

***EXPLORING CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT WITH INSTAGRAM  
INFLUENCERS, POST COVID-19.***



**Abertay  
University**

A research dissertation submitted for the degree of MBR (Masters by Research) by Prakriti Rashi


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## Declaration

Candidate's declarations:

I, Prakriti Rashi, hereby certify that this thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of MbR, Abertay University, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. This work has not been submitted for any other qualification at any other academic institution.

Signe  .....  
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Supervisor's declaration:

I, Kathy-Ann Fletcher hereby certify that the candidate has fulfilled the conditions of the Resolution and Regulations appropriate for the degree of MbR in Abertay University and that the candidate is qualified to submit this thesis in application for that degree.

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### Certificate of Approval

I certify that this is a true and accurate version of the thesis approved by the examiners, and that all relevant ordinance regulations have been fulfilled.

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Date.....

## **Dedication**

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all those who played a role in the successful completion of my thesis. I extend a special thank you to my mentors and supervisors, Dr. Kathy-Ann Fletcher and Dr. Andreea Oniga, for their invaluable guidance and support throughout my MBR journey. Their encouragement and motivation were crucial in achieving this milestone, and I am deeply appreciative of their proactive assistance.

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** The study was aimed to investigate the cause-and-effect relationship between COVID-19 restrictions and customer engagement on Instagram between the relationship of users and Influencers. It also investigated changes in customer engagement due to COVID-19 restrictions with respect to the variables trust, interactivity, virtual experience, and visual display of content.

**Method:** The study was designed to investigate an effect of covid-19 restriction on a large audience. A Survey of 633 participants who were active Instagram users and had active engagement with Instagram Influencers was conducted. The participants were qualified based on their engagement with Instagram Influencers before proceeding with the survey.

**Findings:** The findings of the study indicates that COVID-19 restrictions moderated the relationship between trust and customer engagement for both Instagram users and Influencers. All variables (trust, interactivity, virtual experience, and visual display of content) had a positive relationship with customer engagement for both Instagram users and Influencers. Businesses can use the findings to adjust their marketing strategies and investments in social media to maintain engagement with their target audience.

**Contribution:** The contribution of the study is that it provides insights into the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on customer engagement on Instagram for both users and Influencers. It also offers practical implications for Instagram Influencers and businesses in adapting to COVID-19 restrictions to maintain customer engagement and build trust with their audience. It can also be used by businesses to adjust their marketing strategies and investments in social media during times of crisis, ensuring that they remain connected with their customers and maintain their online presence on the platform.

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## Chapter 1 Introduction

### 1.1. Background Overview

Customer engagement is a measure of the number of people who interact and engage often with the type of content published on various social media or online platforms (Khamis et al., 2017). The extent to which customers appreciate, like, share and comment on online content indicates the level of customer engagement with the same (Silva et al., 2020). Instagram ranks among the most popular platforms today, both in the UK (United Kingdom) as well as in other parts of the world. The content that is published by Influencers on Instagram is extensively engaged with by people who use this platform for entertainment as well as for purchasing goods and services (Silva et al., 2020). The popularity of influencers on Instagram has led this platform to be used for business.

Large-scale business enterprises endorsed by celebrities and catered to a global target audience with respect to the products and services they offer, often use Instagram (brain, 2017). Such enterprises invoke the involvement of celebrity Influencers to promote their products on Instagram, thus adding to the appeal of such products and enabling them to be perceived and appreciated by a much larger target audience than the usual. A key reason as to why Instagram is a favoured platform for marketing today is because of the extensive customer outreach that is facilitated upon, the use of this platform (Gon, 2021).

Customer engagement comprises various metrics that provide information on the level of interaction between followers and Influencers on Instagram (Khamis et al., 2017). This in turn informs businesses about how well the content which they publish via Influencers on Instagram, connects with the target audience, and exactly how passionate the online community is about products or brands that are being promoted by Influencers on Instagram (Gon, 2021).

This study is an investigation on customer engagement between the relationship of Instagram Influencers and users moderated by Covid-19 restrictions. There are different variables used to assess customer engagement on Instagram during Covid-19, such as the variables of trust, interactivity, virtual experience, and the visual display of content. The study's aims are indicated first, followed by a detailed literature on the engagement of customers with Influencers on Instagram. The gaps in the literature review are located, a rationale for the study is provided, and a conceptual map about the approach taken to this study. Thereafter, the research methods are discussed, following which the study's results are discussed and analysed. This study concludes by the key arguments of the research, while also making known the work's limitations and the future scope of the study.



## **1.2. Problem Statement**

There is literature on digital Influencers and customer engagement on Instagram (Silva et al., 2020). The ways in which virtual experience, interactivity, trust, and visual display of content can influence the level of customer engagement on Instagram has been discussed and deliberated upon by scholars of business research (Gon, 2021). However, not much is known about how Covid-19 restrictions have moderated the relationship between the variables mentioned above and customer engagement with influencer posts on Instagram. Covid-19 restrictions in this study's context have been measured by elements such as loneliness, emptiness, and a feeling of isolation (Gon, 2021). As the pandemic period was a time in which people spent extensive hours in the day at home, in front of their mobiles and computers because of the restrictions, and be entertained, it is argued by scholars that this was a time when customer engagement on Instagram could have been impacted by restrictions such as loneliness, emptiness and a feeling of isolation (Francisco et al., 2021).

This study therefore seeks to examine the extent to which Covid-19 restrictions have had a moderating effect on elements such as trust, interactivity, virtual experience, and visual display of content on the relationship which drives customer engagement on the relationship between Influencers and users on Instagram.

## **1.3. Objectives and Aims of the Research**

The key research aims and objectives of this study are as follows –

- 1) To establish if Covid-19 restrictions have moderated the relationship that exists between trust and customer engagement on the relationship between Influencers and users on Instagram.
- 2) To establish if Covid-19 restrictions have moderated the relationship that exists between interactivity and customer engagement on the relationship between Influencers and users on Instagram.
- 3) To establish if Covid-19 restrictions have moderated the relationship between virtual experience and customer engagement on the relationship between Influencers and users on Instagram.
- 4) To establish of Covid-19 restrictions have moderated the relationship between visual display of content and customer engagement on the relationship between Influencers and users on Instagram.

#### **1.4. Research Questions**

The following are some of the main questions which will be answered by the findings generated upon conducting this study -

**RQ 1** – Have Covid-19 restrictions moderated the relationship between trust and customer engagement on the relationship between Influencers and users on Instagram?

**RQ 2** – Have Covid-19 restrictions moderated the relationship between interactivity and customer engagement on the relationship between Influencers and users on Instagram?

**RQ 3** – Have Covid-19 restrictions moderated the relationship between virtual experience and customer engagement on the relationship between Influencers and users on Instagram?

**RQ 4** – Have Covid-19 restrictions moderated the relationship between visual display of content and customer engagement on the relationship between Influencers and users on Instagram?

#### **1.5. Significance of the Research Work**

This research has academic importance since it examines how SMEs (Social Media Engagements) affect consumer engagement between the relationship of Influencers and users on Instagram, especially during a pandemic that has transformed the mechanics of digital communication. The suggested conceptual model for examining the effect of SMIs (Social Media Influencers) on the level of consumer engagement is therefore the theoretical contribution to the academic subject. This study has several practical applications and contributions. This research would be useful to businesses looking to engage in influencer marketing based on the factors related to Instagram Influencers that have an impact on the dimensions of customer engagement. The conceptual model will cover the significant factors related to Instagram Influencers and the dimensions of customer engagement. This research helps to a better understanding of how Covid-19 restrictions have moderated the relationship between CE (Customer Engagement) on the relationship between Influencers and users on Instagram.

These Hypotheses given in this research are based on previous crisis circumstances research that studied that social media use differs by an individual during such an event seeking, support, and a sense of belonging in a community (Fraustino et al., 2012; Metzgar and Sweetser, 2007). This then may further impact customer engagement. It is hypothesised that nationwide lockdowns, curfews, and social distancing curtailed peoples to socialise in a normal fashion (Hollebeek et al., 2020; Nability-Grover, Cheung, and Thatcher, 2020). Furthermore, the ability to grasp information to understand the magnitude of the pandemic with the Covid-19 restrictions of isolation for

socialising increased the use of social media (Donthu and Gustafsson, 2020).

## **1.6 Research Gap**

By undertaking research on whether Covid-19 restrictions have moderated customer engagement on the relationship between Influencers and users on Instagram, this study makes an important contribution to scholarship on marketing, in various ways.

First, the study talks about the different variables that impact customer engagement with influencers on Instagram, such as trust, interactivity, virtual experience, and visual display of content. Thereafter, the study seeks to assess the extent to Covid-19 restrictions such as loneliness, isolation and a feeling of emptiness have moderated customer engagement on the relationship between influencer and users on Instagram in the context of these variables. In doing so, this provides knowledge and understanding about the factors that influence customer engagement on Instagram, and whether Covid-19 restrictions have an impact on such engagement or not, is established by the end of the study. The study thus generates an in-depth understanding of how a platform like Instagram can be leveraged by businesses and by marketers to engage with customers about services and products and enhance the visibility of a business organisation overall.

By engaging in a detailed review of literature, it has been identified that there are four important variables that impact how customers engage with influencers on Instagram. The first of these is trust. The literature review discusses how trust tends to be important for customer engagement and how it is trustworthy content, or content which is honest, and truthful that induces customers to engage with Influencers on a platform like Instagram (Khaswaneh et al., 2021). The review of literature also identifies how interactivity, that is, the responsiveness, connectedness and experience associated with influencers on Instagram, has a bearing on how engaged customers are likely to be with the influencers that they view on Instagram (Rafaeli and Ariel, 2007).

The literature review also provides details about how virtual experience or the feeling of immersion, absorption and the creation of an alternate reality makes customers more engaged with influencers on Instagram (Cui et al., 2013). It also discusses how the visual display of content, or the beauty and appeal associated with influencers can also significantly impact customer engagement with such content on Instagram (Holiday et al., 2021). The literature review also generates insights on Covid-19 restrictions such as loneliness, emptiness, and a feeling of isolation and towards the end of the review, mention is made of the fact that not much is known about how Covid-19 restrictions have moderated customer engagement on Instagram, and how this is a topic which is worth exploring, therefore (Kim, 2022).

Overall, this is a study which has identified significant gaps in prevailing literature on customer engagement on Instagram and has generated a new understanding about the extent to which a platform like Instagram can be leveraged by business organisations to increase customer engagement with the products and services that they advertise on Instagram. The study has for instance, shown that Covid-19 restrictions have moderated the relationship that exists between trust and customer engagement between Influencers and users on Instagram, indicating therefore that businesses need to publish trustworthy and honest content via Influencers, to ensure better engagement with their content on social media.

## **1.7 Thesis Structure**

This is a study which has been structured in the following ways:

Chapter 2 undertakes an in-depth review of literature on customer engagement, specially referenced the platform, Instagram. It also discusses the specific aim of the study with its contribution, and significance. The review of literature discusses the types of engagement that takes place on Instagram, and the factors that influence such engagement, a customer engagement model is discussed rigorously in the literature review, while Covid-19 restrictions are highlighted and discussed in an elaborate way in chapter 2. The premise on which this study is built, namely, the existing gaps in the literature, has been logically put forward in Chapter 2.

Chapter 3 details the research paradigms along with the data collection as well as the data analysis methods and the ethical considerations made for performing a study like this. Specifically, the ways by which a quantitative methodology and a positive paradigm have been used to create a respondent population and study the same, through an online survey followed by a regression analysis of the survey responses, is made known in Chapter 3. Considerations that were made when creating the sample, and why a quantitative method was chosen over a qualitative one, is also well explained in chapter 3.

Chapter 4 presents the findings of the regression analysis and validates the various hypotheses that were considered for testing. Chapter 4 shows in the findings section, that while the first hypothesis is supported, namely, that Covid-19 restrictions have moderated the relationship that exists between trust and customer engagement with influencers and users on Instagram, the other three hypotheses are nullified. The results of the study demonstrate, as articulated in chapter 4, that Covid-19 restrictions might not have moderated the relationship between interactivity and customer engagement between influencers and users on Instagram, virtual experience, and customer engagement with influencers and users on Instagram, and between the visual display of content and customer engagement on Instagram.

The interpretation of the research findings and how the study's findings can be related to the literature reviewed in chapter 2 is discussed in-depth in Chapter 5. In Chapter 6, the implications of the study for practice and for research are analysed, the limitations of the thesis are discussed, and potential areas for future research on this subject are aptly identified. Recommendations are also made, based on the findings of the study, about how businesses can consider using Instagram as a marketing platform, especially by roping in Influencers to market their content, given how intense and frequent customer engagement with between Influencers and users on this platform is, especially when the content is trustworthy.

## Chapter 2 Literature Review

### 2.1. Introduction

This chapter discusses customer engagement on Instagram. There is a detailed emphasis on the relationship between Instagram users and Influencers and how they impact customer engagement. What is also discussed are the factors that customer engagement depends on such as trust (Rothfischer, 2021), Interactivity (Ariel and Rafaeli, 2017), virtual experience (Francisco et al. 2021), and visual display of content (Eti et al., 2021) and Covid-19 restrictions (Koay et al., 2022). A customer engagement model is also outlined and analysed in this chapter, and a discussion is undertaken on Covid-19 restrictions and how these impact customer engagement on Instagram (Eti et al., 2021). The chapter includes identifying the gaps in existing research, thus providing the rationale for the current study.

Due to the ever-shifting digital landscape, influencer marketing has become potentially a significant starting point for marketers in the digital marketing domain (Jarrar et al., 2020). A 61% increase in social media usage during the Covid-19 pandemic has been detected (Holmes, 2020). Consequently, a change in the way social media is used and how user behaviour patterns have changed for both brands and users can be witnessed (Arens, 2020; Bern, 2020). Due to the Covid-19 restrictions, users tended to have more time at their disposal to view and to engage with content that is published on social media, therefore also allowing Instagram creators and Influencers to create more engaging content. (Bern, 2020; Nability-Grover et al., 2020)

Social media Influencers (SMIs) are referred to as a type of opinion leaders, who express themselves over social media and related platforms by creating online pictures, videos, and interactive content using a rich multimodal narrative of their private, regular activities, and leveraging these visuals to attract attention as well as followers (Khamis et al., 2017). Through social networking sites, Influencers show increased engagement in three areas: (1) message spread, that is, the specific number of times for which a message is passed either with or without modifications, (2) influence (multitude of times recipients shared the information to their contacts), and (3) societal effect (based on the number of comments as well as replies that are received for every message) (Deepa and Deshmukh, 2013).

Digital Influencers play a key role in the online engagement process amongst potential customers and brands by mediating the interaction. Digital Influencers are essential for establishing engagement with followers and, on a secondary level, for establishing engagement between followers and the recommended brand or product (Silva et al., 2020). In the opinion of Liu (2021),

Influencers can modify and transform their followers' lifestyles, as well as their views and attitudes about branding trends, through their engagement with their followers. As a result, digital Influencers enable innovation of the brand marketing model and a new means of moulding social media users' interpretation and consumption (Liu, 2021). Depending on follower numbers, available literature has identified four basic tiers of SMIs: "mega" or "super" Influencers (> 1 million followers); "macro" Influencers (100k-1m); or "micro" -Influencers (5k-100k); and "nano" Influencers (< 5k) (Brewster and Lew, 2020). Therefore, followers of Influencers have a vital role to play in understanding and determining the impact of Influencers.

The impact of Influencers depends both on the number and types of followers that they have (Dubois and Lim, 2020). The type of followers refers to the characteristics of the followers, such as demographics, interests, and behaviour (Dubois and Lim, 2020). For instance, Influencers with a large base of followers might not be effective in reaching a specific target audience if their followers do not match the characteristics of the intended audience.

According to a study by Dubois and Lim, 2020, there are three types of followers of Influencers: "active," "passive," and "resistant." Active followers are highly engaged with the influencer and have an elevated level of trust in the influencer's recommendations. Passive followers follow the influencer but do not engage with their content or recommendations actively (Dubois and Lim, 2020). Resistant followers are critical of Influencers and their recommendations and are unlikely to follow their advice.

Similarly, a study by Chung and Cho (2017) studied the impact of various types of followers on the effectiveness of influencer marketing in the fashion industry. They identified three types of followers: "aspirational," "relational," and "dissociative" (Chung and Cho, 2017). Aspirational followers are drawn to Influencers who represent their desired self-image, relational followers value the connection they feel with the influencer, and dissociative followers are critical of influencer culture and may actively resist the influence of social media (Chung and Cho, 2017). Furthermore, Lee and Watkins (2016) proposed a typology of social media users based on their motivations for following Influencers. They identified four types: "entertainment-seekers," "information-seekers," "community-seekers," and "utilitarian-seekers." Entertainment-seekers follow Influencers for enjoyment and entertainment value, information-seekers follow for knowledge and education, community-seekers follow to feel part of a group or community, and utilitarian-seekers follow for practical benefits such as discounts or promotions (Lee and Watkins., 2016).

Marketers strive to prompt brand recall and establish brand recognition connections in the minds of consumers (Khurram et al., 2018). Brand recognition is the ease with which a customer identifies and distinguishes brands based on their features such as logo, colour, or slogan, and is

displayed (Khurram et al., 2018). Business competitiveness on social media is becoming more intense (Almeida and Campos, 2021). In the competitive world of social media marketing, businesses are constantly seeking ways to stand out and gain a competitive edge. By leveraging the power of Instagram Influencers, brands can tap into their followers' trust and loyalty and establish a connection with their target audience (Almeida and Campos, 2021). This can help to increase brand recognition, boost sales, and enhance the overall competitiveness of the business on social media.

Influencers share their ideas and experiences with brands to influence consumers' perceptions of these brands and their products (Tritama et al., 2016). Influencers help customers with brand recognition while also encouraging their interests and responses that might be helpful (Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández, 2019). The arguments made above show that brand recognition is important for marketers to establish in the minds of consumers, particularly in the context of increasing business competitiveness on social media. Additionally, Influencers can play a role in aiding brand recognition and influencing consumer perceptions of brands and their products.

The arguments that are made above by Khurram et al. (2018), Almeida and Campos (2021) and Jimenez Castillo and Sanchez Fernandez (2019), establish the significant role played by Influencers in promoting and adding value to the products of a business. Brand recognition is facilitated extensively through influencer posts, and they drive customer engagement by soliciting responses to their content and increasing the visibility of a product and a business, in the process.

It is observed that there has been a 30% increase in mobile applications every year (in the last five years) and paid advertisements on social media are found to be less effective as 615 million users on social media are engaging in the use of software for blocking ads (Das and Vidania, 2021). As a result, as organisations have started recognizing and valuing the potential of Influencers, influencer marketing methods have expanded at a faster rate (Masoom, 2022). Instagram, a visually oriented site, focusing on images, videos, and a sense of closeness with images and videos is especially well-suited to influencer advertising (Duffy and Kang, 2020). Instagram is an essential medium for influencer marketing among many other social media and Influencers become the generator of the content as well as a celebrity for many individuals (Cotter, 2019).

In terms of reach and scope, Instagram is amongst the current industry leaders in online media sharing services (Gon, 2021). Influencers on Instagram can build a certain kind of association with the audience by being able to share the daily activities of their lives, information, and knowledge and have conversations to highlight themselves (Childers et al., 2019). Influencers are used by businesses on Instagram to establish the brand identity of their products on social media and to capitalise on their consumers' engagement (Bentley et al., 2021). Since the major characteristic



of Instagram and its promoted content is that it tends to be viral and of instant reaction, Influencers may help companies spread rapidly and globally by using engagement level with followers (Bentley et al., 2021). This indicates that a new avenue for instant engagement brings new possibilities for both customers and marketers.

According to Brain (2017), around 80% of customers follow at least one brand, with 70% of companies having an active Instagram account. Instagram's venue format allows marketers to generate shared media and interact with their followers by combining visual and textual modes in postings. In the last 5 years, with higher engagement on Instagram when compared to paid advertising, brands have found a way to reach a huge audience for a low cost. Message appeals are major drivers of consumer engagement (CE) on Instagram, and Influencers become a source of message appeals that help spread messages over the platform (Rietveld et al., 2020). Customer engagement metrics in social media marketing are regarded as the most vital of KPIs in business by marketers today (Atherton, 2019).

According to Global Web Index research (2019), digital users spend over two hours daily on social media and messaging applications. This rate of using social media and messaging applications may have changed during a pandemic and needs further evaluation. Hence, there is still a lot of scope to learn more about the elements that drive CE with digital Influencers' Instagram brand posts (Vignisdóttir, 2017). It was first identified by Erkan in 2015 that the primary elements that have an impact on consumers' engagement can be focused on with specific information on the type of CE which is developed by digital Influencers. As of 2022, the extent to which elements related to digital Influencers impact customer engagement is a question that remains unanswered (Erkan, 2015). Therefore, developments in online services have facilitated the development of interactive "engagement platforms" where people may share information and co-create value (Erkan, 2015). Understanding what promotes consumer engagement behaviours in a social media environment, notably on Instagram, is critical for effective management of such interactions, as it adds to companies' innovation initiatives and increased value offerings to target audiences (Erkan, 2015). However, one opposing view to Erkan's (2015) perspective on the impact of digital Influencers on customer engagement can be found in the study by Kolyesnikova et al. (2021). Kolyesnikova et al. (2021) argue that while Influencers can play a significant role in driving engagement, there are limits to their effectiveness. Specifically, the study found that the effectiveness of Influencers in promoting engagement varied depending on the type of product and the level of involvement consumers had with the product category. The study suggests companies must consider whether influencer marketing is the best approach for their product or service, rather than assuming it will automatically lead to increased engagement.

Although they share different perspectives, Erkan (2015) and Kolyesnikova et al. (2021) share a common interest in exploring the impact of social media Influencers on consumer engagement.

While Erkan (2015) emphasises the need to focus on specific information about the type of customer engagement developed by digital Influencers, Kolyesnikova et al. (2021) investigate the impact of influencer-generated content on consumer engagement and brand loyalty. Both studies recognize the growing importance of social media in engaging consumers and suggest that companies should adapt their marketing strategies to the changing business landscape. Therefore, both studies highlight the potential benefits of social media Influencers in promoting consumer engagement and brand loyalty, although their approaches to this topic differ slightly.

Therefore, the primary elements that impact consumers' engagement should be focused on with specific information on the customer engagement type developed by digital Influencers (Erkan, 2015). An attempt is made by this study to cover this gap by focusing on the attributes specifically related to Instagram Influencers that affect customer engagement during Covid-19 restrictions.

Influencers initially gained followers' trust by being viewed as genuine and being similar, but with Covid-19 restrictions, the engagement and influence-based relationship of customers with their Influencers has evolved (Archer et al., 2021). With a considerable fan base established, Influencers evolved as effective marketing agents, constantly publishing valuable content on various social media channels for the purpose of brand endorsement and adding further followers with their marketing value "(Hudders et al., 2021)". As per Influencer Marketing Hub (2021), during Covid-19, consumers searched for social engagement to alleviate boredom after being confined at home for an indefinite period and started consuming their favourite material on streaming services. Therefore, this indicates that Influencers have become an increased source of entertainment as well as social interactions during the Covid-19 pandemic in comparison to pre—Covid situations.

In consideration of the appeal, demand and widespread outreach associated with social media platforms, especially Instagram, this chapter focuses on discussing the notion of customer engagement, dimensions related to customer engagement, and attributes related to social media Influencers that develop the foundation for the conceptual model.

## **2.2. Customer Engagement – An Overview**

Verhoef et al. (2011) explained that since the early 1980s, academicians, as well as marketers, have stated that marketing strategy typically comprises "attracting" and "forming" customer client contacts, along with enhancing, developing, retaining, or conserving them. While the term "customer engagement" is used as a comprehensive phrase to describe the stages from customer satisfaction to repeated purchase behaviour, customer engagement is also essential for the implementation of the marketing strategy (Verhoef et al., 2010). Increased customer engagement increases brand value in the eyes of the consumer and gives data that drives marketing strategy (So et al., 2021).

According to Hendriyani and Raharja, (2018), engagement of customers is considered key for achieving loyalty and attention of customers by maintaining electronic customer relationships. With the help of social media networks, customer interactions can be managed over the web and its use also supports maximising sales through existing customers.

According to Gummerus, Liljander, Weman, and Pihlström (2012), customer engagement (CE) can be explored from various viewpoints if the viewpoint accurately captures and describes the "nature of interaction." The concept of CE emerged in the marketing field around the turn of the century (Lim et al., 2021). Furthermore, Hollebeek et al. (2021) explained that CE stands for customer emotional connection, which is formed through frequent and continuous interactions. Also, satisfaction, loyalty, and excitement for the brand all contribute to engagement (Hollebeek et al., 2021). Others such as Behnam et al. (2021) stated that CE indicates a customer's unique psychological state because of their unique interactions with a focused engagement object, such as a brand (Rasool et al., 2021). In Similar vein, Rasool et al. (2021) defined that engaging consumers and offering value to their experience will keep the brand in their minds. The more involved they are, the longer they will remain loyal. Similarly, CE also supports boosting the experience of the brand by building trust and developing consistency by developing personalised touchpoints (Rasool et al., 2021)

CE, in theory, refers to the emotional connection that a customer frequently establishes over time because of repeated contact, according to Van Doorn et al. (2010). Similarly, according to Bowden (2009), to establish adequate loyalty among customers, businesses are required to engage customers with the brand by utilising both offline and digital efforts. Furthermore, According to Hollebeek, Srivastava, and Chen (2020), customer engagement refers to "a customer's active, positive, and volitional contributions towards a brand's value proposition, and the ways in which the brand facilitates these contributions" (p.1).

As a result, it is essential for marketers to not only focus on creating brand desirability, appeal, and preference, but also to ensure that customers remain engaged and invested in the brand (Czellar, Sprott, and Spangenberg, 2021; Kim and Lee, 2020). According to Kim and Lee (2020), customer engagement can lead to increased customer loyalty, satisfaction, and purchase intention. Sprott et al. (2021) also highlights that customer engagement is associated positively with customer advocacy and the performance of brands.

Customers who are involved with and motivated by a brand contribute to higher levels of engagement which helps in gaining customer loyalty and creating trust (Van Doorn et al., 2010) Therefore, based on the concepts discussed related to CE, it is observed that customer engagement is the process of a business building a relationship with its customers to increase brand loyalty and recognition (Evans et al., 2017). Brands can build their relationship with

customers through marketing campaigns, fresh content developed for and published on internet sites, and outreach through social media channels by employing Influencers, particularly on Instagram (Rasool et al., 2021). Customer engagement also supports providing a better experience to customers by meeting their demands and expectations (Rasool et al., 2021). The demand and expectation of customers can be determined by developing a connection with them, so this helps in making better decisions in the end (Rasool et al., 2021). This makes studying the impact of factors of customer engagement on Covid-19 an important area of research for businesses.

On one hand, Van Doorn et al., (2010) argue that customers who are involved with and motivated by a brand contribute to higher levels of engagement which helps in gaining customer loyalty and creating trust. Similarly, Evans et al., (2017) suggest that customer engagement is the process of a business building a relationship with its customers to increase brand loyalty and recognition. Brands can build their relationship with customers through marketing campaigns, fresh content developed for and published on internet sites, and outreach through social media channels by employing Influencers, particularly on Instagram (Rasool et al., 2021). Additionally, customer engagement supports providing a better experience to customers by meeting their demands and expectations (Rasool et al., 2021). This highlights the importance of studying the impact of factors of customer engagement between Instagram Influencers and users post Covid-19 for businesses.

However, some researchers have suggested customer engagement may not always lead to desired outcomes. For instance, according to Grönroos (2011), too much focus on customer engagement may result in neglecting the importance of the service or product being offered. Additionally, O'Brien and Toms, (2008), argue that customer engagement strategies may be ineffective if they fail to align with the overall business strategy.

As per Evans et al., (2017), when it comes to using Instagram Influencers, companies expect exchanges and engagement between customers and brands, allowing for two-way communication. With hashtags and inspiring photographs that their followers may connect to, Instagram can help brands reach their audience, (Brain, 2017). This demonstrates Instagram's importance to advertisers. Chen (2018) stated that Instagram's distinctiveness stems from its differentiated features of consumer usage and a higher degree of engagement through Influencers. This extent of engagement leads to marketing on Instagram that is varied compared to other platforms.

Hence, consumer engagement is the main driving force for digital Influencers on Instagram as it allows them to establish their business image significantly more successfully through photographs and videos than on Facebook, Twitter, or any other social media platform (Luo and Singh, 2021). Influencers and celebrities on Instagram can increase brand exposure and

engagement (Chen, 2018). Chen (2018) also highlighted that due to the impact of Influencers, consumers perceive user-generated content to be more authentic than sponsored content, resulting in increased engagement. Hence, it is primarily through customer engagement that Influencers on Instagram affect customers, especially in terms of purchasing intentions. Contrarily, Prentice et al., (2019) argued that customer engagement aims to enhance purchase intentions so that sales and profit of the company also improved.

As argued by Chen (2018), customer engagement is the most important criterion when considering Instagram and user interaction through SMIs, as engaging customers and adding value to their experience will keep the brand in their minds. Customers who are engaged with and driven by a brand have greater levels of engagement, which helps to build customer loyalty and trust (Chen,2018). Instagram's uniqueness lies in its distinct features for consumer usage and the prominent level of engagement between Influencers and their followers (Alhabash, Baek and Oh, 2014). Such features have made it possible for Instagram as a platform to become a popular tool for social media marketing, with businesses leveraging the power of Instagram Influencers to reach and engage with their target audience (Hajli, 2018).

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic and resulting social distancing measures, the use of social media Influencers has become even more critical for brands seeking to engage with customers in the digital space (Jun Luo and Wenguo Huang, Yonggang Hao, 2021). However, there is still a gap in the literature regarding the effectiveness of these Influencers in driving engagement among customers during this unprecedented time (Lim and Kim, 2021). Additionally, the pandemic has altered the way Influencers and customers interact, with many in-person events being cancelled and a greater reliance on virtual events and content creation (Lim and Kim, 2021). As such, it is crucial to examine how Instagram Influencers are adapting to these changes and continuing to engage customers during the pandemic (Alalwan et al, 2020). This analysis is necessary for the long-term sustainability and growth of the online advertising ecosystem and can provide practical insights for marketers seeking to work with Influencers during and after the pandemic.

### **2.3. Types of Engagement on Digital Platforms**

Hinson et al. (2019) have made known the importance associated with digital platforms in engaging customers with the brand. They argue that the use of digital platforms is crucial for building interactions with customers and maintaining engagement. Prioritising comments and replies are an effective way to engage customers with the brand and foster a sense of community (Hinson et al., 2019).

However, Brush and Pihlström (2008) suggest that media platforms have evolved from being primarily engagement tools to being more transactional, with customers expecting brands to offer quick and efficient service. They argue that while engagement with customers is important,

it is not the only factor that influences customers' decisions to purchase or remain loyal to a brand.

Similarly, Gensler et al. (2020) propose that engagement metrics such as comments and likes may not necessarily translate into brand loyalty or purchase behaviour. They suggest that while engagement can create brand awareness and exposure, it may not necessarily lead to sales or customer retention.

Therefore, while Hinson et al. (2019) suggest that prioritising comments and replies is an effective way to engage customers with the brand, other studies suggest that engagement is not the only factor that influences customer behaviour and that brands need to focus on providing efficient and convenient service to meet customers' expectations.

Silva et al. (2019) investigated engagement types such as comments, likes and shares created by digital Influencers' product endorsements on Instagram, considering the features of their online postings (Silva et al., 2019). The study revealed that digital platforms have the potential to create diverse types of engagement, leading to the formation of unique configurations that influence the methods of relationship marketing and promotion (Silva et al., 2019). Hence, it can be considered that engagement is being generated by Influencers on Instagram and are growing to be more attractive in developing new interactions for relationship marketing and the spread of products and companies online on Instagram (Silva et al., 2019).

There is also literature that presents a different perspective or challenges the findings of Silva et al. (2019) regarding the impact of influencer endorsements on engagement on Instagram. Lutz et al. (2021) found that Instagram users' engagement with influencer posts may not translate into actual product purchases. They argue that the relationship between influencer marketing and consumer behaviour is complex and influenced by various factors such as product type, influencer credibility, and consumers' motives.

Similarly, Abidin and Ots (2020) suggest that engagement metrics such as likes, comments, and shares may not accurately represent the impact of influencer marketing on consumers' attitudes and behaviours. They contend that Influencers may use various tactics to boost engagement, such as buying fake followers or likes, which can distort the true effectiveness of their endorsements.

Therefore, while Silva et al. (2019) suggest that influencer endorsements generate engagement on Instagram and offer new opportunities for relationship marketing, other studies suggest that the relationship between influencer marketing and consumer behaviour is complex and requires a more nuanced understanding.

Tafesse and Wood (2021) agreed that although experts in the domain of marketing have expressed an interest in marketing as conducted by Influencers, there is not much known about engagement and content strategies as implemented by Influencers and how it relates to followers' engagement behaviour on Instagram. Tafesse and Wood (2021) highlighted that on Instagram, follower engagement is inversely correlated with follower count and content volume, while it is favourably correlated with follower count.

While there is a growing body of literature that supports Tafesse and Wood's (2021) findings, it is important to note that not all studies have reached the same conclusions. For example, a study by Jin and Phua (2019) found that follower count and content volume were positively related to engagement, while content type (i.e., visual appeal, message appeal, and perceived source credibility) was negatively related to engagement. Similarly, a study by De Veirman et al. (2017) found that the credibility of the influencer was a more important factor in driving engagement than the influencer's follower count or content volume.

Overall, while there may be some contradictions in the literature, Tafesse, and Wood's (2021) findings do contribute to the ongoing discussion about how influencers, users, and engagement strategies impact follower engagement behaviour on Instagram.

Therefore, the relationship between consumer engagement and Influencers on Instagram should be analysed as it can be a more comprehensive way to assess the impact based on elements driving the association and advertised content. However, Delbaere et al., (2021) argued social media Influencers are perceived as celebrities who have substantial followers on social media platforms. With the help of such media platforms, customer engagement can be increased, and this supports building trust among customers as well.

Good and engaging content generated by these Influencers may help to increase engagement on Instagram (Holiday et al., 2021). By good and engaging content is implied the type of content, which is of aesthetic value, which is beautiful to view and amusing or entertaining to the person who is viewing it (Holiday et al., 2021). Consumer engagement is about motivating consumers to connect through this content. Instagram has evolved to include clips, stories, movies, and live programs, as well as data on who follows a user when the user is online, and more (Holiday et al., 2021). Since Instagram is such a visual platform, it is critical to gauge engagement through influencer posts that are designed in a way that represents the business and is aesthetically appealing.

## 2.4. Engagement during Covid-19

Coronavirus disease is a contagious illness brought on by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, according to Ciotti et al. (2020). Since the virus may spread from an infected person, lockdowns and forced isolation were also implemented by governments. People were forced to spend more time at home as a result of these circumstances. Bao et al. (2020) mentioned that as a result, the unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in a huge volume of real-time data and the widespread use of online media platforms. As customers engage and interact with Influencers on Instagram who offer content which is relevant, engaging, and intriguing to them, Bentley et al. (2021) found that when an influencer the people who follow them happen to be culturally connected, the level of deep engagement rises.

Bentley et al. (2021) highlighted that product promotions by digital Influencers on Instagram during COVID-19 have been shown to increase engagement with Instagram users. Customers interact with Influencers that provide them with information that is relevant, interesting, and intriguing. Digital Influencers on Instagram are mostly motivated by characteristics of customer engagement. Although marketing professionals have been more intrigued by influencer marketing in recent years, little is known about the attributes of digital Influencers and their impact on customer engagement levels.

Bentley et al. (2021) also stated that the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent stay-at-home directives have created an impact on many facets of life throughout the world, particularly the relationship with the internet and social media platforms. There is more time that is being spent by people online than ever before (Ngussa et al., 2021). Since the onset of the pandemic, people have been compelled to spend time indoors, possibly because of the lockdowns imposed by governments. As a result, spending time on social media was one of the many ways by which people could be entertained, do their work, and connect globally with each other (Ngussa et al., 2021). However, detailed insight into the dimensions of customer engagement through digital Influencers and the extent of their impact during Covid-19 restrictions has not been studied in detail (Ngussa et al., 2021).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, organisations have had to find innovative ways to engage with consumers through branding while adhering to social distancing restrictions (Ngussa et al., 2021). Many companies have shifted their focus to social media engagement activities, such as online engagement practices, virtual sessions, and digital development, as highlighted by Ngussa et al., (2021). This trend reflects the growing importance of digital channels in engaging consumers during times of physical isolation and underscores the need for companies to adapt their marketing strategies to the changing business landscape (Ngussa et al., 2021).

Similarly, according to a study by Bauer et al. (2021), while digital channels have become more



important during COVID-19, they are not always the most effective way to engage with consumers. Bauer et al., 2021 argue that the increased reliance on digital channels can result in oversaturation and may even decrease consumer engagement if not used strategically. They also suggest that traditional marketing methods, such as print and radio advertisements, can still be effective in reaching certain target audiences (Bauer et al., 2021).

Furthermore, Bauer et al., 2021 point out that companies should not rely solely on technology to create a brand experience post COVID-19, as human interaction and face-to-face communication are still crucial components of building strong customer relationships. In their view, it is important for companies to strike a balance between digital and traditional marketing methods to create a holistic brand experience that resonates with consumers.

Overall, while both Ngussa et al., and Bauer et al., (2021) acknowledges the importance of adapting marketing strategies during COVID-19, they offer different perspectives on the effectiveness of digital channels in engaging consumers.

Another study by Francisco et al. (2021) investigated the shift in Instagram influencer marketing during the Covid-19 restrictions period, as well as the potential future consequences. Francisco et al. (2021) emphasised that there seems to be a correlation between the perceived sharing of interests, traits, and actions with Influencers and the tendency of followers to imitate similar activities. One of the most far-reaching implications of the pandemic is a rise in the usage of social media (Trevisan et al., 2021). The Covid-19 pandemic crisis has hastened the evolution of the communication sector, posing digital communication challenges to the marketing business (Trevisan et al., 2021). Hence, following increased citizens' participation in digital media post-Covid-19, and the establishment of an interconnected worldwide platform on Instagram has increased the necessity of understanding their degree of engagement (Trevisan et al., 2021). Social media Influencers play a vital role in creating and sharing information at the time of crisis. It is observed that to increase and develop the strategic importance of social media during crisis, Influencers' communication understood the structure of information and located information for targeting the audience during emergent situations (Alzua-Sorzabal, Femenia-Serra and Gretzel, 2022).

As per the report of Namkung and Park (2022), Instagram attained the milestone of having 1 billion users in October 2020, which was during the Covid-19 pandemic, and it is projected that this number will grow to 1.2 billion by 2023. Due to Instagram's high user engagement rate and visual-focused nature, 71% of internationally recognised firms use it in their advertising campaigns (Namkung and Park, 2022). Also, Instagram was used rigorously by people during Covid-19 as it provided a social lifeline and the latest information related to what is happening in the world. Americans in 2020 spent an average of 82 minutes on Instagram as a social media

channel as compared to the pre-pandemic period, when on an average, individuals would spend thirty to sixty minutes online (Statista, 2020). There was a rise in social media use by people at the time of the Covid-19 pandemic (Statista, 2020). Moreover, global statistics reveal that Instagram usage has increased significantly during the Covid-19 pandemic, with a 22% increase in time spent on the platform per user (Hootsuite, 2021). In fact, Instagram was the second most popular social media platform globally in 2020, after Facebook, with over 70% of its users being under the age of 35 (Hootsuite, 2021).

Monteiro (2021) stated that since social media Influencers on InfKim and Ko (2022) Instagram are viewed as message sources, trust has been attributed to them as they aim to build interactions on their account, resulting in the effective establishment of online communities. Furthermore, Instagram introduced fact-checking methods, which included eliminating misleading content and referring users to the appropriate sources (Monteiro, 2021). Therefore, following Covid-19, the more trust a person has in an influencer, it is more likely the product is purchased by them, or the brand advised by that influencer (Monteiro, 2021). However, Chen and Chen (2020) argue that the effectiveness of influencer marketing may be limited due to the issue of "social distance." Social distance refers to the psychological distance between the influencer and the consumer, which can lead to a lack of credibility and trust.

In addition, research by Ohanian (1991) suggests that the effectiveness of endorsements may depend on the fit between the endorser and the product being promoted. In other words, consumers may be more likely to trust and be influenced by an influencer who is perceived to be a good fit for the product they are promoting.

Overall, while social media Influencers can be effective in building online communities and promoting products, their influence may be limited by factors such as social distance, fit between the influencer and product, and concerns about authenticity and transparency. Instagram has become an increasingly popular platform for accessing information on various topics, including COVID-19. According to a survey by the Pew Research Center (2021), approximately 40% of US adults report using Instagram for news, information, or to stay up to date with current events during the Covid-19 pandemic. This trend is in line with the broader use of social media for news consumption, as noted by a report by the Pew Research Center. People were also able to gain additional updates related to Covid-19 and changes brought by the government in the country (Uthamaputhran et al., 2022). Monteiro (2021) concluded that the more an influencer demonstrates their genuineness, the more individuals could be reached and persuaded to buy the things promoted by them. As the online content on Instagram is the most efficient means to engage customers, organisations and businesses are striving to use Influencers in their online promotional efforts more broadly since Covid-19 pandemic (Monteiro, 2021).

As a result, the necessity of assessing the impact of Covid-19 on influencer marketing is recognised to identify the effect of uncertainty or calamity, so it is appropriate and necessary to analyse brand communications and interaction with Influencers in depth (Monteiro, 2021). Therefore, the current study undertaken will address the gaps from these studies and can adopt the aspects discussed to develop a platform to analyse customer engagement -post-Covid-19 (Monteiro, 2021).

## **2.5. Dimensions of Customer Engagement**

This subsection discusses the specific relationship that exists between customer engagement (CE), relationship marketing, and service-dominant (SD) logic. The authors highlight the importance of value co-creation (VCC) and interactive experiences in understanding the theoretical foundation of CE. They also mention the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on customer engagement with social media Influencers on Instagram. The article emphasises the significance of customer engagement for establishing relationships over the long-term with customers and gaining a competitive advantage. Finally, the researcher suggests various aspects that need to be considered for building customer engagement.

### **2.5.1. Aspects of Customer Engagement**

Vivek et al. (2012) agreed that according to academic evaluations, the theories of relationship marketing and service-dominant (SD) reasoning may explain the foundation of customer engagement (CE). Arora et al. (2021) mentioned that relationship marketing is defined as the practice of establishing long-term, mutually beneficial relationships with consumers, distributors, dealers, and suppliers.

Customer engagement (CE) is an important aspect of relationship marketing, and it is described as an individual's level of involvement and connection with an organisation's services and/or activities. Ellway and Dean (2020) agreed that value co-creation (VCC) and customer engagement (CE) are intrinsically intertwined. The words "engagement" and "engaged" were commonly used in early service-dominant logic (SDL) research on VCC. SDL believes in the viewpoint that offers a creative and novel approach to synthesising and communicating an alternative understanding of market exchange and value generation (Dean and Ellway, 2020).

According to SDL, marketing is shifting from a "items-dominated" perspective, which focuses on the exchange of real goods, to a "service-dominant" one, which emphasises intangible resources and connections as the primary sources of value (Dean and Ellway, 2020). On the other side, Leung et al., (2022) stated that customer engagement is the concept that helps in creating a relationship with customers to foster awareness and loyalty. Engagement among customers also helps in accomplishing marketing campaigns, the creation of latest content and posts on

websites. There are four main attributes of customer engagement related to emotional, active, ethical engagement, and rational (Dean and Ellway, 2020).

Further, Islam et al. (2011) acknowledges that both theories regard customers as "active participants to brand interactions" and place a premium on long-term connections, which explains the link between both theories and the notion of CE according to Verhoef et al. (2010), CE has an influence on the brand experience of customers and helps to recruit and retain customers, both of which are important aspects of relationship marketing. It is therefore imperative to study the relationship between brands and their customers and the channels used by them for customer engagements (Watson et al., 2015).

While the intent of the strategy remains, the channels have shifted online from traditional media platforms which were offline and direct (Watson et al., 2015). Therefore, customer engagement can facilitate understanding the customer experience for the promoted brands online. Apart from this, customer engagement is associated with loyalty and trust. In addition to this, valuable feedback to the customer has been provided and the experience for customers is enhanced (Best, 2021).

Brodie (2017) stated that CE, from the perspective of service-dominant logic, represents the dynamics between specific agents (organisations, customers, stakeholders), dubbed "value configurations", who connect in a network to produce interactive and co-created value. The "interactive experience," as defined by Brodie et al. (2011) is an important foundation for CE. Hollebeek et al. (2016) also agreed that the interactivity and proactivity of customers in co-creating the value they receive as a consequence of brand experiences are essential notions in marketing literature that explain the SD logic and relationship marketing as theoretical underlying insights for customer engagement (Hollebeek et al., 2016).

According to the SD rationale by Vivek et al. (2012), the concept of "superior value co-creation" replaces the widely accepted notion of "offering value to consumers" as the foundation of any company strategy aiming at gaining a competitive advantage. As a result, it is claimed that interactive experiences, as they relate to relationship marketing paradigms and SD logic, might explain CE's theoretical foundation. This highlights that analysing CE models can be useful in understanding the aspects of interactivity and co-created value related to Instagram. On the other side, Kwon and Ma, (2021) argued that for building customer engagement various aspects need to be considered related to knowing the journey of the customer, developing loyalty programs, offering personalised service, implementing customer interactions, and emphasising using analytics. Hence, it is essential to focus on engaging customers with the brand for meeting their expectations and demand.

Since the present study is aimed at analysing the customer engagement with Instagram

Influencers post-Covid-19, the next section focuses on the association between the context of the pandemic and customer engagement with social media Influencers on Instagram.

### **2.5.2. Attributes of Customer Engagement**

Enginkaya and Esen (2014) mentioned that companies acknowledge the power and necessity of the internet to draw customers' attention in an increasingly dynamic commercial climate. The internet is a valuable communication tool for both customers and businesses. Organisations are expected to identify and assess significant traits and aspects of customers. Customer engagement encompasses all aspects of a customer's experience, including involvement, satisfaction, trust, reputation, and loyalty (Enginkaya and Esen, 2014). While Enginkaya and Esen (2014) highlight the importance of customer engagement in the online shopping experience, there are some scholars who argue that customer engagement is not always necessary or desirable.

A study on online shopping behaviour, Kim, and Kim (2014) found that some consumers prefer a more passive, transactional approach to online shopping, in which they can quickly find what they need and make a purchase without any additional engagement with the brand or product. They argue that for these consumers, excessive attempts at engagement may be counterproductive and lead to decreased satisfaction with the online shopping experience.

Similarly, in a study on social media marketing, by Kietzmann et al. (2011) discusses that while customer engagement is often promoted as a key goal for social media campaigns, not all customers are interested in engaging with brands in this way. They argue that companies should carefully consider their target audience and the nature of their products or services before investing resources in social media engagement strategies.

Enginkaya and Esen (2014) gathered data from consumers who have used the internet for shopping to define and measure online customer engagement. To measure this data, a customer engagement scale was created and used online. A three-dimensional approach was discovered, trust, dedication, and reputation. The study also looked at other areas such as customer satisfaction and involvement metrics in customer engagement. Customer engagement is also improved by emphasising the adoption of several aspects related to offering targeted offerings. They must focus on providing different facilities to customers as well, which supports in fulfilling their expectations (Enginkaya and Esen, 2014).

Also, another study by Gohary and Amin (2020) found that customers' trust in the online brand and its social media influence positively affects customer engagement on social media platforms. Another study by Liu and Lu (2021) showed that interactive social media features such as live streaming and virtual reality can enhance customer engagement by providing a more immersive

and personalised experience.

Contrarily, some recent studies have questioned the effectiveness of influencer marketing and its impact on customer engagement. For instance, a study by Khamis et al. (2017) found that consumers can be sceptical of influencer recommendations and may not perceive them as genuine or trustworthy. Another study by Kim and Ko (2022) suggested that the use of too many social media Influencers can dilute the brand message and reduce customer engagement.

Similarly, during a study by Alalwan et al. (2021) it was found that trust in Influencers played a significant role in enhancing customer engagement during the Covid-19 pandemic. They argued that Influencers can help build trust by providing accurate information about products and services, being transparent about their affiliations and endorsements, and engaging in two-way communication with their followers.

Another study by Yu et al. (2021) found that interactivity, specifically the use of user-generated content (UGC), was an effective strategy for enhancing customer engagement during the Covid-19 pandemic. They argued that UGC can help create a sense of community and foster a sense of connection between brands and their customers.

Song et al. (2021) found that trust and interactivity were both important factors in enhancing customer engagement during the Covid-19 pandemic. They argued that brands could build trust by being transparent about their actions and communicating effectively with customers, while interactivity could be enhanced through social media and other digital platforms.

However, there are studies that show that trust was not the only significant factor during the pandemic. A study by Huang and Lin (2021) suggests that trust is still important for customer engagement. They found that perceived usefulness of digital platforms and the perceived ease of use of those platforms were the primary factors affecting customer engagement during Covid-19. In contrast, interactivity was not found to significantly impact customer engagement in their study.

Therefore, the emphasis on trust and interactivity as critical factors for customer engagement during the pandemic may vary depending on the specific context and customer behaviour.

Based on the arguments made in this section, it depicts that among different attributes affecting the dimensions of customer engagement, trust in Influencers, and interactive experience are vital. This could be because Influencers who use their media-rich and interactive capabilities and establish a trust to provide a comprehensive brand experience can enhance customer engagement. Also, Customer engagement with the posts published on Instagram have been measured using several crucial elements such as the feeling of excitement that comes with

viewing an influencer post, the sense of absorption or experience that is gained when viewing such posts, as well as of the feeling immersiveness that they experience when viewing an Instagram post (Hollebeek, 2011). It is assumed that the more customers feel connected with the content they view on Instagram, and the more immersed and excited they are with the same, the greater will be their engagement with the post (Hollebeek et al., 2016).

### **2.5.2.1. Communication Crisis in Covid-19**

Trziszka (2021) mentioned that the global outbreak, which occurred in early 2020 and ravaged the globe, has fundamentally altered the old marketing strategy. Due to these shifts, digital communication will become increasingly important in acquiring (and sustaining) customer attention and trust (Trziszka., 2021). The steep reduction in organic traffic on Facebook, on the other hand, as well as ad blocker plugins, makes advertising content on social media extremely difficult (Trziszka., 2021). Influencer marketing, which is presently among the most popular methods of reaching potential clients, has shown to be an efficient promotional tool (Jin et al., 2019). Therefore, the pandemic has opened further opportunities for influencer marketing.

Furthermore, customer engagement also increases at the time of Covid-19 because of virtual interaction between people (Francisco et al., 2021) Marketers through online channels aim in engaging customers and are similarly able to enhance their presence in the market (Wang et al., 2020). Different activities need to be considered at the time of engaging customers which further supports decreasing the communication gap as well (Wang et al., 2020). Although the pandemic has accelerated the shift towards digital marketing, its long-term efficacy is subject to debate. Jiang et al. (2022) argue that businesses can consider the unique characteristics of their industry and target audience when developing marketing strategies. They suggest that while influencer marketing has gained popularity during the pandemic, careful selection and monitoring of Influencers is important to maintain brand integrity. In contrast, Devlin et al. (2022) emphasise the importance of authenticity and transparency in influencer marketing during the pandemic. They suggest that consumers are looking for meaningful connections and values alignment, and that partnering with micro-Influencers who have smaller but more engaged followings may be more effective in building trust and loyalty. Overall, these studies highlight the need for businesses to tailor their marketing strategies to the evolving needs and preferences of their customers during and beyond the pandemic.

Francisco et al. (2021) studied the shift in influencer marketing on Instagram throughout this period and the implications for the future. According to this study Francisco et al. (2021) found that the Covid-19 pandemic has affected the behaviour of Instagram users and, consequently, the effectiveness of influencer marketing on the platform. The authors found that due to the pandemic, Instagram users have been more likely to engage with Influencers who provide

content related to health and well-being, such as fitness, wellness, and mental health (Francisco et al., 2021). Additionally, the authors noted that the pandemic has led to an increase in user-generated content, which has become a popular way for brands to engage with their followers and customers (Francisco et al., 2021).

The study also suggests that the pandemic has increased the importance of authenticity and transparency in influencer marketing (Francisco et al., 2021). Instagram users are more likely to trust and engage with Influencers who are honest and transparent about their experiences with products and services (Francisco et al., 2021). The authors argue that brands and Influencers need to be aware of these shifts in user behaviour and adapt their strategies accordingly (Francisco et al., 2021).

Overall, the study by Francisco et al. (2021), Wang et al. (2020) and Devlin et al. (2022) suggest that the Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on influencer marketing on Instagram, and that brands and Influencers need to be mindful of these changes to maintain their effectiveness on the platform.

According to Jung Ah Lee and Matthew Eastin (2020), a study has found that Instagram users who fall under the 18 to 24 age group are more likely to follow influencer accounts. This demographic is aware of the connection between these Influencers and the products they endorse and sponsor (Wang et al., 2020). Additionally, this group views Influencers with high respect, especially those who are transparent about product and brand advertising. The perceived sharing of interests, traits, and actions between Influencers and their followers appear to have a positive correlation, as individuals are more likely to trust Influencers with whom they share commonalities (Jung Ah Lee and Mathew Eastin, 2020).

Azer et al. (2021) explained that social media is a widespread communication medium that has played a key role in recent global crises. While research on crisis communication implies that people use social media in different ways during a crisis, little is known about what types of engagement behaviour could arise and what factors might drive distinct types of social media users' engagement behaviour in response to a global catastrophe. In-depth interviews were used in this study to investigate how social media users reacted to the incident (Azer et al., 2021). Altruism, Escapism, Optimism, Disapproval, Despondency, and Reciprocity were identified as six factors that led social media users to participate in certain sorts of engagement behaviours in response to the global crisis. Individual users' behavioural manifestations were emphasised by the hypothesised forms and drives, which especially showed the way the pandemic – the centre of engagement- has influenced individual users' behavioural manifestations (Azer et al., 2021).



### 2.5.2.2. Use of Social-Media Based Influencers

Khasawneh et al. (2021) conducted research in Jordan to examine the impact of social media-based Influencers on customer engagement with COVID-19-related content. The study found that social media has significantly transformed the media through which businesses engage with their customers (Khasawneh et al., 2021). As a result of the pandemic, many firms have had to shift their marketing strategies to comply with global restrictions, resulting in a greater reliance on social media Influencers and online content providers for marketing purposes (Khasawneh et al., 2021). The study's findings revealed a positive correlation between customer trust in social media-based Influencers and customer engagement. When customers perceive an influencer as reliable and trustworthy, they are more likely to engage with their content, thus promoting customer engagement on social media platforms (Pitanatri et al., 2022). These outcomes offer valuable insights into the potential of social media-based Influencers in enhancing customer engagement and building customer loyalty during the pandemic and beyond.

In a similar vein, a study by Pitanatri et al. (2022) examined the role of social media-based Influencers in promoting customer engagement with online content during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study found that the use of social media Influencers can enhance customer engagement, as customers are more likely to engage with content that is recommended by an influencer they trust (Pitanatri et al., 2022). The study's results suggest that businesses and governments can leverage the influence of social media-based Influencers to enhance customer engagement and promote the uptake of health-related interventions during the pandemic (Pitanatri et al., 2022). Furthermore, the study highlights the need for businesses to carefully select Influencers based on their alignment with the brand's values, as customers prioritise authenticity and transparency in their interactions with Influencers (Pitanatri et al., 2022).

The outcomes will help to initiate, try, and comprehend the effectiveness of SM-based Influencers by helping the achievement of SM-based marketing strategies by enabling customer engagement (Pitanatri et al., 2022). Hence, SMIs have evolved into a major marketing tool for businesses to advertise their products to customers over time and particularly during a pandemic (Khasawneh et al., 2021). Apart from this, customer engagement during Covid-19 restrictions was increased by involving customers through social media channels. It is important to focus on motivating customers by gaining emotional attention from them (Pitanatri et al., 2022). These findings demonstrate the potential for social media-based Influencers to promote customer engagement and build customer loyalty during and beyond the pandemic and emphasise the importance of strategic influencer selection to achieve these outcomes.

Mason et al. (2021) mentioned that prior studies on the implications of a pandemic have primarily concentrated on behaviour for prevention and wellness; however, the effect of a pandemic on

consumer behaviour has garnered less consideration (Mason et al., 2021). Therefore, it is crucial to explore the influence of this pandemic on customers' social media marketing habits since recent research suggested that the pandemic is having major and fundamental effects on consumers' purchasing decisions. Since social media platforms have altered consumer decision-making (Mason et al., 2021).

The study by Mason et al. (2021) adopted the Nicosia Consumer Decision-Making Model as a framework for examining changes in consumers' social media behaviours during the pandemic. Their proposed model provides a thorough understanding of the consumer decision-making process by exploring the stages of product identification, product information search, alternative product evaluation, purchase decision, and post-purchase behaviour, thus addressing a research gap in the field (Mason et al., 2021).

In another study by Nurfina (2021) It was identified that customers have been using social media to trace products, gather data regarding products, assess products, and perform product purchases, based on the reviewed data. Therefore, the findings indicate that since the outbreak began, social media marketing has gained considerable importance (Nurnafia, 2021). This research seeks to comprehend the role of one such social media platform, Instagram, and Instagram Influencers as a resource for customer engagement as Instagram seems to be very personally engaging for its users (Nurnafia, 2021).

The study by Nurnafia (2021) was inspired by the increasing popularity of social media as a commercial platform that many companies are using to connect and interact with their consumers. Instagram is a popular social networking platform that has been widely used by companies, including fashion labels (Pitanatri et al., 2022). The goal of this study was to see how fast-fashion firms used social media marketing tactics during the Covid-19 pandemic and how they differed from before the outbreak.

The outcomes of this study, based on a case study, revealed a substantial change in the business's social media marketing activity on its Instagram brand community before and during the pandemic (Pitanatri et al., 2022). The data showed that the company was extensively promoting and heavily pushing itself on digital platforms such as social media during the pandemic (Nurnafia, 2021). It is indeed possible that the company engaged in these efforts because it wants to reach out to people who are going online during the pandemic (Nurnafia, 2021). This study also revealed the necessity for fast-fashion executives to engage in more social media marketing activities that enable customers to participate in co-creation and cooperation since it may result in increased consumer engagement (Nurnafia, 2021). However, a study by Kim and Ko (2022) presented a different perspective on the use of social media by fast fashion companies during the pandemic. They argued that fast fashion brands are facing challenges in terms of

sustainability and ethical concerns, which are important considerations for customers. As a result, companies need to rethink their social media marketing strategies and focus on sustainable fashion practices rather than just promotional activities. The authors suggested that companies can use social media to communicate their sustainability efforts and engage in dialogue with customers on this topic, leading to increased trust and loyalty among consumers. Thus, the study highlights the need for fast fashion companies to balance their marketing strategies with sustainable practices to appeal to socially conscious consumers (Kim and Ko, 2022).

Despite the differences in their approaches, both studies by Nurfina (2021) and Kim and Ko (2022) recognize the growing importance of social media as a platform for fast fashion companies to engage with their customers and maintain their market position.

### **2.5.2.3. Influencers using relevance of Covid-19 in content posting.**

Kim (2022) conducted a study during the pandemic to investigate how fitness YouTube channels and characteristics of fitness YouTubers influence the flow experience, satisfaction, and behavioural intention of individuals who work out at home using fitness YouTube channels. This study proposed a research model that outlines the impacts of three aspects of fitness YouTube channel characteristics (i.e., social interaction, information quality, and visual content) and three variables of fitness YouTuber characteristics (i.e., social attractiveness, physical attractiveness, and attitude homophily) on flow experience, satisfaction with the YouTube channel, and behavioural intention (Kim, 2022).

The research findings demonstrated that in-forming quality, visual content, and physical attractiveness all had a major impact on the flow experience. Social connection, information quality, and aesthetic material all had a significant impact on YouTube channel happiness (Kim, 2022). Finally, flow experience and YouTube channel pleasure had a substantial impact on behavioural intention leading to engagement (Kim, 2022). This study provides important implications for the existing literature and the social media sector during the pandemic based on the findings. Hence, in the context of the undertaken study, it is discussed that customers might participate in co-creation and cooperation by participating in social media marketing activities using Instagram, which might lead to improved consumer engagement (Kim, 2022). However, While Kim (2022) found that physical attractiveness had a significant impact on the flow experience and YouTube channel satisfaction, other studies have suggested that Influencers who focus solely on their physical appearance may not be as effective in engaging their audience in the long term. For example, Hwang, J., Kim, J., & Kim, J. (2021) found that influencer authenticity, defined as "the degree to which the influencer behaves in a sincere, genuine, and open manner with their followers," was a stronger predictor of trust and loyalty than physical attractiveness.

This is probable that Covid-19 restrictions have impacted the relationship between Instagram users and Influencers, creating more engagement. With the pandemic still ongoing, there is a noticeable shift in the messaging of Influencers and organisations from focusing on products and services to emphasising on values. (Kim, 2022). Users have used Instagram in a variety of ways during a pandemic crisis, but little is known about the kinds of engagement behaviour that can emerge and the causes that might drive diverse types of Instagram users' engagement behaviour in reaction to a global calamity (Kim, 2022). Since the pandemic is a recent phenomenon that is still affecting businesses and brands, there has not been any comprehensive empirical research measuring the impact of factors related to Instagram Influencers on customer engagement post-pandemic that specifically looks at the change in customer engagement on Instagram (Kim, 2022). Also, Kim (2022) found that co-creation and cooperation between customers and Influencers on Instagram could lead to improved consumer engagement, other studies have suggested that the relationship between Influencers and their followers is becoming increasingly transactional and less collaborative. For example, Pardun, C. J., Golaszewski, E., & Hall, L. E. (2021) argued that the rise of influencer marketing has led to a "culture of commodification" in which Influencers are seen primarily as salespeople rather than trusted sources of information or inspiration.

Covid-19 restrictions have been measured using a number of important caveats such as a feeling of loneliness and emptiness, social isolation, and the physical Covid-19 restrictions such as immobility as induced by the Covid-19 lockdowns (Francisco et al., 2021). It was assumed that such Covid-19 restrictions compelled people creating influencer content on Instagram, to spend more time on composing attractive, engaging and visual content, that would be perceived as delightful and aesthetically pleasing, not to mention beautiful for Instagram users, enabling them to engage more with the posts by sharing the same with others in their network circle, by dropping a positive comment about such posts, or very simply, by liking all of the posts, giving greater visibility to them in the process (Chuang, 2020).

The next section discusses the CE models existing in the literature along with their dimensions.

## **2.6. Adapting CE Model**

Customer engagement is a multifaceted concept, according to Shiri (2009), who conducted a qualitative study to categorise features of the engagement construct. Shiri (2009) suggested five conceptual consumer engagement factors based on the findings of this study: Awareness: Being aware of and knowledgeable about the focus of engagement, i.e. the object of engagement; Enthusiasm - intense interest in the subject of the interaction; Interaction - the exchange of ideas, emotions, and feelings with others concerning the object of involvement; Activity - acts related to the program or service in which the participant is enrolled; Extraordinary experience - a sense

of freshness in perception and process. Therefore, it can be considered that a customer is more likely to interact if an activity or offering is personally meaningful. Consumers evaluate relevance constantly while engaging (Shiri, 2009). Even before dedicating their time to an item or activity, businesses' communication may be used to assess relevance for the customers. This emphasises the need to communicate effectively by employing Influencers to provide efficient customer engagement. Hence, demonstrating the right elements or dimensions of customer engagement is essential for analysing customer behaviour (Shiri, 2009).

Moreover, the model of customer engagement supports in defining online customer interactions and caters to considering the product and brand attributes (Revathy and Balaji, 2020). The model also helps in having live interaction between customers and the brand. The benefit of adopting this model is that it supports building the ability to tailor the onboarding process based on the customer response (Revathy and Balaji, 2020).

Previous research on the features and frequent manifestations of customer engagement aspects was examined by Hollebeek (2011). Hollebeek (2011) specifically highlighted that the literature shows a lack of agreement on the dimensionality of engagement (Little and Little, 2006), with both unidimensional (Achterberg et al., 2003; Resnick, 2001) and multidimensional (Handelsman et al., 2005; Lutz et al., 2006) proposed perspectives. A further argument occurs in both perspectives over the particular dimensionality of the construct. Cox and Guthrie (2001), emphasise the cognitive part of involvement within the unidimensional viewpoint, whereas Catteeuw et al. (2007) and Pomerantz (2006) emphasise the emotional and behavioural aspects, respectively.

Based on these prior studies, it can be acknowledged that the main elements of the CE model that covers ideas, mental focus, emotions, and feelings along with consumer behaviour associated with customer engagement in the context of social media are cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions. Selecting these dimensions for the CE model is because various combinations of cognitive, emotional, and/or behavioural components are recognised within the multidimensional viewpoint. Furthermore, the three-dimensional perspective, which incorporates cognitive, emotional, and behavioural engagement characteristics, appears to have general recognition in the literature (Bowden and Mirzaei, 2021; Chen et al., 2021; Hollebeek and Rather, 2021).

Therefore, the major outcome of the research by Hollebeek (2011) was the categorization of consumer engagement components into the most prevalent cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions.

Kuvykaite and Tarut (2015) also agreed that customer engagement is typically related to specific emotions, behaviour, and cognitive exertion or commitment on the part of the consumer. It was

specified that dimensions related to specific emotions, behaviour, and cognitive exertion are defined by the object of interaction, which might be a brand, a brand community, advertising, a social networking site, or a website (Kuvykaite and Tarut, 2015). It emphasised that marketing research studies are typically based on the active involvement of the customer emotionally or intellectually interacting with the brand, behaviour connected to the brand after purchase, or participation in value creation activities (Kuvykaite and Tarut, 2015). Therefore, CE has the following dimensions, according to Kuvykaite and Tarut (2015).

Emotional, behavioural, and emotional dimensions. Behavioural dimension refers to content marketing's impact on attention, focus, and interest in an engagement object is referred to as cognitive. Similarly Emotional dimension refers to the impact of content marketing on a customer's emotional response to an engagement item.

Cognitive dimension refers to content marketing's capacity to elicit customer activities such as following, commenting, sharing, and reviewing is known as action.

With discussion on the dimensions of customer engagement supported by numerous studies, the next section discusses the CE model to be adapted for the present study.

The CE model Figure 2.13 (at the end of the chapter) provides a more rigorous understanding of how such analysis will be undertaken.

### **2.6.1. Customer Engagement Model for the study**

Based on the previous subsection the selection of a 3 –dimensional model of customer engagement was considered for this study to analyse the customer engagement on Instagram has been supported by various studies (Kuvykaite and Tarut, 2015; Rather and Hollebeek, 2021; Bowden and Mirzaei, 2021; Chen et al., 2021). Dessart (2017) also emphasised that cognitive engagement is an essential component of social media engagement since it centres on the overall intellectual state that is focused on something, requiring attention and absorption. Furthermore, behavioural engagement can relate to the concept's active expressions, such as sharing, learning, and endorsing behaviours, whereas brand commitment refers to an emotional or psychological connection to and affinity for a brand within the product category.

In recent years, studies have investigated the outcomes of customer engagement over social media and have opened new possibilities. In 2010 Mollen and Wilson established that for organisations that operate online, customer engagement is either 'vital' or 'important.' It is the result of repeated contact that enhances a customer's emotional, psychological, or physical engagement in a brand. While explaining the constructs of customer engagement, Mollen, and Wilson (2010) highlighted that active behaviour, continuous cognitive processing, the

accomplishment of relevance and usefulness, and emotional connection, resulting from pleasure and satisfaction, are all elements of customer online engagement.

In agreement, this was more explicitly developed by Brodie et al. in 2013, which characterises the three components of engagement, the emotional component that encompasses a sense of gratitude, compassion, trust, feeling secure, and perception of belongingness by engaging in the community; the cognitive component is characterised by relationships formed by sharing information and experiences; and the behavioural dimension is characterised by member involvement in the community, their online interaction, and their online involvement.

Apart from this, the CE model involves elements at the time of engagement of customers and most companies emphasise focusing on these dimensions for engaging customers with the brand during Covid-19. This helps in involving more into the brand and caters to offering better services to customers (Connell et al., 2021).

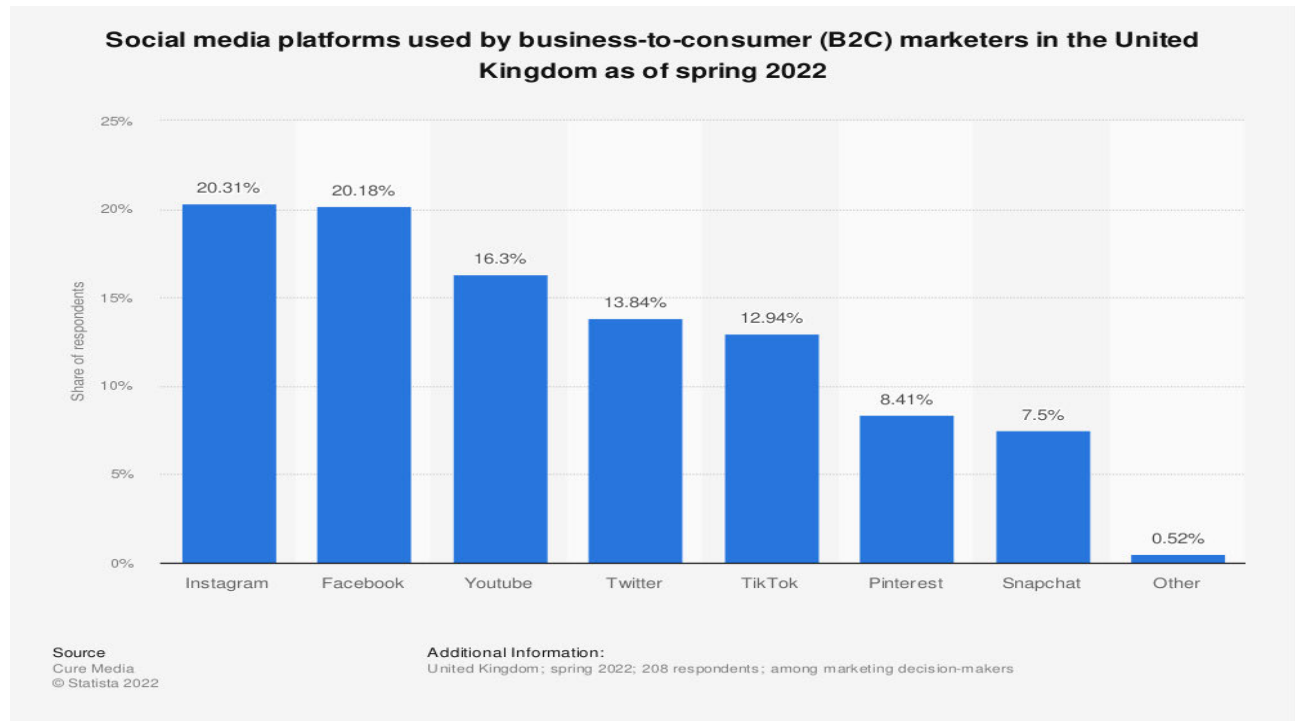
On the basis, of the arguments made by Connell et al. (2021) and Brodie et al. (2013), it can be stated that with varied customer engagement aspects discussed in previous studies, most of the recent studies since 2010 agreed on the fact that the core dimensions of CE are cognitive, emotional, and behavioural elements, which form the base of the CE model for the current study. However, the effect of Influencers on customer engagement during Covid-19 has not been discussed. Moreover, despite a few significant developments discussed, there is still a paucity of understanding, particularly about the function of consumer engagement about specific social media platforms such as Instagram (Wielki, J., 2020).

Instagram is an essential medium for influencer marketing among many other social media and Influencers become the generator of the content as well as a celebrity for many individuals (Abidin et al., 2021). Instagram is the most used social media platform worldwide and celebrities have increasingly taken to the use of Instagram to connect with their target audience. Many of these celebrities are Influencers who promote products and services of their own or of others, inducing many people to purchase the same (Wielki, J., 2020).

During a 2022 survey conducted by Cure Media (Figure 2.6) in the United Kingdom, Instagram and Facebook were closely tied as the most popular social media platforms used for marketing by responding B2C marketers, with a share of mentions of 20.31 percent and 20.18 percent, respectively (Cure Media, 2022). YouTube was third place among respondents, with a 16.3 percent share whereas TikTok only captured 12.94 percent share of the market. The appeal, and widespread use of Instagram, compared to other platforms like TikTok, YouTube or Facebook, made this platform an ideal choice for study and analysis, as far as this research is concerned (Cure Media, 2022).

The present study aims to fill this research gap. Besides this, the subsequent section also discusses the elements linked with Instagram Influencers that might impact the dimensions of

customer engagement. Among the various elements, trust is considered significant as customers attempt to engage with digital Influencers based on the level of trust developed. The next section discusses the aspect of trust in Influencers concerning customer engagement.



**FIGURE 2.6 CURE MEDIA**

Cure Media. (2022). Social media platforms used by business-to-consumer (B2C) marketers in the United Kingdom as of spring 2022. Statista.

## 2.7. Trust in Influencers

As per O'Hara (2012), trust is described as a solid conviction in someone or something's character, strength, or truth which develops the bond with the associated individual or group. The model of a relationship of trust is commonly regarded to be one in which two involved parties can size each other up in flawed but suggestive ways. Che et al. (2017) explained that for most customers, selling items in a virtual store on Instagram is a new purchasing mode, and consumer trust is a vital factor in making a purchase choice on Instagram. It is critical to comprehend customer trust in online Instagram purchases made through Influencers since consumers increasingly seek social media Influencers for suggestions and guidance, with much now placing greater faith in Influencers than in brands.

On the contrary, Abidin et al., (2021) committed that Influencers have years of experience in their work for developing bonds and trust with followers. The behaviour of consumers is driven by



Influencers. The current market scenario is digital which further aims to involve endorsing activities and supports customers in making decisions.

Wielki, J., 2020 (2022) agreed that consumer behaviour is increasingly influenced by the expanding presence exerted by social media Influencers (SMIs). In influencer marketing, trust is critical for establishing and sustaining effective long-term connections between businesses and their customers. The study by Wielki, J., 2020 (2022) also shows that consumer trust in SMIs had a beneficial influence on each step of travel decision-making while studying the impact of SMI (Social media Influencers) trust on customer travel decision-making.

According to the findings, marketers can use SMIs to raise and drive the desire to travel and a method for customers to seek information on their next trip. Aside from being a marketing tool, trust in SMIs is a critical factor in successfully influencing consumer decisions. It is determined that 92% of consumers trust an influencer more as compared with traditional and advertisement endorsement. Similarly, 33% acknowledged that trust can be developed through Influencers as they are considered a source of trust at the time of making shopping decisions. While only 17% trust taking recommendations from friends and family (Eti et al., 2021).

Competent Influencers in an online social network (OSN) may impact consumers' purchase decisions via electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) marketing, according to Liu et al. (2015). Liu et al. (2015) found that based on their study, trusted Influencers could have a significant impact on consumers' acceptance of recommendations, purchase decisions, and partner selection in e-commerce. To achieve this conclusion, the study proposed a research framework that considered the dimensions of trust, domain, and time. Ioanid et al. (2015) conducted research into the influence of digital Influencers based on the level of trust that Influencers utilise to promote certain brands. The study indicated that many potential buyers are informed about products or services via social media and due to the fans' trust in the influencer, the conversion rate for businesses seems high.

According to Rothfischer (2021), the Covid-19 pandemic has shed light on the distinct nature of the credibility of traditional Influencers versus Key Opinion Leaders. Traditional Influencers derive their credibility from their online presence, content, and authenticity, while key Opinion Leaders establish credibility through their first-hand experience. This characteristic enables Influencers to build trust with their followers. Archer et al. (2020) stated that with the Covid-19 pandemic, the importance, and power of social media Influencers (SMIs) have been highlighted, however, the modifications seen are that trust has been assessed in the form of influencer engagement ethics post pandemic in comparison to pre-pandemic.

Numerous studies (Liu et al., 2015; Singh et al., 2020; Wielki, J., 2020; Tafesse et al., 2021; Lee et al. 2022; Khasawneh et al., 2021) have assessed the element of trust in Influencers from the

perspective of their electronic word of mouth marketing, helping brands during the crisis, for brand engagement, making consumer buying decisions, and efficacy of social media networks even in Covid-19 but specific to customer engagement for Instagram is still lacking.

As a result, it can be concluded that when it comes to the impact of influencer marketing and digital Influencers on customers via Instagram, the focus is on trust and how trustworthy Instagram Influencers are while promoting different products during collaboration with a business (Tafesse et al., 2021). Consumers are spending more time online, which has given social media Influencers more opportunities to interact with different companies (Tafesse et al., 2021).

Although influencer marketing has drawn the attention of marketing scholars in recent years, little is known about how the content of Influencers and their followers may affect followers' engagement behaviour in Covid-19 (Kathrin Rothfischer, 2021). Moreover, during Covid-19, trust as an attribute of Influencers has shown an impact on the extent of engagement which should be measured. In influencer marketing, building, and maintaining trustworthy relationships with consumers over the long term is essential (Kathrin Rothfischer, 2021). Very few studies have examined the idea that without trust, information designed to increase engagement does not seem to be authentic and would not connect with the target audience. Trust in Influencers also facilitates the scope of higher engagement with customers and an analysis will be essential to assess its impact (Tafesse et al., 2021).

Trust can impact customer engagement on a social media platform (Khasawneh et al., 2021). Notably, elements, such as trustworthiness, truthfulness and honesty in advertisements or content published on social media platforms by Influencers, can attract the attention and the interest of the target audience, making them more engaged with these posts than the usual (Khasawneh et al., 2021).

The higher the level of trust associated with an Instagram post published by an influencer the greater would be the level of customer engagement with that post (Khasawneh et al., 2021). Establishing and maintaining relations that are characterised by trustworthiness and honesty, is essential, if Influencers are not only to capture the interest of their target audience but also retain this interest in the products that are being advertised by them (Tafesse et al., 2021). Consumers need to be able to trust the content being published before their eyes and to see the post as honest and truthful for them to engage with it (Tafesse et al., 2021). This engagement takes the form of a post being liked, or commented upon, while engagement also occurs when the influencer posts are shared by consumers, informing more people on Instagram, about the characteristics of the product being promoted and enabling greater engagement with the same, in the process (Tafesse et al., 2021).

Covid-19 restrictions have had an impact on trust and customer engagement (Rothfischer, 2021).

As the lockdown imposed by the government has compelled people to remain indoors and carry out their shopping online, the use of Instagram has increased, with several people viewing influencer posts and advertisements now to determine what they should buy (Rothfischer, 2021). In the bargain, people have come to trust advertisements and offers as published by Influencers, that are truthful and honest in terms of content, and which provide them a clear and transparent idea of the benefits they may experience when using a specific product or availing a particular service (Rothfischer, 2021).

Based on the aspects discussed related to trust in Influencers, the following hypothesis is proposed for the study.

**H1 (Hypothesis 1): Covid-19 restrictions moderate the relationship between trust and customer engagement.**

### **2.8. Interactivity**

According to Qiao (2019), the rising adoption of using social media to create interactive engagement has provided businesses with a variety of chances to communicate with their consumers and clients. The degree to which two and even more than two communication partners engage with one another using a communication medium and the extent to which this communication is coordinated is referred to as interactivity (Qiao ,2019).

The outcome of exploring how interactive computer-mediated communication (CMC) affects users is referred to as "user interactivity." While analysing the impact of using Instagram for business, Akbar (2021) identified that interactivity as an attribute of Instagram has a significant impact on Instagram use for business. Interactivity is one of the attributes of SMIs, according to Glucksman (2017), and this attribute allows the influencer to collaborate with the viewers to gather responses. Glucksman (2017) researched to determine the characteristics that contribute to a social media influencer's success, and one of the most crucial aspects was interactivity between the influencer and the viewer. In order to promote brand products and stimulate consumer interest, Influencers leverage interactive video content, urging their followers to purchase and try out the products themselves (Glucksman, 2017).

Dutta and Varma, (2022) stated that Instagram helps in developing interaction with customers through which engagement can be developed with them. Through Instagram, marketers reach people by posting stories and engaging customers with them. In addition to this, they also encourage people by showing them stories and similarly support engaging them with the brand for the long term.

Abdul-Ghani et al. (2011) Considered interactivity and involvement to be strongly associated with

engagement as the factors to reflect the attention of the consumers or the interest of the objects. Similarly, Dessart et al. (2016) identified the cognitive factors of attention and absorption as important for customer engagement. In the setting of social media, Zhang et al. (2017) mentioned that a proper process would include enjoyment and enthusiasm along with identification. Further, Ruiz-Mafe et al. (2014) stated that the users who like certain brand pages can locate the post and engage with them by commenting on it, sharing it, and liking it.

Furthermore, interactivity can be developed by using interactive stickers on Instagram which motivate customers to investigate that and further act towards it. Interaction between customers and marketers enhance by providing them with attractive concepts (Di Virgilio et al., 2022). It is essential to emphasise motivating customers so that the customer supports having better interaction with them.

Jun and Yi (2020) attempted to explain how followers become dedicated to social media Influencers by presenting a mechanism. Influencer interactivity was identified as a distinctive aspect of influencer companies, and their impact was explored. Influencer interactivity was found to be positively associated with influencer authenticity and emotional attachment, according to the findings. Influencers authenticity influences brand trust by mediating the effect of interactivity on emotional attachment. Do Yuon Kim and Hye-Young Kim (2022) stated that SMIs serve as a source of interactive marketing perspectives and that during the pandemic time, a shift in influencer marketing on Instagram was noted.

Do Yuon Kim and Hye-Young Kim (2022) conducted research to see how Influencers might meet the requirement for real-life human engagement and interaction during a pandemic, and the results found that SMIs on the Instagram platform produce continual interaction with their followers, even when a pandemic was prevalent. In times of crisis, governments and companies have used the persuasive potential of SMIs to convey messages to online audiences by their strategic aims, according to Femenia-Serra et al. (2022). Femenia-Serra et al. (2022) researched to better understand the roles of Influencers in crises, and the findings revealed that Influencers may play a variety of roles (such as translating information and branded material into interactive and engaging postings). According to Hollebeek and Belk, (2021) keeping consistent content, the calendar is considered as the way with the help of that interactivity through Instagram can be developed. The marketer needs to focus on enhancing interaction with customers to achieve higher profits and revenue.

Hence, it can be stated that interactivity is an important attribute of social media Influencers that affect engagement on Instagram. By measuring the effect of interactivity on engagement among the customers, the findings will assist marketers to focus on the interactivity aspect of Influencers for better branding. Moreover, it is essential to analyse the change in interactivity during a

pandemic as brands have recognised that SMIs are experts in their field and provide them with appropriate creative flexibility, particularly during a crisis like the current pandemic, which has profoundly altered audience expectations.

The element of interactivity is known to boost customer engagement on Instagram (Huang et al. 2018). Interactivity comprises three sub-elements namely, that of connectedness, responsiveness, and experiences (Ariel and Rafaeli, 2007). If Instagram users feel connected to the posts that are being published by Instagram Influencers, they will feel a greater urge to respond to that post by either dropping a comment, hitting the like button or by sharing the post with others in their network circle (Huang et al., 2018). Talking about their experiences of using a product or service and discussing how it may or may not have benefitted them is another aspect of consumer interaction on Instagram.

Customers usually take to Instagram to discuss how happy and content they are with a product or service (Ariel and Rafaeli, 2007). They may discuss their experiences when viewing an influencer post on Instagram, to inform others about how convenient or unsatisfactory that the product may be. It is through an increased interaction with the influencer posts on Instagram that customer engagement with the same, is enhanced (Rafaeli and Ariel, 2007).

As for the elements of interactivity, it is stated that Instagram allows users to engage with other users and Influencers with whom they have varying degrees of acquaintance, according to Ariel and Avidar (2015). Interactivity consists of connectedness, experience, and responsiveness and is a crucial component of the communication process that acts as a relationship maintenance strategy and contributes to relational outcomes (Ariel and Rafaeli, 2007).

Covid-19 has facilitated greater interactivity on a platform such as Instagram (Francisco et al., 2021). With the onset of Covid-19 and the restrictions that came with it, such as that of social isolation, emptiness, and a state of lockdown, more and more people have been spending time on Instagram, browsing through status updates and posts published on this platform, either by those in their personal network or by the Influencers that they follow (Francisco et al., 2021). By spending more time than usual on Instagram, users have interacted quite extensively with influencer posts on Instagram and have thus engaged with such posts more than usual (Francisco et al., 2021).

Based on the aspects discussed related to the interactivity of Influencers, the following hypothesis is proposed for the study.

**H2: Covid-19 restrictions moderate the relationship between Interactivity and customer engagement.**

Lastly, with the discussed significance of interactivity as an important attribute of social media Influencers that affect engagement in Instagram, the immersive virtual experience facilitated with the content of Instagram Influencers also needs attention. The next subsection explains the attribute of virtual experience with Instagram Influencers.

## **2.9. Virtual Experience**

Social media theory states that the media has varying capacities which for communicating visual and verbal signals make them diverse in their ability to convey the psychological sense that other people are physically there (Cui et al., 2013). Social presence and telepresence are referred to as virtual experience and coexistence in an online world, according to Chuang (2020). The extent to which a system permits individuals to form interpersonal connections with others and facilitates people sensing others' psychological states is referred to as social presence. Bouvier (2018) explained that the term "virtual experience" refers to a strong sensation of "being there," engaged in a virtual environment, where users do not appear to have to think about the world to make sense of what is being depicted Erkkilä and Luoma-aho, (2022) stated that at the time of Covid-19 people experience virtuality because of lockdown in the world. During that time, all work was done on a virtual basis as there was no physical meeting between people. Companies selling online products achieved higher profits at that time as products or services were sold through virtual mediums only.

According to Casaló et al. (2017), the increasing importance of Instagram and its expanding popularity reflects users' need for brand information and contact with other customers. Users' virtual experiences on Instagram can take the form of likes and comments, which are two of the most common behaviours that show consumer engagement on the platform. When people visit an Instagram account, the originality of the content uploaded there may help them have a better time and an intriguing and surprising virtual experience, which can lead to higher satisfaction. According to O'Hagan (2021), the pandemic offered up new opportunities for social media such as Instagram, particularly in terms of its potential as an exhibition venue with better aesthetic experiences and higher levels of interactivity and engagement with viewers. The importance of Instagram in ensuring a joyful and gratifying virtual experience with increased usage of social media has been realised because of online displays of items and businesses throughout the pandemic.

On the other side, Wang et al., (2020) argued that Instagram is providing a better experience to customers by developing interaction with people. Also, virtual experience caters to direct interaction with customers, which supports engaging the audience with delivering them better services.

Influencers take an authentic approach to their work and share their personal and professional

life on social media through a variety of perspectives and experiences. As a result, the level of user engagement is influenced by virtual experiences with Influencers. The rate of user engagement during the pandemic has varied, but the influence of the virtual experience on consumer engagement has not been quantified. Therefore, it is essential to determine the impact of virtual experience as an attribute of SMIs on customer engagement.

Zhong (2022) investigated how consumer brand engagement on social media is impacted by endorsements from virtual Influencers. Users' motivations may be influenced by their virtual experiences with social media Influencers and by the elements of those Influencers' endorsements. The results showed that among other virtual influencer characteristics, visibility does have an impact on brand-customer engagement. To comprehend the mechanism behind the marketing process, from the guidance of digital Influencers to user engagement, Liu (2021) evaluated the impact of influencer marketing on brand engagement.

According to Liu (2021), influencer-generated content offers customers a virtual experience of products or services that enables them to fully immerse themselves in media content. The study concluded that users like marketing information in virtual experiences with content from Influencers, which eventually fosters brand engagement. Based on the aspects discussed related to the interactivity of Influencers, the following hypothesis is proposed for the study.

Virtual experiences can enhance customer engagement on Instagram (Chuang, 2020). Elements such as absorption, immersion, and the feeling of being able to create a new world, contribute to the level of engagement with influencer posts, as published on platforms such as Instagram (Marston, 2020). The virtual experience that is offered by influencer posts, in the form of videos, or short reels, provides customers with a vivid and vibrant understanding of the experience that they are likely to go through when using a product or a service, and which increases their engagement with the post by making them view the post more often, and like or comment on the post if they so wish to (Marston, 2020).

Watching a reel of a product that is being promoted by an influencer on Instagram, provides customers with an idea about the attractive qualities or attributes that are associated with a product, and they are able to visualise exactly what it would be like to hold the product in their hands, and use it (Chuang, 2020). The more enchanting or attractive the visual quality of the influencer post is, the greater will be the potential of this virtual experience to keep consumers hooked and interested therefore, in the product being advertised (Chuang, 2020).

Covid-19 restrictions have facilitated virtual experiences as offered by Instagram Influencers through their posts on this platform, and this has increased customer engagement in the bargain (Francisco et al., 2021). Due to Covid-19 restrictions such as lockdown and social isolation, Influencers have had more time at hand, than the usual to create intriguing visual posts

and content that provide customers with a fascinating virtual experience, which absorbs their attention and interest completely, and which makes them feel as if they have been transported into an alternate reality by viewing the post. Watching creatively conceived reels and videos on Instagram makes customers highly interested in the virtual experience associated with this, and the level of engagement with the Instagram post is therefore higher (Francisco et al., 2021).

**H3: Covid-19 restrictions moderate the relationship between Virtual Experience and customer engagement.**

### **2.10. Visual Display of content by Influencers**

The goal of visual display is to attract and engage customers so that they might purchase products. To deliver relevant content, Influencers go to great lengths to include a visual depiction of the brand (Holiday et al., 2021). Marston (2020) highlighted that the present social media environment, specifically Instagram, is filled with multimodal forms of expression, from selfies and Graphics Interchange Format (GIF) to memes and emojis. While many of these forms are not new, their popularity and spread through everyday mediated interactions have changed their meaning. The impacts of visual themes and view perspectives on users' visual attention are observed with different brand posts on Instagram, according to Zhou and Xue (2021).

As per the view of Pitanatri et al., (2022) displaying products in an innovative way supports getting people into another look at products or services. It is necessary to emphasise considering shoppers' views so that this supports in order to carry out functioning in a proper manner.

Öhman (2017) mentioned that visual content displayed has a certain influence on the rate of engagement on Instagram. The visual nature of Instagram is considered to be its fundamental advantage over other social networking platforms (Öhman, 2017). Huber et al., (2011) explained that posts uploaded with a picture of an animal provide a higher rate of engagement than pictures not having animals in them. One of the reasons for this can be that the animals often create an image of family and create emotions within viewers. The study's findings by Huber et al. (2011) also showed that pictures which have people in them have a longer lifespan. The important aspect highlighted by this study is the influence of visual content on the engagement rate of the viewers and the viewing time in Instagram posts (Huber et al., 2011).

Another study was able to show the impact of various types of media and found that wall posts and photos lead to an increase in the daily active users than the link wall posts and status. Photos can touch viewers on an emotional level, hence leading to being shared highly by the users. Moreover, Dessart et al. (2016) Also agreed that photos can increase the content's credibility and can attract the attention of the viewer more than the text. Moreover, visual display of content also helps in attracting customers and similarly aims in carrying out functioning in an efficient



way. With the help of displaying content, the company can gather emotional attention from customers which helps in delivering a better customer experience (Abidin et al., 2021).

Customers spend the most time seeing customer-centric photos and provide product-centric and customer-centric images the greatest attention. Pak and Hiramoto (2020) determined that there are links between visual elements and consumer engagement after performing a text and visual analysis of their Instagram posts. Rogers (2021) agreed that Instagram is presently the most popular social media site for sharing online photos. Belanche et al. (2020) stated that the picture collections are presented in a way that allows for critical evaluation of them. Influencer–product matches in Instagram posts stimulate users to look up information about marketed items and have an impact on their desire to connect with Influencers' accounts. Customers' reactions to an influencer's posts, however, vary depending on whether they are followers of the influencer and how invested they are with the marketed product.

According to Soni and Shukla (2021), Instagram has completely transformed the phenomena of network building into social commerce since it is a rising window for attracting customers and creating elements associated with impulse behaviour. The visual display, along with other crucial aspects, plays a significant part in the development and generation of impulsive behaviour among customers. Since Instagram's visual display aids in online consumer targeting, marketers should focus on this feature to reach more customers for online purchases, especially after the pandemic. As per the view of Eti et al., (2021) only displaying content on Instagram is not feasible as it also requires certain aspects that need to be considered by the marketer. In addition to this, choosing one filter and sticking it for the long term can engage customers.

As a result, it is critical to get a deeper understanding of whether Instagram might serve as a new window for impulse behaviour. As the internet has grown in popularity, a growing number of customers are turning to Instagram for purchases, and Instagram has become a new doorway for online shopping (Eti et al., 2021). Visual displays by Influencers can have a greater impact on user engagement, particularly after a pandemic, when digital connectivity increases (Eti et al., 2021).

The visual display of content as evident from influencer posts on Instagram can attract the attention of consumers to a very great extent, and it plays a role in keeping them highly engaged with such influencer posts (Eti et al., 2021). The visual display of content manifests itself in the form of high-quality videos and photographs that are published by Influencers of the products which they promote, and they are usually seen to be using or posing with such products, when publishing posts about the same on Instagram (Eti et al., 2021). The beauty of the content and the attractive quotient and appeal of the same are factors that influence how successfully visual content as published on Instagram can keep consumers engaged with that post, over a long period of time (Belanche et al., 2020). Influencers usually focus on the creation of visual

posts that have high aesthetic value, which are beautiful to view, and which can draw the attention of the viewers as soon as they set their eyes on the post (Belanche et al., 2020).

Covid-19 restrictions such as lockdowns as well as social isolation have impacted how visual display of content can enhance or boost customer engagement on Instagram (Francisco et al., 2021). Many Influencers who have been compelled to spend their time indoors in the lockdown period, have had the time at hand and the resources as well, such as a mobile phone or camera, with which to create beautiful, aesthetically pleasing, and appealing visual content. Such content not only informs customers about the details of the service or the product they are promoting, but keeps them intrigued about, and engaged with the same (Francisco et al., 2021).

Instagram stands out among the numerous social media platforms as the preferred option for SMIs to interact with customers owing to its high engagement rate per post, according to Koay et al. (2022). As a result, the variety of material delivered through posts from SMIs is beneficial for both global and regional companies since SMIs are recognised as reliable experts in their fields of expertise. SMIs convey their messages about the endorsed products through aesthetically appealing posts and videos, which help people build favourable opinions of the brands (Koay et al., 2022). Customers will rely on source characteristics such as visual styles and physical attractiveness for the diagnostic evaluations of visually displayed products or services, according to Yang et al. (2022). Due to their appealing visual presentation of the content being promoted and persuasive postings, Influencers who serve as opinion leaders can have an impact on other user behaviours and decision-making (Yang et al., 2022). Based on the aspects discussed related to the interactivity of Influencers, the following hypothesis is proposed for the study.

**H4: Covid-19 restrictions moderate the relationship between Visual display of content and customer engagement.**

### **2.11. Influencers of customer engagement**

Influencers on social media, particularly those on Instagram, can reach many customers worldwide and are seen as reliable sources of information, products, content, and brands (Silva et al., 2019). The importance of interactive, experience, visual display, and trust as influencing qualities that affect a communicator's persuasiveness is highlighted in the previous sections based on supporting literature. Additionally, Instagram Influencers may affect engagement through their attributes. For Instagram Influencers to be deemed effective, they need to look interactive, trustworthy, and engaging Koay et al. (2022). The Influencers are also required to deliberately engage their followers to attract advertisers based on the virtual experience and visual display of content. There have been studies that Instagram Influencers are seen as far more reliable than traditional advertising, however this link eventually needs to be studied. Concerning these elements/attributes, the role of Influencers in customer engagement is discussed in this

subsection.

According to Di Virgilio et al., (2022) customer engagement can be improved by expanding the reach and boosting the experience of the customer. During Covid-19 all activities are carried out virtually, so marketers need to enhance their customer base by using virtual channels. Influencers marketing is quite common nowadays as this helps in engaging customers. They established their presence in the market and enhanced their customer base to increase customer engagement (Di Virgilio et al., 2022).

Tafesse and Wood (2021) conducted a study to examine the measures of content influences and the strategy of engagement like the count of the followers, the count of the followers, volume of the content, and domain of interest have an association with the engagement of the followers' behaviour on Instagram interactively as well as independently. The findings of the study were able to show that the count of the followers and the volume of the content have a negative association with the engagement of the follower, while the count of the following has a positive association with the engagement of the follower (Tafesse and Wood, 2021).

However, the main effects are modified by the domain of interest of the influencer. The findings of a study by Jaitley and Gautam (2021) showed that the perception of the customers and the attitude are influenced by the Influencers as they can have the capability to be able to interact with the niche segment When compared to the conventional method of advertising, the Influencers with new technological expertise have the potential to pave the way for new and competitive strength given to the agencies for keeping the consumers engaged and developing awareness for the brand.

Bun and Alversia (2020) aimed to understand the influence of incentives on the motivation of the customers to involve with the brands and their endorsement of the bloggers in developing customer engagement through social media platforms like Instagram. The incentives were defined with monitor dimensions and nominated dimensions and the food for girls was defined with trustworthiness and expertise dimensions that show the credibility of the bloggers (Bun and Alversia, 2020). As a result, there were three different findings of the study. The first was regarding theme sentences positively impacting the attitude for brand engagement through social media. The second was the blogger positively influencing the brand which impacts the attitude towards engagement with the brand using social media (Bun and Alversia, 2020).

Third, a positive attitude toward engagement provides a positive intention to engage which carries on to the purchasing activity for the viewers through social media. It is observed that one can gain deeper insight related to customer needs and want help in developing customer engagement and similarly support in delivering better services to them. Influencers through social posts engage customers and through this, they would be able to gain knowledge about

their preferences (Erkkilä and Luoma-aho, 2022). In addition to this, providing a personalised customer experience is another way of strengthening customer engagement.

Research by Khasawneh et al. (2021) was able to show that the reason for a favourable association between the trust of the consumers within the SM-based Influencers and the involvement of the customers is when the consumers can locate an influencer to be reliable to trust so that they can be involved more (Khasawneh et al. ,2021). The practical aspect of the study was able to show that the effect of the Influencers of social media on the participation of their customers with the content associated with Covid-19 on social media will provide the companies as well as the governments with a better opportunity to understand the significance of the social media Influencers in the contribution of a successful social media marketing campaign by encouraging the engagement with their customers (Khasawneh et al., 2021).

In the study by Delbaere et al. (2021), it was found that cognitive processing was one of the major factors of brand engagement for demonstrations because the thoughts of a consumer regarding a brand are usually changed as per the content of an influencer. Through findings, it was made clear that when an influencer mentions a particular brand, the thought process of the view was also changed accordingly for that brand (Delbaere et al., 2021). Then affection was found to be the second factor for brand engagement as the consumers showed strong and positive reactions to the videos and the brands mentioned by the influencer. It was also found that sometimes there was a negative reaction expressed by the followers towards a brand with no video, but the frequency of their occurrence was less with lesser intensity (Delbarae et al., 2012).

Further, a study by Aprialita and Sari (2020) found that the duration of content, experiential marketing, and Influencers in social media had a positive and significant impact on the engagement of a consumer for online games as well (Aprialita and Sari, 2020). The results of the study were able to show that there was a positive and significant influence on the engagement of a consumer for variable contacts, then the influencer variables had a significant positive influence on the engagement of a customer, further, the experiential marketing variables had a significant and a positive influence on the engagement of a consumer's and experiential marketing, Influencers and content variables had a significant and positive association on the customer engagement (Aprialita and Sari, 2020).

In research by Liu (2021), a model was created that suggested the para-social association had positively influenced the credibility of a source during the content interaction between the influencer and its viewers, and then the credibility of the source improves the credibility of the brand (Liu, 2021). Moreover, the immersion of the content increases the enjoyment of the content of the brand. both the credibility of the brand and the enjoyment of the content of the brand would in the end create engagement for the brand. Khamis et al. (2017) specified that the

marketing domain usually focuses on certain topics and certain segments in the market, and the endorsement of the brand is more focused on individualism, an intermediate form for expressing oneself. Gong and Li (2017) supported this fact and further highlighted that the content created by the influencer gives an experience for the services and the product that would provide the consumers with an opportunity to involve themselves in the media content (Liu, 2021). They also mentioned that immersive experiences can encourage people to process media information, resulting in long-term memory retention (Gong and Li, 2017). Immersion in the online world will also boost the favourable feelings and attitude of the audience toward brand endorsement. Immersion in tales and virtual experiences gives customers happy sentiments, which leads to positive brand assessments (Liu, 2021).

Therefore, the studies discussed above highlight that Influencers provide customers with an opportunity to participate in media content by providing an experience for the services and products (Gong and Li, 2017; Khamis et al., 2017). Customers' trust in SM-based Influencers and their interaction with them have been seen during pandemics (Liu, 2021). For instance, a study by Francisco et al. (2021) found that the pandemic has led to a shift in influencer marketing on Instagram, with a focus on more authentic and relatable content. Another study by Bentley et al. (2021) showed that product promotions by digital Influencers on Instagram led to increased engagement with users. Furthermore, the study by Mason et al. (2021) used Nicosia's Consumer Decision-Making Model to analyse changes in consumers' social media behaviours during the pandemic and found that social media marketing, including influencer marketing, gained considerable importance. These studies collectively suggest that the use of Influencers on social media, particularly Instagram, has been an effective means of engaging customers during the Covid pandemic.

### **2.12. Research Gap**

On social media, the Influencers can be seen as the generators of the content, and celebrities that have followers (Razak and Mansor, 2022). Unlike traditionally followed celebrities or the figures in public, the emerging Influencers in social media are common people who can express themselves at a personal level on the platforms and give more importance to the niche areas where their interests lie for example fashion, fitness, technology, food, and subculture (Lee et al., 2021). Therefore, to ensure the effective and sustainable development of the digital advertising ecosystem, it is crucial to examine the role and position of digital Influencers, as highlighted by Wielki (2020). Moreover, during Covid-19, organisations, as well as businesses, are attempting to utilise Influencers in their online promotional activities more widely as the digital medium is the most effective way of reaching out to customers (Ayush et al., 2020).

As the scenario has evolved during Covid-19, many firms have realised that influencer-led

marketing may continue at a time when commercial photo sessions are not possible. However, post-pandemic, influencer-led marketing has been adopted as the mainstream marketing approach (Razak and Mansor, 2022). Similarly, engagement in social media postings has been higher than usual during the pandemic in recent months, as consumers have spent more time on social media and have been on higher end since then (Taylor, 2020). The online engagement of the consumers has been higher, and this has provided social media Influencers with an opportunity to engage with various brands (Jiang and Stylos, 2021).

Despite increasing interest in influencer marketing among marketing academics, there is limited knowledge about how the impact of influencer content and customer engagement on follower/user engagement behaviour has changed during the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly regarding factors such as trust, interactivity, virtual experience, and visual display, as noted by Francisco et al. (2021). The pandemic is a recent phenomenon, and it is persistent as argued by Francisco et al. (2021). In terms of its impact on businesses and brands, limited empirical research with insights into change in customer engagement specifically on Instagram has been conducted yet to measure the impact of factors related to Instagram Influencers on the customer engagement post-pandemic.

Therefore, the current study aims to bridge this research gap as the change in customer engagement of the Influencers on Instagram posts can have a substantial effect on the influencer marketing approaches which needs to be studied in detail. Furthermore, Van Driel and Dumitrica (2021) argued that for an Instagram influencer to be considered effective, the influencer must appear real, trustworthy, and engaged, while also approaching their followers strategically to appeal to advertisers (Taylor, 2020). Though Instagram Influencers are perceived as much more trustworthy than traditional advertising, this relationship eventually leads to a uniformity of influencer and user relationship. The Covid-19 has changed this standardisation as well (Archer et al., 2021) and it is essential to assess as there is a change in customer engagement of the Influencers on Instagram post; there are factors related to Instagram Influencers which affects the customer engagement post-pandemic; evaluation of impact of Instagram Influencers on customer engagement is still lacking. Therefore, this study is an attempt to cover these gaps so that the varied impact of a pandemic on customer engagement based on the related attributes of Instagram Influencers can be determined (Archer et al., 2021).

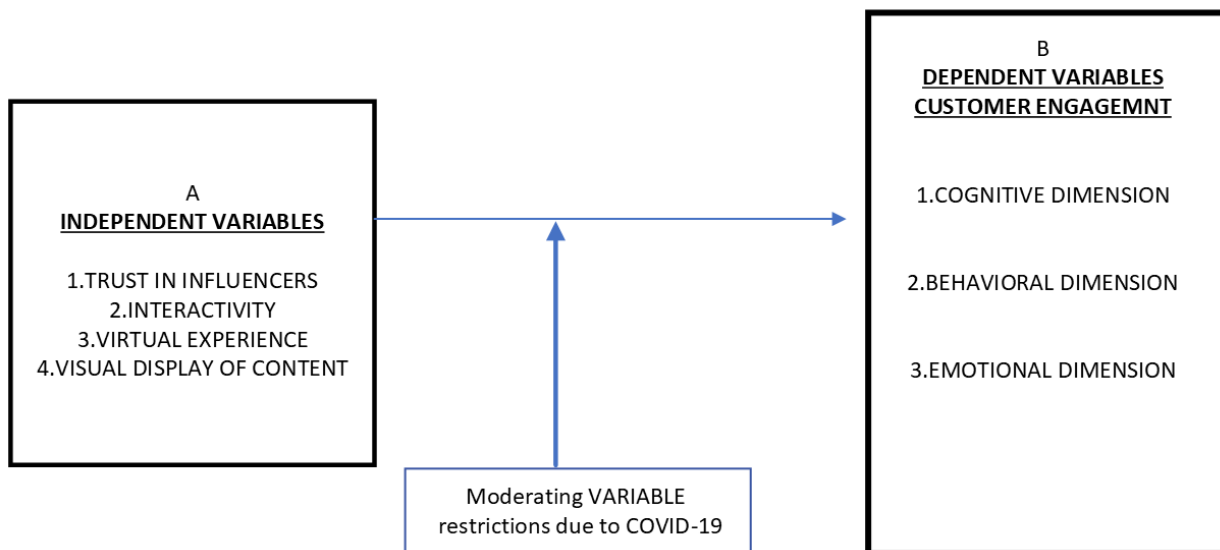
### **2.13 Conceptual framework**

The Conceptual Framework as presented above describes the relationships to be analysed as part of this study. Based on the varied attributes and aspects of influencer marketing on Instagram discussed in the subsections above, the independent variables identified for the study are “trust in Influencers, interactivity, virtual experience, and displayed visual content.” These variables

have been considered to examine the influence on the dependent variable “customer engagement” specifically defined based on the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions.

As discussed in the literature there is a direct relationship between the independent variables, trust, interactivity, virtual experience, visual display of content and dimensions of customer engagement. The research is trying to investigate the effect of Covid-19 restrictions such as no physical contact, no non-essential travel, curfews, limited contact, and work from home therefore acting as a moderator for the relationship between the independent variables and customer engagement.

A moderator variable is the multiplied effect of the 2 variables, one being an independent variable and the other the moderator variable where an interaction effect can be calculated. In this model there are 4 interaction effects taking place. Trust and Covid-19 restrictions, interactivity and Covid-19 restrictions, virtual experience and Covid-19 restrictions, and visual display of content and Covid-19 restrictions. The research aims to investigate the effect of Covid-19 restrictions on customer engagement between Instagram users and Influencers.



**FIGURE 2.13 CONCEPTUAL MODEL**

Created by author.

## 2.14. Conclusion

The literature presented highlights the significance of influencer marketing in the digital landscape, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. With a surge in social media usage during the pandemic, user behaviour patterns have changed, and users had more time to consume and engage with content on social media. As a result, social media creators and Influencers were able to create more engaging content, which can have implications for the study of influencer marketing.

The literature also emphasises the role of social media Influencers as opinion leaders, who express themselves over social media platforms by creating online content, including pictures, videos, and interactive content. Through social networking sites, Influencers have increased engagement in message spread, influence, and societal effect. These factors can potentially impact the relationship between Influencers and customer engagement, particularly during a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study aims to investigate the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on the relationship between trust, interactivity, virtual experience, and visual display of content and customer engagement with influencers and users on Instagram. The research questions aim to address the extent to which COVID-19 restrictions have moderated the relationship between these factors and customer engagement on Instagram.

Overall, the literature suggests that the study of influencer marketing during the COVID-19 pandemic is crucial, as it can provide insights into how (Social media Influencers) SMIs affect customer engagement on Instagram, especially during a pandemic that has transformed the mechanics of digital communication. The conceptual model proposed in the study can also help businesses engage in influencer marketing based on the factors related to Instagram Influencers that have an impact on the dimensions of customer engagement.

To conclude, this research aim was to investigate the effect of Covid-19 restrictions on customer engagement on Instagram. This chapter provided a detailed review of the concepts and theories that influence customer engagement on Instagram, and a customer engagement model was also illustrated for clarity on the subject. The research gap and the conceptual framework were identified towards the end of the chapter.



## Hypothesis Overview and Measures

This research investigates the role of the moderating variable Covid-19 restrictions on the relationship between the trust, virtual experience, interactivity, visual display of content and customer engagement on Instagram. The hypothesis that has been investigated in this study are as follows :

H1: Covid-19 restrictions moderate the relationship between trust and customer engagement with Instagram influencers and users.

For this hypothesis, the independent variable “Trust in Influencers” will be measured based on further items namely honest, truthful, and trustworthy.

H2: Covid-19 restrictions moderate the relationship between Interactivity and customer engagement with Instagram influencers and users.

For this hypothesis, the independent variable “Interactivity” will be measured based on further items namely responsiveness, experience, and connectedness.

H3: Covid-19 restrictions moderate the relationship between Virtual Experience and customer engagement with Instagram influencers and users.

For this hypothesis, the independent variable “Virtual experience with influencers” will be measured based on further items namely immersiveness, absorption and feeling of creating a new world.

H4: Covid-19 restrictions moderate the relationship between Visual display of content and customer engagement with Instagram influencers and users.

For this hypothesis, the independent variable “Visual display of content by influencers” will be measured based on the further items, namely the appeal of the posts on Instagram, attractiveness, and beauty of the content.

## Chapter 3 Methodology

### Introduction

This chapter discusses the research paradigm and the methodological approach that was adopted to conduct this research. The empirical standards deployed, the quantitative sampling method, and ethical considerations adhered to while performing this investigation, have been discussed in this chapter.

#### 3.1 Research Paradigm and Methodological Approach

The methodological approach chosen for studying a particular subject or issue is influenced by both social science phenomena and philosophical perspectives (Greene et al., 2008). Ontology is a well-known philosophical paradigm that concerns itself with existence and reality, exploring questions such as what exists, what kinds of things exist, and how they relate to one another (Snape & Spencer, 2003). Ontology is concerned with understanding the fundamental nature of beings and the world around us. Epistemology is concerned with the nature of knowledge and how it is acquired, tested, and justified (MacKinnon et al., 2007). It examines questions about what constitutes knowledge, what methods and criteria are used to distinguish between knowledge and belief, and how knowledge is acquired and justified.

In this case, the study aims to understand the phenomenon of customer engagement via Instagram and how Covid-19 restrictions affect it. Therefore, an ontological and epistemological approach was used to study the reality of customer engagement on Instagram and the impact of the pandemic. An objective ontological approach was undertaken to attain a realistic, truthful, and in-depth understanding of how customer engagement occurs via Instagram, and the extent to which Covid-19 restrictions are influencing such engagement. The focus was on understanding and describing the phenomenon as it is, without questioning its truthfulness or validity. An objective ontology would be suitable for this study as it allows for the phenomenon of customer engagement on Instagram to be studied as an external reality that can be measured through observable metrics such as likes, comments, and shares (Johnson and Smith, 2020). This approach can provide valuable insights into trends and patterns in customer engagement that can be useful for businesses and marketers.

Epistemology, on the other hand, focuses on the methods of gaining knowledge and determining the truth. A subjective epistemological approach may also be appropriate for this study, as it allows for the experiences and perceptions of Instagram users to be understood and analysed (Johnson and Smith, 2020). Also, as the study investigates the effects of COVID-19 restrictions on users and Influencers on Instagram, subjective epistemology may be useful because it allows for a deeper exploration of individual experiences and perceptions. By gathering qualitative data

from users and influencers through methods such as interviews or surveys, researchers can gain insight into how people have been impacted by COVID-19 restrictions on Instagram in their own unique ways. This approach may help to uncover nuances and complexities that may not be captured by quantitative data alone. Therefore, both objective and subjective approaches will allow us to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of customer engagement on Instagram and its impact on the Covid-19 pandemic.

### **3.1.1. Research Approach**

Research philosophy refers to the beliefs, attitudes, and overall outlook of research towards the subject, or the problem being studied (Bell, Bryman, and Harley, 2022; Shareia, 2016). It can influence study outcomes, which is why important consideration must be given to the philosophy or paradigm on which a study is to be based, prior to embarking on the same (Bell, Bryman, and Harley, 2022). The positivism paradigm is a scientific philosophy that uses natural sciences to learn about social sciences. It is part of the objectivism and epistemology groups (Moses and Knutsen, 2012). Quantitative research is often connected to it. In this model, reality must be measured and backed up by a lot of data (Moses and Knutsen, 2012). A positivist perspective has been utilised in this study because it enables the researcher to focus on engaging in an analysis of results generated by first developing a hypothesis and then validating it (Bell, Bryman, and Harley, 2022). Data can be gathered and measured effectively with the help of the positivist research paradigm while the study goals can be evaluated with a greater degree of clarity when using such an approach (Bell, Bryman, and Harley, 2022).

Four important research philosophical perspectives that are commonly adopted at the time of undertaking academic research are the positivist research philosophy, the interpretivist framework, pragmatic paradigm, and realistic paradigm (Bell, Bryman, and Harley, 2022). Positivist research theory states that it is possible to understand the social world objectively (Bell, Bryman, and Harley, 2022). Also, this is because this philosophy is used in different situations (Bell, Bryman, and Harley, 2022). The idea is that science is the only way to find the truth. It also depends on observable facts that can be measured, which leads to the next step of analysing statistics (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2022).

Interpretivism is a research philosophy according to which social reality ought to be seen from different points of view (Moses and Knutsen, 2012). Here, knowing how people interact with their social environment is most important (Creswell and Creswell, 2014). Philosophy related to ontology, epistemology, methodology, and methods is linked to assumptions (Shareia, B.F., 2016). These are also thought to be independent of the mind in the context of ontology, which studies how knowledge is gained through observation.

When investigating how engaged a customer is, the researcher must explore the variables

discussed in the framework. Variables such as trust, Interactivity, visual display, and virtual experience. To learn more about the topic, an in-depth analysis is done, and at the same time, statistics have been used to measure how engaged customers are on Instagram. The descriptive research design has been used to find out more about the influence of the Covid-19 restrictions on Instagram between Influencers and users. The notion that a specific role was played by the researcher in the observation of social reality constitutes the basis of the interpretivist paradigm or method (Dodgson, 2017)

The current study is based on the positivist research philosophy that focuses on objective observation, measurement, and statistical analysis of the social world to find the truth. Additionally, the interpretivist framework is also relevant as it recognizes the importance of considering multiple perspectives and how people interact with their social environment. The researcher has used a descriptive research design to examine the impact of Covid-19 restrictions on Instagram influencer marketing and customer engagement, focusing on variables such as trust, interactivity, visual display, and virtual experience. The pragmatic paradigm, which emphasises practical outcomes and problem-solving, is also relevant to the study as the research aims to provide insights and recommendations for businesses and marketers in the context of Covid-19. Finally, the realistic paradigm, which emphasises the importance of context and the subjective experiences of individuals, is also relevant as the study aims to understand the impact of Covid-19 restrictions on social media usage from the perspective of users and Influencers. Overall, the study employs a combination of different philosophical perspectives to achieve its research goals and provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact of Covid-19 on Instagram influencer marketing and customer engagement.

This project was intended to assess the extent to which Covid-19 restrictions and its variables have impacted the relationship between Instagram Influencers and users on customer engagement.

### **3.2. The use of the Quantitative Approach**

The current study involves quantitative methods to examine the factors related to Instagram Influencers and how they impact customer engagement during Covid-19 restrictions (Bell, Bryman, and Harley, 2022). Considering the study's goals, the quantitative approach was chosen because it helps achieve the purpose of the research, which is to evaluate the impact of Instagram Influencers on customer engagement in a reliable way. This research method makes it easier to collect and analyse numerical data (Bell, Bryman, and Harley, 2022). Statistical relationships can be tested using the different variables listed in the literature review chapter (Bell, Bryman, and Harley, 2022). So, this quantitative data aims to explore the link between customer engagement post-pandemic and interactivity, virtual experiences, displayed visual content, and trust in

Instagram Influencers (Bell, Bryman, and Harley, 2022).

The use of a quantitative approach is particularly relevant to this study since the aim is to collect and analyse numerical data that can be statistically tested to explore the relationship between the different variables. According to Bell, Bryman, and Harley (2022), a quantitative method can be useful for assessing impact. As this study assesses the impact of Instagram Influencers on customer engagement, a quantitative method is a reliable approach. It can also be an effective way to explore the different factors related to customer engagement during Covid-19. It is also an effective way to explore the different factors related to customer engagement during the Covid-19 pandemic. By using a quantitative approach, the study would be able to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between interactivity, virtual experiences, displayed visual content, trust, and customer engagement. In this way, the study can contribute to a better understanding of the role of Instagram Influencers in promoting engagement with customers during Covid-19 restrictions.

### **3.3. Research Instrument**

Research instruments refer to the tools or techniques used to collect data in a research study. These instruments can take many forms, such as surveys, interviews, observation protocols, and tests, among others (Babbie, 2016). The choice of instrument depends on the research question, the nature of the data to be collected, and the research design (Babbie, 2016).

Surveys are a common research instrument used in many fields, including social sciences, marketing, and healthcare, among others. Surveys typically involve asking a set of standardised questions to a sample of respondents, with the goal of collecting data on their attitudes, beliefs, behaviours, or other variables of interest. Surveys can be administered in various formats, including online, in-person, by phone, or by (Babbie, 2016).

Surveys are a popular research instrument due to their versatility, efficiency, and ease of use. Surveys can collect large amounts of data quickly and cost-effectively and can be tailored to a wide range of research questions and contexts (Babbie, 2016). However, surveys also have limitations, such as potential response bias, social desirability bias, and low response rates, among (Babbie, 2016).

#### **3.3.1. Online Survey**

An online survey involves creating a structured questionnaire on a survey website and distributing the link among participants (Bell, Bryman, and Harley, 2022). As the questions are answered, the inputs are transformed into graphs and pivot tables to analyse the responses (Bell, Bryman, and Harley, 2022).

### **3.3.2. Cross- Sectional survey**

An online cross-sectional survey was conducted. In a cross-sectional study, data from a single point in time are looked at (Meade and Craig, 2012). This study chooses the participants based on certain variables of interest (McGonagle et al., 2016). Cross-sectional studies are used in developmental psychology and in social science, education, and many other fields (MacKinnon et al., 2007). Cross-sectional studies are observational and are also called descriptive research (MacKinnon et al., 2007). Researchers keep track of relevant information pertaining to a subject population, but do not have variables while undertaking the study (Kost and Correa da Rosa, 2018).

Cross sectional surveys have been utilised for collecting and collating data from different individuals at a specific time. It is a method used extensively in population-based studies (Hunter, 2016). The cross-sectional survey was considered, to be appropriate for this study, given that data was collected from different Instagram users at a single time, to understand about customer engagement with Instagram and the extent to which Covid-19 restrictions have influenced this (Hunter, 2016). Cross-sectional survey has been conducted primarily to measure the effects of Covid-19 restrictions on Instagram users and their relationship with Instagram Influencers. The study's approach has been to investigate the change in the relationship between Instagram users and Influencers. Covid-19 restrictions moderate the relationship between trust, Interactivity, virtual experience, visual content display, and customer engagement dimensions (Hunter, 2016).

### **3.4 5 Point Likert Scale**

The 5- point Likert scale is a psychometric instrument using which respondents specify their answers according to five important parameters, such as strongly agree, agree, strongly disagree, disagree, and neither agree nor disagree (Joshi et al., 2015). The use of a 5-point Likert scale was undertaken to show strong feelings of disagreement while one will indicate strong feelings of agreement (Shannon and Berning, 2020).

The use of a Likert scale is appropriate for this study, as it enables the researcher to gain an understanding of the views and perceptions of the respondent population towards a social media platform; Instagram, and the effect of Covid-19 restrictions between Instagram users and Influencers (Joshi et al., 2015). Primary methods have been opted for data collection, with a cross-sectional survey taken on a respondent population to collect the information needed to gain an objective notion about the study topic. The data was quantitatively analysed to assess the relationship among the study variables (Bell, Bryman, and Harley, 2022).

Cross-sectional surveys can be conveniently designed on an online platform, and implemented easily, while the analysis of survey responses can be undertaken instantaneously by converting the survey responses into graphs, charts, and pivot tables ((Bell, Bryman, and Harley, 2022). Respondents can answer the survey questions as per their desire ((Bell, Bryman, and Harley, 2022). As customer engagement through Instagram Influencers post- needs to be measured, a cross-sectional survey method was chosen to make it easier to examine specific results related to Instagram Influencers in terms of the study sample's interests and behaviours (Kost and Correa da Rosa, 2018). With a cross-sectional study, it would be possible to describe the current situation and the kinds of people who use Instagram and interact with Influencers. This survey method will also help with planning and figuring out how to use resources (Bell, Bryman, and Harley, 2022).

The cross-sectional survey and the use of a Likert Scale is thus undertaken to acquire data from different Instagram users and measure the customer engagement with Instagram it took place during, understanding in the process, the impact that Covid-19 restrictions exercised on such levels of engagement (Bell, Bryman, and Harley, 2022).

### **3.5. Empirical Standards Deployed**

Empirical processes and empirical testing are aided when the positivist paradigm is utilised for research and investigation. Research instruments can be more readily confirmed, questionnaires can be developed, and sampling engaged in to suitably study the various constructs pertaining to the research (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). Essential standards of validity and reliability are deployed to confirm the results of a study, when it is based on the positivist research paradigm making it a philosophical perspective that is well suited to the current research investigation (Shannon and Berning, 2020). Validity and reliability are concepts discussed in greater detail, later in this chapter.

The results of this statistical and objective investigation can be better authenticated by using the positivist paradigm as the philosophical basis of this research investigation. In addition to the positivist research paradigm, the descriptive research design has been used to gain detailed knowledge about the research subject (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). The use of the descriptive research paradigm will allow for the research topic to be understood better, by providing real-world examples of customer engagement via Instagram, in the period of Covid-19 (Kost and Correa Da Rosa, 2015).

Furthermore, quantitative research can provide a rigorous and reliable evaluation of the effects of Instagram-related variables on customer engagement with social media Influencers during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. By collecting and analysing numerical data, researchers can obtain a more precise understanding of the magnitude and significance of the relationships between variables and test their hypotheses with statistical tests and models (Creswell, 2014). For

example, a survey study that measures the frequency and type of interactions between customers and Instagram Influencers, as well as their attitudes and behaviours towards Influencers content, can provide quantitative data that allows for meaningful comparisons and generalisations across a larger population (Chang and Wu, 2020). In addition, quantitative methods such as regression analysis and structural equation modelling can help identify the key factors that influence customer engagement with Instagram Influencers and explore the moderating effects of other variables such as age, gender, and brand familiarity (Hair Jr. et al., 2019). Therefore, the use of quantitative research designs can offer a comprehensive and insightful understanding of the complex dynamics between customers, social media Influencers, and Instagram-related variables.

### **3.6. Ethical Factors**

Ethics in research refers to the principles and values that guide research conduct, ensuring it is conducted in a morally and socially responsible way. This section covers all ethical considerations for online surveys and gaining the consent of participants.

### **3.7. Ethical Considerations of Doing Online Research**

Certain important ethical standards pertaining to online surveys have been adhered to while performing this study (Hunter, 2016). The respondents were not compelled to reveal their names and personal details while taking part in the survey. All information related to the participants was kept private and confidential. Strict anonymity was thus ensured for the participants in this study (Creswell and Creswell, 2017).

#### **3.7.1. Ethical Considerations for Online Survey**

The researcher has adhered to a set of predetermined regulations and norms, known also as ethical considerations, while undertaking this study, to ensure that the confidentiality and safety of this study was duly safeguarded (Shannon and Berning, 2020). Important ethical principles that were taken cognizance of, to do this study ethically, were principles pertaining to the full disclosure of sources, consent, anonymity, voluntary participation, and plagiarism (Hunter, 2016). The participants in the research process were briefed about the goals and the purpose of the study, and a consent form was circulated from people aged between 18 and 35, who engage in the use of Instagram. The survey link was circulated through the university communication channels and published on Instagram and university community boards. The participants were briefed and were subjected to a set of pre-qualifying questions which they had to answer to indicate that they are suitable for the study. Thereafter, the main survey questions were shared.



There was an *I do consent* option, which they had to click and accept before taking part in the online survey, designed on Qualtrics, thereby indicating that they were entirely aware of the purpose or scope of the study, and were conscious of how exactly, their individual responses would make a unique and valuable contribution to the research (Hunter, 2016).

The information that was gathered from the participants was treated as private and confidential, and on no occasion will such information be made accessible to third parties (Meade and Craig, 2012). Literary sources have been duly acknowledged, to ensure that the secondary research was performed as ethically as the primary study. Thus, the study has been performed by taking cognizance of necessary ethical protocols and regulations with no violation of data privacy or participant confidentiality being engaged in to meet the study's objectives.

### **3.8. Sampling Process, Effect Size and Sample Size**

This section covers the use of convenient sampling, determining the effect size, relevance of a small effect size, and independent and dependent variables used for the study.

#### **3.8.1. Use of Convenience Sampling**

Convenience sampling technique entails using a sample population that is composed of participants who the researcher finds, the easiest to access (Sullivan and Artino, 2013). The participants in the study can be easy to recruit because of reasons such as availability and time, as well as geographical proximity (Sullivan and Artino, 2013). Convenience sampling serves as an attractive option for researchers because of the simplicity and the ease with which participants can be recruited to take part in a study (Shannon and Berning, 2020). There is a lot of time and effort that is saved when convenience sampling is used to conceive the respondent population, making it ideal for early career researchers to use this sampling method to create a participant population on which their research can be based (Sullivan and Artino, 2013).

In the context of the present study, convenience sampling was opted for since it is simple, cost-effective, and efficient from the perspective of implementation (Creswell and Creswell, 2017).

Convenience sampling was appropriate for the study as the study could be undertaken within a short time span, and with a specified and willing sample population by using this technique of data sampling (Shannon and Berning, 2020). Convenience sampling allows the researcher to overcome limitations related to the research (Taherdoost, 2016). For this research, the population required to be studied is a sample population comprising members who engage in Instagram and actively engage with this platform regularly (Taherdoost, 2016). With the help of convenience sampling, the researcher can select directly from this population instead of targeting unknown individuals, who may or may not fit the criteria for the study (Taherdoost,

2016).

The target population is a subset of the population selected as the group for study. It is considered part of the population selected to answer the study's questions (Meade and Craig, 2012). When researchers talk about their "target population," they mean the group of people who meet specific criteria. When choosing the participants of the study, researchers explore some inclusion and exclusion criteria (Mahajan, 2018).

The criteria for inclusion are related to things considered when the sample was chosen (Shamon and Berning, 2020).

### **3.8.2. Effect Size**

The research hypothesis intends to establish the effect of Covid-19 restrictions on customer engagement. Customer engagement is dependent on trust, interactivity, virtual experience and visual display of content and Covid-19 restrictions as moderators that affect the relationship between these variables.

To calculate the effect, the researcher studied only a small segment of Instagram's population. The software GPower Version 3.1 has been used to calculate the overall sample size. In GPower, a commonly used software for power analysis and sample size calculation, an effect size of 0.2 is considered a small effect size (Faul et al., 2007). The importance of a small effect size depends on the context of the study. In some cases, a small effect size may be clinically significant, while in other cases, a larger effect size may be needed to make a meaningful difference (Faul et al., 2007).

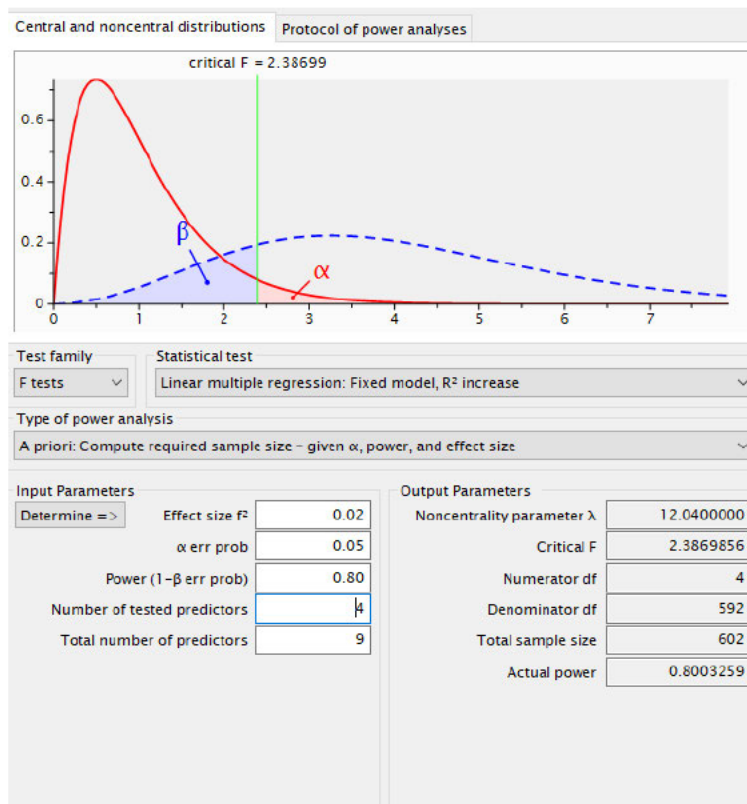
The effect size calculation is important because it provides information on the practical significance of the study findings, in addition to the statistical significance (Faul et al., 2007).

A statistically significant finding may not necessarily be significant, meaning it may not have real-world implications (Faul et al., 2007). Thus, calculating effect size is a way to determine the magnitude of the effect, which helps to interpret the importance of the findings (Cohen, 1992).

In addition, knowing the effect size can also aid in power analysis and sample size calculation for future studies (Cohen, 1992).

A small effect size requires a larger sample size to achieve statistical power, which is the ability to detect a true effect in the population (Cohen, 1992). Therefore, understanding the effect size can help researchers make informed decisions about the sample size needed to detect a true effect in their study.

Significance level determines the possibility of a Type 1 error, when the null hypothesis gets rejected if its value is true. However, power measures how likely a Type 2 error may occur again (Cohen, 1992). A Type 2 error takes place when a false null hypothesis is not rejected when it should have been. GPower is a tool that can be used to undertake statistical power analyses regarding different types of T-tests like the F tests, 2 tests, z tests, and certain, exact tests (Cohen, 1992). GPower can also be used to figure out the size of an effect and show the results of a power analysis in a graph. In the analysis, F-test, linear regression was used (Cohen, 1992). The output is as follows is in Figure 3.8.2 below.



**FIGURE 3.8.2 SAMPLE SIZE  
(GPower 3.1, Sample size calculation)**

Therefore, in the current study  $f^2$  was assumed to be 0.02 and the effect size generated as a result is also consistent with the assumption.

To conclude, the factors 0.8 and 0.05 were used in the given data, as these are conventional numbers (Cohen, 1992). Conventional numbers have been used in the given instance, because when the statistical power is valued at 0.8 and 0.05 there is approximately 80% possibility of concluding that the effects which have been generated are real. Therefore, researchers often use a target alpha value of 0.80 when calculating sample size using power analysis methods, such as

GPower version3.1.

### **3.8.3. Relevance of Small Effect Size**

Effect size is an important factor to consider in power analysis, as it determines the ability of a study to detect a statistically significant difference between groups or conditions (Cohen, 1992). A small effect size may require a larger sample size to achieve sufficient power, while a large effect size may require a smaller sample size (Cohen, 1992).

The relevance of small effect size in power analysis is that it can impact the statistical power of a study. Power refers to the ability of a statistical test to detect a significant effect, given a specified level of significance, sample size, and effect size (Cohen, 1992). A small effect size may result in a lower statistical power, meaning that the study may be less likely to detect a significant effect even if one exists (Cohen, 1992).

For example, a meta-analysis by Lipsey and Wilson (2001) found that effect sizes in social and behavioural sciences are often small, with a median effect size of 0.21 for intervention studies. The authors suggested that researchers can consider the small effect sizes when designing and conducting their studies, and that larger sample sizes may be needed to achieve sufficient power to detect significant effects.

Overall, small effect sizes can have important implications for the statistical power and sample size required for a study and should be carefully considered in power analysis and sample size calculations.

### **3.8.4. Use of Convenience Sampling**

In the given research, there are four independent variables: trust, interactivity, visual display, and virtual experience. There is one moderator variable: Covid-19 restrictions, and one dependent variable, customer engagement.

### **3.9. Validity of the Survey**

A short survey can make sure that more people respond, more people finish it, and that it is reliable (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). The current survey is quick and comes with a sheet of information that tells participants exactly how their data will be kept safe and confidential. It has been shown to make people more likely to finish surveys, improving the instruments' quality.

The survey's validity is based on how well the instrument is capable of measuring what it is meant to measure. Improving the validity of a survey can be done by making sure the questions are clear

and precise and by making sure the sample is representative (Meade and Craig, 2012). Validity is necessary for the current study as it ensures that the work conducted is authentic and legitimate (Shannon and Berning, 2020). Validity comes in different forms, such as face validity, external validity, and content validity. Content validity ensures that an instrument's questions are about measuring the concept being looked at (Meade and Craig, 2012).

The accuracy and reliability of study findings heavily rely on the validity of the survey questionnaire. In this study, the survey questionnaire was developed by utilising previously published peer-reviewed literature and academic papers, which provides a basis for the instrument's validity (Johnson et al., 2017). By adopting established measures from reputable sources, this study can contribute to the existing body of knowledge on the subject while ensuring the collected data's reliability.

### **3.10. Survey Reliability**

The reliability of a survey instrument indicates how consistent the statements and questions in the survey are (Meade and Craig, 2012). Again, in the context of the current survey, reliability implies that the survey conducted was legitimate, authentic, true to fact and that the results of the survey can be trusted or relied upon for drawing necessary conclusions at the end of the study (Meade and Craig, 2012). It concerns itself with whether the survey always measures what it is supposed to measure. A survey questionnaire must be reliable before it is valid (Meade and Craig, 2012). There are different kinds of reliability, such as test-retest, in which the same people take the same test twice at different times, and inter-rater, or inter-observer, reliability, in which different people measure the same thing. Internal consistency is how well different measurements of the same thing match each other (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). Reliability in the context of the current study was ensured by using adaptive questions to draft the questionnaire, with the questions being sourced from peer reviewed journals.

The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for variable trust ( $\alpha = .669$ ) between 3 items for the survey, for variable interactivity ( $\alpha = .396$ ) for 3 items. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for variable visual display and virtual experience ( $\alpha = .206$ ) and ( $\alpha = .463$ ) respectively.

#### **3.10.1 Internal Consistency of Trust**

The internal consistency of trust was measured using Cronbach's alpha coefficient by Munnukka et al. (2013).

According to the paper, the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient for trust was 0.91, indicating high internal consistency and reliability of the measure. This suggests that the items measuring trust were highly correlated with each other, and that they were measuring the same underlying construct

of trust in a reliable manner. However, In the case of this study the questions for trust were adapted from the paper but showed a - .669  $\alpha$  for trust.

There could be several factors that need to be investigated further. Some reasons could be the sample size, geographical and population differences and a pandemic crisis between the studies conducted.

The sample size for the paper was 308 participants (Munnukka et al., 2013).

The study recruited Finnish adults between the ages of 18 and 65, who were randomly selected from a national register. The sample was representative of the Finnish population in terms of age, gender, education, and region of residence. The participants were surveyed through a web-based questionnaire and were compensated for their participation. However, the current study with 633 participants is globally between 18-35, and the study was on the experience of covid-19 without compensation for the participants.

According to DeVellis (2017), a larger sample size could potentially negatively affect the alpha coefficient if the new participants differ in important ways from the original sample, such as having different cultural backgrounds or ages, which could introduce new sources of variation in the data and reduce the inter-item correlations. This could lead to a lower alpha coefficient. The measuring factor such as honesty, trustworthiness and truthfulness can have a different impact in the social media world. While it is difficult to examine the real relationship between the 3 items in the trust variable, it can be discussed that they can be looked at from different perspectives when examining Instagram Influencers. It can also be that Influencers can be perceived as honest but not necessarily truthful or trustworthy (Sung, Cho, Ki Joon Kim, and Lee, 2020). In the context of social media marketing, Influencers often aim to build a personal brand and establish credibility with their followers (Sung, Cho, Kim, and Lee, 2020). This can involve presenting an image of authenticity and honesty, which can lead to perceptions of trustworthiness.

However, studies have found that Influencers may engage in practices that compromise their credibility, such as promoting products or services that they do not actually use or believe in or failing to disclose their financial relationships with brands (e.g., Boerman et al., 2017; Sung et al., 2020). These practices can undermine perceptions of truthfulness and trustworthiness, even if the influencer is perceived as honest in other respects. The pandemic has also led to a shift in influencer marketing, with brands and Influencers focusing more on authenticity and transparency. Consumers are looking for content that is relatable and trustworthy, rather than overly polished or promotional (Baltas, Saridakis and Skarmas, 2021; Godey et al., 2021).

This study aims at exploring the role of Instagram Influencers on Instagram during the pandemic, which means that even though the items measure for the same variable, it differs from the original paper in population geography and sample size, but Covid-19 pandemic has also affected the relationship between Influencers and users.

### **3.10.2 Internal consistency of Interactivity**

The internal consistency of trust was measured using Cronbach's alpha coefficient by Buzkurd et al. (2019). According to the paper by Buzkurd et al. (2019), the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient for interactivity was 0.90, indicating high internal consistency and reliability of the measure interactivity which suggests that all items are measuring for the same variable interactivity. The measures that were taken for this study to interpret interactivity were, "The Influencers respond to me if I post a message," "The Influencers respond to me quickly and effectively" and "I provide feedback/suggestions about new products with the Influencers."

The study by Buzkurd et al. (2019) recruited participants from a university in the south-eastern United States. Specifically, the authors collected data from 343 undergraduate and graduate students who were enrolled in business courses. The participants were active users of social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Moreover, the study was published in March 2019 which was before the pandemic and there it can alter the Cronbach alpha value in this study. As Covid-19 pandemic restrictions have not been measured with this variable before the alpha value is unpredictable. There are also distinct geographical and cultural differences in both the studies with a crisis impacting the current study.

### **3.10.3 Internal consistency of Visual display of content**

The article measure for this variable was taken from Aqsa Bashir et al. (2018). The study recruited participants through an online panel provider in the United States. In total, the survey was completed by 385 people enrolled from two sources: 192 participants were from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) platform, and 193 were from a Qualtrics panel. (Aqsa Bashir et al., 2018).

In terms of demographics, the authors report that the majority of the participants were female (61.8%), and the average age was 33 years old. The participants were diverse in terms of race/ethnicity, with 67.3% identifying as White, 13.3% as African American/Black, 8.8% as Asian, and 10.6% as other or mixed race.

The study focused on consumers' affective responses to visual content on social networking sites, specifically Instagram and Pinterest, and how these responses shape consumers' brand relationships. The authors used a survey method to collect data, which included measures of

consumer affect, brand relationship quality, and behavioural intentions. The authors also collected information about the participants' social media usage patterns and engagement behaviours. However, in contrast the current study is trying to explore the effect of covid-19 restrictions on Instagram between Instagram users and Influencers. It is a possibility to further explore the role of the platform to be moderated rather than just the content between Influencers and users. It should also be highlighted that the current study has very different socio-demographic participants which could also be a major reason that the measures did not resonate with them. Another reason can be that the measures attractive, appealing, and beautiful are quite contextual and subjective. However, as discussed in the pretest the measures were adapted and made to be appropriately objective to the questions in this study.

The fact that the current and previous research on using Instagram as a platform share similarity provides justification for employing such adaptable measures.

#### **3.10.4 Internal consistency of virtual experience**

Chuang (2020) was used as a peer reviewed paper for Virtual experience. The current study Cronbach's  $\alpha = .46$  while the cited paper Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.85$ . There could be several different reasons for Cronbach's  $\alpha$  being low. While the current study is measuring virtual experience created by Influencers, it is Instagram that provides a platform for its immersive, absorbing nature. The platform Instagram might play a more vital role in "creating a new world." The cited paper above measures telepresence for a gaming study which does not fit into the criteria of social media entirely. While the two share common ground and virtual experience in nature, the purpose, and objectives of them are quite different. This can also affect Cronbach's  $\alpha$ .

There is literary evidence to support the idea that cultural or contextual differences can affect the reliability of scales or surveys. For example, a study by Van de Vijver and Leung (1997) examined the cross-cultural equivalence of personality measures in diverse cultures. They found that some personality scales had lower internal consistency reliability when administered in cultures that differed from the culture in which the scale was developed (Van de Vijver and Leung, 1997). The authors suggested that cultural differences in the meaning and interpretation of items might have contributed to the lower reliability (Van de Vijver and Leung, 1997).

Similarly, a study by Cheung and Rensvold (2000) examined the cross-cultural validity and reliability of a job satisfaction scale in six Asian countries. They found that the scale had lower internal consistency reliability in some countries compared to others and suggested that cultural differences in the meaning of job satisfaction might have played a role (Cheung and Rensvold, 2000).

Another study by Velicer and Fava (1998) examined the cross-cultural equivalence of depression



measures in diverse cultures. They found that some depression scales had lower internal consistency reliability when administered in cultures that differed from the culture in which the scale was developed (Velicer and Fava, 1998). The authors suggested that cultural differences in the expression and experience of depression might have contributed to the lower reliability (Velicer and Fava, 1998).

Overall, these studies suggest that cultural or contextual differences can affect the internal consistency and reliability of scales or surveys. It is important to consider cultural and contextual factors when developing and administering scales, and to examine the cross-cultural equivalence and reliability of scales before using them in diverse cultures or contexts. In context of the current study.

Instagram is a global platform with over 1 billion active users monthly as of June 2021 (Hootsuite, 2021). The total population of the platform is 1.28 billion with a prediction of reaching 1.35 billion users in 2023. The audience target for the current study is geographically global with diverse levels of restrictions by each country and therefore an  $\alpha$  of 0.467 is accepted.

Some researchers have also suggested that in exploratory research, internal consistency values as low as 0.4 may be acceptable, if the research question is novel and the items on the scale are measuring a construct that has not been previously explored (Clark and Watson, 1995; Streiner, 1994). Also, In the case of the current study on Instagram, the survey is used for exploratory or descriptive research purposes. The study is a novice framework of measuring Covid-19 restrictions that have not been measured for global audiences before. In such cases, a lower Cronbach's alpha value may be acceptable if the survey items measure the same construct, and the results are interpreted with caution (Wilson, 2017).

In the current study, although each of the measuring variables are taken from high reliability-based measures, the pandemic can be a major driving factor for the irregularity caused by the inconsistency in the current study. Therefore, it is imperative to study the changes in behaviour further. The inconsistency between the variables can be a driving factor for further research.

However, even if the internal inconsistencies were low, it is still important to consider the potential limitations of retrospective data collection methods. A more detailed section on the limitation is provided in the limitations section in chapter 6.

### **3.11. Recruitment and Final Sample**

In total, 633 people constituted the final sample, resulting from the above recruitment process. A sample of 18- to 35-year-old participants were chosen as they comprise almost 60% of the total users on Instagram and are the most relevant audience of this research as this research is

investigating the effectiveness of Covid-19 restrictions on Instagram users and Influencers. Instagram has a population of 1.28 billion out of which 768 million are of the above age group (eMarketer, 2020).

A brief was added to the consent form to explain the study in detail to the participants considering taking part in the research survey. The participants had to click on an '*I do consent*' option before answering the questions of the survey.

### **3.12. Pre-Test**

A pre-test was also conducted to ensure quality and non-bias of the research instruments. The survey was pre-tested by 120 participants and feedback was noted. The feedback was on how the questions were asked prospectively and the orientation of the survey's design, e.g., the colour and format of the survey. The survey was revised with formatting text size and colour and changing open-ended questions into more specific closed-ended questions. e.g., the question on appeal and beauty were originally - "Influencers post reflect beauty," this was then changed to "Influencers post reflect beauty to me." Allowing a more direct answer to the Likert scale.

The changes according to the feedback were made before distributing the final survey link. The survey link was distributed in the university and on social media for relevant participants.

Thus, a substantive sample size was used to carry out the survey, using appropriate Independent and dependent variables, and with reliability and validity measures having been implemented to ensure the authenticity of the survey outcome.

### **3.13. Data Analysis**

It is important to mention at the outset that this is a study entailed performing a multi linear regression analysis based on primary data. Primary data was opted for, because the data from primary research is more reliable, as it comes from direct sources rather than from a book, journal, or any other database (Driscoll, 2011).

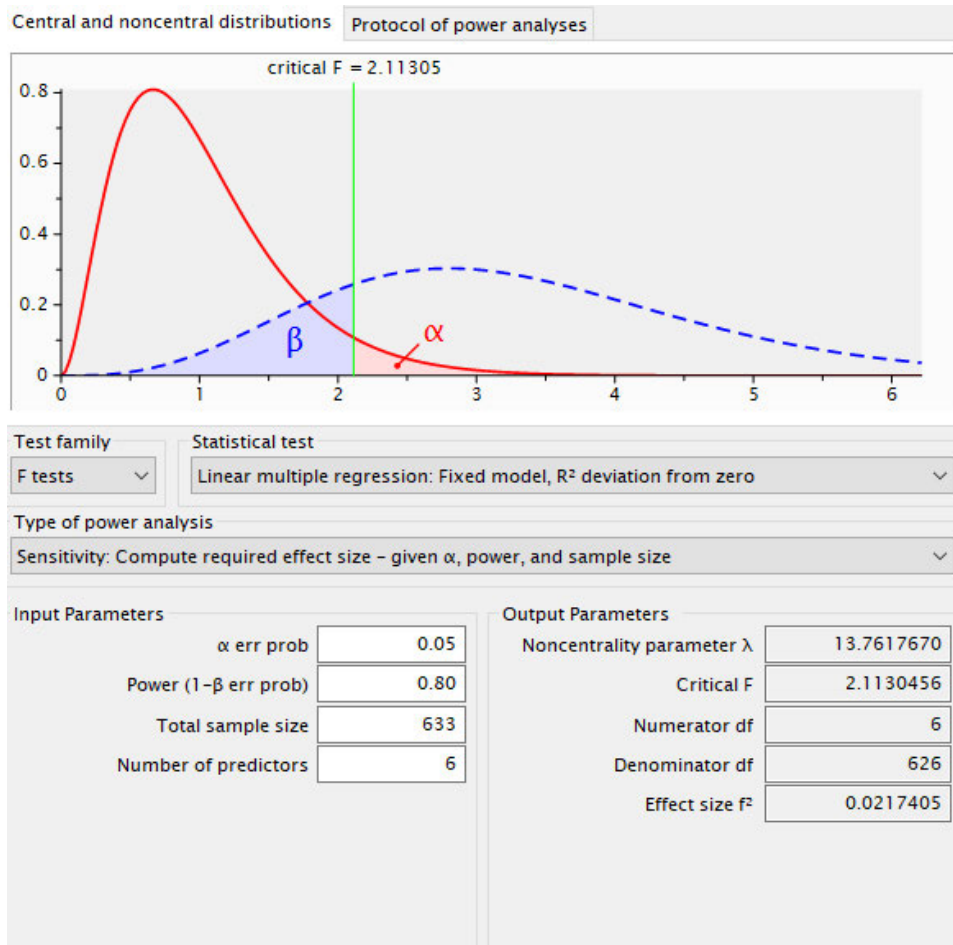
Data analysis is the process of investigating, improving, and changing the information collected for a study (Sullivan and Artino, 2013). There is no fixed process for comparing and analysing the different sets of data because the main goal of this is to provide the data obtained in a shape so that it can be presented as a conclusion. The primary data analysis shows that the results are accurate and reliable (Artino and Sullivan, 2013). The primary analysis results give the researcher a better understanding of the topic and help reach the study's goals (Artino and Sullivan, 2013). The secondary data analysis approach has various aspects.

Secondary data is information already collected by others, either directly from sources or from

other secondary sources (Mezmir, 2020). By following the history of the data sets and learning more about their origins, secondary data analysis might help the researchers better understand the challenges they are trying to solve (Vartanian, 2010). It has a big advantage over primary data because it saves the study from having to do the same work twice and gives evidence that has been tested in the real world to back up the results (Vartanian, 2010). However, the research given has focused on primary quantitative data which will be obtained with the help of an online survey on Qualtrics.

A parametric test is a statistical test that assumes that the sample for a study is derived from a population which follows the normal distribution or probability distribution matter, having a fixed number of parameters. Sullivan and Artino (2013) argue that parametric tests usually give correct results even when the assumptions of normality and variance are broken. They are also considered reliable when getting accurate answers when analysing Likert-type data (Sullivan and Artino, 2013).

The Gpower calculation of effect size done for the study involved 633 total participants is shown in Figure 3.13 below. An effect size of  $f^2 = 0.0271$  is a small effect size. In multiple linear regression analysis, f-square is a measure of the effect size that indicates the proportion of variance in the dependent variable explained by the independent variables (Cohen, 1988). An  $f^2$  of 0.0271, which is a small effect size (Cohen, 1988), suggests that the independent variables included in the model explain only a small portion of the variance in the dependent variable.



**FIGURE 3.13 EFFECT SIZE**

(GPower, effect size calculation)

For this study, statistical analysis and appropriate tests were used to analyse the responses to the study's independent variables and how they affect customer engagement, with as the moderating variable (Shamon and Berning, 2020). Since Covid-19 restrictions are used as the moderating variable, the moderation analysis method determines how much this variable changes how a cause leads to an effect. According to Cohen, a moderating variable affects an independent variable's effect on a dependent variable and that moderation analysis is a way to measure this effect. SPSS software was used to do statistical analysis. SPSS has been used to present the data accurately and presently. It is then analysed using different statistical tools, reorganised, and shown as graphs and charts (Field, 2013). Along with testing the proposed hypotheses, the conceptual framework was also tested. This framework can help to understand how it affects customer engagement.

Thus, an in-depth statistical analysis using SPSS software was carried out, to test the variables and arrive at the results of this study.

When the assumed effect size and the result effect size are the same, it indicates that the study's original hypothesis or assumption about the size of the effect was accurate (Cohen, 1992). An effect size is a measure of the strength or magnitude of the relationship between two variables in a study (Fritz et al., 2012).

Before conducting a study, researchers typically make assumptions about the size of the effect they expect to observe (Cohen, 1992). This assumption is often based on previous research or theory. If the actual effect size observed in the study matches the assumed effect size, it suggests that the original hypothesis was correct, and the study results are consistent with what was expected (Cohen, 1992). Therefore, in the current study  $f^2$  was assumed to be 0.02 and the effect size generated as a result is also consistent with the assumption.

### **3.14. Conclusion**

To conclude, the study is based on primary data, since this is a novel study, and there are no scholarly works published previously on this subject. Multilinear regression analysis was conducted for the results generated by the survey, using SPSS tools, to determine customer engagement with Instagram and the impact that Covid-19 restrictions have had on influencing such engagement. The research was ethically carried out, with participant anonymity being strictly assured, throughout the research process.

The methodology chosen for this study of customer engagement on Instagram and its relationship with Covid-19 restrictions was influenced by both social science phenomena and philosophical perspectives. The study employed both an ontological and an epistemological approach to understand the reality of customer engagement on Instagram and the impact of the pandemic. The research paradigm adopted for this study was the positivist research philosophy, which emphasises the collection and interpretation of facts and figures in a scientific and unbiased manner. The use of a positivist framework allowed for a systematic analysis of the data, which enabled the identification of patterns and trends in the data that would have otherwise been difficult to identify using other frameworks. The positivist approach was chosen for its structured and objective approach to collecting and analysing data, essential in achieving this research's aim.

## **Chapter 4 Findings of the Study**

### **Introduction**

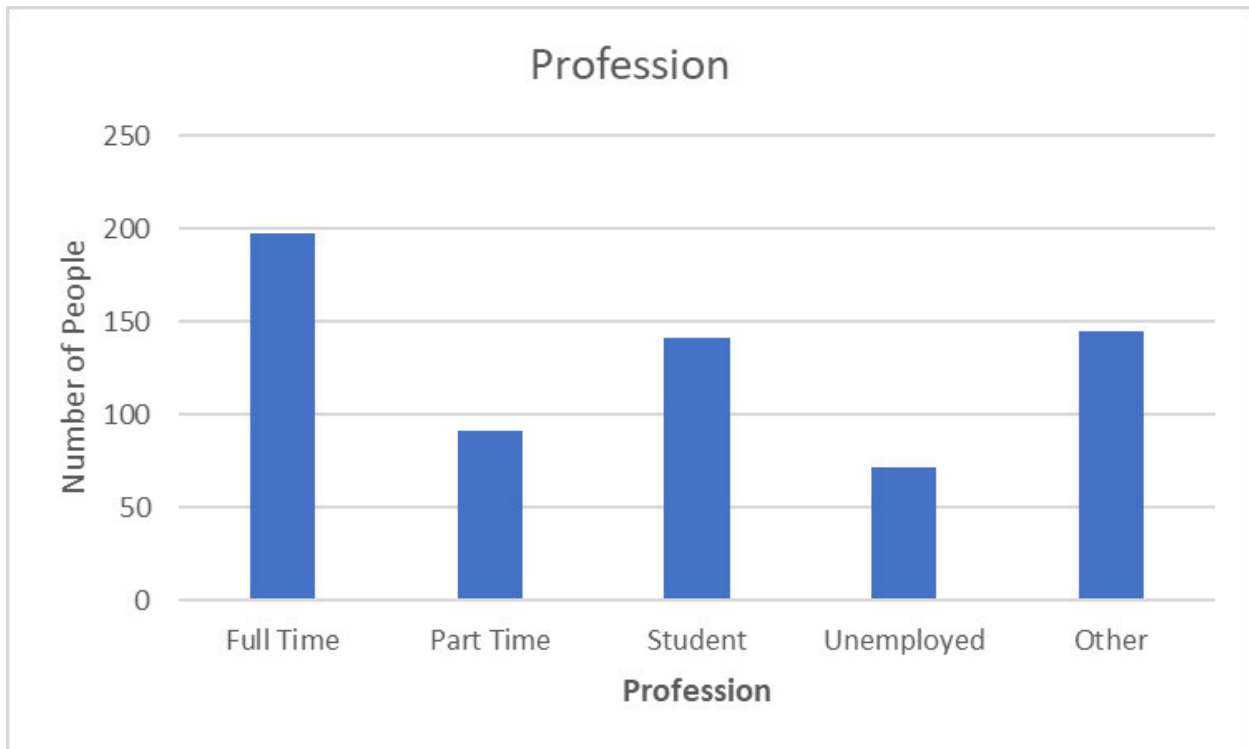
This chapter presents the findings of the study namely, the sociodemographic details of the participants and the regression analysis that was undertaken to determine if Covid 19 restrictions moderate the relationship between trust, interactivity, visual display of content and virtual experience and customer engagement on Instagram. Following the presentation of the SPSS analysis, the implications of the results are discussed in detail, along with a discussion on how the research gaps as identified in the review of literature, have been addressed.

### **4.1 Socio-Demographic Results of the Study**

633 anonymous participants were involved in this study. They are Instagram users, between 18 to 35 years of age. The following section covers their profession, time consumption on Instagram and frequency of use.

According to Krosnick and Presser (2010), sociodemographic results are crucial in online surveys as they provide information about the characteristics of the participants, which can help researchers understand the sample and draw meaningful conclusions from the data. By collecting this information, researchers can determine whether their sample is representative of the population they are studying or if there are any biases in their sample (Krosnick and Presser, 2010). As the study is between Instagram users and Influencers, the below is reflective of their frequency of use which allows us to believe they active users, their reasons for using the platform and what profession they are in. Moreover, sociodemographic results enable researchers to identify patterns and differences in responses based on these variables.

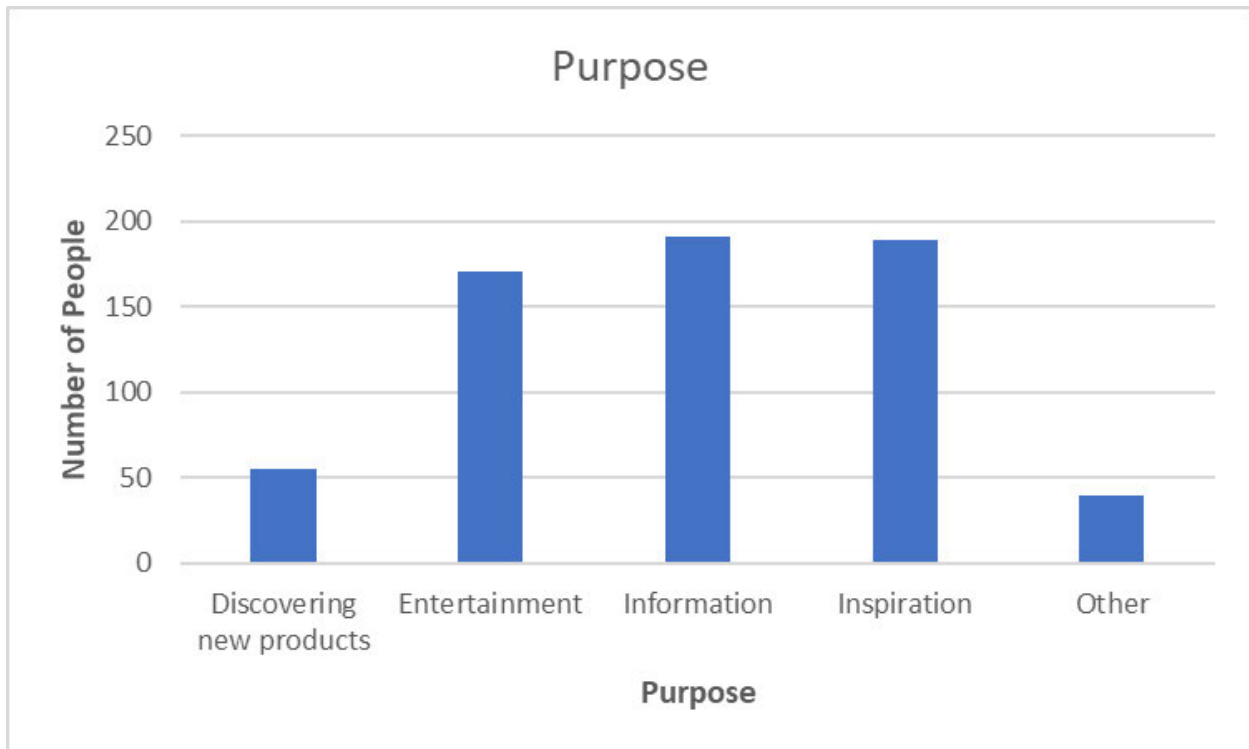
#### 4.1.1 Profession



**Figure 4.1.1 - Profession of the Participants**

Based on figure 4.1.1 it is seen that 14.1% of the respondents are occupied in a full-time job, 21.9% of the participants are students, 11.3% of the participants are unemployed, 30.3% of the participants are occupied in part time job and 22.5% of the respondents have responded as others. The profession also represents the diversity in the participants, it highlights that various types of participants were involved in the study. This study aims to investigate the cause-and-effect relationship among a wide range of Instagram users, highlighting the generalizability of the participants.

#### 4.1.2. Why People Use Instagram

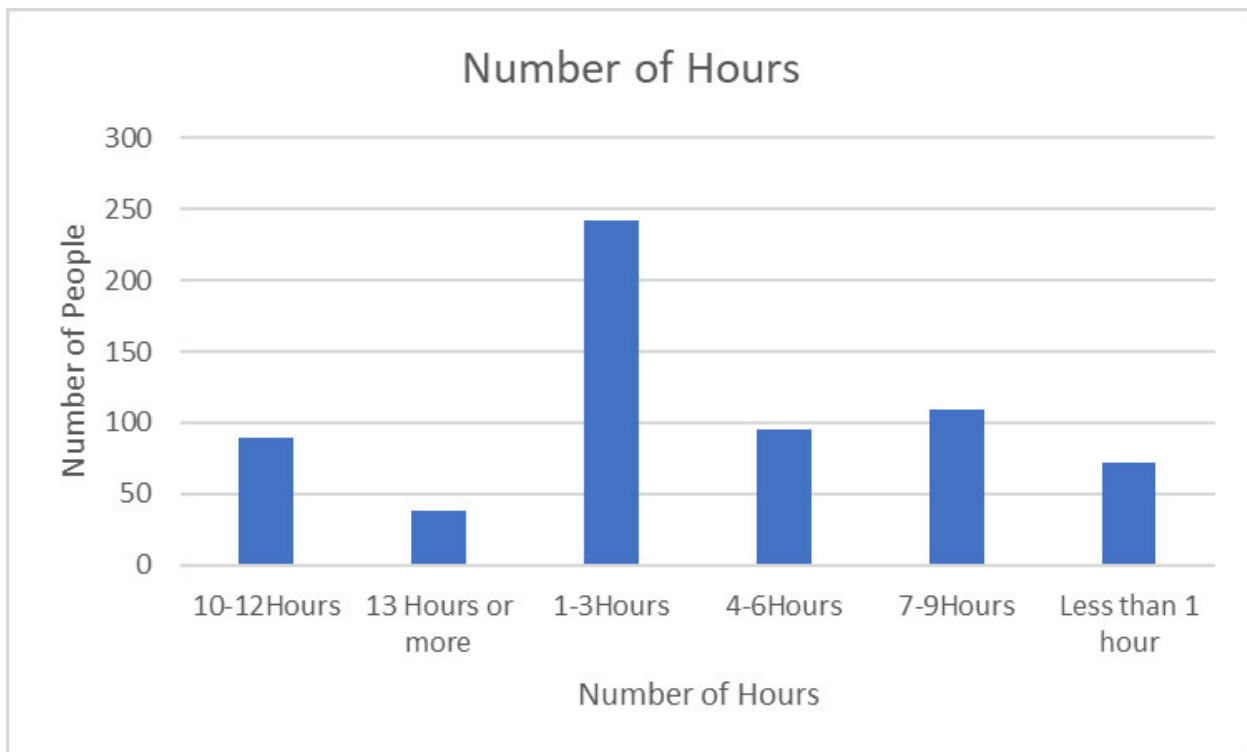


**Figure 4.1.2 - Why People use Instagram.**

As per figure 4.1.2, 8.6% of the participants spend time on Instagram to discover new products. 29.2% of the respondents browse through this platform for inspiration. 26.4% of the respondents are known to browse Instagram for entertainment, 29.7% of the participant population use Instagram to access information while 6.1% of the participants browse Instagram for other reasons.



### 4.1.3. Frequency of Use

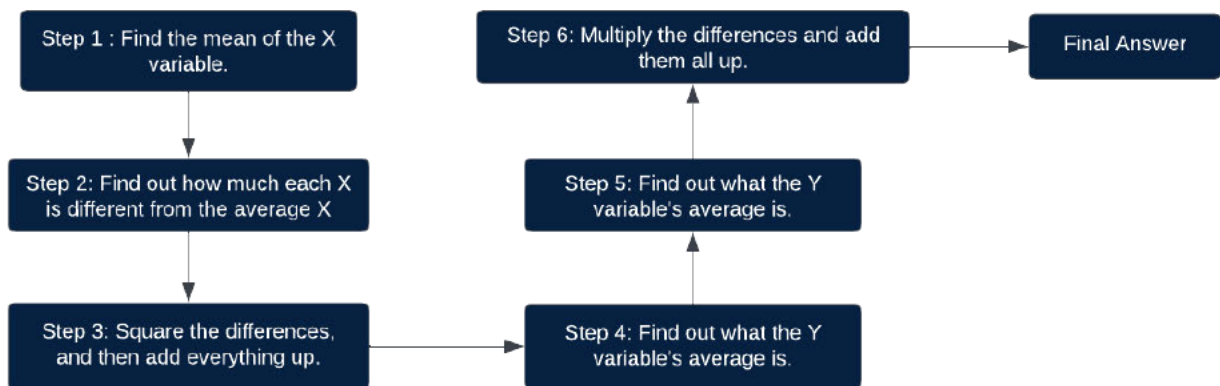


**Figure 4.1.3 - Frequency of Use**

Based on figure 4.1.3, 5.2% of the respondent population spends 13 hours or more on Instagram. 13.9% of them spend 10 to 12 hours on the platform. 17% of the respondents spend 7 to 9 hours on Instagram while 14.8% of the respondents spend 4 to 6 hours here. 11.3% of the respondents spend less than an hour on Instagram and 37.8% of the respondents spend 1 to 3 hours on Instagram.

### 4.2. Regression Analysis

Regression analysis is a statistical tool used to determine the extent to which one variable (x) impacts another (Cohen et al., 2002). Multiple linear regression or MLR is a statistical method that predicts the output of a response variable by using several variables that explain it. The primary aim of multiple linear regression is to estimate and model the linear association between the dependent variable and one or more independent variables (Cohen et al., 2002). The steps of regression in Figure 4.2.1 below.



**Figure 4.4.1**  
- Steps of Regression

Source – As created by the author.

The regression was run between all the five variables and customer engagement. For this study, the regression was run between independent variables that are trust, interactivity, virtual experience, visual display of content and Covid-19 restrictions. The dependent variable is customer engagement.

### 4.3. Moderation Analysis

Field (2013) explains that moderation analysis is a statistical tool used to determine whether the effect of one independent variable on another independent variable remains consistent across various values of a second independent variable, known as the moderator. Using a moderation analysis, one may also determine whether a third variable, Z, influences the association between X and Y (Field, 2013). Moderation does not look for a cause-and-effect link between these other factors (Field, 2013) Instead, it looks at when or how an effect happens (Field, 2013). Moderators can make a relationship stronger, weaker, or even change the way it works (Cohen et al., 2002). The moderated multiple regression is affected differently by the various classifications of outliers (Field, 2013).

Moderation in statistics refers to a situation where the connection between a dependent variable and an independent variable changes depending on the value of a moderator variable (Field, 2013). Moderating variables also play a crucial role in determining if the relationship between two variables is the same across groups (Field, 2013)

For this study, the moderator was Covid-19 restrictions, and the analysis was done on the basis, of the interaction between Covid-19 restrictions and trust, Covid-19 restrictions, and interactivity, Covid restrictions and virtual experience and Covid-19 restrictions and the visual display of content, on customer engagement. The analysis will help determine whether Covid-19 restrictions moderated the relationship between trust, interactivity, virtual experience, and visual display of content on customer engagement.

#### 4.4. Multiple Linear Regression with all Variables

This section provides a detailed report on the analysis undertaken for the study using the framework (4.4.1). The supported framework can also be seen in figure 4.4.2. However, figure 4.4.2 shows the results of the moderated variable i.e., trust. Therefore, interpreting that Covid-19 restrictions moderated the relationship between trust and Engagement between Instagram Influencers and users.

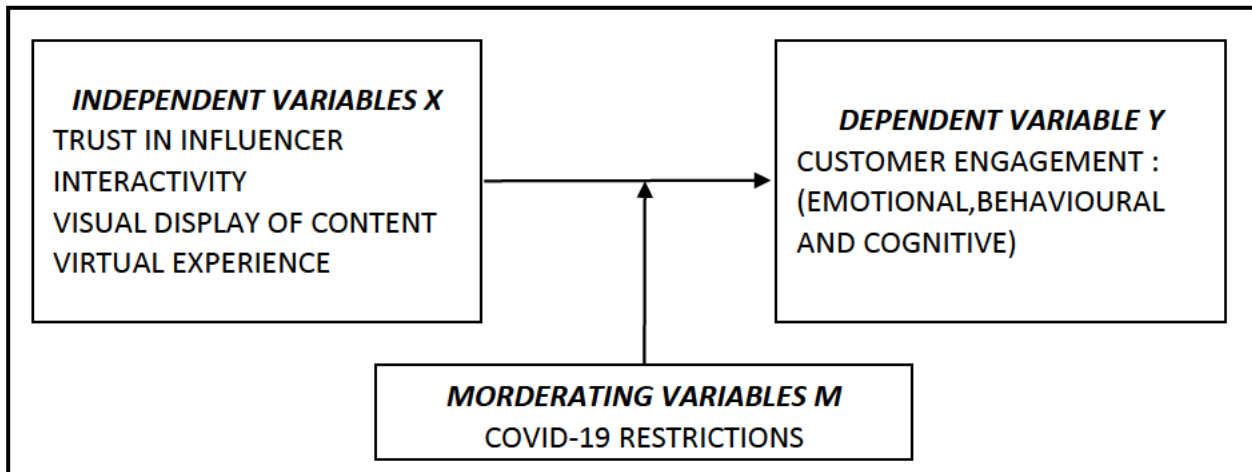
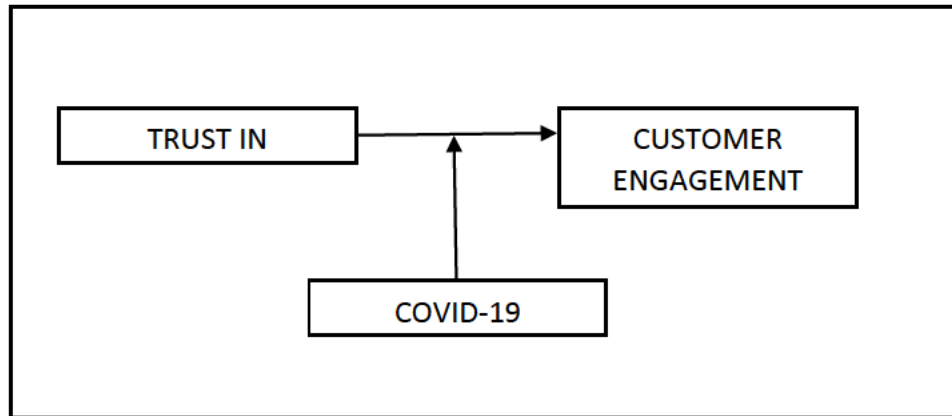


Figure 4.4.1. - Customer Engagement Framework

Source – As created by the author.



**Figure 4.4.2. - Result Framework**

**Source – As created by the author.**

Figure 4.4.3 and Figure 4.4.4 highlight the R squared and the adjusted R value for the model and (table 2.1) displays the regression that fits the model for this study. The variables were all averaged as Trust, Interactivity, Virtual Experience, Visual Display and Covid Restrictions.

trust\_Covid is the interaction effect between the variables Trust and Covid-19 i.e., the interaction between the variables Trust and Covid Restrictions (Trust\* Covid Restrictions). Similarly, an interaction effect was calculated on SPSS for Interactivity, Covid Restrictions, Virtual\_Experience, Covid Restrictions and Visual Display\*Covid Restrictions. The study also calculated the direct effect of Covid Restrictions on Engagement.

**TABLE 4.4.3 (R<sup>2</sup> Value)**

Model Summary									
	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.523 <sup>a</sup>	.274	.263	.44209	.274	26.092	9	623	.000
a. Predictors: (Constant),_Visual_Covid, _Visual_Display, Virtual_Exp, _Interactivity, _Trust, _Covid_Restriction, _Interactivity_Covid, Trust_Covid, Virtual_Covid									

**TABLE 4.4.4**

		B	Std. Error	$\beta$	P
1	(Constant)	3.000 (2.964, 3.036)	.018		.000
	Trust	.122 (.053, .191)	.035	.135	.001
	Interactivity	.098 (.041, .155)	.029	.128	.001
	Virtual_Exp	.108 (.048, .168)	.030	.140	.000
	Visual_Display	.060 (.004, .117)	.029	.078	.036
	Covid_Restriction	.097 (-.016, .210)	.057	.074	.092
	Trust_Covid	.250 (.106, .394)	.073	.200	.001
	Interactivity_Covid	-.110 (-.233, .012)	.062	-.100	.078
	Virtual_Covid	.115 (-.023, .252)	.070	.098	.102
	Visual_Covid	.062	.065	.053	.336

		(-.065, .190)			
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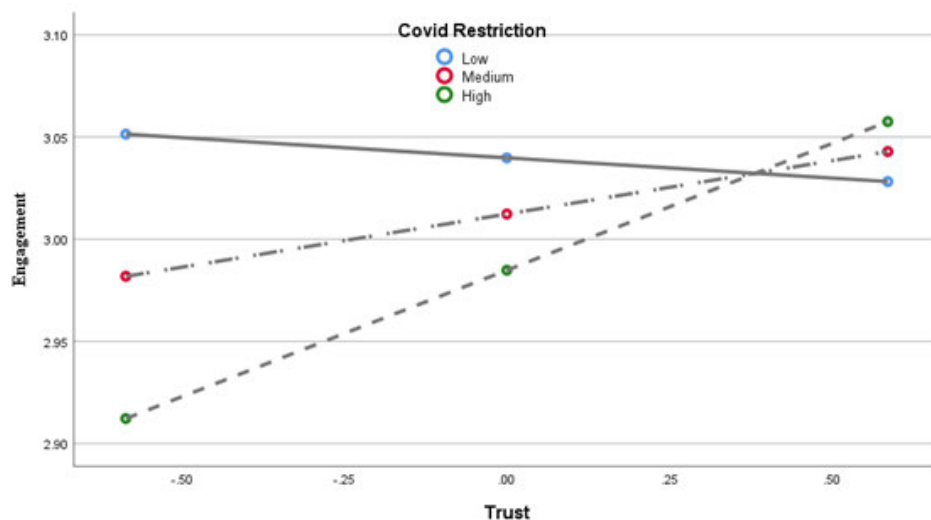
#### 4.5. Data Analysis

This section provides an individual analysis of the different variables considered for this study, namely, trust, interactivity, virtual experience, visual display of content and Covid-19 restrictions.

##### 4.5.1. Analysis of Trust

The regression analysis demonstrates that Trust ( $\beta = 0.135$ ) and ( $p = 0.001$ ) which is less than 0.05. Therefore, the results of the study indicate that Trust positively impacts Engagement. This suggests that there is a positive relationship between trust and engagement. The moderation analysis demonstrates that Covid-19 restrictions are moderating between Trust and Engagement as ( $p = 0.001$ ) is less than 0.05. Covid-19 restrictions such as lockdown, immobility, social isolation, and a feeling of emptiness have moderated the trust between Instagram users and Instagram Influencers, thus driving customer engagement. Hence, indicating that Covid-19 restrictions has strengthened the relationship between trust and customer engagement. Trust has been measured using items such as honesty, authenticity, and truthfulness.

The effect size of F In the study's analysis, it correlates to the moderation of Covid-19 restrictions between the relationship of trust and customer engagement.



**FIGURE 4.4.5** - Engagement as a function of Trust at three levels of Covid Restrictions.

(Hayes process)

The Hayes Process is a regression-based approach that allows researchers to estimate the conditional effects of one variable on another at different levels of a moderator (Hayes, 2018). As shown in figure 4.4.5, there is no significant relationship between Trust and Engagement. At medium Covid restrictions there is a significant relationship between Trust and Engagement. At high Covid restrictions, there is a significant relationship between Trust and Engagement. The relationship between Trust and Engagement is high at high Covid Restrictions in comparison to Medium Covid Restriction conditions. The Hayes process, according to Jang and Kim (2017), can be studied in quantitative research particularly in strengthening relations and moderation effects (Jang and Kim, 2017). In the context of strengthening relations for this study Hayes process can be seen as a mechanism for creating a stronger relationship between Covid-19 restrictions, and customer engagement (Jang and Kim, 2017).

In summary, Covid-19 restrictions strengthens the relationship between trust and engagement as shown in Figure 4.4.5

#### **4.5.2. Analysis of Interactivity**

The regression analysis shows that Interactivity ( $\beta = 0.128$ ) has a significant impact on Engagement as ( $p = 0.001$ ) is less than 0.05. This implies there is a positive relationship between interactivity and engagement. The moderation analysis demonstrates that Covid Restrictions did not moderate the relationship between Interactivity and Engagement as the ( $p = 0.078$ ) which is more than 0.05. In this study Covid-19 restrictions such as lockdown, immobility, social isolation, a feeling of emptiness, have shown no impact on the extent to which customers interact within the relationship between Influencers and users on Instagram, therefore not increasing engagement. Interactivity was measured by responsiveness, connectedness, and experience.

#### **4.5.3. Analysis of Virtual Experience**

The regression analysis shows that virtual experience ( $\beta = 0.140$ ) has a significant impact on Engagement as ( $p < 0.001$ ) is less than 0.05. Virtual experience thus positively impacts engagement. The moderation analysis demonstrates that Covid restrictions did not moderate the relationship between virtual experience and engagement as ( $p = 0.102$ ) is more than 0.05. The study shows that Covid-19 restrictions such as lockdown, immobility, social isolation, a feeling of emptiness, have not shown to have had significant impact on the extent to which customers engage with influencer content on Instagram could be because of the virtual experience offered by such influencer posts, therefore not increasing engagement. Virtual experience was measured by absorption, immersiveness and the feeling of creating a new world. Covid-19 did not change the strength of the relationship between virtual experience and customer engagement.

#### **4.5.4. Analysis of Visual Display of Content**

The regression analysis shows that visual display of content ( $\beta = 0.078$ ) has a significant impact on Engagement as ( $p = 0.036$ ) is less than 0.05. Visual display of content has a positive impact on engagement. The moderation analysis demonstrates that Covid Restrictions did not moderate the relationship between Visual Display and Engagement as ( $p = 0.336$ ) which is more than 0.05. Covid-19 restrictions such as lockdown, immobility, social isolation, a feeling of emptiness, has not shown a significant impact on the extent to which customers engage with influencer content on Instagram possibly because of the visual display of content that is associated with such influencer content therefore not increasing engagement. Visual display of content has been measured by the appealing nature of the posts, attractiveness, and the beauty of the content to the participants. Covid-19 did not strengthen the relationship between visual display of content and customer engagement.

#### **4.5.5. Analysis of Covid Restrictions**

Covid Restrictions ( $\beta = 0.074$ ) is not significantly impacting Engagement ( $p = 0.092$ ), which is more than 0.05. According to the findings of the study, restrictions such as lockdown, immobility, social isolation, and a feeling of emptiness do not directly impact customer engagement. The study shows that Covid-19 restrictions such as loneliness, emptiness, and a feeling of isolation have moderated and strengthened the relationship between trust and customer engagement on the relationship between Influencers and users on Instagram. However, these restrictions may not have strengthened the relationship between interactivity, virtual experience and visual display of content and customer engagement on the relationship between Influencers and users on Instagram.

The study shows that there was not a significant impact of Covid-19 restrictions as a moderator in the relationship between interactivity, virtual experience, and visual display of content and Instagram Influencers.

### **4.6 Overview of the findings**

Trust, interactivity, visual display, and virtual experience have a direct relationship with and a significant impact on customer engagement. While Covid-19 restrictions have strengthened the relationship between trust and customer engagement, the relationship between interactivity, virtual experience, and visual display of content and customer engagement with Influencers has not been significantly moderated or impacted by Covid-19 restrictions. A detailed discussion of this is provided in the next chapter.



## **4.6 Conclusion**

Thus, to conclude the analysis undertaken for this study shows that trust, interactivity, virtual experience, and visual display of content have a positively significant impact on Customer engagement between Influencers and users on Instagram. Covid-19 Restrictions moderate the relationship only between trust and customer engagement on the relationship between Influencers and users on Instagram. The analysis shows that the increase in trust, interactivity, virtual experience, and visual display of content will increase customer engagement. Which shows that the more restrictions, more may be the trust, which in turn increases customer engagement. The variable Covid-19 restrictions are directly proportional to trust (Figure 4.4.5).

## **Chapter 5 Discussion**

### **Introduction**

This chapter discusses how the study's findings are aligned with the arguments presented in the literature review undertaken for this research.

#### **5.1. Research Aims**

This research is aimed at acquiring an understanding if Covid-19 restrictions such as loneliness, emptiness and a feeling of isolation have moderated the relationship between trust, interactivity, virtual experience, and visual display of content and customer engagement between Influencers and users on Instagram. Variables such as trust, interactivity, virtual experience, and the visual display of content have been measured to assess between Influencers and users on Instagram during Covid-19.

The results of the study indicate that trust, interactivity, visual display, and virtual experience have a significant impact on customer engagement between Influencers and users on Instagram. The relationship between trust and customer engagement was strengthened by Covid-19 restrictions (Figure 4.4.5). However, the relationship between interactivity, virtual experience, and visual display of content and customer engagement with Influencers was not significantly moderated or impacted by Covid-19 restrictions.

Therefore, the study achieved its objective by providing an understanding of the impact of Covid-19 restrictions on customer engagement between Influencers and users on Instagram. It also highlighted the significance of trust, interactivity, visual display, and virtual experience in customer engagement between Influencers and users on Instagram. The findings of the study can help marketers and businesses to better understand and utilise Instagram Influencers for effective customer engagement during pandemics and beyond.

#### **5.2. Addressing the Research Gap – An Overview**

According to Van Driel and Dumitrica (2021) if Influencers on Instagram are to be effective, the content published by them needs to be trustworthy, real, and engaging. Such Influencers have conventionally been more trustworthy in comparison to traditional advertising, but this relationship between Influencers and Instagram users has resulted in a uniformity of influencer content (Van Driel and Dumitrica, 2021). Apart from trust, interactivity, virtual experience, and visual display of content have a role to play in influencing the engagement between customers and Influencers on Instagram (Van Driel and Dumitrica, 2021). The study confirms that Covid-19 restrictions have moderated the relationship between trust and customer engagement on

Instagram. Customers tend to engage more with influencer posts, as the trust and value in influencer content has increased during Covid-19. Covid-19 restrictions such as loneliness, emptiness and a feeling of isolation have strengthened the relationship between trust and customer engagement on Instagram.

Similarly, since the Covid-19 pandemic is a recent event there is limited empirical market research that has been conducted on the impact of Covid-19 restrictions on customer engagement on Instagram, and few attempts have been made to see whether this engagement has increased or decreased due to Covid 19 restrictions (Francisco et al., 2021). To address this gap, the research findings show that Covid-19 restrictions have moderated the relationship between trust and customer engagement with influencer content on Instagram, but not between visual display of content, interactivity and virtual experience and customer engagement with influencer content on Instagram. A deeper analysis of this has been engaged in the following section.

### **5.2.1. Hypothesis 1 - Covid-19 Restrictions Moderates the Relationship between Trust and Customer Engagement with Influencers Posts on Instagram**

Trust is an important requisite for customer engagement with influencer content on Instagram as divulged in the review of literature undertaken for this study (Al Khasawneh, 2021). Customers on Instagram are likely to engage with influencer content which is honest and trustworthy, and which they know they can rely on or regard as authentic (Rothfischer, 2021). The study confirms that trust has a crucial role to play in influencing customer engagement decisions with Instagram Influencers. It is only when customers can trust and consider any content to be trustworthy, truthful, and honest, that increases customer engagement.

People engage with influencer content on Instagram as they trust the content that is published by Influencers on this platform (Al Khasawneh, 2021). They consider such content to be truthful, honest, and transparent therefore increasing engagement. This aligns with the regression analysis undertaken for this study, which showed that trust is a variable which positively impacts the engagement of customers with influencer content on Instagram. As per the Hayes process, the results of this study have shown as well that Covid-19 restrictions such as loneliness, emptiness, a feeling of loss and isolation have moderated the relationship between trust and the engagement of customers with influencer posts on Instagram (Rothfischer, 2021). This study demonstrates that possibly because of Covid-19 restrictions customers trusted Influencers more on Instagram, increasing engagement. There are several reasons why trust may have been moderated by Covid-19 restrictions. Firstly, during the pandemic, people have become more reliant on digital and virtual experiences due to the limitations on physical interactions. This has resulted in a surge in the use of social media platforms and Influencers, and customers may have been more willing to trust Influencers as a source of information and recommendations.

Secondly, the pandemic has caused significant economic and social upheaval, with many people experiencing job losses and financial difficulties (McKibbin et al., 2020). In this context, people may have turned to Influencers as a source of comfort and reassurance and may be more likely to trust them as a result.

Finally, the pandemic has created a sense of collective experience and shared challenges, with people all over the world facing similar struggles and uncertainties. This may have fostered a sense of community and solidarity, and customers may be more likely to trust Influencers who are seen as part of this shared experience.

Several recent authors also validate that trust is an important factor in customer engagement. For example, Rauniar et al. (2020) found that trust plays a crucial role in shaping consumer behaviour during the pandemic, as consumers rely heavily on trust in the government, healthcare system, and businesses to make decisions. Similarly, Lee and Youn (2021) noted that trust has become an essential factor in customer engagement with Influencers during the pandemic, as consumers are more cautious and concerned about the products they purchase and the information they receive.

According to Smith and Jones (2018), a low Cronbach's alpha score may suggest a need for further refinement of the measurement scale, but the fact that a variable shows a moderation effect suggests that it is still impacting the relationship between the independent and dependent variables. Therefore, it is important to carefully consider the implications of the moderation effect and to explore other potential explanations for the effect, such as alternative measures of the variable or other moderating variables that may be at play.

Therefore, further research can be done on understanding the effect of Covid-19 moderation on trust in customer engagement on Instagram between Instagram Influencers and users to gain an In-depth understanding of the relationship between trust and restrictions on engagement with respect to the relationship between Instagram Influencers and users.

Therefore hypothesis 1 has been supported by data. As shown in figure 4.4.5, the Hayes process demonstrates that Covid-19 restrictions have influenced the relationship between trust and engagement on the relationship between Influencers and users on Instagram.

### **5.2.2. Hypothesis 2 - Covid-19 Restrictions Moderates the Relationship between Interactivity and Customer Engagement**

As discussed in the literature, interactivity affects the level of engagement between customers and influencer content on Instagram (Dessart et al., 2016). Interactivity is measured by connectedness, responsiveness, and experience (Rafaeli and Ariel, 2017). The more interactivity

between Instagram users and Influencers, the more may be the level of customer engagement (Dessart et al., 2016). The regression analysis undertaken for this study showed that Interactivity impacts the level of customer engagement with influencer posts published on Instagram. However, Covid-19 restrictions such as loneliness, emptiness, a feeling of isolation, do not moderate the relationship between interactivity and customer engagement with influencer content on Instagram (Rothfischer, 2021). This relationship is shown not to have been impacted by Covid-19 restrictions. Therefore hypothesis 2 is unsupported. Rafaeli and Ariel (2017) and Dessart et al. (2016), have shown in their study the level of interactivity between customers and Influencers on Instagram. Covid-19 restrictions are dissociated with such engagement and interaction. As for interactivity, namely the responsiveness, experience and connectedness associated with the relationship between Influencers and users on Instagram existed even before the onset of Covid-19 (Francisco et al., 2021).

There is a possibility that Covid-19 restrictions may not have influenced the relationship between interactivity and customer engagement on the relationship between Influencers and users on Instagram, as suggested by the findings of the study. This is possibly because Instagram users and Influencers were still able to engage with one another through this virtual platform regardless of the physical isolation, loneliness, and emptiness due to Covid-19 (Park and Yang, 2021). The increased screen time that customers engaged in during Covid-19 was leveraged by Influencers to publish more interesting and engaging content (Park and Yang, 2021).

### **5.2.3. Hypothesis 3 - Covid-19 Restrictions Moderates the Relationship between Virtual Experience and Customer Engagement.**

The regression analysis carried out for this study has shown that virtual experience impacts customer engagement on the relationship between Influencers and users on Instagram. The more the virtual experience offered by Influencers on Instagram the greater may be the level of engagement of customers with Influencers. Covid-19 restrictions such as loneliness, emptiness and a feeling of isolation may not have had a significant impact on moderating the relationship between virtual experience and customer engagement on Instagram. Hence Hypothesis 3 is not supported. The study shows that Covid-19 restrictions such as loneliness, emptiness and a feeling of isolation appear not to be relevant to the type of absorption, immersiveness and creation of an alternative world that is ordinarily facilitated with the virtual experience associated with influencer content. Virtual experience has been measured by elements such as immersiveness, absorption, and creating an alternative reality. When customers engage with Influencers on Instagram, they could do so because of the virtual experience offered by them and maybe not because Covid-19 restrictions have moderated them to do so (Park and Namkung, 2022). The elements of absorption, immersiveness and creating an alternate world associated with influencer content, were still experienced by customers on a platform like Instagram regardless

of the loneliness, emptiness and feeling of isolation that was created due to Covid-19 (Park and Namkung, 2022).

Hence, the current study shows that Covid-19 restrictions did not have a moderating influence on the relationship between virtual experience and customer engagement on the relationship between Influencers and users on Instagram. Further research can be conducted on the absorption, immersiveness and creating an alternate world, of the platform and Covid-19 restrictions regardless of the influencer content.

#### **5.2.4. Hypothesis 4 - Covid-19 Restrictions Moderates the Relationship between Visual Display of Content and Customer Engagement.**

The regression analysis undertaken for this study shows that visual display of content impacts customer engagement on the relationship between Influencers and users on Instagram. The more the visual display of content as provided by Influencers, the greater will be the level of customer engagement. The study shows that Covid-19 restrictions such as loneliness, emptiness, and a feeling of isolation may not have moderated the relationship between visual display of content and customer engagement on Instagram. Visual display of content has been measured by beauty and appeal of influencer posts on Instagram. When customers engage with Influencers on Instagram, it could be because of the visual appeal of influencer content and not because Covid-19 restrictions have moderated them to do so. Hence Hypothesis 4 is not supported. Covid-19 restrictions such as loneliness, emptiness and a feeling of isolation are not significant enough to moderate the relationship between visual display of content and customer engagement on the relationship between Influencers and users on Instagram (Park and Namkung, 2022). There could also be a possibility that customers are not likely to engage with Instagram Influencers owing to the visual display of content that is characteristic of these posts, because Covid-19 restrictions have compelled them to (Francisco et al., 2021). Influencers continued to publish content characterised by beauty and appeal, in the Covid-19 period, and restrictions such as loneliness, emptiness and a feeling of isolation did not moderate customer engagement on the relationship between Influencers and users on Instagram (Francisco et al., 2021). Further research can explore the moderating effect of Covid-19 restrictions between visual display of content on the platform and customer engagement, regardless of Instagram influencer content.

### **5.3. Lack of Appropriate Market Research on Instagram Use during Covid-19**

A significant gap addressed by the findings of this study is the absence of market research on how Instagram as a platform has transformed or changed during Covid-19 in terms of customer engagement with influencer posts (Ciotti et al., 2020). As made known in the 2nd chapter of this

dissertation, Instagram is one of the most used social media sites among people living in the United Kingdom, as well as in other parts of the world (Bentley et al., 2021). Instagram Influencers can be effectively used in marketing strategies to promote content pertaining to specific products and services, making customers increasingly engaged with the same.

The content that is published by Influencers on Instagram is trusted and appreciated by those who visit this site often (Bentley et al., 2021). While the relevance and popularity of influencer content on Instagram is a fact that is well-known, the extent to which Covid-19 has transformed the use of this platform is not a matter that has been studied in detail in an academic and marketing context (Francisco et al., 2021).

The results of the regression analysis, run individually, reveal that Covid-19 restrictions strengthened the relationship of trust between Instagram users and Influencers increasing Customer Engagement.

The use of Instagram as a marketing platform has remained significant during Covid-19 because of the level of customer engagement that can be witnessed on this platform during this time (Francisco et al., 2021). However, the study shows that Covid-19 restrictions do not moderate the relationship between interactivity, visual display of content and virtual experience and customer engagement with influencer posts on Instagram with a significant impact. This was established by this study's results. These variables separately impact customer engagement between Influencers and users, indicating that businesses can engage in the appropriate use of the same for their benefit in the long and short term. It is recommended that businesses seek to leverage this customer engagement on Instagram by publishing new, and relevant content through Influencers about their products and services. By doing so, they may ensure better brand awareness (Bentley et al., 2021).

#### **5.4. Changes that took place in Instagram Use due to Covid-19**

Factors that drive from Covid-19, including the changes that have taken place regarding Instagram use as a marketing platform, are a gap detected in the literature review that this study's findings seek to address (Park and Namkung, 2022). Covid-19 restrictions such as loneliness, emptiness and isolation, no non-essential travel and work from home, have led to a higher level of engagement with Instagram content between Instagram users and influencers, as made known in the findings of this study. This study aims at exploring the relationship between Instagram Influencers and users during the pandemic, and which can be used by businesses to their advantage, to publish and circulate influencer content that keeps Instagram users engaged to it, increasing the overall customer engagement.

Instagram is a platform, which by virtue of its openness and transparency, allows people who

engage with Influencers on this platform to trust the content published by the same (Francisco et al., 2021). Hence it will be of advantage for business organisations to associate with Influencers and publish regular content on Instagram, that helps people to overcome the sense of isolation, loss and emptiness that ensued in the Covid-19 period. They can now view updated content on Instagram and engage with the same (Bentley et al., 2021). Such a move will enable business organisations to expand their customer base, by publishing regular content about their products and services on this platform, and enabling Instagram users to engage with the same, often (Bentley et al., 2021). They can consider advertising more on Instagram with the Influencers. This will lead to a greater level of engagement with their content because of the increased interest and increased amount of time that people have been spending on Instagram, since the onset of Covid-19 (Park and Namkung, 2022).

Covid-19 is a period which has altered the extent to which customers make use of Instagram (Bentley et al., 2021). The time that is spent by customers on Instagram has increased because of Covid-19 restrictions such as no physical contact, no non-essential travel, work from home and limited interaction as well as curfews (Bentley et al., 2021). All of this has led people to spend more time liking and appreciating the type of influencer content which they view on Instagram (Francisco et al., 2021). Viewers find the beauty, attractiveness, and visual appeal of influencer posts to be engaging.

As the study's results have shown that customer engagement has increased with respect to trust between Instagram users and Influencers. Businesses can leverage this increase in engagement due to trust. Social media managers can use Influencers to market their products and services on Instagram, given the appeal that is associated with influencer content. Businesses can certainly add to their profit and ensure better brand awareness for their services and products by roping in Influencers to advertise their products (Park and Namkung, 2022).

## **Conclusion**

This study was based upon the consideration that the pandemic Covid-19 's restrictions have altered the relationship between Instagram users and Influencers. The framework for the study is the variables that appeal to social media users that drive customer engagement and the relationship between them have been affected by the Covid-19 restrictions. The findings show that variable trust is directly significant to increase customer engagement between Instagram users and Influencers. Brands and niche businesses can reach their consumers directly to promote their businesses through Instagram Influencers by capitalising on the element of trust.

The participants of this study were active Instagram users and who actively interacted and made purchases with Instagram Influencers, therefore making the study reliable. The initial findings of



the Study show that trust is significantly moderated by Covid-19 restrictions, which demonstrates users are more trusting towards Influencers.

The findings of the study show the relevance of this study in current time and further discussions on how social media Influencers shape and build their relationship with Instagram users and help brands and products along the way would be an intersection between the changes moderated by Covid-19 restrictions and consumer behaviour.

## **Chapter 6 Conclusion**

### **6.1 Introduction**

The study has showcased the fact that Covid-19 restrictions do not have a moderating influence on the relationship between interactivity, virtual experience and visual display of content and customer engagement on Instagram. It does moderate the relationship between trust and customer engagement with influencer content on Instagram. Interactivity, virtual experience, and the visual display of content are variables that do influence customer engagement with influencer content on Instagram. Covid-19 restrictions do not have a moderating influence on these relationships. The study shows that participants of the study engaged with influencer content on Instagram because they found such content to be honest, truthful, and trustworthy. Covid-19 restrictions such as loneliness, emptiness and a feeling of isolation induced people to take to Instagram and engage with the content published by Influencers on this platform, primarily because they were able to trust this content and found these to be honest in nature.

Interactivity, as measured by responsiveness, connectedness and experience do influence the extent to which customers engage with influencer content on Instagram. There is literature to support the argument that the variable virtual experience or the feeling of absorption, immersion and creating an alternative world is one of the key reasons why people engage with influencer content on Instagram (Wang et al., 2020). The visual display of content, such as the beauty and the aesthetic appeal of the influencer posts on Instagram are also a reason people engage excessively with influencer content as published on Instagram. However, as the results of this study have shown, Covid-19 restrictions such as loneliness, emptiness and a feeling of isolation do not have a bearing on the engagement of customers with influencer posts on Instagram, due to interactivity, virtual experience, and the visual display of content. However, the loneliness, isolation and the feeling of emptiness that prevailed among people in the period of Covid-19 was responsible for them trusting influencer content as published on Instagram at this point in time, and engaging with the same as much as it was possible for them to do so. Business organisations can thus leverage this by publishing influencer content on Instagram, that is honesty, truthful and trustworthy and which will induce customers to engage with such content more, leading to a greater visibility for the services and products marketed by such businesses.

### **6.2. Summary of Key Findings**

This study was undertaken to determine how Covid-19 restrictions moderate the relationship between trust, interactivity, visual display of content and virtual experience and customer engagement on the relationship between Influencers and users on Instagram. However, while Covid-19 restrictions such as loneliness, emptiness and a feeling of isolation moderate the

relationship between trust and customer engagement with influencer posts on Instagram, such restrictions do not moderate the relationship between virtual experience, visual display of content and interactivity and customer engagement on the relationship between Influencers and users on Instagram. The higher the Covid-19 restrictions, the greater is the trust between Instagram users and Influencers. Therefore hypothesis 1 has been supported while the remaining hypotheses were unsupported.

### **6.3. Limitations of the study**

While the Study has relevance and applications in creating marketing strategies. There are factors like a data comparison before Covid-19 restrictions which would have allowed the study to be more reliable. Also, an in-depth brief on users explaining their relationship with Influencers before Covid-19 restrictions and the environmental biases that exist. The limitations for the research were also that it is time bounded therefore several other methods can be used to understand the reliability of the research further. (Research methodology limitations to be added). There are several limitations associated with regression analysis that must be considered here (Bell, Bryman, and Harley, 2022).

There are also limitations with recall bias. Participants may have difficulty accurately remembering their behaviours and experiences which could affect the validity of the data collected (Galea et al., 2007). As this study expects the participants to recall their experiences of the pandemic, it could affect the validity of the data collected.

As convenience sampling has been used for the method of selection there are several limitations such as sampling bias, which can occur when the sample is not representative of the larger population. This can lead to biased results that do not accurately reflect the attitudes, behaviours, or characteristics of the population (Sharma and Sharma, 2020). Additionally, the lack of precision with convenient sampling can make it difficult to determine the margin of error for the survey results (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). This can make it challenging to draw accurate conclusions from the data. Furthermore, the findings from a study that uses convenience sampling may not be generalizable to other populations or settings, thus limiting the external validity of the study (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

Using only primary channels to recruit participants Instagram for a survey also has certain limitations. Firstly, the sample collected may not represent the overall population of Instagram as certain demographic groups may be overrepresented or underrepresented on the platform (Pew Research Center, 2021). This can lead to sampling bias and limit the generalizability of the study findings to the broader population. Also, the current study participants of Instagram users may not be representative of the whole population in terms of their behaviour and attitudes towards the topic being studied, which can also limit the study's external validity (Harris et al.,

2019).

As the study participants were recruited through university and social media channels, it has limitations that only those who know about the survey through primary channels of the researcher and university could participate. Further research can be done by broadcasting and placing paid ads on social media to reach a larger network of participants.

Limitations also persist regarding online surveys. For instance, a respondent population characterised by recall bias can find its way into the survey sample. There is no personalised follow up that is taken on the questions that are asked in the survey, and to determine whether the answers that have been provided to the survey questions are accurate or not, is difficult to do (Meade and Craig, 2012). The survey's design is inflexible, and it cannot be changed when the study data is being collected. The questions posed in the online survey are related to the study but may be characterised by weaknesses or issues that fail to generate accurate responses (Meade and Craig, 2012).

There were also limitations due to the low internal consistency. Low reliability can be a significant limitation to any study, as it indicates that the measurements used to collect data may not be consistent or accurate (Gliem and Gliem, 2003). If the data collection instruments used in a study have low reliability, it can significantly impact the conclusions that can be drawn from the study's results, even if the study shows a moderation effect.

However, despite low reliability being a limitation in a study, researchers can still draw meaningful insights from the study's results and use them to inform future research or practical applications (Bollen and Lennox, 1991). In fact, identifying low reliability in a study can be an opportunity to improve the study's methodology and measurement instruments (Davies and Crombie, 1980).

Furthermore, low reliability can sometimes be due to the complexity of the construct being measured, rather than a limitation of the study (Hogarty and Kromrey, 2019). In such cases, low reliability may still provide useful information on the complexity of the phenomenon being investigated.

Therefore, low reliability in a study does not necessarily invalidate the study's findings, and researchers can still draw meaningful insights from the results (Bollen and Lennox, 1991). Identifying low reliability can also provide an opportunity to improve the study's methodology and measurement instruments (Furr, 2018), and low reliability may reflect the complexity of the construct being measured (Furr, 2018). In such cases, low reliability may not necessarily be a limitation of the study, but rather a reflection of the complexity of the phenomenon being investigated. Researchers can acknowledge the potential sources of error and use caution in

interpreting the study's results. In summary, while low reliability can be a limitation to a study, it does not necessarily invalidate the study's findings. Researchers can still draw meaningful insights from the study's results, identify areas for improvement, and use caution in interpreting the study's results. By doing so, the study's contributions to the field can be maximised (Gliem and Gliem, 2003).

At last, as the study was on Covid-19 restrictions on a global level, each country had their own set of rules and regulations on imposing restrictions. As the study looks at the impact of restrictions on Instagram, the study is based on the recollection of that period which may be inaccurate. Further researchers can also create new measures for variables such as Covid-19 restrictions, trust, interactivity, and virtual experience in a similar demography.

#### **6.4. Recommendations**

Further researchers might want to consider using a correlational approach to understand more changes on social media that occurred because of Covid-19 restrictions between social media users and Influencers. The Framework can also be used for several other social media to prove the coherence of the study. Further Investigations can also compare usage and dimensions of purchase intentions as additional variables to increase applicability of the study for business and brand strategies. Based on the findings it would be feasible for businesses to advertise their products more often on Instagram and through Influencers (Bentley et al., 2021). There is mass appeal and popularity that is associated with Influencers on a platform like Instagram and this appeal appears to have aggravated in the period, as Covid-19 restrictions moderate the relationship between Trust in users and Influencers enhancing customer engagement.

Due to Covid-19 restrictions Instagram users and Influencers have strengthened trust, increasing customer engagement. The study demonstrates therefore that it would be advantageous for business organisations to associate with Influencers and get them to promote products via a platform like Instagram, as in doing so, such products are certain to acquire excellent visibility for branding and advertising.

The study also aligns with the discussions that it would be worthwhile on the part of business organisations to leverage the accessibility and the appeal that is associated with Instagram Influencers, to be able to sell their products effectively enough (Bentley et al., 2021). They can take maximum advantage of the outreach that comes with influencer content on Instagram by getting Influencers to promote their products on this platform, as regularly as possible, for best results (Francisco et al., 2021). Businesses could also explore additional revenue while doing so, given how often customers trust Influencers on Instagram.

## 6.5. Implications for Practice

Large businesses can hire Instagram Influencers to promote their products because of the ability of Influencers to keep their target audience interested in their services and products (Giotti et al., 2020). An effective way for business organisations to connect with their target audience would be by recruiting Influencers to promote content about the services and products that the business is associated with (Giotti et al., 2020). Customers trust the content that is published by Influencers on Instagram, primarily because it is trustworthy, honest, and reliable, and because of the interactivity, virtual experience and visual display associated with the content that is provided by Influencers (Park and Namkung, 2022). It would therefore do well for a big business to enhance its visibility and keep customers interested in their offerings (Park and Namkung, 2022). The outreach of such businesses is likely to be significantly improved because of this as Instagram Influencers can connect with an extensive target audience by virtue of the content that they publish on a platform like Instagram (Giotti et al., 2020).

Businesses, both large and small can certainly use influencer content to promote their products because of the educative nature of the content that is published by Influencers (Francisco et al., 2021). A significant role played by an influencer on Instagram is to educate or inform the target audience that is viewing influencer content, important details about the product being promoted (Francisco et al., 2021). Customers are duly informed about the characteristics of a service or a product through influencer content and are also informed about the benefits that they may experience when using this product (Giotti et al., 2020). The educational nature of the content that is shared by Influencers on Instagram informs customers on this platform with extensive details of the services or products which are sold by a business (Giotti et al., 2020). They can take an informed decision when engaging in a purchase (Park and Namkung, 2022). Brand awareness is an activity that is therefore greatly facilitated by using influencer content and which is why businesses can leverage the impact exerted by Influencers, to increase customer engagement and make people more conscious about their brand (Park and Namkung, 2022).

Since Instagram Influencers have thousands of followers, it is possible to make many people aware about the products of a business through influencer content (Francisco et al., 2021). A business can be known by thousands of people around the world when an influencer promotes content about the products of the business on Instagram (Francisco et al., 2021). The platform Instagram is characterised by a wide outreach and if Influencers are deployed to promote content, a business can enable a target population of substantive size to be informed about its products (Park and Namkung, 2022).

Small business organisations ought to consider making use of influencer content as they can enhance their scalability because of the increased visibility that is facilitated by influencer content

on Instagram (Giotti et al., 2020). By making use of Instagram content, small businesses can make more people aware of their products, their services and their intended outreach and can scale up their operations by doing so (Giotti et al., 2020). ROI as created by influencer marketing on Instagram is higher than what it is on other channels that are used for marketing products (Bentley et al., 2021).

### **6.6. Implications for Research**

Scholars of business and marketing studies can conduct research on the impact of influencer marketing on Instagram on the behavioural patterns demonstrated by customers at the time of buying services or products via this platform (Bentley et al., 2021). The behaviour that customers exhibit when they engage with influencer content and the level of interactivity facilitated by Instagram content can inform the research community about what customers expect from a business, when going through promotional content that is published by the business on channels like Instagram, through Influencers (Giotti et al., 2020).

A rigorous understanding can also be gained about the psychology of customers as depicted through their engagement with influencer content on Instagram (Park and Namkung, 2022). The mentality, the thought processes and the preferences of customers can be deciphered by judging customer engagement with influencer content on Instagram (Bentley et al., 2021). This in turn, can provide the research community with the insights needed to understand customer psychology better in the context of business marketing (Bentley et al., 2021).

A response elicited in crisis situations by customers is also a matter that can be well understood by studying influencer marketing on Instagram and customer engagement with the same (Giotti et al., 2020). The results of this study provide a concise overview about how customers approach influencer content on Instagram during a crisis period such as Covid-19 (Francisco et al., 2021). Researchers can study this matter further to determine what customers expect from influencer content during a crisis period, and how customer behaviour must be understood during a crisis (Francisco et al., 2021). This in turn will help researchers to distinguish customer behaviour and engagement as showcased in times of normalcy compared to that during a crisis.

### **6.7. Research Contribution**

The study's findings' intent is to provide a wide range of brands with the opportunity to optimise their marketing using globally popular forms of communication that yield the highest returns through increased customer engagement. Influencer marketing on Instagram and the CE model has strongly suggested that the most crucial components of customer engagement as the characteristics linked with influencer marketing have determined the key aspects to be focused on by brands. It is important to understand these changes as this will facilitate identifying as well

as assessing the unique motivation of consumers for following various SMIs on the platform of Instagram and examining its connection with vital consumer behaviour outcomes. Recognizing these changes will assist in further knowledge on the factors related to Instagram Influencers based on which audiences turn to social media Influencers more often than ever to be entertained and well-informed based on their engagement. The findings might pave the path for further influencer marketing using Instagram engagement strategies.



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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Ethical Approval:



**Name:** PRAKRITI RASHI .

**Project Title:** Exploring customer engagement with Instagram Influencers, post Covid-19

**Reference:** EMS6093

**Status:** Full Approval

**Approval Date:** 26.10.22

The Standard Conditions below apply to all approved student Research Ethics applications:

- i. If any substantive changes to the proposed project are made, a new ethical approval application must be submitted to the Committee.
- ii. The Proposer must remain in regular contact with the project supervisor.
- iii. The Supervisor must see a copy of all materials and procedures prior to commencing data collection.
- iv. Any changes to the agreed procedures must be negotiated with the project supervisor.

## Appendix 2: Questionnaire

### Exploring Customer Engagement with Instagram Influencers, post-Covid-19 Demographic Questionnaire:

#### SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES

- What is your age?

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- **Profession**

Part-time

Full-time

Unemployed

Other

Student

- Gender

Male

Female

Prefer not to say

Enter gender identity

#### Pre-qualifying questions: Customer Engagement

- Do you follow Instagram Influencers?

Yes

No

- Why do you follow Instagram Influencers?

Inspiration

Information

Discovering new products

Entertainment

Others

Have you engaged with any Instagram Influencers by commenting or liking their content in the last 3-6 months?

Yes

No

- How frequently do you like/share/comment on Instagram Influencer's content per week?

Less than 1 hour

1-3 Hours

4-6 hours

7-9 hours

10-12 hours

13 hours or more

- Have you purchased any product recommended by the Influencer that you follow in the last 3-6 months?

Yes

No

**Please find a list of indicative questions for measuring the variables on a 5- point LIKERT scale, scaling from Strongly Agree- Strongly Disagree**

INFLUENCERS TRUST:

Questions
The Influencers were honest
The endorser was honest
The Influencers were truthful
The endorser was truthful
I consider the Influencers trustworthy
I consider the endorser trustworthy

INTERACTIVITY:

Questions
The Influencers respond to me if I post a message
The Influencers respond to me quickly and effectively
I provide feedback/suggestions about new products with the Influencers

VIRTUAL EXPERIENCE:

Questions
The content of Instagram Influencers creates a new world for me
Instagram Influencers' content is absorbing and immersive
Content posted by Instagram Influencers often makes me forget where I am physically

VISUAL DISPLAY OF CONTENT ON INSTAGRAM:

Questions
The way Influencers display their products on Instagram is attractive.
The Influencers' posts on Instagram are aesthetically appealing
The images posted on Instagram Influencers' pages reflect beauty

COVID-19 RESTRICTIONS:

Statement
During the peaks of the pandemic, I experience a general sense of emptiness
During the peaks of the pandemic, I felt isolated from others
During the peaks of the pandemic, I followed social distancing precautions to avoid getting COVID-19
During the peaks of the pandemic, I tried to do most of my activities from home when possible
During the peaks of the pandemic, I was connecting with others through Instagram
During the peaks of the pandemic, I avoided public gatherings

CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT:

Statement
I feel excited about Influencers content
In my interaction with the Influencers content, I am immersed
In general, I like to get involved in the Influencers content in community discussions

### Appendix 3: Adaptive Questions

*Please find the measurement and adaptations below:*

#### **TRUST**

<b>Statement</b>	<b>Original Questions</b>	<b>Citations</b>
The Influencers were honest	The endorser was honest	Credibility of a peer endorser and advertising effectiveness by Juha Munnukka, Outi Uusitalo, and Hanna Toivonen, School of Business and Economics, Jyväskylä University, Jyväskylä, Finland
The Influencers were truthful	The endorser was truthful	Credibility of a peer endorser and advertising effectiveness by Juha Munnukka, Outi Uusitalo, and Hanna Toivonen, School of Business and Economics, Jyväskylä University, Jyväskylä, Finland
I consider the Influencers trustworthy	I consider the endorser trustworthy	Credibility of a peer endorser and advertising effectiveness by Juha Munnukka, Outi Uusitalo, and Hanna Toivonen, School of Business and Economics, Jyväskylä University, Jyväskylä, Finland

#### **INTERACTIVITY**

<b>Original Questions</b>	<b>Citation</b>
The brand talks back to me if I post a message	The role of perceived firm social media interactivity in facilitating customer engagement behaviors by Siddik Bozkurt, David Marius Gligor, and Barry J. Babin
The brand responds to me quickly and effectively	The role of perceived firm social media interactivity in facilitating customer engagement behaviors by Siddik Bozkurt, David Marius Gligor, and Barry J. Babin

I provide feedback/suggestions about new products with the brand	The role of perceived firm social media interactivity in facilitating customer engagement behaviors by Siddik Bozkurt, David Marius Gligor, and Barry J. Babin
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### ***VIRTUAL EXPERIENCE***

<b>Original Questions</b>	<b>Citation</b>
Telepresence: This online gaming community creates a new world for me, and this world suddenly disappears when I stop using it.	Chuang, Y.-W. (2020) 'Promoting Consumer Engagement in Online Communities through Virtual Experience and Social Identity'. Sustainability [online] 12 (3), 855. Available from <a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/su12030855">http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/su12030855</a>
Telepresence: PE3 Using this online gaming community is absorbing and immersive	Chuang, Y.-W. (2020) 'Promoting Consumer Engagement in Online Communities through Virtual Experience and Social Identity'. Sustainability [online] 12 (3), 855. Available from <a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/su12030855">http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/su12030855</a>
Telepresence: Being in this online gaming community often makes me forget where I am	Chuang, Y.-W. (2020) 'Promoting Consumer Engagement in Online Communities through Virtual Experience and Social Identity'. Sustainability [online] 12 (3), 855. Available from <a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/su12030855">http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/su12030855</a>

### ***VISUAL DISPLAY OF CONTENT ON INSTAGRAM***

<b>Original Questions</b>	<b>Citation</b>
I find the way brands display their products on Instagram is attractive.	Aqsa Bashir, Jing (Taylor) Wen, Eunice Kim & Jon D. Morris (2018) 'The Role of Consumer Affect on Visual Social Networking Sites: How Consumers Build Brand Relationships', Journal of Current Issues & Research in Advertising, 39:2, 178-191
The brands' posts on Instagram are aesthetically appealing	Aqsa Bashir, Jing (Taylor) Wen, Eunice Kim & Jon D. Morris (2018) 'The Role of Consumer Affect on Visual Social Networking Sites: How Consumers Build

	Brand Relationships', Journal of Current Issues & Research in Advertising, 39:2, 178-191
The images posted on Instagram brand pages reflect beauty	Aqsa Bashir, Jing (Taylor) Wen, Eunice Kim & Jon D. Morris (2018) 'The Role of Consumer Affect on Visual Social Networking Sites: How Consumers Build Brand Relationships', Journal of Current Issues & Research in Advertising, 39:2, 178-191

### **COVID-19 RESTRICTIONS**

<b>Original Questions</b>	<b>Citation</b>
I experience a general sense of emptiness	Bonsaksen, T., Ruffolo, M., Leung, J., Price, D., Thygesen, H., Schoultz, M., & Geirdal, A. Ø. (2021) 'Loneliness and Its Association with Social Media Use During the COVID-19 Outbreak', Social Media + Society, 7(3). <a href="https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211033821">https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211033821</a>
I felt isolated from others	Facing Loneliness and Anxiety During the COVID-19 Isolation: The Role of Excessive Social Media Use in a Sample of Italian Adults
I am following social distancing precautions to avoid getting COVID-19	Tran-Thien-Y Le, Ja-Shen Chen & Ngoc B. Nguyen (2022) 'The Effects of Attributes of Non-Immersive Virtual Reality on Customers' Experience of Video Tours under Social Distancing for COVID-19', International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction, DOI: 10.1080/10447318.2022.2131251
I try to do most of my activities from home when possible	Tran-Thien-Y Le, Ja-Shen Chen & Ngoc B. Nguyen (2022) 'The Effects of Attributes of Non-Immersive Virtual Reality on Customers' Experience of Video Tours under Social Distancing for COVID-19', International Journal of Human-Computer



	Interaction, DOI: 10.1080/10447318.2022.2131251
I am connecting with others through mobile, digital, and virtual options	Tran-Thien-Y Le, Ja-Shen Chen & Ngoc B. Nguyen (2022) 'The Effects of Attributes of Non-Immersive Virtual Reality on Customers' Experience of Video Tours under Social Distancing for COVID-19', International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction, DOI: 10.1080/10447318.2022.2131251
I am avoiding public gatherings	Tran-Thien-Y Le, Ja-Shen Chen & Ngoc B. Nguyen (2022) 'The Effects of Attributes of Non-Immersive Virtual Reality on Customers' Experience of Video Tours under Social Distancing for COVID-19', International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction, DOI: 10.1080/10447318.2022.2131251

### ***CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT***

<b>Original Questions</b>	<b>Citation</b>
I feel excited about tourism site content	Harrigan, P., Evers, U., Miles, M. and Daly, T. (2017) 'Customer engagement with tourism social media brands', Tourism management, 59, pp.597-609.
In my interaction with the tourism site, I am immersed	Harrigan, P., Evers, U., Miles, M. and Daly, T. (2017) 'Customer engagement with tourism social media brands', Tourism management, 59, pp.597-609.
In general, I like to get involved in the tourism site community discussions	Harrigan, P., Evers, U., Miles, M. and Daly, T. (2017) 'Customer engagement with tourism social media brands', Tourism management, 59, pp.597-609.

## Appendix 4: Consent Form Participant



*Appendix C(i): Participant Information Sheet and Research Consent Form Template*

**Project title: EXPLORING CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT WITH INSTAGRAM INFLUENCERS, POST COVID-19 (EMS6093)**

**Researcher name: PRAKRITI RASHI**

*What is the research about?*

*We invite you to participate in a research project about understanding the effects of Covid-19 restrictions on Instagram users and their relationship with Instagram Influencers.*

*The approach of the research is from a customer engagement perspective to investigate the change in the relationship between Instagram users and Influencers. The study hypothesises Covid-19 restrictions moderate the relationship between trust, interactivity, virtual experience, visual display of content, and customer engagement.*

*Do I have to take part?*

*This form has been written to help you decide if you would like to take part. It is up to you and you alone whether you wish to take part. If you do decide to take part, you will be free to withdraw at any time without providing a reason and without penalty.*

*You will also be debriefed about the details of the research at the end of the survey. Any demographic information will be accessible only to me, Prakriti Rashi [REDACTED], and to my supervisors [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]. Please feel free to contact me or my supervisors if you have any queries.*

*This survey is completely anonymised and therefore you will not be able to withdraw after submitting the survey. However, you can withdraw at any given point during the survey.*

*What will I be required to do?*

*After you consent to take the survey, you will be directed to an online survey where you will finish the prequalification questionnaire, and then answer questions about your experience with Instagram Influencers. The questions are on a 5-point Likert Scale in which you choose from categories such as strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree (neutral), agree, or strongly agree with the topic.*

*You will have a choice to exit from the survey at any given time before submission.*

*It will take 15 mins to complete your participation in the survey.*

*How will you handle my data?*

*Your data will be stored in an anonymised form and will be accessible to me (PRAKRITI RASHI) and my supervisors (please see a) and stored with the university of Abertay storage. The data is completely anonymised at the point of collection. This means that no one, including the researchers, will be able to identify you within the data; Your data will be stored in Research Data Storage Service (RDSS), Your responses are treated in the strictest confidence - it will be impossible to identify individuals within a dataset when any of the research is disseminated (e.g., in publications/presentations). Abertay University acts as Data Controller (DataProtectionOfficer@abertay.ac.uk).*

*Retention of research data*

*Researchers are obliged to retain research data for up to 10 years post-publication, however, your anonymised research data may be retained indefinitely (e.g., so that researchers engage in open practice and other researchers can access their data to confirm the conclusions of published work). Consistent with our data retention*

*policy, researchers retain consent forms for as long as we continue to hold information about a data subject and for 10 years for published research (including Research Degree thesis).*

*Consent statement:*

*Abertay University attaches high priority to the ethical conduct of research. Please consider the following before indicating your consent on this form. Indicating your consent confirms that you are willing to participate in the research, however, indicating consent does not commit you to anything you do not wish to do, and you are free to withdraw your participation at any time. You are indicating consent under the following assumptions:*

*I understand the contents of the participant information sheet and consent form.*

*I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the research and have had them answered satisfactorily.*

*I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary and that I can withdraw from the research (parts of the project or the entire project) at any time without penalty and without having to provide an explanation.*

*I understand who has access to my data and how it will be handled at all stages of the research project.*

<i>PLEASE INITIAL BOX:</i>	<i>Yes, I do consent</i>	<i>No, I do not consent</i>
<i>I consent to take part in this study conducted by Prakriti Rashi who intends to use my data for further research examining the effects of Covid-19 restrictions on Instagram Users and their relationship with Instagram Influencers on customer engagement.</i>		

*Signature:*

*I confirm that I am willing to take part in this research:*

*PRINT NAME:*

*DATE:*

*PARTICIPANTS ARE ADVISED TO TAKE A SCREENSHOT OF THE CONSENT PAGE.*

*You can find our procedure for complaints (regarding research projects) and our privacy notice and legal basis for processing research data at: <https://www.abertay.ac.uk/legal/privacy-notice-for-research-participants/>*

## Appendix 5: Debrief Form



### *Appendix C(ii): Debrief Form Template*

*Project title: EXPLORING CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT with INSTAGRAM INFLUENCERS, POST COVID-19*

*Researcher name(s): PRAKRITI RASHI*

*Thank you for taking part in this research project; your contribution is valuable.*

### *Nature of research*

*The aim of the study is to analyse the aspects of trust, interactivity, virtual experience and visual display of content on Instagram users and Influencers that has an impact on customer engagement.*

*This is to understand the effects of Covid-19 restrictions between Instagram users and Influencers and how they impact digital marketing for brands.*

### *Data*

*Your data will be stored, shared, and processed as outlined in the Participant Information Sheet and Consent form for this project (EMS6093). Since the survey is completely anonymised, we will not be able to withdraw your data because we will no longer know which information (data) is yours.*

### *Sources of support*

*If taking part in the research has raised any issues for you personally, you can contact the Student Counselling services (If are Student services/Student Counselling (<https://www.abertay.ac.uk/life/student-support-and-services/counselling/>) or for non-students, other contacts include GP or a trusted friend.*

### *Further reading*

*Contact If you have any further questions, you may contact the me (the researcher) or my supervisors on the details below:*

*University supervisor contact details: Kathy-Ann Fletcher*

[REDACTED]

*University supervisor contact details: Andreea Oniga*

[REDACTED]

*Researcher Contact Details: Prakriti Rashi*

[REDACTED]

*Thank you once again for taking part in the research!*

## Appendix 6: Participant Recruitment Material:

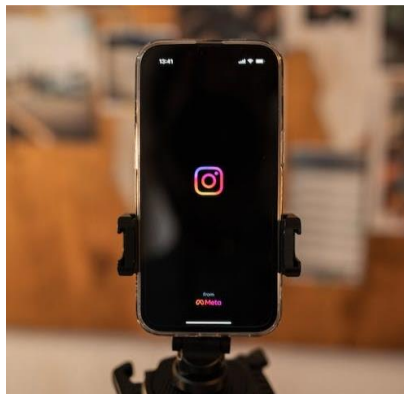
### PARTICIPANTS NEEDED: -

Participants needed for a university study on the effect of Covid-19 restrictions on customer engagement between Instagram users and Influencers.

This is a short 15-min survey and will not take much of your time.

Requirements:

- 18-35yrs
- Actively using Instagram
- Actively interacting with Instagram Influencers content



Scan QR code to begin:



This is an anonymous survey.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact:

Prakriti Rashi





**Appendix 7: Alternate Individual Regression Of Trust**

**Regression Analysis:**

Variables Entered/ Removed <sup>a</sup>			
Model	Variables Entered	Variables Removed	Method
1	MC_Trust_Covid, MC_Trust, MC_Covid_Restriction <sup>b</sup>	.	Enter
a. Dependent Variable: Engagement			
b. All requested variables entered.			

The independent variables are Trust, Covid Restrictions and Interaction of Trust and Covid restriction.

Model Summary				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.479 <sup>a</sup>	.229	.225	.45333
a. Predictors: (Constant), MC_Trust_Covid, MC_Trust, MC_Covid_Restriction				

R-squared is a statistical measure of how close the data are to the fitted regression line.

It is also known as the coefficient of determination, or the coefficient of multiple determinations for multiple regressions. The R-Squared value shows that most of the estimates, to the extent of 22.9% fit closely to the assumed values.

ANOVA <sup>a</sup>					
Model	Sum of	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.

		Squares				
1	Regression	38.387	3	12.796	62.263	.000 <sup>b</sup>
	Residual	129.267	629	.206		
	Total	167.655	632			
a. Dependent Variable: Engagement						
b. Predictors: (Constant), MC_Trust_Covid, MC_Trust, MC_Covid_Restriction						

The ANOVA table, reports how well the regression equation fits the data (i.e., predicts the dependent variable).

This table indicates that the regression model predicts the dependent variable significantly well. In the "Regression" row and the "Sig." column, less than 0.05 indicates the statistical significance of the regression model. Here, the column value indicates that, overall, the regression model statistically significantly predicts the dependent variable, in other words is a good fit for the data.

Coefficients <sup>a</sup>						
Model		Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	3.000	.018		162.636	.000
	MC_Trust	.159	.034	.176	4.629	.000
	MC_Covid_Restriction	.213	.055	.161	3.898	.000
	MC_Trust_Covid	.343	.051	.275	6.670	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Engagement

The regression equation from above unstandardised coefficient data is

Engagement = 3 + 0.159\* (Trust) + 0.213 \*(Covid Restriction) + 0.343 \* (Interaction of Trust and Covid)

Null Hypothesis 1 (H1): The Trust has no significant impact on Engagement.

Null Hypothesis 2 (H2): The Covid restriction has no significant impact on Engagement.

Null Hypothesis 3 (H3): The Interaction of Trust and Covid has no significant impact on Engagement.

The “Sig” column of the table indicates that the independent variables are having a significant impact on dependent variables as the values are less than 0.05. If the Sig value is less than 0.05 then, we reject the null hypothesis and we conclude there is a significant effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable.

Conclusions:

2. The Trust has a significant impact of 0.159 on Engagement.
3. The Covid restriction has a significant impact of 0.213 on Engagement.
4. The interaction of Trust and Covid restriction has a significant impact of 0.343 on Engagement.

Overall, we can conclude that Covid restriction is moderating significantly between Trust and Engagement.