

GHANA INSTITUTE OF JOURNALISM

THE MILLENNIAL CONSUMERS' PERCEPTION OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS  
DURING THE PURCHASE DECISION PROCESS

ANDREWS NII OKAI TETTEH

OCTOBER 2020

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MAPR 19088

A PROJECT WORK SUBMITTED TO THE GHANA INSTITUTE OF JOURNALISM  
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE AWARD OF MASTER  
OF ARTS IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

OCTOBER 2020

## DECLARATIONS

### CANDIDATE'S DECLARATION

I, ANDREWS NII OKAI TETTEH, the author of this dissertation, do hereby declare that the work presented was done by me at the Ghana Institute of Journalism from February 2020 to October 2020. This work has never been presented either in whole or in part for an award of any other degree in this University or elsewhere.

Andrews Nii Okai Tetteh.....

Date.....

### SUPERVISOR'S DECLARATION

I, DR. STANLEY KWAME MARCUS SEMARCO, hereby declare that the preparation of this project work has been supervised by me in accordance with the guidelines on supervision as laid down by the Ghana Institute of Journalism.

Dr. Stanley Kwame Marcus Semarco .....

Date: .....

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the Almighty God for His direction, love and protection towards my family. I also dedicate this dissertation to my parents, Mr Richard S.K Botchway and Agartha Annan, who have been a great influence in my life and for the wonderful support offered to me in my entire life.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Besides being ever so grateful to God for everything I am and will be, my sincere gratitude goes to Dr. Stanley Kwame Marcus Semarco, who with great love and patience, guided me through this dissertation.

I thank my superiors and colleagues at EchoHouse Ghana Limited who supported my Masters degree journey by accommodating my new work schedule and often agreeing to cover for me while I attended to academic assignments.

I am most grateful to my cheerleaders, who encouraged me to continue pursuing this degree when it seemed my strength could no longer pull this off.

To everyone who contributed to making this academic journey a success, I will forever hold you in my heart.

## ABSTRACT

Engaging social media influencers to promote business ideas, products and services by Public Relations Professionals is becoming a common practice in the profession. This is based on the idea that people with significant following on social media can help brands influence consumers during consumer buying decision process. This qualitative study used qualitative literature review method to explore the millennial consumer's perception of social media influencers at each phase of the consumer buying decision process. Through research, this study proposed a new dynamic conceptual consumer buying decision model to explain the various consumer buying decision processes. It also developed five key propositions. These are; Social Media influencers will trigger need recognition among certain youth-oriented product categories, Social Media Influencers are digital brand information repository, Niche Social Media Influencers must be credible product reviewers not just endorsers, Social Media Influencers provide purchase leads and Consumers pass judgment on the social media influencer.

**Keywords: Social Media Influencer, Millennial Consumer, Consumer Buying Decision Process**

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## **Chapter One**

### **1.0 Introduction**

#### **1.1 Background**

Since prehistoric times leading up to the documented history of the conquest of European Kings, the renaissance, the industrial revolution and now to the digital era, one thing that has continued to remain fundamentally the same is transaction between one and another. Whether it is about negotiating new treaties, war, better trade, or plain modern-day commerce, those who sell have had to implement tactics to seem favorable in the eyes of those expected to buy. While Kings sought approval from the Pope to wage wars, the nobility sought favor from the Kings to transact their own titled enterprises. It is why the role of community and opinion leaders in marketing has always been essential (Bergstrom, 2019).

Opinion leaders are valued sources of information who possess sufficient influence on other people within their community or area of influence (Carpenter & Sherbino, 2010). They are seen as experts and consumers tend to believe them when these opinion leaders speak well of a particular product, service or idea. An opinion leader is a well-known individual or organization that has the ability to influence public opinion on the subject matter for which the opinion leader is known. Opinion leaders can be politicians, business leaders, community leaders, journalists, educators, celebrities, and sports stars (Grimsley, 2015).

When celebrity culture began to take hold, movie stars, musicians, sports stars and other famous people mainly in the entertainment industry started endorsing products. In the United States, one of four advertisements uses celebrities to gain brand awareness and preference (Stephens & Rice,

1998). It has become evident that celebrities help bring consumer attention to a brand message. “The literature on endorser effects is rich, providing insights into the efficacy of endorser effects, the underlying processes, and the conditions under which endorser effects may be strengthened. The dominant explanation in these studies assumes the value-transfer approach that focuses on how celebrities promote brand awareness and brand purchase through source credibility, source attractiveness, image congruence,” (Hung, Chan, & Tse, 2011).

Gu, Hung and Tse (2008) hold the position that though the above-mentioned approaches provide a perspective into how endorser effects work, they noted that the value-transfer may occur differently in other cultures. They agreed with the outlined modalities through which the effects of the celebrity attributes are transferred to the brands they promote, however, they believe the ways and how this is done will be different from one culture to the other. However, there are times a celebrity endorsement can go bad and reflect negatively on the endorsed brand. Other writers have explored this in detail. For instance, the Pinocchio factor as explored by Temperley and Tangen (2006). In popular culture, Pinocchio is a character that can never tell a lie, however, whenever he does so, his nose grows a little longer. By applying this ideology to celebrity endorsement, Temperley and Tangen (2006) discussed instances where the celebrities are motivated by money as such they are willing to say or do anything to promote a brand irrespective of the rippling effect that may follow. This then ingrain a certain unhealthy perception in the minds of consumers that the endorsement is not from a place of honesty as they will regard the celebrity to be a liar who will say anything for the money the brand is offering. This casts doubt on the entire promotional message with also negatively reflects on the brand itself (Temperley & Tangen, 2006).

However, coming out of the failures and successes from celebrity endorsement is the ushering in of a new kind of third party brand endorsers known as social media influencers who operate through influencer marketing. Influencer marketing occurs when brands or communication professionals contract certain types of well known and trusted individuals or organizations to help the brand engage its customers. This is a growing trend used in public relations initiatives (Glucksman, 2017).

The use of social media influencer marketing as a communication tactic has done a lot in increasing accessibility between a brand and its consumer, vice versa. Before this level of increased engagement between the consumer and the brand, as brought about by social media influencer marketing, most brand communications were one-sided often giving the consumer little opportunity to even start a consumer to brand communication channel (Glucksman, 2017). Though by most accounts, social media influencer marketing has helped consumers to also get a better deal from brands, what perception do the consumers have about social media influencers, if any, during the purchase decision-making process? Do the social media influencers play a role when consumers are going through the purchase decision-making process?

## **1.2 Problem Statement**

There have been countless number of research into the role of opinion leaders, celebrities endorsements and their relationships to brands, the messages they promote and the consumers they hope to influence or win their attention. In recent times, there is a growing number of research on the new development of influencer marketing and how it offers a new avenue for advertisers to reach customers (Glucksman, 2017).

Glucksman (2017) in his research into the rise of social media influencer marketing on lifestyle branding asked research questions such as what makes a social media influencer successful, whether companies viewed them as a plus to their business. He used pentadic analysis focusing on the act, agent, agency, scene, and purpose of a media artifact to evaluate campaigns carried out by social media influences on Instagram. The researcher also used content analysis of YouTube videos to understand how the social media influencers engaged with their audiences.

His quantitative-based research found that the success that brands may expect when they engage a social media influencer is due to the two-way interactive public relations tactic. This goes to enforce Grunig's two-way symmetrical communication model he recommended for Public Relations professional in his Excellence Theory. At its core, Grunig (2008) two-way symmetrical communication model allows for negotiation between the brand and its publics – in our case the customers – and it also promotes mutual understanding between the two. This is achieved, through influencer marketing, which places much emphasis on engagement with the audience.

Zak and Hasprova (2019) looked into the role of influencers in the consumer decision-making process. They used survey and focused mainly on fast-moving consumer goods. Only 21.9 percent of their respondents said an influencer would encourage them to buy. Alternatively, 45% of the respondents said they would be influenced if the item they are buying is clothes. The methods used by both researchers prevented them from probing further to understand why the respondents were influenced to purchase another item that was promoted by an influencer.

While investigating the influencer relationship between YouTubers and their audience Gümüş & Üyesi (2018) confirmed that YouTubers did have an influence on the people who consume their content. YouTubers are people who are widely known on YouTube for the content they produce and share on the video streaming platform (Sudha & Sheena, 2017). Gümüş & Üyesi (2018) found four factors in the perception of the 257 participants who answered the self-administered questionnaires. The factors are the YouTuber Video Perception, Content Sharing, Perceived Benefit and Impact on Purchase Decision. They also found that the participants had a positive perception of the YouTubers which gave them the ability to greatly impact the purchase decisions of their audience. However, this research was limited to a specific social media platform and interrogated the relationship between YouTubers on their audience, there is a possibility that the same relationship will not exist on other social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter where the engagement dynamics are different.

Frimpong and Khurshed, (2020), on the other hand, conducted a qualitative study into the impact of online marketing influencers on consumer purchase decisions in Ghana. They gathered primary data by conducting telephone interview with 10 participants of varying age groups and different educational and professional backgrounds. They found that the social media influencers played a key role in the purchase intentions of their followers. However, the research did not establish the different roles, if any, the social media influencers played at the various phases of the purchase decision process. Further, as such a niche research area, a research with 10 respondents may not adequately establish the nuances of a trend that is still developing.

In an effort to confirm or reject the argument that social media influencers are as powerful and influential as traditional celebrities, Burke (2017) studied how social media influencers are the new celebrity endorsement. Various studies and literature have already confirmed the influence of traditional celebrities when used in promotional campaigns by Public Relations professionals (Rojek, 2015; Turner, 2014; Atkin, 1983). Burke (2017) investigated this by comparing product perception of the research participants to promotional posts by social media influencers. Burke (2017) found a direct correlation between the promotional post and the brand perceptions held by the participants. However, this research did not illustrate whether that perception was a deciding factor when the consumers were going through the consumer buying process.

Previous researchers have not adequately established how consumers perceive social media influencers and their level of influence while they journey through the buying decision-making process. Moreover, previous researchers have also not comprehensively demonstrated which phase of the buying decision-making process that social media influences are mostly needed, and what tactics they must employ to ensure that they provide the expected influence.

When the consumer is in various phases of the buying decision making process, their goals at each phase are different from the other phase, however, there is a literature gap that provides a clear understanding of how social media influencers fit into these various goals and tasks the consumer performs at each specific phase.

Another research gap is that, most research into the area of consumers and social media influencers have generally focused on consumers as a whole. Not many have narrowed down the research to

just millennial consumers who are documented to form the majority of social media users. Previous researchers have included various age segments into the definition of consumers, however, this research will provide literature relevant to brands focused on the niche millennial consumer market.

In the absence of such literature, communication professionals have largely been unable to effectively harness the full potential of social media influencers to provide the needed assistance and reinforcement needed by brands to guide the consumers through the buying process and ensure that a brand favorable action is taken by the consumer at the end of the buying decision process. A clear understanding of the expectations a consumer has about a social media influencer while he or she goes through the buying decision process will help communication professionals to implement an effective all-round communication engagement campaign and plan that will yield the most desired results.

My research will employ a qualitative method to examine how consumers perceive the influence of social media influencers as consumers go through the buying decision process. It will help determine at what point in the buying decision process that the role of a social media influencer is most relevant. This will be helpful to Public Relations Practitioners who will be required to plan and implement a comprehensive Integrated Marketing Communication strategy. The qualitative approach that will be used for this study is a qualitative literature review.

### **1.3 Research Objective**

#### **1.3.1 General Objective**

1. Millennial consumers' perception of social media influencers during the purchase decision process.

#### **1.3.2 Specific Objectives**

- 1 To identify the perception millennial consumers have about social media influencers in the need recognition phase.
- 2 To examine the role of social media influencers at the information search phase.
- 3 To describe the influence of social media influencers during evaluation of alternatives.
- 4 To explain the millennial consumer's perception of social media influencers at the purchase phase
- 5 To establish the potential role of social media influencers at the post-purchase phase.

### **1.4 Research Question**

1. What is the millennial consumers' perception of social media influencers during the purchase decision process?
2. What is the perception millennial consumers have about social media influencers in the need recognition phase?
3. What is the role of social media influencers at the information search phase?
4. Do social media influencers influence the evaluation of alternatives?

5. What is the millennial consumer perception of social media influencers at the purchase phase?
6. What is the role of social media influencers at the post-purchase phase?

### **1.5 Significance of The Study**

Communication research into the phenomenon of social media influencers and how they are perceived by consumers while they go through the consumer buying process is still regarded as a niche research area, as a result, this research will help to establish whether businesses hoping to increase their bottom line must employ social media influencer marketing. It will also help businesses optimize their social media influencer marketing campaigns so that they can execute measurable campaigns.

Furthermore, this research will provide an understanding of the relationship between the customer and social media influencers and how that relationship can be best monetized by a brand. By so doing, this will be adding to the growing body of literature in this niche research area and make it one of the widely explored areas in public relations especially when the profession is increasingly moving to the online space.

### **1.6 Scope of The Study**

This study was developed in the form of a desk report that synthesized secondary data to develop propositions. As a purely qualitative literature review study, the inability to triangulate the method by complimenting it with another qualitative method to validate the data and propositions will serve as a limitation to this research.

## **1.7 Outline of The Study**

The study is made up of four chapters. Chapter one is the introduction that captures the background, problem statement, the objectives and research questions as well as the limitations and scope of the study.

Chapter two consist of literature review where key issues about the subject area has been discussed, a conceptual model was developed, theories were explored to provide the theoretical underpinnings of the research and empirical studies were reviewed with a number of propositions outlined.

Meanwhile, Chapter three was about the methodology used for this study and the proposed methodology to be adopted for a recommended study that advances a study into the subject area. Chapter four discussed the propositions and provided bases for a future study into the topic.

## **Chapter Two**

### **2.0 Literature Review**

#### **2.1.1 Social Media Influencers**

Traditional Word of Mouth (WOM) has turned into Electronic Word of Mouth (E WOM) and influencer marketing has emerged. It is a form of marketing where the advertising focuses on specific individuals with a large number of followers (Chatzigeorgiou, 2017). This means that anyone can become a social media influencer and can have the opportunity to work with brands. Social media users who have grown their following over time, are recruited by brands to help them in their internet-based marketing and public relations tactics. Social media influencer marketing is also described as the art and science of engaging people who are influential online to share brand messaging with their audiences in the form of sponsored content (Sammis, Lincoln, & Pomponi, 2016).

Millennials, people who were born between 1985 to 1999 (Pendergast, 2010) are said to be the dominant group on social media platforms (Chatzigeorgiou, 2017). The millennials are the age group with the most purchasing power and the most active one in social media. It is the age group where connecting to others is highly important and this makes them lean towards influencers on their various platforms (Chatzigeorgiou, 2017). Based on the lifestyle of millennials who spend more time online than offline social gatherings, traditional word of mouth is slowly losing its effectiveness. WOM has been widely accepted in the traditional marketing environment it is regarded as an effective tactic with great influence on customer behavior (Olmedilla, Arenas-Marquez, & Martinez-Torres, 2016).

However, due to advances in information technology and the building of communities in the virtual space, the traditional word of mouth has moved online and it is being propagated by people with a large following in these online communities (Olmedilla, Arenas-Marquez, & Martinez-Torres, 2016). Emerging literature is interrogating the use of social media influencers in public relations activities. In many ways, there is a common agreement among scholars that this trend has in effect broken the wall between the consumer and the brand, bringing them closer and dictating a different way for the brand and consumers to engage (Glucksman, 2017).

One major risk in engaging social media influencers in a brand's public relations activities is that the social media influencer's attitude will also reflect on the brand. There is a transfer of qualities from the social media influencer to the brand they are promoting. It is, therefore, essential for the brand to ensure that the social media influencer keep online conversations very positive and respectful in order to avoid negative blow back onto the brand (Glucksman, 2017). It has been suggested that one thing that works for Social Media Influencers is their perceived trustworthiness (Ditt, 2020). Though they operate based on their popularity as well, Social Media Influencers encounter a problem when they mention, recommend or endorse brands in their virtual text, photo and video content (Ditt, 2020).

Writers, such as Ditt (2020) argue that when Social Media Influencers make such explicit promotions consumers may regard the influencer as being passionately inauthentic, as the consumers may form the opinion that their recommendations may be commercially driven.

As a result, the continuous effort by a social media influencer to promote a brand may compromise their perceived passionate authenticity. This requires that the activities of the social media influencer must be effectively coordinated to ensure that when the consumer believes the purchase decision making is in his or her own interest and not because it was due to the persuasion of a social media influencer (Lee & Young, 2009).

### **2.1.2 Consumer Purchase Decision Process**

Various research findings have been done to establish the buying decision-making process of consumers. Richame (2007) as cited by Bray (2009) stated that beginning about 300 years ago early economists, led by Nicholas Bernoulli, John von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern, started to examine the basis of consumer decision making. This early work approached the topic from an economic perspective, and focused solely on the act of purchase (Loudon, et al, 1993). It is only since the 1950's that the notion of consumer behaviour responded to the conception and growth of modern marketing to encompass the more holistic range of activities that impact upon the consumer decision (Blackwell, et al, 1991).

In a modernized definition of consumer behavior, (Schiffman & Della, 2007) called it the behavior that consumers display in searching for, purchasing, using, evaluating, and disposing of products and services that they expect will satisfy their needs. This definition takes the consumers buying decision journey from the information search right down to the review of the consumed product or services.

In these series of steps that the consumer embarks, what is the role that the social media influencer is playing in ensuring that the consumer has enough information, buys the product, attains customer satisfaction and generates a positive image about the consumed product or services? It is always maintaining this positive image that public relations professionals are concerned about. This is to prevent the situation where the customer becomes an adversary to the company and now joins the category of active public based on Grunig (1968) categorization of publics based in his Situational Theory of Publics.

### **2.1.3 Types of Purchase Behaviour**

Consumers behave differently based on the circumstances they are faced with this also determines the various forms of the purchase behaviour (Karimi, 2013). Karima (2013) identified four main types of purchase behaviour which include complex buying behaviour, dissonance-reducing buyer behaviour, habitual buying behaviour and the variety-seeking buying behaviour.

According to the author, complex buying behaviour is characterized by high consumer involvement, the consumer often requires more time, information and sometimes need help. This type of buying behaviour comes up when the product or service is expensive, there are major differences among the brands offering similar products or services. This type of purchase is irregular and it's is carried out once in a while.

Karima also highlighted dissonance-deducing buyer behaviour where there is little difference among the brands offering competitive products or services. It is a relatively quick purchase

process though the product or service may also be an expensive item. The expensiveness of the product requires a high consumer involvement who provides a quick response to a good price.

The habitual buying behaviour is the third buying behaviour identified by Karima (2013). The low level of customer involvement also leads to little search for information about the brand. This is made easy because the customer passively receives information through media. Most of the brands offering competitive products or services have little brand difference.

However, with the variety-seeking buying behaviour, as identified by Karima (2013), the consumer engages in a lot of brand switching, questioning the extent to which the consumer develops brand loyalty to any of the brands he or she patronizes. This type of behaviour requires rather low customer involvement in the process though there is a high perceived brand difference.

## **2.2.0 Conceptual Framework**

### **2.2.1.0 Buying Decision Models**

Since the 1950s when the concept of consumer buying decision became a concept to interrogate, various writers have developed buying decision models to posit a supposed process by which consumers make their buying decisions. Various models have been developed to explain consumer buying behaviour. They have tried to depict what consumers go through in order to choose one brand over the other. The earlier models were conceptual with a wide range of constructs (Karimi, 2013).

The models suggested that the consumer buying process flows in a linear form, from stage 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5, however, these models have been challenged as consumers are known to go back and

forth during the buying decision process (Milner & Rosenstreich, 2013). Due to the complexity of the consumer buying decisions they were simplified to a five-stage model that has since been used in consumer research (Karimi, 2013). The earlier models provided the basis for new and improved consumer behaviour models. Some of the earlier models are reviewed and their limitations will be discussed. This will then lead to the development of a contextual consumer buying decision model that reflects the complexity of a practical buying process taking into consideration the various types of purchase behaviour as discussed above.

#### **2.2.1.1 Consumer Buying Decision Process Model – (Nicosia, 1996)**

One of the writers who have been credited for developing a buying decision model is Francesco M Nicosia in 1966. His book, *Consumer Decision Processes: Marketing and Advertising Implications*, arguably provided the first model and the contextualization of a process consumers go through to make a purchase. His model defined four key activities in the consumer buying decision process which comprised of consumer attitude formation, information search and evaluation, the act of purchase, and post-consumption feedback. It focused heavily on the brand's message and marketing efforts that are communicated to the customers. This ended up becoming a limitation to his model as it focused on the marketer's point of view and perception of a linear process rather than the point of view of the consumer who was actually going through the process.

#### **2.2.1.2 Consumer Buying Decision Model – (Engel, Kollat and Blackwell,1968)**

Over the years following Nicosia's model Engel, Kollat and Blackwell also developed their own model in 1968. Their buying decision model was based on a sequence of decisions in the process. Their sequences were problem recognition, search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase and

outcome. Other scholars regarded their model to be more of an accurate conceptualization of what the consumer goes through as it included modern issues such as consumption and divestment. It also took into consideration the nuances of buying behaviors which is influenced by factors such as individual, socio-cultural and situational factors. The situational factors influence the type of buying behaviour the consumer will exhibit.

Although this model is linear and sequential, it makes room for feedback loops in the process. However, an essential part of this model is that it portrays an idealistic process where the consumer is aware that there is a need or want that has a consumer solution yet the consumer has little or no knowledge about the possibilities or opportunities that are available. The model underestimated the level to which prevailing factors can influence the consumer while he or she makes the buying decision. The factors can make the decision-making process more complicated and complex or much simpler.

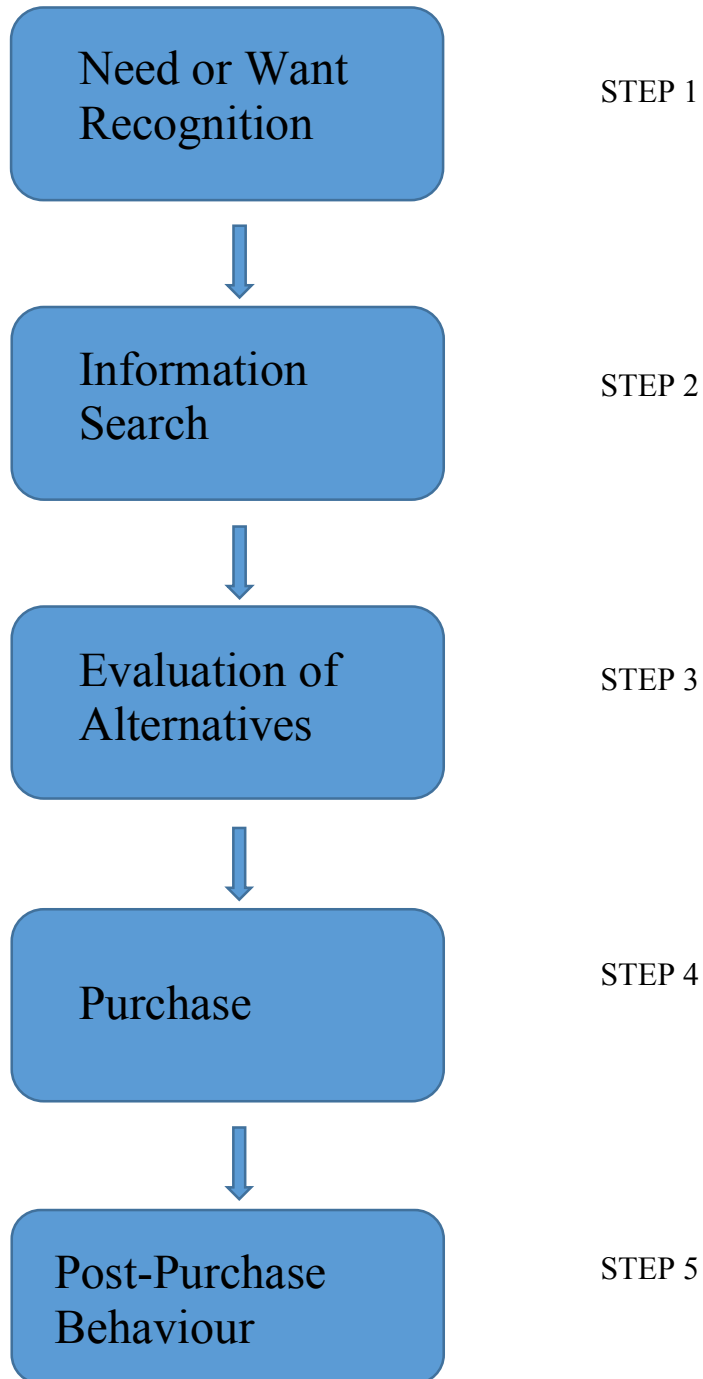
As a result, some of the steps in the process may be moved around and may not be followed in the linear order as this model presents them or they may even be bypassed or the consumer may never use that step altogether. This is more evident when the purchase is a repeat purchase and the consumer is exhibiting the habitual buying behaviour as identified by Karima (2013).

One key critique of this model is that it has a mechanistic approach which does not adapt to different purchase decision making contexts (Bray, 2009). These changing purchase decision making contexts can be occasioned by varying factors which may be individual, social, cultural and/or environmental.

### **2.2.1.3 Classical Purchase Behaviour Model**

Owing to the work writers who have developed and discussed the buying decision model at length, a classical or a traditional model has emerged. These earlier painted a picture of some process consumers go through before and after making a purchase, it might be a service or a product. The works of Nicosia (1966) and Engel, Kollat and Blackwell (1968) have influenced what and possibly dictated what has become the classical purchase behaviour model. This linear model highlights the five main stages of the purchase process. These are problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-purchase behaviour.

The classical model focusses on the stages of the process and very much ignores the interrelation of the variables. It posits a standard process and leaves little room for a more dynamic and flexible buying decision making to take place. It justifies a step-by-step process though practical examples such as repeat purchase has indicated that sometimes the consumer does not follow a mechanized step-by-step process to make a decision. Much more so in the digital age where millennial consumers have much information at their fingertips, a rigid step-by-step decision process may not always be the case for most of such consumers when they are making certain types of purchases.



*Figure 2.1: Classical Purchase Behaviour Model. [Source: adapted from Butler and Peppard (1998) as cited by Karima (2013)]*

The classical or traditional model above shows the linear and sequential nature of the model. It is essential to note that some researchers have divided the purchase stage into two – the purchase decision and the purchase itself. This is mainly due to the time difference between when the decision to take the action is made and when the action is actually taken (Karimi, 2013).

Especially with the use of social media influencers, a consumer may decide to make a purchase decision while surfing on one social media platform or the order, however, the consumer would then need to either make the actual purchase offline or utilize an electronic market place as indicated by the brand. With the time-lapse between these two variables, the consumer may have a change of mind and may or may not make the actual purchase, he or she may go back to another step or even stop the process entirely without making the actual purchase.

#### **2.2.2.0 Conceptual Buying Decision Model**

A conceptual model of the consumer buying or purchase decision process has been proposed (Figure 2.2) below. The model aims to provide for the various buying decision processes occasioned by situational prevailing factors. It aims to illustrate how consumers, as unpredictable as they can be, may move from one component to the other and even ignore certain components altogether. It accommodates the irrational nature of human behaviour – the unpredictability of it. There is no definitive end of this model – it focuses on the process, whichever it may be – without making hard and fast assumptions as to what a customer will or will not do at any given point in the process. It is a model and highlights a flexible process where customers can be in the loop from one “component” to the other, jump one or two components and maybe later come back to those jumped components if the customer wills it or not.

It should be noted that instead of using words like “step” or “stage”, the word “component” or “phase” are being used. This is because the word step indicates the need from moving from point A to B to C. However, the essence of this model indicates that there are no rigorous steps, but components that come together to form the consumer buying decision as a whole. This model sees the consumer buying decision process through the point of view of the consumer and making provision for what they might or might not do rather than focusing on the point of the marketer who would rather prefer the customer to go through a mechanized system of making a purchase decision.

One other key thing this model highlights is bringing in what researchers had identified at the Purchase stage in the Classical Buying Decision model. This model agrees with recent researchers and divides the Purchase stage into two components – the Purchase Decision and the Purchase Action. The difference between Purchase Decision and Purchase Action is time and the actual act of making payment and/or taking delivery of the purchased product or service.

The model provides that the consumer, even though he or she has made a Purchase Decision can change his or her mind by either ending the buying decision process, moving back a component or two or more components. The change of mind can be brought about by a change in any of the factors – individual, social, cultural and/or environmental. This is a dynamic model as opposed to the linear and/or sequential nature of the earlier consumer buying decision models. The dynamic nature of the model is able to correctly illustrate the complexity of real-world decisions (Ariely & Zakay, 2001).

There is also literature to suggest that consumers are active and make vital decisions at any time on the flow of the buying decision process (Papamichail & Robertson, 2003). This is especially evident when the consumer is exhibiting a complex buying behaviour or a dissonance-reducing buyer behaviour as discussed above under types of purchase behaviour. The dynamic model can be adapted to different consumer decision making processes and situations. They can be as simple as the traditional model advocates or as complex as this new conceptual model accommodates.

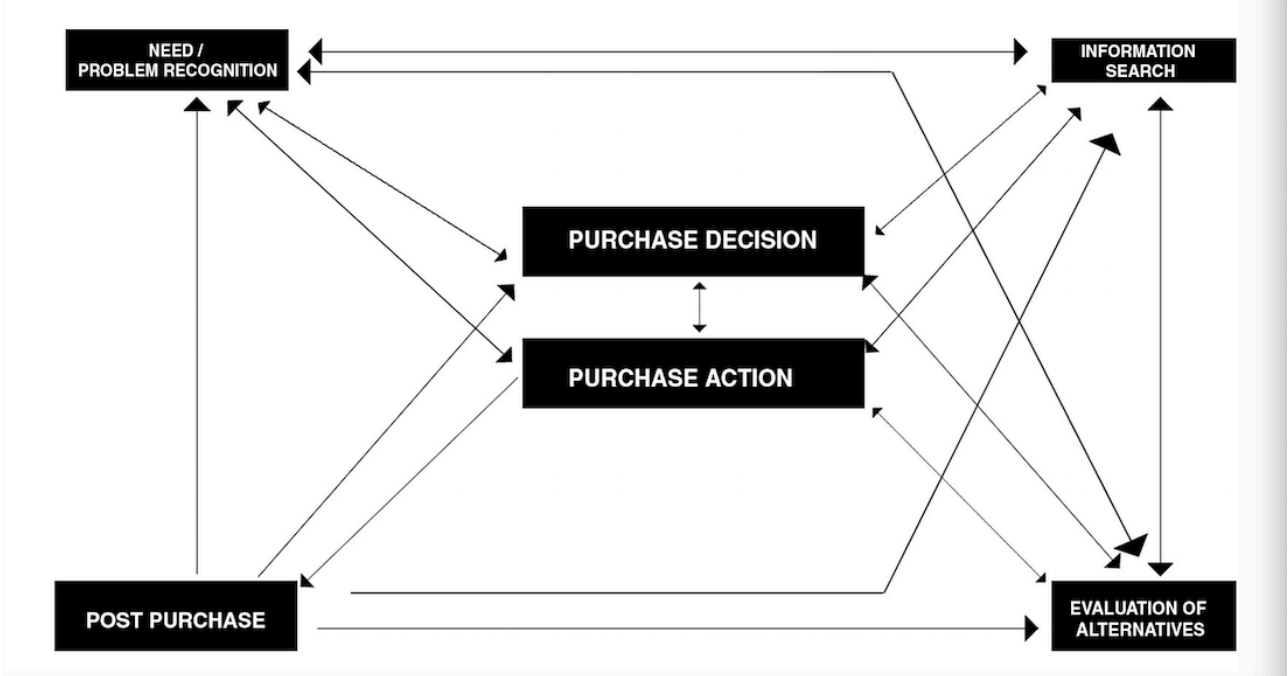


Figure 2.2: A Conceptual Consumer Buying Decision Process Model

Each stage of the buying decision model plays a specific role. There are six components in this model. It builds on the classical model, however, the new model makes room for it to be adapted to various consumer buying decision processes. It does not in any way attempt to prescribe one specific way or process with which consumers make their buying decision. The six components will be discussed below.

### **2.2.2.1 Need/Want Recognition**

The consumer decision-making process of the conceptual model involves six components. Need or want recognition or problem recognition as some writers chose to call it is when the consumer first realizes that he or she needs or wants something, or he or she has a problem that needs to be fixed, addressed or solved. This process is occasioned by an interaction between processed stimuli inputs and environmental and/or individual variables (Bray, 2009). For instance, here is when marketers want to deliberately create what is called an imbalance between consumers' present status and their preferred status – who they are now or what they have now to who they can become and what they can have (Stankevich, 2017).

The imbalance between their current state to the preferred state registers the need, want or problem in the mind of the consumer and states the process of detecting and buying a product or a service (Stankevich, 2017). This is the trigger of the decision-making process and is seen as of the first procedural component from which the rest of the process continues (Bruner & Pomazal, 1993). Sometimes the need recognition can occur instantly and it can be a very basic impulse - this is called an internal stimulus. An external stimulus is when a person is affected by outside influences (Stankevich, 2017).

Marketers and Public Relations practitioners create an imbalance/need by employing the use of tactics such as advertising and sales promotions. However, they can also trigger or reinforce a desire when the consumer sees a social media influencer use the product, patronize the service or even express the interest of hoping to do something, such as, a social media influencer posting that he/she would be spending a relaxing weekend at an exclusive beach resort. It is all about the

consumer recognizing that he/she needs something, has run out of something, or has an interest in something (Bray, 2009). It can be a physical need or want, such as thirst or hunger. It can be a social need or want, such as seeing a friend or a social media influencer with the latest cell phone or a new car. It can be a psychological need or want, such as purchasing a new shoe or sneakers to wear since the consumer wants to feel good about themselves, or even feel confident.

#### **2.2.2.2.0 Information Search**

The second component to discuss is information search. Once the need has been triggered, consumers first engage in an internal search for information. The information search about finding the different alternatives that he/she can purchase to satisfy the need/want (Stankevich, 2017). The consumer will first search within him or herself by scanning through their memory bank for previous experiences in hopes of finding the information they need to make a decision (Bray, 2009). Beyond, this they look externally for information by consulting external sources of information such as books, friends, websites, social media, family, magazines among others (Bray, 2009).

There are two types of information search, internal and external:

##### **2.2.2.2.1 Internal Information Search**

As mentioned earlier, the consumers first consult their memory for information. If they have enough information already stored in memory, then they will move to the next component (Stankevich, 2017). The internal search for information is entirely a mental activity on the part of the consumer. They think about brands they have purchased or patronized before. If the brand met

their needs and the experience was good, it is very likely they will buy the same brand again (Milner & Rosenstreich, 2013). This is another reason why post-purchase, which will be discussed later, is also an essential component in the consumer buying decision-making process.

Previous experience is vital for the consumer to conduct an internal search and it even dictates how long the individual thinks about various brands (Moital, 2007). Consumers typically reduce the number of options quickly and concentrate on only a couple or a small set of options – the evoked set (Moital, 2007). Consumers have been found to show greater confidence in making a purchase decision when they rely on information from memory (Dodson, Bawa, Krueger, 2007).

One key thing with internal search is that brand awareness and brand equity are very important as it helps the consumer to easily recall the brand. The higher the level of brand equity, the more likely the brand will be purchased with little mental effort and no additional consideration of other brands (Stankevich, 2017). However, if the post purchase is not favorable, or the customer did not enjoy the product or service, then they will need more information – external search for information.

#### **2.2.2.2.2 External Information Search**

An external information search is when the consumer resorts to external sources of information. The consumer can consult friends and family about their experiences with acquiring a new product. They can also research public sources, such as reviews and blogs. Another external information source would be marketing-controlled sources, such as banners, television ads, brochures, etc

(Stankevich, 2017). Traditional word of mouth or electronic word of mouth plays a key role when the consumer is conducting an external search for information (Chatzigeorgiou, 2017).

The external search for information normally occurs under three conditions. First, the consumer has a negative post purchase experience with the brand and does not want to use the brand again. Second, it is a high-involvement decision, and the consumer is exhibiting the type of purchase behaviour that he or she requires more information before making a decision. Third, it is a socially visible product such as a car or a house, and the consumer wants to make sure he or she will get social approval or make a healthy impression with the purchase decision (Stankevich, 2017). The amount of time consumers spent searching for information is influenced by three key factors such as the consumers' ability to search for information, their level of motivation to search for information which also means the type of purchase behaviour the consumer is exhibiting (which has been discussed above) and finally, the perceived cost of searching versus the perceived benefit of searching (Milner & Rosenstreich, 2013).

#### **2.2.2.2.3 Ability to Search**

The ability to search for information determines the extent and the amount of time the consumer will dedicate to the information search process (Hettich, Hattula, & Bornemann, 2018). Consumer's ability to search is about their knowledge of a product category and brands. With a high involvement purchase, consumers tend to search for more information and spend more time searching for information (Milner & Rosenstreich, 2013).

Conversely, individuals with little knowledge of a product category or brands tend not to search for information, primarily because they do not know where or how to search for information (Stankevich, 2017). They don't know the product category well enough to know what to look for, for instance, a consumer with very little or no knowledge about cars will not know about the auto websites or magazines they can access for essential reviews. However, on the other extreme, individuals with a great amount of knowledge about a product category, such as a computer nerd, would spend less time searching since they already possess more than enough knowledge (Bray, 2009). The group that spends the most time searching is in the middle. They are the consumers who have some knowledge, so they have an idea of what to look for, where to look and what to ask, however, they do not have enough knowledge to make a decision (Carrigan, Szmigin, & Wright, 2004).

#### **2.2.2.2.4 Level of Motivation**

The level of motivation has been identified as one of the factors that influence the amount of time consumers spent by consumers in the external search for information. The motivation is determined by involvement, cognition, enthusiasm and the consumer's quest for intrinsic satisfaction to carry out the purchase (Carstensen, 2006). The higher the level of involvement, the more time a consumer will spend in searching for additional information, it should also be noted that certain types of consumers prefer to weigh every option and make sure they are right before the make a move.

### **2.2.2.3 Evaluation of Alternatives**

However, when the consumers have gathered all the necessary information they need about the product category and the brand, the evaluation of alternatives component comes to play. When consumers are on the evaluation of alternatives component, the amount of time spent there is relative to the type of purchasing behavior the customer is exhibiting and the prevailing factors he or she is faced with. This may take only a few minutes for low cost, low involvement decisions to several months, years or even decades for high involvement decisions (Hettich, Hattula, & Bornemann, 2018).

The evaluation of alternatives or solutions component is where consumers evaluate all the brands in the evoked set which often may include substitute products, and product categories (Milner & Rosenstreich, 2013). Previous studies have argued that need recognition and evaluation of alternatives are the most prominent of the consumer decision-making components, and that a significant number of consumers rely largely on prior knowledge and inbuilt preconceived criteria when making a decision (Mata & Nunes, 2010; Yoon et al., 2009).

The process of evaluating alternatives is when the consumer is looking for the best deal available. The idea of the best deal could be based on product attributes which is subjective to each consumer. This could be price, quality, brand, product, brand positioning, a place to buy (location), consequences of using the product, etc (Stankevich, 2017). This is where the consumer questions him or herself whether they actually need the product or service while assessing the available alternatives. Usually, the consumer chooses one the most important attribute based on which he or

she will make a final decision or using a cut-off method (e.g., price, quality, brand, etc.) (Stankevich, 2017).

Key moments that play significant roles could be emotional connections/experiences with products (Stankevich, 2017). This relatable public relations campaigns are effective because they resonate with the consumers' own past emotions. During the evaluation of alternatives, heuristics or decision rules (Plous, 1993) are used. These are essential techniques used to evaluate the alternatives presented from the previous procedural components of the decision-making process.

#### **2.2.2.4.0 Purchase Decision**

This component in the consumer decision making process is where the consumer makes a brand choice and decides to make the purchase the product or patronize the service. The decision is made after being informed about the alternatives that are available. The purchase decision is considered separate to purchase due to the separation of the activities and the fact that the decision does not necessarily lead to purchase (Milner & Rosenstreich, 2013).

There is a time difference between when the consumer makes a purchase decision, that is making his or her choice among different substitutes to actually carrying out the purchase decision (Milner & Rosenstreich, 2013). Often, there is a time delay between making a purchase decision and the actual purchase (Stankevich, 2017), this is especially true when the consumer is making a complex purchase such as a university application form, vehicle or even a mobile phone.

It is also known that, in making a decision, consumers may defer making the decision for some time due to the greater perceived risk inherent in the purchase, particularly the uncertainty and potential loss (Murray, 1991). When making a purchase decision, consumers employ heuristics (Plous, 1993). This decision making mechanism is used to sift through viable possibilities in order to arrive at a favorable outcome.

#### **2.2.2.4.1 Heuristics**

Simon (1990) who is credited as the father of heuristics research in judgment and decision making, argued that heuristics are “methods for arriving at satisfactory solutions with modest amounts of computation,” implying that consumers seek to reduce the effort associated with decision processes.

Heuristics can be used to pass judgment and by consumers to make a choice – this is done by simplifying how they make those judgments and decisions (Shah & Oppenheimer, 2008). When using heuristics to make a decision, consumers dispense the product features and store the product values instead (Shah & Oppenheimer, 2008). For instance, instead of storing the whether they spent more money one service as compared to the other, consumers would rather remember whether one service made them feel better than and the other, vice versa.

Consumers have been noted to utilize a variety of approaches instead of one invariant approach to solving problems that pertain to making a choice (Karimi, 2013). Especially in situations where the consumer is faced with a large set of alternatives, consumers tend to begin the decision making process with non-compensatory strategies to eliminate unwanted alternatives and reduce the size

of the consideration set (Karimi, 2013). By reducing the complexity of the information used during the decision making process, decision makers, in this case, consumers, expend less effort (Shah & Oppenheimer, 2008). Consumers also tend to spend less effort in decision making when the information is easier to retrieve, either because it is computed quickly or has been made readily available through other means.

However, it is essential to note that the processing method may change as consumers begin to learn more about the decision problem and start modifying the strategy which best suits a particular condition, this minimizes the cognitive effort and maximizes the accuracy (Wang & Benbasat, 2009).

Heuristics is said to have occurred when cues make it easier to access information and it is used to make a decision that calls for the exclusion of other cues (Shah & Oppenheimer, 2008). Here, these cues may be brand position, product features and value. Heuristics that examine or compare fewer alternatives are particularly suited for reducing the effort associated with making choices (Shah & Oppenheimer, 2008). This is ideal for consumers when they go through a complex buying decision process.

It is essential for Public Relations practitioners to be aware of this because this is where their creative communications come to play. They must make sure their brand identity, product features and value and brand equity is heavily registered in the mind of the consumer. The key here is to ensure that your brand is at the top of the evoked set. By doing so, the Public Relations practitioners reduces the burden on the consumer and even sets the brand apart from the competition. This where

the Public Relations practitioner's tactics come to play and social media influencers when engage right can help greatly as the consumer employs heuristics to make a purchase decision.

#### **2.2.2.5 Purchase Action**

This the component of the consumer buying decision process that deals with the exchange of value between the consumer and the brand. This is where the consumer makes good on the decision made. There are often situations where the consumer may make a purchase intention to buy a certain product, however, he or she would not close the deal. At this point, the consumer may require more information to make a decision (Stankevich, 2017). The purchase action is about actually making the purchase, with money exchanging hands and the consumer following through with the decision made. While consumers will normally purchase the brand they intended to buy, sometimes in-store signage or deals will alter the purchase decision.

The purchase component is particularly relevant not only because it is the output of the decision-making process, but also because purchasing is a highly behavioural aspect of the process (Milner & Rosenstreich, 2013). Most of the other components in the consumer buying decision process are internally focused it is manifested as a thought process however, the actual purchase action is entirely manifested externally. Besides external information search, the purchase action is by far the most external confirmation of the existence of a consumer buying decision making process. Once a consumer chooses which brand to buy, he/she must still implement the decision and make the actual purchase (Stankevich, 2017).

### **2.2.2.6 Post Purchase**

The last component of the consumer buying decision process that will be discussed is post purchase. This is after the consumer has made the purchase action. This is where concept such as customer satisfaction comes to play. The consumer will carry out his or her own evaluation and review of the performance of the product or services (Stankevich, 2017). Was the product right for the consumer? Did their actual experience conform to their expectations?

If the product or service was able to meet or exceed the consumer's expectations the consumers will potentially become an unofficial brand ambassador who would then be influencing others through word of mouth or electronic word of mouth (Stankevich, 2017). Given their increased online activity (Zickuhr & Madden, 2012), satisfied consumers become essential for spreading electronic word-of-mouth by sharing their own experiences much like what the Social Media Influencers did.

Even in the consumer's own case, research has shown that post-consumption satisfaction is a key driver for repurchase and/or consumer loyalty, especially for low involvement purchase decisions (Mittal & Kamakura, 2001; Teller, Gittenberger, & Schnedlitz, 2013). However, just as a positive post-consumption satisfaction can be a force for good, the same can be said for negative feedback which will also pose as a Public Relations crises.

This is very serious in the case of a millennial consumer who has unfettered access to social media and by extension all the other potential millennial consumers. They can cause real damage to the brand online in equal measure to the positivity they can also contribute through electronic word of

mouth. Most millennial consumers are active publics who have high levels of involvement and problem recognition, and lower levels of constraint recognition (Grunig, 2005).

### **2.3.0 Theoretical Framework**

#### **2.3.1 Social Learning Theory**

The social learning theory is said to have been advanced by Albert Bandura (1971,1986,1991) when he interrogated the ideas of social-psychologist Kurt Lewin about how individual processes are dependent on their social interactions. He discussed Social Learning theory as one that focuses on the process of learning and by extension social behaviours whereby people or individuals acquire new behavioural patterns by observing and intimating others (Bandura, 1991).

This theory argues that people learn by observing others, retaining what has been observed, reproducing the observed behaviour. The individual will go through this process if they have the necessary motivation to do so (Bandura & Walters, 1963). This motivation can be increased if the change in behaviour, lifestyle or value is clearly and directly linked with increasing the individual's own status in life (Pelling, et al., 2015).

Observation, according to literature, can lead to learning of new responses, strengthen/weaken existing ones and elicit previously learned responses (Samal, 2016). In as much as observation is at the centre of social learning, authors Keen, Brown and Dyball (2005) also argue that critical reflection also plays a key role in social learning.

“Social learning is a process of iterative reflection that occurs when we share our experiences, ideas and environments with others,” (Keen, Brown, & Dyball, 2005).

However, to actually set about of influencing people and getting them to engage in social learning, there must be a clear communication of information and demonstration of how to make the changes, which could also be how to use the product and/or service and the value to be obtained (Pelling, et al., 2015).

One key thing in getting the most out of social learning is also knowing when it is the right time to trigger the process. Writers have integrated the idea of when is the most effective time to prompt social learning. However, what has become overwhelmingly true is that it is possible that different ‘triggers of social learning’ exist that will make some points in time more effective (Pelling, et al., 2015).

One thing about timing is being on the lookout for the “window of opportunity” (Birkmann, et al., 2008), as the literature suggests that it is more likely for knowledge to be translated into proactive action and then shared through the concept of social learning during key targeted periods of time or by key individuals. It has been established earlier that clear communication of information and demonstration of the change as well as timing is essential, however, who is the one doing the communication. Who is the individual or the society or the group or the customers learning from – answering the question of the ‘Who’ is a key factor (McCarthy, Crandall, Whitelaw, General, & Tsuji, 2011).

Although social learning can take place as a consequence of self-reflection by individuals or groups of people such as customers, the very fact that customers or people in general have a wider connection to a wider social-ecological system will suggest that even the most internal and personal learning processes, to a certain degree, is influenced and/or dictated by external factors such as ideas, values and norms (Pelling, et al., 2015). This gateway of the individual or a group of people to an external social entity other than themselves provides the opportunity for someone or people or even an institution they look up to communicate with them and demonstrate the value to be driven from taking a particular action (Yarmohamadzadeh, Jabbarianpour, & Faizy, 2016).

With social learning, the individuals or the group of people who receive the information or observe the demonstration of the change tend to take ownership of the message and are therefore likely to share with others. Research showed that most of the situations where this occurred, the communication was most often than not disseminated by an opinion leader or mavens disseminating information and demonstrating the desired change (Pelling, et al., 2015). Sometimes, it could even be peers who are sharing this new information and demonstrating the change that is in turn imitated by the individual or the group (Sanchez, et al, 2006; Parker, et al, 2008).

The above theory can be used to explain how and why followers of social media influencers imitate them by buying the same shoes they wear, get the same dress design and even jump onto social media campaigns they see the influencer engaged in. Public Relations experts can adopt social learning theory to engineer the positioning of their brands by involving social media influencers

who have been noted as modern-day opinion leaders who influence individuals and groups of people.

### **2.3.2 Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM)**

Social learning, as discussed above can take place anywhere and in a traditional sense when there was no internet, it would have been offline in social settings or through traditional channels such as Television, radio, newspapers, billboards and other pre-internet communication channels. However, with the internet and the rise of social media, these new media platforms have also become conduits for social learning. This social learning in the electronic sphere can be manifested in the form of what researchers refer to as electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). The existence of the term eWOM also suggests the existence of a pre-internet age system called Word-of-Mouth (WOM) which is the traditional form of eWOM.

WOM has been noted as one of the most influential channels of communication and/or persuasion in the marketplace (Fan, Miao, Fang, & Lin, 2013). Among all the communication tools that are available to Public Relations practitioners, WOM is said to be the one that is most trusted by customers and other publics (Bickart & Schindler, 2001), it is also more relevant, and can reduce consumer resistance significantly because it originates from the experiences of other consumers who they can identify with and trust.

Sen and Lerman (2007) supported previous literature that consumers trust former consumer reviews about a product or services more than what advertising says about the same product or

service. However, just like many other things that have migrated to the virtual space, WOM has too and it is known as eWOM.

The Internet or new media has provided numerous venues for consumers to share their views and experiences, and electronic WOM (eWOM) spreads at an unprecedented speed and at a much lower cost than traditional WOM (Li & Zhan, 2011). Through new media platforms such as social media, customers are able to share their opinions about products or services with both familiar and unfamiliar people – this gives them a great ability to influence the perceptions others have about the brand they are talking about (Erkan, 2016).

Studies have proved that for eWOM to be effective and achieve its goal of persuading and influencing consumer purchase intentions, the social media content must be quality, the influencer should have some credibility and the information in itself should also be useful (Erkan, 2016). After the penetration of the internet and before the popularity of social media platforms, the version of eWOM that existed then is entirely different from the version of eWOM that exists now on various social media platforms (Canhoto & Clark, 2013). This then promoted eWOM from just two or more ordinary people sharing their experiences about a brand to modern-day social media savvy thought leaders leading the way on pushing a brands narrative – they are known as the social media influencers.

However, the effectiveness of both WOM and eWOM is also dependent on the receiver of the information (the consumer) being willing to learn the new information in order to reduce his or her risks (Erkan, 2016). Just as it was highlighted by the social learning theory, the individual or

the group of people receiving or observing the social change would have to be motivated enough to want to pick up on the learnings and take action. This then refocuses the argument on the fact that customers are not just passive who absorb any information they are sent but they are active participants who would often choose what information to receive and even dictate how to engage with it (Kotler & Keller, 2012). This is why the importance of choosing the right messenger (social media influencer) and crafting a social media appealing message (creative commercial content) are essential for effective deliberate eWOM engagement on social media platforms.

eWOM is a fairly recent marketing and public relations success and more research needs to be conducted to understand how far social media influencers travel with consumers while they navigate the buying decision process (Porter, 2017). Explaining consumer responses to influencer marketing needs to be investigated as eWOM gets entrenched in the Public Relations and Marketing tool kit. (Voorveld, 2019).

#### **2.4.0 Review and Critique of Related Studies**

##### **2.4.1 Consumers Perception and Social Media Influencers and Need Recognition Phase**

Celebrity endorsement of products and services has been one of the traditional advertising phenomena that have been investigated and explored by researchers. There is enough research on the effects of celebrity endorsements and their influence on consumers, however, since the advent of social media, a new crop of celebrities have emerged. The popularity of these social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and others have also created what have now come to be known as social media influencers. An increasing number of brands are relying

on these social media influencers to perform an improved version of the role that the mainstream celebrity endorsers perform.

However, as brands are banking on the persuasive relationship between social media influencers and their followers, how much of that influence is leading to need recognition among the consumers, it is doing so at all. The role of influencers at the need recognition phase seems to be very key as demonstrated by Gros (2012). As discussed earlier, need recognition is when the consumer is stimulated to recognize that he is or current state does not match his or her desired state and that there is a product or a service that can help the consumer reach that desired state (Bray, 2009). Here, the social media influencers become those agents who stimulate that desire through either demonstration or testimonial on their highly followed social media platforms (Gros, 2012). Gros (2012), who used a mix of quantitative and qualitative data also admitted that this is true for certain products that fall within categories such as entertainment, travel, clothes and electronics.

Fotis (2015) explored such situations where the role of social media influencer will be diminished or none existent at the need recognition phase. While looking at social media and its impacts on consumer behaviour the findings indicated that social media influencer played little or no role at the need recognition phase. Fotis (2015) attributed the reason to the type of product, which in this case was holiday accommodation. Fotis (2015) claimed securing a holiday accommodation was the expected demand for a generic holiday decision. The conclusion here is that social media influencers do increase need recognition among consumers but it is not true for every product category available on the market. Khatib (2016) also confirmed Gros (2012) by arguing that the

role of social media influencers had a direct impact on the consumer's wanting to achieve a similar desired state. This is consistent with positions taken by Bandura (1971,1986,1991) in his social learning theory in which he explores how others emulate people they regard as thought leaders.

However, Akar, Yüksel, and Bulut (2015) urged public relations professionals to use two approaches to ensure that need recognition is ignited. First, the brand should engage the social media influencer to infiltrate the social media circles of customers to gather data on consumers about their needs and wants, this will then help the brand to predict latent purchase needs. With this done, it would be quite easy to trigger the need recognition. The second approach is to secure paid advertising on social media platforms that would guarantee that a lot more people than usual would see a promotional post. Though early studies are confirming that paid advertising on social media helps create awareness and in some instances generate sales, a sponsored post on the brands own social media platform goes out of the scope of engaging social media influencers.

As previous literature has indicated, cultural factors also play a role in how social media influencers may or may not trigger need recognition (Stankevich, 2017). Ghana, as an African country is relatively late in influencer marketing as compared to western countries. It would therefore be essential to carry out a quantitative study that would give room to have a larger number of participants as compared to a qualitative study to comprehensively investigate the phenomenon in our own cultural setting. Nonetheless, the above studies provide empirical roadmap to studying this emerging phenomenon in the country.

PROPOSITION 1: Social Media influencers will trigger need recognition among certain youth-oriented product categories.

The is proposition is based on a study from Gros (2012) and confirmed by Fotis (2015) which revealed that social media influencers are not the need recognition triggers for certain product categories. Understanding this in the Ghanaian contest will ensure that Ghanaian based brands do not join the influencer marketing bandwagon when it is not appropriate for them or even do it right. This is because if a brand is using the influencer as a need recognition tactic for a product such as holiday accommodation as discussed above may be a waste of resources.

#### **2.4.2 Role of Social Media Influencers at the Information Search Phase**

Though researchers are gradually investigating the phenomena of social media influencers, not many have been done to understand the role they play while the consumer is going through the purchase decision making process. When consumers are in the information search phase, they are said to be very selective in the kind of information they chose to consider (Khatib, 2016). An increasing number of consumers are using social media to conduct information (Lee, 2013). As indicated in the quantitative research by Lee (2013), the consumers begin to actively search for information instead of passively receiving information. This is where ensuring that enough information is made available to the consumers on the channels he or she already uses (social media) is very key to the success of the public relations effort. In such a situation who better to do it than the social media influencer with a wide reach and established credibility.

In Khatib (2016), the survey findings indicated that consumers were active in acquiring information since it is easy to access readily available information on social media platforms. This puts social media and social media influencers as the platform and gatekeepers of information about brands. That is why it is essential to ensure that when the need has been recognized, the customer already has enough information from about your brand from their trusted social media influencer source of information. This phase is key because when your information is not accessed, your brand will invariable not be included in the alternatives that would be evaluated. This is because this is when consumers need help the most as they tend to shortlist products in the evoked set (Akar, Yüksel, & Bulut, 2015).

Akar, Yüksel, & Bulut, (2015) also concluded in their quantitative study with 392 participants that brands must ensure that accurate information is readily available and accessible at this stage. The accurate information should include testimonials of others who have used the product or service.

While the above studies have emphasized the need to fully deploy the social media influencers to ensure that information is readily available and accessible, there is no clear proposed concept of how it should work. My research will seek to assess the best approach brands should engage social media influencers are information sources especially when they are content generators on their own. It is about finding out the best way to make sure that as the social media influencer is acting as an informational resource, they do not unwittingly drown out the brand's message with their own content. When this happens, their efforts and that of the brand's would be counter-intuitive.

**PROPOSITION 2: Social Media Influencers are digital brand information repository**

This is because most consumers first point of call to search for information is social media, therefore it is best to ensure that the people whose content are consumed the most on social media serve as spokespersons armed with all the brand's information. Alternatively, they should serve as agents redirecting the consumers to the organization's own platforms for detailed information resources.

### **2.4.3 The Influence of Social Media Influencers During Evaluation of Alternatives**

The evaluation of alternatives phase of the decision buying process is where the brand competition is essential and setting one brand apart from the other is vital (Ozer, 2012). Ozer (2012) designed a case study to investigate the effect of social media on consumer buying decision process. This explored three cases where a person took an action to download an app, bought a phone in another case and purchased a vehicle in another. The case highlighted what has been discussed earlier as the seeming weakened role of social media influencers when it comes to certain product categories (Gros, 2012). Ozer (2012) in all three cases when it came to the evaluation of alternatives phase the dominant forces were social media reviews and word of mouth, which has also already been demonstrated is what birthed what we now call electronic word of mouth (Li & Zhan, 2011).

Lee (2013) wrote that social media influencers are essential in this phase because they provide a sense of indirect experiences that the consumers relies upon when he or she is theoretically going through the evaluation phase. The survey research by Lee (2013) agreed with Ozer (2013) by suggesting that the consumer will be looking for other consumer perspectives about information gathered. This creates the avenue for the review, testimonials and e-WOM to take place. This is also more prevalent when the product is new to market (Lee, 2013).

In explorative research by Fotis (2015) consumers were also found to be consulting the platforms of social media influencers and other influential review platforms to correctly list the available alternatives in order of preference based on the customers own desired criteria. Though social media influencers are somehow consulted, the key platforms visited by consumers are product review sites. The “traditional” social media influencer role is reduced here.

The gap in the above studies is that they do not proffers a solution on how best to engage the social media influencer at this phase of the consumer decision process when the consumer is looking elsewhere for information. Though the researchers highlighted what the consumer does, they did not provide business solutions that can be deployed by brands to ensure that the social media influencers have a role to play even if it is subtle.

**PROPOSITION 3: Niche Social Media Influencers must be credible product reviewers not just endorsers**

This is because literature confirms that even at evaluation of alternatives phase the consumer is still consulting external sources of information. These consultations are done to obtain reviews and e-WOM. Brands must ensure that they are engaging influencers who have the capacity to also review the product and service. Niche or product category specific social media influencers who provide honest reviews will tend to earn customer trust.

#### **2.4.4 Millennial Consumer's Perception of Social Media Influencers at the Purchase Phase**

Kalu (2019) assessed the impact of social media influencer marketing on purchase intention from an Irish male millennial's perception. The gendered research investigated male millennials to find out the level of their engagement with the social media influencers influenced their purchase intention. This was because other research had confirmed that female millennials are more active on social media than the male millennials. The study used focused group discussion and in-depth interviews to understand the extent to which the physical attractiveness of the social media influencer can affect the purchase intentions of the male millennial consumer. Kalu (2019) also evaluated the reaction of male millennials towards a sponsored post on a social media platform. The purpose was to understand the real feelings of male millennials and their perception toward social media influencers. The researcher found that male millennials are not used to traditional advertising. Instead, they live in an age where the internet triumphs and they spend most of their time on social media. It was also concluded that visual content is most appealing to users on social media platforms. However, this research did not indicate the extent to which the social media influencer and the captivating visual content go to influence the male millennial consumer in making a purchase decision beyond the initial achievement of gaining the attention of the consumer.

Writers are divided as to whether social media influencers play a role in the actual purchase decision. While studies show that consumers are influenced are to purchase a product because of a social media influencer other researchers have also argued that at the time of making the purchase it is the customer's own personality and the product's added value that counts (Ozer, 2012). The case study by Ozer (2012) placed the role of social media influencers at the need recognition,

information collection, evaluation of alternatives and post-purchase behavior, leaving out the purchase phase.

Other writers such as Fotis (2015) have claimed that the role of social media influencer here is to amplify or broadcast a consumer's purchase decision so as to provide some sort of social media clout to the consumer. It is about massaging their ego and making them feel part of a community of consumers for a particular brand which will end up boosting their emotions for the brand. However, even this does not indicate the exact role or the consumer's perception of the social media influencer at the very point of making the purchase. In the best case, it enters into the area of post-purchase social media influencer role. What other writers such as Khatib (2016) have argued is that the role of the social media influencer in the purchase decision phase is the summation of their role throughout all the other phases that preceded the purchase decision and action phase.

Most researchers have largely not investigated the exact role of social media influencers at the phase. Unlike the other phases of the purchase decision process, writers are unsure of the perception and role of social media influencers at the purchase phase. The unavailability of such literature leaves a gap that must be filled.

**PROPOSITION 4: Social Media Influencers provide purchase leads**

Previous literature has been unable to clearly identify a measurable role or consumer perception of social media influencers at the purchase decision and action phase. The available literature only

attributes purchase lead generation to social media influencers when it comes to this purchase decision and action phase. This research will advance the literature on this phase and how social media influencers are perceived at this phase.

#### **2.4.5 Role of Social Media Influencers at the Post-Purchase Phase**

Unlike the consumer perception of social media influencers at the purchase decision and action phase, there is ample literature on consumer perception on social media influencers at the post-purchase phase (Ozer, 2012; Lee, 2013, Fotis, 2015; Khatib, 22016, Akar, et al, 2015).

Most consumers at this phase would confirm their purchase to make sure that they made the right choice and proceed to share the news about their latest purchase, they would also match the post-purchase experience to the desired experience. This is when they tend to become brand ambassadors or those that will question the brand and the credibility of the social media influencer through WOM and e-WOM (Akar, Yüksel, & Bulut, 2015). Akar, Yüksel, & Bulut (2015) recommended that the brands and social media influencers must enable post-purchase reviews on social media. This review could end up being helpful to another client at either need recognition, information search or evaluation of alternatives phases. The credibility of the social media influencer is put to the test and evaluated after post-purchase. Most consumers who have an online presence would also take to the same platforms to either recommend or poorly review the brand with will affect future endorsements of the social media influencers (Khatib, 2016). With social media being a user-generated platform, consumers can equally pose as threats or opportunities to brands (Khatib, 2016). Though Khatib (2016) found that e-WOM can create experiential data for

prospective consumer's it requires feedback from more consumers, highlighting the fact that quantity here is as essential as the substance itself.

Consumers would also look up to social media influencers with whom they now have a positive feeling experience in common with, Fortis (2015) found. This positive feeling can come from the social media influencer acknowledging the consumer or from other users. Fortis (2015) also affirms that the outcome of the post purchase experience will determine whether the consumer increases, maintains or decreases the respect and believability level he or she had for the social media influencer.

Though the literature, acknowledges that social media platforms allows the consumer to provide feedback on the acquired experiential, most literature have focused the feedback on the brand and not the social media influencer. However, the credibility of the social media influencers is also on the line as the experiential would affect any future trust the consumer would have for the social media influencer and any other brand he or she endorses.

**PROPOSITION 5: Consumers pass judgment on the social media influencer**

This is because literature has demonstrated that it is only after the consumer purchases and uses the product that they can fully affirm the claims made by the brand and vehemently reechoed by the social media influencer. It is after purchase and consumption that the customer would review both brand and influencers. The influencer trust level will either go up or will be reduced depending on the experience the consumer had.

## Chapter Three

### 3.0 Methodology

#### 3.1 Design

For a long time with no provision for data collection, the qualitative literature review method was employed for this research. The area of social media influencer and how they are perceived by consumers why they go through consumer purchase behaviour is now a growing field of study, as such the research looked at the assumptions and/or positions other writers have held in the past. This would form the foundation of what will become one of the most explored areas of studies as more members of the society are connected online and sign up for social media profiles. This qualitative literature review provided the avenues for a number of studies that have used varying approaches to investigate the subject area to be reviewed.

The theme analysis type qualitative literature analysis was used for this study. The themes were developed from the five specific objectives outlined in Chapter 1 of this study. This type of analysis is done by creating themes that go further to explore the conceptual themes inherent in the subject area (Onwuegbuzie, Leech, & Collins, 2012). The theme analysis focuses on how the study interrogates the relations between the key concepts or variables and these come together to form a general research area of study. The key concepts in this study were millennial consumers, social media influencers and consumer buying decision process which has its own several proposed models.

For this study, the broad concepts or variables mentioned above were used in the search for literature and previous study from digital platforms such as Jstor. They were searched as individual

concepts and later matched based on the frame of the topic to find previous related studies in the niche subject area. The Available data presented through the digital search were put in folders named after the solo or matched concepts. This was done to ensure that only literature that met the criteria for inclusion were saved in the folders that were then used to provide the bedrock literature for the entire study. This process of exclusion and inclusion took into account among other things the methods used by the researchers which provided a basis for the dependability of their research, and the theories that underpinned their research. Attention was also paid to the presentation of the data.

Further searches for literature were also conducted to meet the burden of the research questions and objectives of this study. The search highlighted each of the five objectives and identified literature that could provide some level of theoretical understanding and assumptions that would be used to explore the objectives and the propositions that were developed during the critique of related studies.

### **3.2 Sampling: Article Selection Approach**

Sampling is the processing of choosing the elements of the characteristics that would be used to provide data for the study. Even when conducting a study based on a qualitative literature review, the sample and the sampling method should be considered by the researcher (Omona, 2013). When selecting the sample for the research, Creswell (2002) as cited by Omona (2013), advocated that though a qualitative sample is not employed for generalization purposes, the sample should not be too small which would make it difficult to achieve saturation. For this study, a sample size of five literature sources were used in the review.

Those five studies though were purposefully sampled from the digital database mentioned earlier even though purposive sampling does not require underpinning theories or a definitive set of number of data sets (Tongco, 2007). “The purposive sampling technique, also called judgment sampling, is the deliberate choice of an informant due to the qualities the informant possesses,” (Tongco, 2007). As this study was a qualitative literature review, it was essential to purposefully, seek out studies that have addressed similar research questions and objections and have previously studied the variable in this study. However, it should be noted that this sampling method is biased as it is solely based on the decisions of the person conducting the research (Etikan & Bala, 2017).

In the selection of articles, downloaded online, they had to meet the inclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria adopted for this study focused on the relevance of the article to the study, citations used in the article and the source of data provided. The basic argument the article was putting forward was interrogated with attention to the evidence provided to support the claims made.

### **3.3.0 Proposed Method for Future Studies**

#### **3.3.1 Methodology**

When researching to determine the millennial consumers’ perception of social media influencers during the purchase decision process, the researcher should establish that perception at each phase of the decision buying process and how that perception reflects on the image of the brand that hired the influencer. The researcher must explore how the social media influencer marketing tactics actually influences the customers as they go through each stage of the customer buying decision process. Based on the above, a mixed approach of quantitative and qualitative methods will be

highly recommended. The quantitative research will be conducted to understand the perception consumers have about social media influencers and the brands that hire them. While the qualitative research will be conducted to explore the consumer buying decision and the potential risk social media influencers pose to the brands that hire them.

### **3.3.2 Mixed-Method**

Mixed method research is defined as mixing qualitative and quantitative data in one study (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie and Turner, 2007; Harrison and Reilly, 2011). It has been already established by other researchers that quantitative research methods and qualitative research methods belong to two mutually exclusive schools of thought or paradigms. There have long been disagreements among researchers who believe in one of the above paradigms (Karimi, 2013). However, “if either of these research approaches could be proven to be universally applicable, the debate would have been resolved long ago” (Fitzgerald & Howcroft, 1998). The mixed-method approach is now “recognized as the third major research approach or research paradigm, along with qualitative research and quantitative research” (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie and Turner, 2007).

The sequential mixed method should be used for this research. This method allows the two sets of data to be collected one after the other such that the first data is collected, analyzed and the findings guide the collection of the second data set (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007). This research will pay particular attention to the qualitative research and illustrate how statistical analysis can support interpretative data. As a result, the quantitative data should be collected first whose findings will be used to develop a guide for the focused group discussion that will collect the qualitative data.

If the sequential mixed method is adopted, then the parallel relationship between the samples for the two approaches will be explored. A parallel relationship specifies that the samples for the qualitative and quantitative components of the research are different but are drawn from the same population (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007). This means the sample that is employed to collect the qualitative data could be representative of the sample employed to collect the quantitative data. The quantitative data collection should make use of a survey with self-administered questionnaires. However, the qualitative research should take the form of a focus group discussion.

This approach will not only help the researcher determine consumers' perception of social media influencers at each phase of the consumer buying process, but it would give the researcher the opportunity to gain an in-depth understanding of why those perceptions exist or do not exist.

## **Chapter Four**

### **4.0 Conclusion**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

This study set out to provide a basis to explain the millennial consumers' perception of social media influencers during the purchase decision process. To achieve this, a number of questions were asked which included what is the perception millennial consumers have about social media influencers in the need recognition phase, and what is the role of social media influencers at the information search phase? Also, there was a need to investigate if social media influencers influence the evaluation of alternatives, the millennial consumer perception of social media influencers at the purchase phase and whether social media influencers play any role at the post-purchase phase.

The research relied on secondary data to investigate the phenomenon by synthesizing what researchers have discovered about this topic. The qualitatively reviewed literature provided a basis to discuss the questions raised to achieve the research objective.

First the relationship between consumers' perception of social media influencers at the need recognition phase was explored. That was where literature suggested that social media influencers play key role at this phase of the consumer buying process (Gros, 2012). This is true as the social media influencer play the awareness creation role of exposing consumers to products and services they might not have heard of or might have assumed they had no need for. The social media influencers are therefore, regarded as part of the social and physical factors that stimulate need recognition among consumers. However, this was not held to be true in all circumstances as the

product or market sub category differs. For instance, it was established by Fotis (2015) that sometimes the social media influence may not stimulate need recognition especially when an expected demand is created when one buying decision is made. In that case, the social media influencer would have played no role on the consumer buying process of satisfying the expected demand. For instance, if a consumer is influenced by a social media influencer and makes the initial buying decision of purchasing an MTN internet Router, another expected demand the consumer would need to satisfy is actually choosing how much Internet data to buy on a monthly bases. To satisfy this expected demand, he or she would go through the different phases of consumer buying decision process without the influence of a social media influencer. This suggests that though the proposition that social media influencers trigger need recognition, there is a need to understand the market to establish the different kinds of need recognitions that the social media influencer could trigger.

Also, when it came to the role of social media influencers when consumers were in the information search phase, literature suggested that they play the role of being a repository of brand information. At this phase the consumers are actively looking for information instead of passively waiting for the information to show up from nowhere (Khatib, 2016). This meant it was essential for Public Relations Professionals to understand where they are searching for the information, armed with this knowledge, the best social media influencer strategy can be deployed. Lee (2013) argued that the consumers are choosing social media platforms to conduct their search information. This then provides an avenue for brands to engage social media influencers are their online librarians who direct consumers to where they can find brand information. It backs the Proposition Two which provides that social media influencers are the digital brand information repository. When brands

engage social media influencers in this capacity, they make it easy for consumers to find their brand information when they are being selective of the kind of information they chose to include in their evaluation of alternatives (Khatib, 2016).

Furthermore, the literature advanced arguments for the influence social media influencers may have during evaluation of alternatives. The evaluation of alternatives phase is characterized by the consumer assessing the alternatives in the evoked set. The most essential factor here is the consumer's own personal experience, however, when that is not sufficient for a purchase decision to be made, then other people's experiences are relied on (Ozer, 2013). This comes in the form of Word of Mouth (WOM) offline through acquaintances or electronic Word of of Mouth (e-WOM) expressed through product reviews on review platforms or social media posts. This is where the social media influencer must appear sincere, honest and credible to the consumer so that their own reviews will be accepted by the consumer (Proposition 3). This moves the influencers role from being just an endorser of products to one whose product reviews are believed to be authentic and not motivated by monetary gains. This is essential because consumers are already consulting influencers during this phase (Fotis, 2015).

When it came to determining the role of social media influencers during the purchase decision, the researchers put forward contradictory views. Some researchers argued that the influencer played no role at the purchase decision and action phase, instead they documented the influencers role at the need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives and post purchase phases (Kalu, 2019; Ozer, 2012). However, Fotis (2015) believed that the opportunity of sharing an experience with a social media influencers and obtain social media clout motivates the consumer

to make the purchase decision and take the purchase action, thereby giving the influencer some amount of credit for making sure the sale went through. However, due to the challenge of verifying the claim by Fotis (2015) this study advanced the proposition that at the very least the influencer provided purchase decision and purchase action leads.

Lastly social media influencers role in post-purchase consumer behaviour was also documented. The post-purchase phase is where the consumer confirms the purchase to make sure they got what they ordered or paid for. This then sometimes leads to them sharing the news of the purchase either intentionally or unintentionally on social media or with offline acquaintances (Akar, Yüksel, & Bulut, 2015). The consumers may also seek validation or recognition from the influencer after they had followed their advice to make a purchase. Often too, the consumers' perception of the influencer may change either to positive or negative depending on the experience the consumer had after purchasing the product or service (Fotis, 2015). This supported Proposition 5 which implied the conscious or subconscious judgment passed on the influencer due to the outcome of the purchase then becomes the new consumer's perception of that social media influencer.

#### **4.2 Recommendation for Future Studies**

The study found that though social media influencers are seen as early adopters who often introduce their followers to new brands thereby triggering need recognition, this rule does not apply in all situations. PROPOSITION 1 highlighted the fact that social Media influencers will trigger need recognition among certain youth oriented product categories. Future research should investigate which types of product categories do not conform to this this argument.

Also, literature made a case that consumers consult social media influencers when they are actively searching for information. As a result, this study found that it was essential to put influencers in the position where they can provide or direct consumers to the information they need. That is why PROPOSITION 2 advocated that Social Media Influencers are the brand's digital information repository. Future research could investigate how brands are taking advantage of this when they contract social media influencers for a job.

Furthermore, beyond personal experiences and traditional word of mouth, consumers rely on social media influencers when evaluating available alternatives. What the consumer is looking for the most are reviews from past users who could be the influencers. PROPOSITION 3 argued that niche social media influencers must be credible product reviewers not just endorsers. Future research must determine whether most influencers are engaging in product reviews and whether those reviews are trusted and believed by the consumer.

In addition, critical future study must focus on the perceived role of the influencer when the consumer is in the purchase decision and purchase action phase. Previous researchers have major conflicting findings from an amplifier to playing no role at all. PROPOSITION 4 claimed Social Media Influencers provide purchase leads at this phase, however, future research should determine that is exhaustive at that consumer buying decision process phase.

Moreover, consumer's perception about the social media influencer may change at the post-purchase phase. The change will be good or bad depending on the consumer's experience with the

product. Future research can either accept or reject PROPOSITION 5's claim that consumers pass judgment on the social media influencer to form their current perception about the influencer.

Finally, social media influencers carve a niche for themselves by operating within specific industries (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). Besides that, they are also categorized into two main different groups based on the number of followers they have – the micro influencers and the macro influencers (Aguar & Reijmersdal, 2018). The micro influencers have less than 100,000 followers and the macro influencers have more than 100,000 followers, further research should investigate whether the consumer perception of social media influencers from these different categories during the consumer buying decision process will differ why that is.

This proposed study should use the mixed method of combining quantitative and qualitative methods. The approach should be sequential where the survey will be conducted first with self-administered questionnaires. The findings from the survey should be used to develop a guide that will be used for the focus group discussions to understand why those findings came about. In terms of sampling, the parallel approach should be employed where the sample for the focused group discussions is drawn from the same population as the sample for the survey however, the no survey participant should be included in the focused group discussion.

### **4.3 Conclusions**

This study employed the qualitative literature review approach that was based on secondary data. The findings discussed above illustrated the current state of literature though the synthesizing of the various studies provided a new outlook on the various positions taken by previous researchers.

The proposed future study recommended in this study will provide the primary data which will form the basis to accept or reject the propositions outlined and discussed above.

The research will be original because it will paint a picture of how social media influencers are perceived by consumers during the various components or phases of the buying decision process taking into account the current propositions that were developed based on current literature. This will be done by using quantitative methods to understand the cause and effect of this phenomenon among the millennial consumers and the qualitative method will explore why it is so.

The future research will also provide a concise information and guideline for public relations professionals to develop strategies that ensure that at each phase of the buying decision process, they have effectively engaged the social media influencers to sway the consumer's decision their way. When they understand what the consumers expect from the social media influencers at each phase of the consumer buying process, they will know the best way to optimize the social media influencer engagement for the benefit of both the consumer and the brand. There is a bandwagon effect in engaging social media influencers and many professionals are doing so without understanding the science behind it and how to make it work for the benefit of their brands. The pursuit of the research will create an evidence based modalities that guide the engagement of social media influencers.

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