicate the prominence or value placed on their opinions or uploaded content (García-Rapp, 2017). This has trickledown effects as Bloomberg explains, 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of British children between the ages of 6 and 17 aspired to become YouTube influencers, more than three times the amount of respondents who aspired to become doctors and nurses (Stokel-



Walker, 2018). The financial importance of the social media celebrity can be quantified as Hausman (2019) explains that the average US influencer with 100,000 followers on Instagram can earn upwards of \$5000 per post, suggesting that influencers offer a low-cost effective option to the traditional celebrity.

Due to their presence as figures of perceived importance, celebrities and influencers alike are routinely judged based on their perceived social value and behaviours (Munnukka et al., 2019, Ferchaud et al., 2018). This manifests through self-branding and the reliance on modern technology in lieu of the “*legacy media*” (television, radio, and print) which had previously defined what made celebrities authentic (Khamis et al., 2017). Consequentially, social media has provided the average user with the tools necessary to emulate the celebrated status of more traditional mass media figures (Hou, 2019). As a result, the importance of self-branding in the digital-content age has become key to understanding the influencer (Khamis et al., 2017). Influencer authenticity has been shown to impact consumer’s positive feelings regarding brands and products, particularly when the influencer’s image and product’s image matched (Van Norel et al., 2014, Silvera and Austad, 2004). Influencer authenticity has been closely linked to follower purchase intention and or adopting of a particular behaviour or mindset which is congruent with the influencer’s message (Till et al., 2008).

As effective models of advertisement, digital influencers leverage their interactions with their followers to promote behaviours, values, and products (Hwang and Zhang, 2018). Digital influencers are aware of and understand their audience’s needs and can tailor more targeted content, ensuring that consumers feel personally attached whilst deepening the parasocial nature of the experience (Wei, 2017). This is further reinforced by Liu et al. (2017), as digital influencers are more persuasive and genuine than their inauthentically-perceived traditional counterparts.

Digital influencers much like traditional celebrities, develop deep connections with their audience when engaging regularly with their fans (Stever and Lawson, 2013). Disclosure of personal information through SNS (Marwick and Boyd, 2011a, Marwick and Boyd, 2011b) is seen as a primary indicator of authentic behaviour. Kowalczyk and Pounders (2016) explain “*consumers want to learn more about the celebrity as a person...not just aspects of their fame or their career...insights into celebrities’ authentic lives, as opposed to the imagery ... conveyed through the traditional media*” (p. 3). Consumers seek a genuine and “true to self” experience from their digital influencers (Ilicic and Webster, 2016), as opposed to the stylised and inauthentic glamour found on TV and in magazines (Kowalczyk and Pounders, 2016). Furthermore, Hu (2016) notes the underlying nature of the parasocial figure as one individual with varying identities or personae differentiated by the platform used for communications, suggesting that the whilst the figure may be separated by any number of platforms, their central

identity is composed of the many faces they reveal to the audience. In turn, this is the primary sample used for judging authenticity and dictating the value of a PSI with that mediated figure. Similarly, the value of occupational or ideological relevance plays a role in influencing perceptions of influencer authenticity (Chung and Cho, 2017). The importance of ensuring that the brand and the endorser fit appropriately is an important tool for validating authenticity of the influencer and the brand (Labrecque, 2014, Tolson, 2010). If the endorser is a figure that is not well-known or well established in a domain or field of interest, pairing them with a product or service, even on social media platforms, will result in negative perceptions of their value or worth (Chung and Cho, 2017). This move towards an open engagement with the audience is reflective of the parasocial nature of modern digital celebrity/audience engagement and thus we propose:

**RP3: Parasocial interactions are positively related to authenticity.**

This paper makes note of the importance of compatibility between the figure and the product and suggest that authenticity is both a directly and indirectly observable component of the experience of engaging with figures on SNS. As a result, the strength of the parasocial relationship between the influencer and the audience has been shown as an antecedent for behavioural changes, suggesting that loyalty is derived from these interactions and forms as a motivator for audience participation (Quintero Johnson and Patnoe-Woodley, 2016, Hu, 2016).

## **2.6 Loyalty**

Loyalty is defined by marketing literature as “*a deeply held commitment to rebuy or repatronize a preferred product/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand or same brand-set purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behaviour*” (Oliver, 1999 p. 34). As a result, loyalty can be understood as the relationship between consumer engagement and brand effectiveness, and the underlying mechanism which allows brands and consumers to interact with each other in meaningful ways (Kwong and Candinegara, 2014).

Dick and Basu (1994) explain that loyalty can be both attitudinal and behavioural, suggesting that while a consumer may feel positively about a brand or product, their behaviour can be influenced by a number of competitive factors such as competing brand favouritism or situational circumstances (e.g. word of mouth, referrals, recommendations, current sales for competing products). The theories put forth by Dick and Basu (1994) imply that loyalty forms as both a set of psychological and cognitive mechanisms in response to product or service offerings. Leckie et al. (2016) both extends and simplifies upon this psycho-cognitive theory of consumer

loyalty, explaining that it has been shown to form from the interrelationship between both an individual's beliefs about an idea, brand, or product, and their actions in response towards the idea, brand, or product. This notion of loyal consumers or loyalty to a brand functions as the interactions of trust and commitment (Napoli et al., 2014). This suggests a psychological and cognitive element to loyalty derived from not only the direct interaction or experience but rather through an extended experience or set of interactions. Loyalty has been found to manifest through engagement across multiple channels and domains (Leckie et al., 2016), increased information search (Beatty and Smith, 1987), and increased purchasing intentions (Osei-Frimpong and McLean, 2018).

### **2.6.1 Purchase Intention (PI)**

Purchase intent is defined by Hwang and Zhang (2018, p. 159) as “*consumers’ intentions to purchase a product or a service based on their subjective judgment with their general evaluations*”. This is a fundamental part of the consumer-brand digital relationship as brands seek to regularly “*use popular social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to create buzz ...increase sales and gain larger returns from investments*” (Vithayathil, Dadgar, & Osiri, 2017, p. 4128). Factors relating to purchase intention within SNS are parasocial interactions (Audrezet et al., 2018), eWOM (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2013, Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004), and authenticity (Hwang and Zhang, 2018).

A prominent driver of purchasing intentions according to the literature are parasocial interactions and relationships (Audrezet et al., 2018, Munnukka et al., 2019). When consumers feel connected to a social media influencer, they are driven by their messages and content to make decisions and engage brands at a higher level. This is because these influential figures appear socially closer and the audience perceive higher levels of congruence with the content they upload (Hwang and Zhang, 2018, Park et al., 2014). Within digital marketing contexts, parasocial interactions occur on social networking platforms through rich and natural media types, resulting in repeated opportunities for consumers to interact with an influencer and learn about their opinions regarding brands, products, and services (Munnukka et al., 2019). These digital interactions with influencers imitate the traditional word-of-mouth experience that occurs within social circles and often result in consumers feeling that the information they obtain is far more genuine than traditional advertising because it comes from someone who appears socially or culturally similar to them (Hwang and Zhang, 2018). Furthermore, because these electronic word of mouth PSIs hold value to the consumer, they increase the likelihood of purchase intent, as the consumer feels compelled by a friend to make a purchasing decision (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2013, Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004).

Purchasing intent in a digital marketing context often derives from PSI inducing electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM). eWOM is defined by Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, and

Gremler (2004, p. 39) as “*Any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about the product or company which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the internet*”. eWOM provides consumers with the opportunity to engage with others about a product or service and contribute their own experiences. This is because eWOM utilises Social Networking sites and their vast array of content to ensure that consumers have access to as many different sources of information as possible, allowing them to form their own ideas and opinions about a product or service. This is reinforced by Tseng et al. (2014) who found that purchase intention in virtual communities was positively associated with eWOM. Because consumers felt that eWOM was a more authentic and unfiltered way of communicating information about a product or service it resulted in an increased likelihood of purchase intention.

Similarly, authentic behaviours have attributional effects on PI, as De Veirman et al. (2017) explain, Instagram influencers who limit the number of people they follow are seen as less likable, inauthentic and not credible. This perception translates to consumer behaviour as Hwang and Zhang (2018) explain that the appeal behind the digital celebrity’s ability to influence PI is their sociability. Therefore, the less sociable and engaging an online influencer makes themselves across social networking services, the less likely they are to sway opinion and create parasocial interactions and drive purchasing intentions.

Finally, SNS also play a prominent role in influencing PI. As eWOM occurs online, the information sought by the consumer is easily accessible and transparent, unlike in traditional media, where information is delivered asymmetrically, and static in nature, meaning new information cannot readily alter what is being delivered (Park and Kim, 2008). SNS benefit from this transparency, as relevant information is readily available and routinely updated (Hwang and Zhang, 2018). Digital influencers understand this and because of their elevated social prominence and credibility, they can promote consumer PI, resulting in more effective eWOM. This approach to marketing suggests that consumer PI is positively associated with their perceptions of digital influencers and their use of SNS to manufacture an engaging and authentic experience online.

This leads to this study’s fourth research proposition:

**RP4: Authenticity is positively related to purchasing intentions**

## **2.7 Conclusion**

This chapter began by identifying the importance of parasocial interactions and the theoretical developments derived from the Digital Content Marketing literature. The constructs of media richness and media naturalness were introduced to the reader and approaches to their conceptualisation were discussed, including prominence in social networking and psychological underpinnings of their operational mechanics. Following this, a detailed discussion of authenticity was presented, before concluding with an examination of the components of purchasing intentions. Throughout this review, knowledge gaps in the literature were identified and synthesised. By the conclusion of this chapter, a broad theoretical foundation for the study of media selection in social networking relationship development was presented. The next chapter, Chapter 3, builds the conceptual model and research propositions for this study, outlining the design and methodology chosen.

***Chapter Three: Methodology & Preliminary Data Analysis for the  
Purification, Confirmation and Validation of Measures***

### **3.1 Introduction**

This section should be read in conjunction with Chapter Four. Firstly, an overview of how the measures and stimulus media were chosen, followed by an explanation of how data was collected is provided. Following this, the subsequent analysis reports the data analysis for the purification, confirmation, and validation of the measures used in this study. A preliminary analysis of the data including an examination of outliers, normality, multicollinearity, method bias, and a demographic and usage-based profile of the survey respondents is first discussed. An exploratory factor analysis is then presented to identify the factor structure of the data, and to purify the research scales. The reader is then introduced to the two-step approach to structural equation modelling that is utilised in this research study. The first of these steps, the confirmatory factor analysis, is presented and the research measures are examined for their goodness of fit to the data. Structural equation modelling reliability and validity are also examined. This analysis therefore serves to validate the measurement model informing the full structural equation model and subsequent analysis presented in Chapter Four.

#### **3.1.1 Measure Selection**

In selecting the measures, extensive literature was consulted to determine the most appropriate items to measure each of the five constructs. Firstly, media richness was conceptualised as comprising seven items measuring the five factors of rich media as per the approaches of Anandarajan et al. (2010) and Ferry et al. (2001). This was followed by media naturalness, which was conceptualised as comprising two items measuring vagueness and ambiguity as per the scales of Kock et al. (2007). Parasocial interactions was conceptualised as comprising eight items, measuring the interaction process and experience which were derived from the scale put forward by Munnukka et al. (2019). Furthermore, authenticity was conceptualised as comprising seven items measuring consumer perceptions of authenticity as per Munnukka et al. (2019). Finally, purchase intent was conceptualised as comprising two items which were derived from Yi (1990) and Gefen and Straub (2004). These items were conceptualised as a direct indicator of purchasing intent, asking the participants directly about their purchasing opinions of the stimulus presented. The items are presented below within the EFA in chapter 3.3.1 and within Table 8.

#### **3.1.2 Stimulus Selection**

In choosing the stimulus presented to participants, the existing literature indicated that the presentation of either rich or lean media from a social media influencer would dictate how a consumer felt about the figure (Munnukka et al., 2019, Ferry et al., 2001, Ferchaud et al., 2018, Hwang and Zhang, 2018, Chung and Cho, 2017, Quintero Johnson and Patnoe-Woodley, 2016, Lee and Watkins, 2016). Therefore, a brief YouTube video and an Instagram image of the same advertised product (a drink-chilling device), were chosen to examine how respondents

reacted to differing media types. The video and image both showed the product, whilst the video went into depth in examining the product and its usability. In an effort to avoid any product or brand-related biases, an arbitrary product was chosen that lacked any recognisable branding (Esch et al., 2009, Esch et al., 2006). The selection of *Unbox Therapy's* Lewis Hilsenteger as the social media influencer was made because his YouTube channel outputs a large number of videos and posts related to a wide variety of categories from the latest technology products to common and unusual consumer goods and household products, suggesting no direct biases or preferences towards any one brand or product category. Furthermore, his current YouTube subscriber base stands at 17 million users, and along with a total video view count of over 3 billion views this indicates higher levels of recognition and prominence as a social networking influencer.

### **3.1.3 Data Collection Process**

An online survey via Qualtrics survey software was composed of a randomly allocated video or a still image along with a survey comprised of 26 items derived from the literature. The survey was distributed to participants across social networking platforms Facebook and Redditt. The surveys were distributed across groups on the social media platforms who engaged in regular interaction with brands and branded figures. Furthermore, participants were also sourced from students from the Macquarie Business School. Clicking on the survey link lead participants to a consent form outlining the requirements of the survey and the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Those who consented to the survey were then taken to the randomly assigned media and survey which followed. From these outlets, 221 usable responses were attained and used for the following data analysis.

## **3.2 Preliminary Analysis**

Preliminary analysis of the data followed six steps: data preparation; analysis of missing data; identification and examination of outliers; assessment of normality; examination of multicollinearity, and an examination of common method bias. A brief discussion of the findings of the preliminary analysis are presented next.

### **3.2.1 Data Preparation**

Data preparation followed two steps. First, completed questionnaires were case number coded for future reference. Second, data was then coded into SPSS, version 25.0 for electronic storage and statistical analysis.

### **3.2.2 Missing Data**

Cohen et al. (1983) suggested that missing data of up to 10 percent is not considered large and is unlikely to be problematic in the interpretation of the results from studies. The data was examined for variables that had more than 10% missing data (Malhotra et al., 2004). In light



of this, the study experienced no missing data and obtained a total response rate of 221 respondents.

### **3.2.3 Outliers**

The frequency tables were examined to identify univariate outliers of each measurement item. Multivariate outliers were identified by computing the Mahalanobis  $d^2$  distance (Hair et al., 2006, Tabachnick et al., 1996). Whilst a number of outlying observations were identified from both analyses, these observations were considered to be representative of the population and were therefore retained in the analysis (Tabachnick and Fidell, 1989).

### **3.2.4 Normality**

The Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests were used to examine the distribution normality of the data (Field, 2013). The tests revealed that the distribution was non-normal ( $p < 0.05$ ). The skewness and kurtosis of the data set was further examined using a z test. All measurement item values exceeded the critical value of  $\pm 1.96$  ( $p < 0.05$ ) indicating violations of normality (Hair et al., 2006). The data was found to be negatively skewed and positively kurtotic. Multivariate normality was examined using Mardia's coefficient ( $> 1.96$ ) to further investigate distribution of the data. The results of this analysis confirmed significant non-normality of the data. The non-normality in the data was not considered to affect subsequent analysis given the counteracting effect of large sample sizes with regard to non-normality (Hair et al., 2006).

### **3.2.5 Multicollinearity**

Multicollinearity was assessed using stepwise multiple regression (Hair et al., 2006). Particular attention was given to the variable inflation factor scores (VIF). Multicollinearity was not considered a problem within the dataset as tolerance values were  $> .10$  and the VIF index statistics were  $< 10$  (Hair et al., 2006).

### **3.2.6 Common Method Bias**

Common method bias was examined using Harman's single factor test (Jarvis et al., 2003). All variables were loaded into a single exploratory factor analysis. Examination of the unrotated factor solution revealed that multiple factors emerged from the factor analysis. These results provide evidence that common method bias was unlikely to be a concern in this study (Jarvis et al., 2003).

### **3.2.7 Respondent Profile**

The demographic and usage profiles of the respondents are shown in Table 2. The analysis suggests that there were twice as many female respondents as male respondents in the overall sample. The age of respondents was skewed towards 18-24-year-olds. Approximately

half of all participants received either an Instagram Post or a YouTube Video. A precise breakdown of the respondent demographics can be seen in Table 2.

**Table 2 Respondent Profile**

<i>Characteristic</i>	<b>Total (n=221)</b>	<b>Percentage Total (n=221)</b>
<b>Age Total</b>	<b>221</b>	<b>100%</b>
18-24	109	49.3
25-34	51	23.1
35-44	44	19.9
45-54	10	4.5
55 and Older	7	3.2
<b>Gender Total</b>	<b>221</b>	<b>100%</b>
Male	82	37.1
Female	139	62.9
<b>Education Total</b>	<b>221</b>	<b>100%</b>
Less than high school	1	0.5
High school graduate	58	26.2
Diploma	24	10.9
Bachelor's degree	109	49.3
Master's degree	24	10.9
Doctorate	5	2.3
<b>Employment Status Total</b>	<b>221</b>	<b>100%</b>
Employed full time	68	30.8
Employed part time	54	24.4
Casual Employment	45	20.4
Unemployed	51	23.1
Retired	3	1.4
<b>Usage Frequency Total</b>	<b>221</b>	<b>100%</b>
Several times a Day	160	72.4
Once a Day	32	14.5

4-6 times a week	9	4.1
2-3 times a week	3	1.4
Once a week	5	2.3
Rarely	10	4.5
Never	2	0.9
<b>YouTube or Instagram Total</b>	<b>221</b>	<b>100%</b>
Instagram Post	113	51.1
YouTube Video	108	48.9

*Note: Percentage breakdowns may not add precisely to 100%, due to rounding.*

This first section has provided a preliminary analysis of the data and has examined its appropriateness for further multivariate analysis. The following section puts forward the results of the exploratory factor analysis. This analysis was conducted to examine the underlying factor structure of the measures used in this study (Tabachnick et al., 1996).

### **3.3 Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)**

Four preliminary tests were conducted on the data prior to performing the exploratory factor analysis to assess the suitability of the data to factor analysis. The Bartlett Test of Sphericity was used to test for significance of the correlation matrix, and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure was used to establish the suitability of the data for factor analysis (Tabachnick et al., 1996). The Bartlett Test of Sphericity was significant and the KMO was greater than 0.60 (Tabachnick et al., 1996). The inter-item correlations were further examined and were found to be substantial ( $>0.30$ ), and adequate (70%). A visual examination of the anti-image matrix revealed low values. The data was considered suitable for factor analysis (Tabachnick et al., 1996).

A number of methods were employed to assist in the exploratory factor analysis process. These included: the use of principal components factor extraction (Hair et al., 2006); Kaiser's minimum eigenvalue of 1.0 rule (Hair et al., 1998), the Catell scree plot and varimax factor rotation to assist in reducing the data into a minimum number of factors (Hair et al., 2006). Items were considered for exclusion where they were found to either cross-load at  $>.30$  on more than one factor, result in a large drop in item-to-total correlations  $>.20$ , load on an unexpected factor or display communalities  $<.50$ . Coefficient alphas were also examined and alpha scores  $>.70$  were considered to indicate a reliable measurement scale (Garver and Mentzer, 1999). The conceptual model presented in Chapter 1 identified five constructs. These constructs included: media richness, media naturalness, parasocial interactions, authenticity, and purchase intentions. Exploratory factor analysis and scale reliability was undertaken to assess the

underlying factor structure of these items, and to assess the internal consistency of each measure. The results of these analyses for each construct are presented next.

### 3.3.1 Media Richness

Media richness was conceptualised as comprising seven items as per the approach of Anandarajan et al. (2010) and Ferry et al. (2001). These items were factor analysed using the principal components method of factor extraction. This analysis resulted in one factor (eigenvalue 5.117>1.0) accounting for 73.10% of the variance extracted. The results can be seen in Table 3. The factor pattern that emerged from this analysis indicated a single factor solution. Analysis of the coefficient alpha values for this scale supported its internal consistency and reliability (alpha = 0.938).

**Table 3 EFA for Media Richness**

Scale Items	Factor Loadings	Mean	SD
<b>Media Richness</b>			
The influencers message felt personal to me.	.763	3.39	1.792
The influencer uses a variety of different cues (e.g. attitudes, emotions, tones).	.896	4.40	1.860
The influencer uses rich and varied language.	.836	3.95	1.778
The influencer communicates through spoken word	.837	4.62	1.968
The influencer communicates through voice inflection and intonations	.878	4.29	2.051
The influencer communicates through body language	.878	4.16	2.104
The influencer communicates through facial expressions	.890	3.93	2.192

### 3.3.2 Media Naturalness

Media naturalness was conceptualised as comprising two items as per the scales of Kock et al. (2007). These items were factor analysed using the principal components method of factor extraction. This analysis resulted in one factor (eigenvalue 1.852>1.0) accounting for 92.62% of the variance extracted. The results can be seen in Table 4. The factor pattern that emerged from this analysis indicated a single factor solution. Analysis of the coefficient alpha values for this scale supported its internal consistency and reliability (alpha = 0.920).

**Table 4 EFA for Media Naturalness**

Scale Items	Factor Loadings	Mean	SD
<b>Media Naturalness</b>			
The influencers information was vague.	.96	4.09	1.803
The influencers information was unclear.	.96	4.34	1.796

### 3.3.3 Parasocial Interactions

Parasocial Interactions was conceptualised as comprising eight items which were derived from the scale put forward by Munnukka et al. (2019). Factor analysis of the eight items using varimax rotation resulted in the extraction of one factor that accounted for 76.23% of the variance. The results can be seen in Table 5. The factor pattern that emerged from this analysis indicated a single factor solution. Analysis of the coefficient alpha values for this scale supported its internal consistency and reliability ( $\alpha = 0.955$ ).

**Table 5 EFA for Parasocial Interactions**

Scale Items	Factor Loadings	Mean	SD
<b>Parasocial Interactions</b>			
I look forward to watching the influencer	.91	3.66	1.819
If the influencer appeared on another social media platform, I would follow them	.88	3.32	1.779
When I'm watching the influencer, I feel as if I am part of his group	.91	3.35	1.810
I think the influencer is like an old friend	.89	2.82	1.658
I would like to meet the influencer in person	.88	2.85	1.643
If there were a story about the influencer in a newspaper or magazine, I would read it	.83	3.34	1.814
The influencer makes me feel comfortable as if I am with friends	.86	3.38	1.769
When the influencer shows me how he feels about the brand, it helps me make up my own mind about the brand	.82	3.79	1.810

### 3.3.4 Authenticity

Authenticity was conceptualised as comprising seven items as per Munnukka et al. (2019). These items were factor analysed using the principal components method of factor extraction. This analysis resulted in one factor (eigenvalue 5.467>1.0) accounting for 78.10% of the variance extracted. The results can be seen in Table 6. The factor pattern that emerged from this analysis indicated a single factor solution. Analysis of the coefficient alpha values for this scale supported its internal consistency and reliability ( $\alpha = 0.952$ ).

**Table 6 EFA for Authenticity**

Scale Items	Factor Loadings	Mean	SD
<b>Authenticity</b>			
I feel the influencer was honest	.90	4.43	1.624
I consider the influencer trustworthy	.91	4.07	1.515
I feel the influencer was truthful	.90	4.36	1.476
I consider the influencer earnest	.91	4.25	1.492
I feel the influencer knows a lot about the product	.87	4.38	1.607
I feel the influencer is competent to make assertions about the product	.88	4.38	1.535
I consider the influencer sufficiently experienced to make assertions about the product	.81	4.10	1.588

### 3.3.5 Purchase Intent

Purchase Intent was conceptualised as comprising two items which were derived from Yi (1990) and Gefen and Straub (2004). These items were factor analysed using the principal components method of factor extraction. This analysis resulted in one factor (eigenvalue 1.909>1.0) accounting for 95.45% of the variance extracted. The results can be seen in Table 7. The factor pattern that emerged from this analysis indicated a single factor solution. Analysis of the coefficient alpha values for this scale supported its internal consistency and reliability ( $\alpha = 0.951$ ).

**Table 7 EFA for Purchase Intent**

Scale Items	Factor Loadings	Mean	SD
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<b>Purchase Intent</b>			
What are your chances of buying The Portable Rapid Drink Chiller?	.98	2.91	1.928
I am very likely to buy The Portable Rapid Drink Chiller	.98	2.69	1.777

The exploratory factor analyses presented thus far provide an assessment of the underlying dimensionality of the measures used in this study (Polit, 1996). This assisted in model specification and provided the foundation for further assessment of the measurement and structural models for structural equation modelling (Gerbing and Hamilton, 1996).

### **3.4 Structural Equation Modelling (SEM)**

The research model guiding this enquiry was examined using structural equation modelling (Arbuckle and Wothke, 1999). A two-step approach to analysis was employed following Anderson and Gerbing (1998). This involved the specification, and evaluation of a confirmatory factor analysis (Garver and Mentzer, 1999), followed by assessment of the structural relationships between the latent constructs (Anderson and Gerbing, 1998). The model estimation and evaluation process are briefly discussed. This chapter reports the first step of the two-step approach, assessment of the measurement model (Anderson and Gerbing, 1998). The structural model and research hypotheses were brought forward and examined in Chapter Four.

#### **3.4.1 Model Estimation**

A partial disaggregation approach was adopted in this study. This approach reduces random error, increases the stability of estimates, and minimises information loss typically associated with aggregate approaches, whilst maintaining a multiple indicator approach to estimation (Garver and Mentzer, 1999, Bagozzi and Heatherton, 1994). Items representing media richness, parasocial interactions, and authenticity were arbitrarily assigned to form a composite indicator of each construct (Bagozzi and Heatherton, 1994, Sweeney et al., 1999). Each composite indicator was assigned between two and three items. The 10 composite indicators and their original items are shown in Table 8 on the next page.

**Table 8 Composite Indicators & Original Items**

<b>Composite Indicator</b>	<b>Measurement Items</b>
<b>MR1</b>	The influencers message felt personal to me.
	The influencer uses a variety of different cues (e.g. attitudes, emotions, tones).
<b>MR2</b>	The influencer uses rich and varied language.
	The influencer communicates through spoken word
<b>MR3</b>	The influencer communicates through voice inflection and intonations
	The influencer communicates through body language
	The influencer communicates through facial expressions
<b>MN ITEM 2.1.2</b>	The influencers information was vague.
<b>MN ITEM 2.1.3</b>	The influencers information was unclear.
<b>PSI1</b>	I look forward to watching the influencer
	If the influencer appeared on another social media platform, I would follow them
<b>PSI2</b>	When I'm watching the influencer, I feel as if I am part of his group
	I think the influencer is like an old friend
<b>PSI3</b>	I would like to meet the influencer in person
	If there were a story about the influencer in a newspaper or magazine, I would read it
<b>PSI4</b>	The influencer makes me feel comfortable as if I am with friends
	When the influencer shows me how he feels about the brand, it helps me make up my own mind about the brand
<b>AUTH1</b>	I feel the influencer was honest
	I consider the influencer trustworthy
<b>AUTH2</b>	I feel the influencer was truthful
	I consider the influencer earnest
<b>AUTH3</b>	I feel the influencer knows a lot about the product
	I feel the influencer is competent to make assertions about the product
	I consider the influencer sufficiently experienced to make assertions about the product
<b>PI ITEM 5.1</b>	What are your chances of buying The Portable Rapid Drink Chiller?
<b>PI ITEM 5.2</b>	I am very likely to buy The Portable Rapid Drink Chiller

*N.B. All scale items measured by 7-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree.*



### **3.4.2 Model Evaluation**

Multiple indices were used to examine and assess fit of the measurement model (Hoyle and Panter, 1995). Absolute fit was examined using the Chi-square statistic, goodness-of-fit (GFI), and the root mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) indices. Reliance on the Chi-square statistic is not recommended for large samples >200 (Hair et al. 1998), or for samples which contain violations of normality (Baumgartner and Homburg, 1996) due to sensitivity of the test statistic. RMSEA provide a greater degree of robustness and were therefore relied on in this study as primary measures of fit (Hoyle and Panter 1995). Incremental fit indices including the type 2 incremental fit index (IFI), and type 3 comparative fit index (CFI) were also used based on their robustness to sample size. The criterion values used in analysis of the measurement model are as follows: Chi-square  $p > 0.05$ , GFI  $> 0.90$ , IFI  $> 0.90$ , CFI  $> 0.90$  (Hoyle and Panter 1995; Garver and Mentzer 1999). Acceptable fit of the measurement model was determined if: standardised residuals  $< 2.58$  (Hair et al. 1998), and if parameter estimates were statistically significant, based on a  $\pm 1.645$  critical ratio value, and path coefficients  $> 0.50$  (Garver and Mentzer 1999, Bagozzi and Yi 1988, Hair et al. 1998).

### **3.5 Assessment of the Measurement Model**

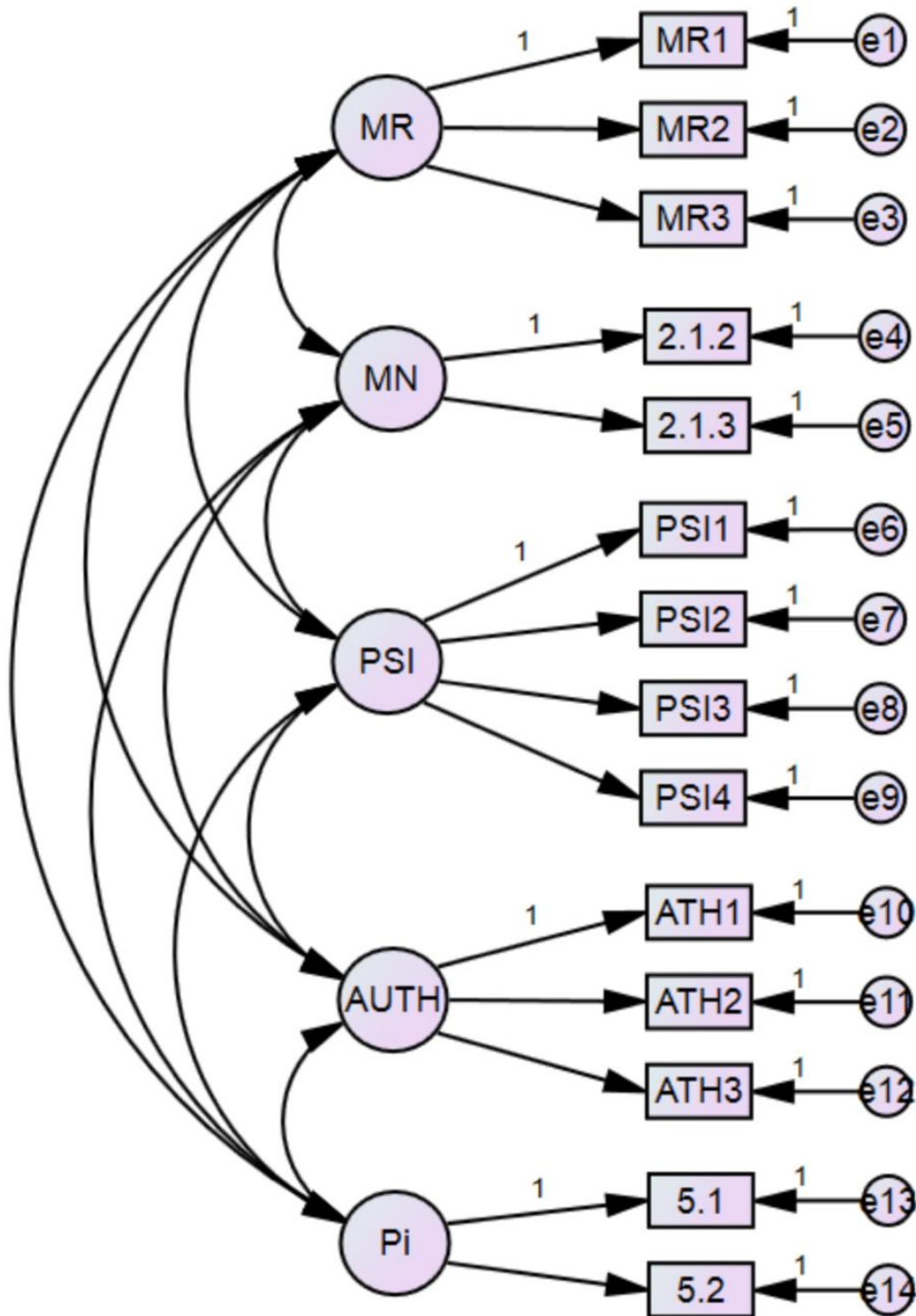
A measurement model was developed in order to firstly, stipulate the proposed relationships between the latent constructs, and the observed indicators and to secondly, assess the ability of the indicators to serve as measures of those constructs (Polit, 1996, Jöreskog and Sörbom, 1993).

### **3.6 Confirmatory Factor Analysis**

The conceptual model developed for analysis in this study puts forward five constructs, namely media richness, media naturalness, parasocial interactions, authenticity and purchase intention. The exploratory factor analysis presented in this section found that these five constructs were described by five factors.

Analysis of the Cronbach alphas for each of these factor structures established the reliability of those factors. Based on these findings, a single measurement model was constructed in which the composite indicators and items reflected each of the five constructs. Each of the indicators was constrained to its respective construct. A confirmatory factor analysis was then used to further establish the strength of these measures. This model is shown in Figure 2.

**Figure 2 Measurement Model**



As can be seen in Table 11, the model fit indices for this measurement model indicated that the synthesised model fitted the data well. The GFI, IFI, and CFI indices exceeded the  $>.90$  criterion for acceptable model fit. The RMSEA index also exhibited acceptable fit ( $<0.09$ ). Although the  $\chi^2$  value was significant ( $p < 0.01$ ), this finding is not uncommon for small sample sizes. The measurement model fitted the data well. The aggregated model demonstrated acceptable fit  $\chi^2 183.67$ ,  $df 67$ , GFI .90, CFI .96, IFI .96, RMSEA 0.089

**Table 9 Fit Indices for the Constructs**

Model Fit for Constructs: CFA Model Model shown in Figure 2	Goodness-of-Fit Indices						
	$\chi^2$	<i>df</i>	<i>P</i>	RMSEA	GFI	CFI	IFI
Sample (n = 221)	183.67	67	.000	.089	.90	.96	.96

Parameter estimates were examined in addition to the goodness-of-fit indices in order to further establish the strength of the indicators as measures of their constructs. All parameter estimates were significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level and well above the  $\pm 1.645$  criterion value. All parameter estimates exceeded the 0.50 criterion. The results are presented in Table 10.

**Table 10 Parameter Estimates and Critical Ratio Values for the Constructs**

Composite Indicators and Latent Constructs CFA Model Model shown in Figure 2	Parameter Estimate	CR value
<b>Media Richness</b>		
MR1	.91	N/A
MR2	.88	18.92
MR3	.87	18.66
<b>Media Naturalness</b>		
ITEM 2.1.2	.89	N/A
ITEM 2.1.3	.96	14.11
<b>Parasocial Interactions</b>		
PSI1	.93	N/A
PSI2	.91	23.30
PSI3	.88	21.06
PSI4	.85	19.05
<b>Authenticity</b>		
AUTH1	.95	N/A
AUTH2	.97	30.57
AUTH3	.81	17.89
<b>Purchase Intentions</b>		
ITEM 5.1	.94	N/A
ITEM 5.2	.96	25.73

*Note: The parameter estimates reported are the standardised regression weights. CR value is the critical ratio of the unstandardised regression weights. N/A means 'not applicable' as the parameter was constrained for model identification.*

The results of this confirmatory factor analysis confirm the results of the exploratory factor analysis. As such, it can be concluded that the indicators used in this study serve as strong measures of their respective constructs. Confirmation of the constructs was established.

### **3.7 Structural Equation Modelling Reliability and Validity Measures**

This section reports structural equation modelling reliability and validity in order to provide additional rigour (Garver and Mentzer 1999). *Item reliability* was examined via the squared multiple correlations for each item and its latent construct. Squared multiple correlations indicate acceptable fit if  $>.50$  (Bollen 1989, Hair et al. 1998). The results are presented in Table 11.

**Table 11 Squared Multiple Correlations for Measurement Items**

<b>Measurement Items and Latent Constructs</b>	<b>Squared Multiple Correlation</b>
<b>Media Richness</b>	
MR1	.83
MR2	.77
MR3	.76
<b>Media Naturalness</b>	
ITEM 2.1.2	.79
ITEM 2.1.3	.92
<b>Parasocial Interactions</b>	
PSI1	.86
PSI2	.84
PSI3	.78
PSI4	.72
<b>Authenticity</b>	
AUTH1	.90
AUTH2	.94
AUTH3	.65
<b>Purchase Intent</b>	
ITEM 5.1	.89
ITEM 5.2	.93

Scale reliability was then assessed using Fornell and Larcker's (1981) formula for construct reliability in order to measure the internal consistency of each of the scales used to measure the latent constructs. Fornell and Larcker's (1981) formula for construct reliability is as follows:  $CREL = (\sum \lambda)^2 / [(\sum \lambda)^2 + \sum (1 - \lambda_j^2)]$ . Table 12 presents the results of this analysis. All scales exceed the criterion value of 0.80 recommended by Fornell and Larcker (1981). The scales used to measure media richness, media naturalness, parasocial interactions, authenticity, and purchase intent were therefore found to exhibit internal consistency and reliability.

To provide further evidence of reliability, average variance extracted was also calculated according to Fornell and Larcker's (1981) formula:  $AVE = \sum \lambda^2 / [\sum \lambda^2 + \sum (1 - \lambda_j^2)]$ . All scales exceeded the 0.50 criterion value for scale reliability (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). The results are presented in Table 12.

**Table 12 SEM Scale Reliability**

<b>SEM Scale Reliability for Constructs</b>	<b>C-REL</b>	<b>AVE</b>
<b>Authenticity</b>	0.94	0.83
<b>Media Richness</b>	0.92	0.80
<b>Media Naturalness</b>	0.87	0.78
<b>Parasocial Interactions</b>	0.94	0.78
<b>Purchase Intentions</b>	0.95	0.91

### **3.7.1 Structural Equation Modelling Validity**

*Convergent validity* was established for all five scales used in this study. Media richness, media naturalness, parasocial interactions, authenticity, and purchase intentions exhibited parameter estimates above the 0.50 criterion, and displayed significance at the  $\pm 1.645$ ,  $p > 0.05$  level. In addition, the average variance extracted estimates demonstrated that the measurement scales accounted for a greater proportion of explained variance than measurement error as the AVE statistics were above the  $> 0.50$  criterion value as per Table 12. The fit indices for the measurement model were also found to be acceptable (CFI, IFI  $> 0.90$ ; RMSEA  $< 0.09$ ). Convergent validity of the scales was therefore established.

*Discriminant validity* was also examined according to Fornell and Larcker's (1981) stringent tests to establish separation between latent constructs. Discriminant validity was established for all latent constructs as the average variance extracted for each construct was greater than the squared structural path correlation between each construct pair. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 13.

**Table 13 Discriminate Validity Scale**

	<b>CR</b>	<b>AVE</b>	<b>MSV</b>	<b>MaxR(H)</b>	<b>ATH</b>	<b>MR</b>	<b>MN</b>	<b>PSI</b>	<b>PI</b>
<b>ATH</b>	0.94	0.83	0.47	0.96	<b>0.91</b>				
<b>MR</b>	0.92	0.80	0.60	0.94	0.69	<b>0.89</b>			
<b>MN</b>	0.87	0.78	0.16	1.03	0.40	0.40	<b>0.88</b>		
<b>PSI</b>	0.94	0.78	0.60	0.94	0.69	0.78	0.21	<b>0.89</b>	
<b>PI</b>	0.95	0.91	0.59	0.95	0.58	0.58	0.02	0.77	<b>0.95</b>

## ***Chapter Four: Integrated Results, Discussion and Implications***

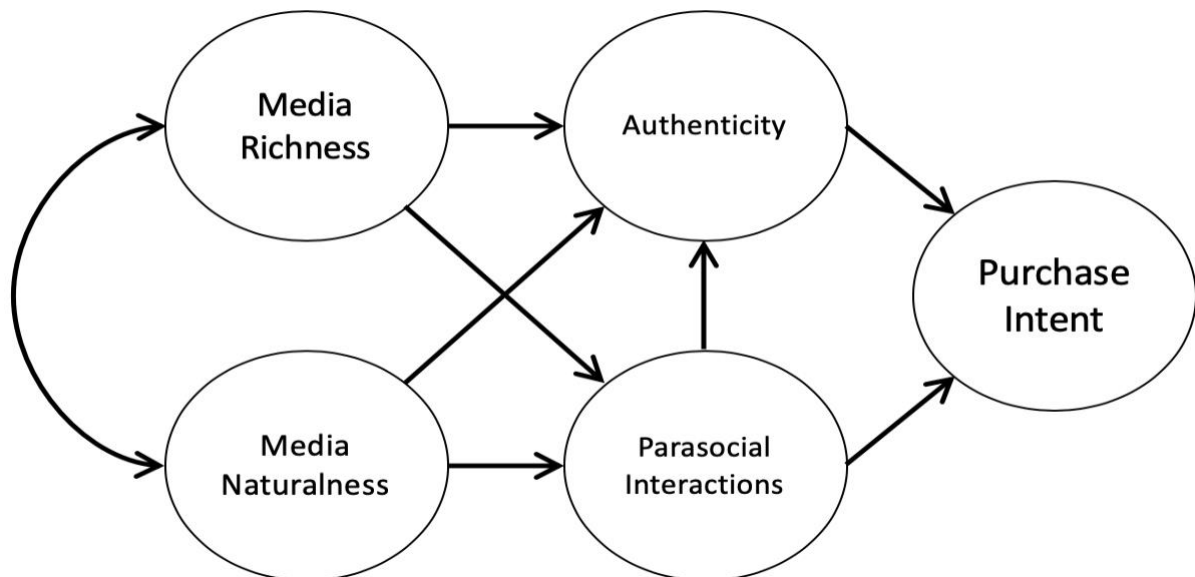
## 4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter reported the analysis and findings of the research model guiding this inquiry. This chapter presents the results, contributions and implications of the research findings. The first section of this chapter reintroduces the research theme guiding the research study and summarises the findings of the quantitative model. The theoretical and managerial contributions of the study are then discussed. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the investigation and presents directions for future research.

## 4.2 Media Influence: the role of characteristics, authenticity and parasocial interactions on purchase intentions

This study developed a model of media influence which specifically examined the role of media richness, and media naturalness as antecedents in the development of parasocial interactions, authenticity and ultimately purchase intentions. This model is shown in Figure 1. The context of this study was social media influencers.

**Figure 1: Conceptual model**



*Notes: The present study investigates the structural interrelationships between constructs in the formation of purchase intentions. Furthermore, the present study examines (1) the structural interrelationships between media richness and media naturalness in the formation of parasocial interactions and perceptions of authenticity and (2) whether the salience of these constructs influences purchase intentions.*

The development of the research model progressed through three stages. The first stage involved a critical review of the literature. This review examined the conceptualisation and measurement of media naturalness and media richness, as well as the role of parasocial influence and authenticity in the formation of purchase intentions. The reader was then introduced to the interrelationships between these constructs.



Based on this critical review, the second stage of the research developed a conceptual model which examined how media characteristics shape parasocial interactions with influencers, as well as perceptions of authenticity and how this in turn impacts upon purchase intentions (seen in figure 1). The research propositions guiding the inquiry were then presented. A multi-construct model of the antecedents to purchase intention formation, which considered the effect of media and influencer characteristics, was forwarded.

Informed by the literature review, the second stage of the research inquiry empirically tested the theoretical model guiding the investigation using a two-step approach to structural equation modelling. This approach empirically established the strength of the interrelationships between the constructs identified in the theoretical model, namely media richness, media naturalness, parasocial interactions, authenticity, and their impact on purchase intentions. The empirical testing of the theoretical model guiding this thesis inquiry therefore completed the analysis approach adopted in this thesis. The results of the quantitative stage of the research are presented next in this chapter.

### 4.3 Results

The hypothesized relationships in the model were tested using structural equation modelling. Goodness of fit statistics for the final structural model indicated that the model fitted the data adequately (GFI=0.90, CFI=0.96, IFI= 0.96. RMSEA=0.93). The proposed model explained 68% of the variance in the purchase intention construct. One of the seven total structural path coefficients was found to be marginally non-significant. The results are summarized in Table 1.

**TABLE 14 Standardized Path Estimates for Research Model**

Relationships		Total Sample N=221	
		$\beta$	CR
H1	Media naturalness → Parasocial interactions	-0.184	-3.093
H2	Media naturalness → Authenticity	0.195	3.342
H3	Media richness → Parasocial interactions	0.823	12.303
H4	Media richness → Authenticity	0.343	3.701
H5	Parasocial interactions → Authenticity	0.381	4.635
H6	Parasocial interactions → Purchase intentions	0.700	9.896
H7	Authenticity → Purchase intentions	0.103	1.549

**TABLE 15 Standardized Effects on Endogenous Constructs: Direct, Indirect and Total Effects**

Effects of → On ↓	Media naturalness	Media richness	Parasocial interactions	Authenticity
<b>Parasocial Interactions</b>				
1. Direct path effect	-0.184	0.823	-	-
2. Indirect path effect	-	-	-	-
3. Total effect	-0.184	0.823	-	-
<b>Authenticity</b>				
1. Direct path effect	0.195	0.343	-0.381	-
2. Indirect path effect	-0.070	0.313	-	-
3. Total effect	0.126	0.656	0.381	-
<b>Purchase intentions</b>				
1. Direct path effect	-	-	-0.700	0.103
2. Indirect path effect	-0.116	0.644	-0.39	-
3. Total effect	-0.116	0.644	0.740	0.103

*Notes: Cell entries are: 1) effects due to direct path; 2) effects due to indirect paths; 3) the total effects*

We found a significant and large effect of media richness on parasocial interactions ( $\beta=0.823$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), and parasocial interactions on purchase intentions ( $\beta=0.700$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), which supports Hypotheses 3 and 6. Media richness also had a significant positive and medium sized effect on authenticity ( $\beta=0.343$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) which supports Hypothesis 4. These findings suggest that media richness has an important role to play in the development of authentic and genuine parasocial interactions, and that these interactions play a large role in influencing purchasing behaviours. Similarly, parasocial interactions had a significant positive and medium sized effect on authenticity ( $\beta=0.381$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), supporting Hypothesis 5. Media naturalness had a small, but significant effect on perceptions of authenticity ( $\beta=0.195$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) supporting Hypothesis 2. However, Authenticity was not found to significantly drive purchase intentions ( $\beta=0.103$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) in support of Hypothesis 7. Our results also found an inverse relationship between media naturalness and parasocial interactions ( $\beta=-0.184$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). Thus Hypothesis 1 was not supported.

Taking into consideration the indirect effects in the model, media richness had the largest indirect effect on purchase intent ( $\beta=0.644$ ) followed by the authenticity ( $\beta=0.313$ ). Surprisingly, the construct of authenticity and, in particular the construct of media naturalness, were found to

have an inverse, nonsignificant, and minimal indirect influences on purchase intentions ( $\beta=0.103$  and  $\beta=-0.116$  respectively). The complete indirect, direct and total effects are reported in Table 15. The development of the research model represents a significant contribution to marketing theory and practice. It advances digital marketing theory by addressing specific knowledge gaps in the literature and has important managerial implications for the use of social media influencers in the promotion of brands, products and services.

#### **4.4 Summary of findings**

The research themes for this study were addressed firstly in the presentation of the empirical model guiding the inquiry. The two themes were: firstly; the identification and operation of rich and natural media types in “influencer” DCM. And secondly, the identification and operation of parasocial interactions in defining authentic influencer behaviour and purchasing intentions. A structural equation modelling procedure was then employed to provide an empirical analysis of the research model. The findings of the model based on the theoretical and quantitative stages of analysis are discussed next.

##### **4.4.1 Findings**

The literature reviewed within this study implied that rich and natural media types were powerful drivers of parasocial interactions in digital content marketing (Hsu et al., 2020, Maity et al., 2018, Kock, 2005b). Rich and natural media have been linked to increased levels of parasocial interactions, increased perceptions of authenticity, and as a result an increase in purchasing behaviour (Kowalczyk and Pounders, 2016). Social Media marketing strategies have focused on the importance of authentic and genuine social media influencers (Hwang and Zhang, 2018), yet further research is required to describe the importance of social networking platforms as a general means to establish a meaningful connection with the consumer (Wang and Sun, 2016). Given the link between authentic brand figures and increased purchasing behaviours (Kowalczyk and Pounders, 2016, Hwang and Zhang, 2018), understanding the impact of rich and natural forms of media on parasocial interactions is a central concern for both practitioners and academics. To address this gap in the literature, and to provide a clearer understanding of the development of purchasing intent which takes into account the effect of parasocial interactions, this study examined purchase intentions within rich and natural social networking settings, namely social media platforms YouTube and Instagram. The development of social networking platforms viewed as rich and natural are more likely to enable the development of “true” parasocial interactions (de Bérail et al., 2019).

The empirical investigation followed a two-step approach to structural equation modelling. The strength of the scales used to measure media richness, media naturalness, parasocial interactions, authenticity and purchase intentions were first established. The interrelationships between the constructs and purchase intentions were then established. The

empirical findings of the two research themes are discussed next. Collectively, these findings provide a detailed understanding of the determinants of purchase intentions for consumers viewing brand and product recommendations put forward by influencers within social media platforms. The examination of the role of the characteristics and nature of media on key parasocial interactions and authenticity in the formation of purchase intentions also addresses recent calls for research to investigate the complexity of the parasocial interactions development within digital media (Palmatier et al., 2006, Ferchaud et al., 2018, Hwang and Zhang, 2018). Very limited attention has been given to examining how media and influencers shape purchase behaviour (Hwang and Zhang, 2018, Munnukka et al., 2019). As such this study addresses a key knowledge gap in the literature by examining the way in which the concepts contribute to digital content marketing. The contributions of this model to theory and to practice are discussed next.

#### **4.5 Theoretical contributions**

This thesis advances the empirical research on parasocial interactions and media richness and naturalness (Ferchaud et al., 2018, Labrecque, 2014). This study also presents as one of the first to provide a more nuanced view of the role of media and influencer characteristics thereby contributing to both the media, and parasocial literature (Ferchaud et al., 2018, Hwang and Zhang, 2018, Rasmussen, 2018). In contrast to the extant literature, which limits the influence of mediated figures to that of brand ambassadors or sponsored figures (Audrezet et al., 2018, Hwang and Zhang, 2018, Horton and Wohl, 1956), this paper provides new knowledge about parasocial influence that includes the importance of media richness and naturalness. It further examines the impact that these characteristics have on the likelihood of purchase intentions as the direct result of an interaction that forms between the consumer and the mediated figure.

The ability to attract and inform consumers in an online and digital space remains a fundamental objective of digital marketing research and practise. The model proposed in this thesis therefore makes several significant contributions to theory. The first contribution relates to the importance and prominence of parasocial interactions as a driver of purchasing intent. The second contribution details the role that media richness plays in driving parasocial interactions. The third contribution explores the impact of naturalness on perceptions of authenticity and parasocial interactions. The final contribution will examine authenticity's presence as a driver of purchasing intent. These contributions are discussed next.

##### **4.5.1 The role of parasocial interactions in driving purchasing intent**

The first contribution relates to the importance of parasocial interactions as a key driver of purchasing intentions. The significance of developing a strong and important interaction with a consumer in a digital space is of vital importance given the limitations of digital communications when compared with face to face communications (e.g. a lack of feedback,

vagueness and ambiguity in the message, limited media choices) (Ferry et al., 2001). It is therefore of paramount importance to researchers that a clear link is established between the ability to maintain a strong and meaningful interaction on a digital social networking platform and any resulting purchasing intentions that may result from these interactions.

Previous literature has examined the prominence of a powerful and well-maintained parasocial interaction between an influencer and their audience (Ferchaud et al., 2018, Rasmussen, 2018, Lee and Watkins, 2016), and this study furthers the existing research by demonstrating that these interactions can result in consumers feeling compelled to purchase a product based on the effectiveness of the parasocial interaction that occurs. This study expands on the existing literature by showing that parasocial interactions positively drive feelings of purchasing interactions (Kowalczyk and Pounders, 2016), but it adds to this by examining underlying psychological and digital marketing drivers of parasocial interactions, namely media richness and media naturalness. By establishing the strength of parasocial interactions as a driver of purchasing intent, this study provides a framework for the examination of underlying antecedents of successful digital marketing communications practices, with a focus on influencer-driven interactions in a social media environment.

#### **4.5.2 The role of rich media as a driver of parasocial interactions**

Secondly, this study advances previous research by examining the associations between media richness and parasocial interactions. This is noteworthy as rich media types have been shown to enhance parasocial interactions (Hsu et al., 2020, Ishii et al., 2019, Maity et al., 2018, Tseng et al., 2017). However, the contributions of this study focused on the importance of rich media types as direct drivers of parasocial interactions and the underlying impact this has on purchase intent. Whilst rich media (e.g. video, audio) have been found to more effectively distribute a message to a global audience when compared to media which contains less verbal and non-verbal cues (Hsu et al., 2020, Maity et al., 2018, Lipowski and Bondos, 2018, Tseng et al., 2017), this study demonstrated that rich media types play a significant role in driving parasocial interactions and the associated feelings of purchasing intent.

Previous literature has highlighted the importance of rich media from a communications and language development perspective (Fernandez et al., 2013, Klitmøller and Luring, 2013, Liu et al., 2009), however this paper's theoretical contribution is aimed at media richness's value as a driver of parasocial interactions. Media that is highly rich is crucial for parasocial interactions as it ensures that the message is provided with added detail and innate benefits not afforded through traditional text-based methods of communications such as letters, books, or even social media posts.

Where previous literature (Munnukka et al., 2019, Hsu et al., 2020) identified that social networking platforms utilised rich media as a method of engaging an audience, this paper's theoretical contribution is establishing rich media as a driver of parasocial interactions and an indirect driver of purchasing intent within a digital marketing environment. In a related contribution, this study is one of the few empirical studies to concurrently investigate the role of rich and natural media types. as antecedents to parasocial interactions, authenticity and purchase intent. This is an important contribution since prior research on media characteristics has examined media richness and naturalness in isolation (Hsu et al., 2020, Maity et al., 2018, Lipowski and Bondos, 2018, White et al., 2017, Kock, 2009, Kock, 2007) thus limiting an understanding of the way in which each of these dimensions influences parasocial interactions and purchase intent (Hsu et al., 2020, Ishii et al., 2019, Munnukka et al., 2019).

#### **4.5.3 Media naturalness's role in driving parasocial interactions and purchasing intentions**

Thirdly, this study further examined the impact of media naturalness as a driver of parasocial interactions. Prior research had established the importance of naturalistic media within computer-mediated-communications (White et al., 2017, Kock, 2009, Kock, 2007). It has found that effective and natural digital communications should employ natural media that supports cognitive ease, clarity, and physiological arousal (Kock, 2007, Kock, 2005b, Kock, 2002). Despite previous research indicating that that natural media directly influenced and drove parasocial interactions (Dolan et al., 2019, Rasmussen, 2018), the results of this study, however, suggest that naturalness is a necessary but not sufficient prerequisite for successful communications within digital platforms. From a theoretical perspective it advances an understanding of the need for cognitive clarity within the communications process (Kock, 2007, DeRosa et al., 2004, Dennis et al., 2008, Dennis and Valacich, 1999).

Importantly, unlike prior studies which have found that media characteristics such as naturalness are important predictors of perceived authenticity (Firgolska and Kucharska, 2019, Dwivedi and McDonald, 2018, Fritz et al., 2017, García-Rapp, 2017, Freberg et al., 2011), the results of this study suggest that naturalistic methods of communications within digital platforms do not support perceptions of authenticity. This may be because the communication of information which is easy to comprehend and clearly communicated is a basic expectation of digital communications. Furthermore, the resulting theoretical implications suggest that deeper investigation is required to examine the underlying mechanisms of naturalistic media in a social networking paradigm. This is important as, whilst consumers innately absorb information from the content they view online, the results suggest that the richness of the content, not its

naturalistic design is more effective at driving perceptions of authenticity and parasocial interactions.

#### **4.5.4 Authenticity's presence as a driver of purchasing intentions**

This study's fourth contribution to the literature establishes authenticity as a necessary but not sufficient condition for purchasing intentions. Extant literature has shown that authenticity is a powerful motivator for consumer behaviour, and in particular purchasing behaviour in online forums (DeGruttola, 2019, Cornelis and Peter, 2017, Kowalczyk and Pounders, 2016, Napoli et al., 2014). However, this study provides evidence which suggests that consumers do not rely on their perceptions of an influencer's authenticity to make purchasing decisions. Whilst literature has stressed the importance of influencer authenticity in the development of a parasocial interaction (DeGruttola, 2019, Audrezet et al., 2018, Kowalczyk and Pounders, 2016), this study finds that simply being authentic is not enough of a prerequisite to drive a consumer's purchasing behaviours. Rather, strong parasocial interactions need to be established prior to a consumer establishing purchasing intent. The impact of authenticity as a driver of purchasing intent is dependent upon the strength of the parasocial interaction created by the audience with the influencer in a social networking environment. Therefore, whilst influencers may be perceived as authentic, authenticity does not equate to purchase intent. This is a novel finding since prior research on authenticity has suggested that consumers equate authentic brand sponsors with quality products and services (Kowalczyk and Pounders, 2016).

In addition to understanding the direct impact of authenticity on purchase intentions within digital communications environments, the present study additionally identifies the important initiating roles of media naturalness, media richness and parasocial interactions on authenticity. The results suggest that the experience of a rich and highly informative encounter with an influencer has a positive impact upon viewers perceptions of the mediated figures and their messages.

#### **4.6 Managerial contributions**

The findings of this research have a number of significant implications that are relevant to the digital marketing sector and to the influencer industry in general. Implications for these sectors are discussed next.

##### **4.6.1 Implications for Digital Marketing Content (DCMs) and Social Media Influencers**

The digital marketing industry is considered a substantial service sector accounting for 50% of an organisation's spending in 2019 (Enberg, 2019). The introduction and rise in prominence of the social media influencer has therefore opened a door for the digital sector in an

effort to entice consumers with rich and varied content that allows them to build meaningful interactions with their audience (Hwang and Zhang, 2018). The results of this study are therefore important since this study provides influencers with an understanding of the role of specific digital content drivers in the development of parasocial interactions and the subsequent effect of this on purchase intentions. The managerial implications of this study are discussed next.

Firstly, the impact of parasocial interactions on purchase intent indicate that influencers should be concerned with the audience's perceptions of the rich, natural, and authentic ways in which influencers communicate with their audience. Influencers are seen as unique and genuine figures and as such, they directly influence a followers perceptions of the brand and the products that they discuss. Influencers should consequentially look to develop campaigns and strategies which highlight their own skills in a social media context, emphasising their ability to incorporate rich and natural media in their published content. For example, influencers who rely too heavily on dense and cognitively exhaustive media like text may find themselves limited in their ability to reach a larger audience (Ferry et al., 2001). Instead, where possible, influencers should ensure that their content incorporates rich, visual elements in their content such as body language and both verbal and non-verbal cues including speech and audio. These media characteristics and biologically innate cues such as body language and hand gestures (Kock, 2009, Kock et al., 2008) support consumers' cognitive and emotional absorption and processing. This paper's results suggest that regular interaction with consumers through weekly updates or digital Q&A sessions can strengthen the relationship that influencers develop with their audience, fostering parasocial interactions. Furthermore, relying on richer media types such as videos and audio should clear up any issues regarding vagueness or ambiguity. In this way, Influencers should focus on the variety of media they employ in a post is just as crucial as the post itself, so influencers should be aware that they may need to use multiple media types to attract and maintain an audience's attention over an extended period.

Given that media naturalness was a necessary but not sufficient condition for purchasing behaviour, influencers should also focus on the importance of cognitive clarity, a sense of physiological arousal in the content being presented, and ensuring the experience feels as close to a face-to-face conversation as possible (White et al., 2017, Kock, 2007). This study revealed that whilst a natural experience with the influencer's content is important, the audience relied more prominently on the variety and detail of the media presented to drive a parasocial interaction. Influencers should therefore ensure that the platforms they use are capable of providing them with sufficient digital resources to effectively get the message across (i.e. if a message requires a detailed explanation, a photo with a caption may not adequately capture the complexity of the topic, instead use a video to clearly explain the situation). As Sheer and Chen



(2004) note an individual's attitudes towards a specific medium may not indicate the likelihood of choosing that medium, as usage is not always a voluntary experience. The norms and resources available may vary from the preferences of an individual and they may find it imposing or difficult to relay a message through non-preferred mediums (Treviño et al., 2000). This has practical implications for social media influencers and marketers alike, as the social nature and usage frequency of different mediums plays a role in their ability to communicate and establish meaning, resulting in individuals actively seeking or avoiding different media types in an effort to acquire new information or gratify a need for varied and rich content (Tseng et al., 2017, Fulk and Yuan, 2017). Similarly, this should result in a trend whereby content creators find themselves actively moving away from platforms or services that don't provide them with the necessary range of media resources to construct valid and relevant content (De Veirman et al., 2017, Roelens et al., 2016)

Whilst not a key determinant of purchase intentions, the perceived authenticity of the influencer did play a minor role in determining purchase intentions. As such, it is critical that influencers convey a trustworthy and genuine digital experience. Marketing strategies should be developed which communicate that the influencer has their followers best interests at heart. This may include for example, the development of readily integrated rapport with followers, concern for their needs, and interest in developing a relational bond with followers, often through direct communications and online chats or posts that respond directly to general queries about the influencer and their lifestyle. These activities offer followers a chance to directly interact with the influencer in a more prominent and accessible setting outside of traditional unidirectional marketing avenues that only pass information on to followers without the opportunity for instantaneous feedback. Followers should perceive that the interactions they have with the influencer through consumption of their content goes beyond simply being informative, it should also serve the function of establishing a bond of legitimacy and authenticity between the influencer's message and the influencer's persona (Ferchaud et al., 2018, Lee and Watkins, 2016, Wang and Sun, 2016, Brown, 2015). Providing followers with a rich and fulfilling experience which aims to foster excitement and intrigue, and which is supported by perceptions of innate and intimate interactions with the influencer in the form of a parasocial interaction, was found to positively, and significantly, contribute to the establishment of purchase intentions. Even if the audience does not perceive them as being authentic or genuine, they can still have a profound effect on their audience based on their digital strategies and social networking presence. The consumer feels more comfortable trusting the influencer's buying recommendations product when the message is rich with information and unambiguous in its delivery.

#### **4.7 Research limitations**

The results and implications of this research should be interpreted in light of several limitations. A number of limitations can be identified. Firstly, the study employed a cross sectional research design which prevents the ability to draw causal inference from the data. The cross-sectional nature of the study therefore means that the findings of this study should be considered representative of a single point in time. Secondly, the sampling method used in this study was based on a convenience sample of participants from a single university, alongside participants within the researcher's social networking groups. As such, this is an incomplete representation of social media users. Thirdly, the constructs selected for investigation in the research model represent a limited selection of the constructs that could potentially have been included. The model could, for example, have investigated other antecedents to parasocial interactions such as interaction duration, interaction frequency, and relational preference. The model could also have investigated other antecedent conditions to authenticity, such as an examination of content quality and its individual components. The model was however limited to the selected constructs in order to achieve parsimony. Finally, this study was undertaken with a limited number of respondents. This approach may have limited the generalisability of the research findings and prevented further testing and model development.

#### **4.8 Implications for Future Research**

The findings of this study suggest several important directions for future research. First, the model could be developed and applied within a longitudinal study. This would enable more accurate investigation of whether the salience of the driving constructs differs over time and for different social media platforms. This is important since followers perceptions of parasocial interactions are unlikely to be static. Secondly, this research should be replicated with several differing social media influencers across several different social networking platforms. Replication should be extended to other rich social networking platforms (e.g., Facebook) as well as to other lean media environments (e.g., Reddit, Twitter). This would enhance a broader understanding of the parasocial interactions process and the generalisability of the current model. Thirdly, researchers should consider other relational variables within the model. The moderating effects of several social networking platforms and the variability in influencer's published content (i.e. different ad campaigns, videos or tweets about several different products or services) could be examined. It is expected that the salience of the constructs in the development of purchasing intentions may vary in accordance with these moderators. Fourthly, this study provided the first empirical evidence that media naturalness may not influence the salience of digital marketing constructs in the development of purchase intentions. At present, few studies in marketing have examined the moderating effect of social media platforms on the impact of parasocial interactions on purchasing intents (de Bérail et al., 2019, Ferchaud et al., 2018,

Hwang and Zhang, 2018, Rasmussen, 2018, Chung and Cho, 2017). Further research is required to investigate this issue within multiple social media platform contexts. Finally, further investigation of the effectiveness of rich and natural media within different influencer marketing contexts, and for different customer segments, would make an important contribution to theory.

#### **4.9 Conclusion**

Parasocial interactions and purchasing intent have been extensively researched in the literature. This study is however, one of the few that model both media richness and media naturalness as drivers of parasocial interactions and perceived authenticity through purchasing intentions. Prior to this research, a multi-construct model of purchasing intent that modelled parasocial interactions simultaneously with other digital marketing constructs had not been forwarded in the literature. In addition to these two key contributions, the model developed and tested in this study extended digital content marketing theory by examining media richness and media naturalness within a parasocial interaction. The model developed in this study therefore makes a significant contribution to theory. Although the model was developed within the context of social networking platforms, the model, and results of this study, may be of relevance to those interested in branding, digital sponsorship, and celebrity endorsements. The findings of this study provide digital marketing management with valuable insights into the drivers of purchase intent and parasocial interactions. This knowledge can be used to more effectively attract, develop, and manage consumer interactions with a brand in a digital space. A detailed understanding of the drivers of purchasing intent is important given the impact that media richness, media naturalness and authenticity have on parasocial interactions. The research model therefore has significant potential for informing the management of consumer-influencer interactions and for subsequently improving the creative output of social media influencers and their branded interactions.

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## *Appendix*

### Item 1: Ethics Approval letter



Macquarie Business School Committee Macquarie University, North Ryde  
NSW 2109, Australia

25/10/2019

Dear Associate Professor Bowden,

**Reference No: 52019551810855**

**Project ID: 5518**

**Title: The influencer and the influenced: Parasocial relationships and the manufacture of Authenticity**

Thank you for submitting the above application for ethical review. The Macquarie Business School Committee has considered your application.

I am pleased to advise that ethical approval has been granted for this project to be conducted by Associate Professor Jana Bowden, and other personnel: Mr David Chidiac.

This research meets the requirements set out in the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research 2007, (updated July 2018).

#### **Standard Conditions of Approval:**

1. Continuing compliance with the requirements of the National Statement, available from the following website: <https://nhmrc.gov.au/about-us/publications/national-statement-ethical-conduct-human-research-2007-updated-2018>.

2. This approval is valid for five (5) years, subject to the submission of annual reports. Please submit your reports on the anniversary of the approval for this protocol. You will be sent an automatic reminder email one week from the due date to remind you of your reporting responsibilities.
3. All adverse events, including unforeseen events, which might affect the continued ethical acceptability of the project, must be reported to the subcommittee within 72 hours.
4. All proposed changes to the project and associated documents must be submitted to the subcommittee for review and approval before implementation. Changes can be made via the [Human Research Ethics Management System](#).

The HREC Terms of Reference and Standard Operating Procedures are available from the Research Services website: <https://www.mq.edu.au/research/ethics-integrity-and-policies/ethics/human-ethics>.

It is the responsibility of the Chief Investigator to retain a copy of all documentation related to this project and to forward a copy of this approval letter to all personnel listed on the project.

Should you have any queries regarding your project, please contact the [Faculty Ethics Officer](#).

The Macquarie Business School Committee wishes you every success in your research.

Yours sincerely,

Associate Professor Jana Bowden  
Chair, Macquarie Business School Committee

The Faculty Ethics Subcommittees at Macquarie University operate in accordance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research 2007, (updated July 2018), [Section 5.2.22].