



**Assessing the impact of social media  
analytics on the growth and  
profitability of SMEs in the Free State  
Province**

**JM Moloji**

**[orcid.org/0000-0002-1170-2599](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1170-2599)**



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Supervisor: Dr NK Ndlovu

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The bottom half of the cover features a blue and white abstract wave pattern, mirroring the design at the top.

## **DECLARATION**

I, Jerry Moloi, hereby declare that the current mini dissertation, submitted to North-West University in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Master of Business Administration degree, is my own original work. The work has not been submitted to any other institution for evaluation or publishing.

18 March 2025

## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my family, **the Makhlokoe a ha Lehasa la Matsimela**, the great-grandchildren of **Kampo Mtwana Moloji**. This achievement is a testament to breaking generational limitations. May this milestone inspire future generations to strive for excellence and continue building on this foundation.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to those who supported me throughout this research journey.

To my beloved wife, **Karabo Kgopa**, thank you for your unwavering love, patience, and encouragement, which have been my foundation. Your belief in me kept me motivated through every challenge.

To my friends, thank you for always encouraging me to continue and pursue my goals. Your support and companionship have been invaluable.

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My appreciation extends to the **NWU Bursary Office** for facilitating the financial support that made this study possible.

This accomplishment would not have been possible without each of you, and I am deeply thankful.

## **ABSTRACT**

This study aimed to explore the perceived impact of social media analytics on the growth and profitability of SMEs that run driving school companies in Free State Province, South Africa. Unlike large organisations, most SMEs in South Africa find it difficult to leverage social media analytics, primarily due to a lack of financial resources and expertise. To examine this issue, the study adopted a qualitative research approach, grounded in the principles and assumptions of the interpretivism research paradigm, which insists on subjectivism. Regarding research design, the study was premised on the phenomenology research design, which values digging deep into the participants' experiences and opinions pertaining to an issue under investigation. The target population of the study were owners and managers of driving schools in Free State province. From this target population, a sample of 15 participants was selected. In-depth interviews were used to collect data from the participants. The data was analysed using thematic analysis to establish themes that permeated across all interview transcripts. The study found that social media analytics significantly have a significant impact on the growth and profitability of SMEs in the Free State Province. Firstly, these analytics facilitate market expansion through effective social media marketing. Secondly, they enhance profitability by increasing sales, revenue, and overall profits while reducing costs. However, SMEs face challenges in utilising these analytics, such as resource shortages, a lack of awareness about available tools, the complexities of their use, and inadequate technological infrastructure. Additionally, platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram play crucial roles in improving customer engagement, fostering stronger relationships and loyalty. Lastly, tools like Google Analytics and Facebook Insights were found to effectively enhance customer engagement and contribute to the profitability and sustainability of SMEs. Therefore, it is recommended that SMEs in the Free State Province invest in training and resources to enhance their understanding and utilisation of social media analytics, while also leveraging social media platforms to improve customer engagement and drive growth.

Keywords: Social media analytics, growth, profitability, driving schools, Free State Province

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# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

## 1.1 Introduction

The evolution of social media technologies is fundamentally changing how businesses grow and expand (Nkosana, 2022; Pour *et al.*, 2021). Among these social media advancements, as Cennamo *et al.* (2020) emphasise, social media analytics has emerged as an important tool for organisations that aim to leverage data-driven decision-making. Accordingly, Moyo (2019) explains that social media platforms generate various types of important data that, when gathered and analysed effectively, help to get insights into developing business growth and improving profitability strategies. Thus, Tarr (2021) argue that for SMEs, which usually encounter intense competition and operate within limited resources, embracing social media analytics presents a unique opportunity for growth and profitability. However, Patrick (2022) asserted that the degree to which SMEs in developing economies such as South Africa are adopting social media analytics remains unexplored. This study aimed to broaden our understanding by exploring the perceived impact of social media analytics on business growth and profitability, particularly focusing on SMEs that run driving schools in Free State Province, South Africa.

## 1.2 Background of the study

Globally, SMEs are increasingly leveraging social media analytics as a strategic tool for business growth and expansion (Akpan *et al.*, 2024). According to Mpungose *et al.* (2024), the introduction of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp presents an unprecedented opportunity for businesses to enhance their profitability and develop their brands. Cheung *et al.* (2020) indicate that companies that use social media analytics to evaluate the effectiveness of marketing efforts, establish emerging customer preferences, and benchmark their performance against competitors often achieve better results. Nogroho and Soewarno (2024) add that companies effectively integrating social media analytics into business operations experience improved decision-making processes, informed innovations, and higher profitability. Sashi *et al.* (2019) and Guo *et al.* (2020) agree that organisations employing social media analytics are typically more adept at anticipating customers' needs and responding to market changes with greater efficacy.

Velempini and Kabanda (2024) assert that SMEs that fail to adopt social media analytics risk being left behind as technological advancement continues to transform industries worldwide.

In South Africa, however, SMEs experience various challenges in adopting social media analytics, regardless of its ability to improve business growth and profitability (Swaartbooi, 2022). Mpungose *et al.* (2024) reveal that most of these SMEs run their businesses in resource-constrained environments, where financial constraints, limited access to technology, and inadequate digital literacy obstruct investment in modern analytics tools. Patrick (2022) establishes that the cost of data and internet connectivity is high in South Africa, which is a significant challenge for SMEs to effectively use analytics tools and social media platforms. Tarr (2021) also highlights that a lack of robust digital infrastructure, especially in rural areas, worsens this challenge and complicates the collection and analysis of social media data. Akpan *et al.* (2024) highlight a significant lack of awareness among SMEs owners regarding the importance of social media analytics and its integration into business strategies. This concern is echoed by Nkosana (2022), who observes that many SME owners in South Africa hesitate to adopt such tools due to a limited understanding of their potential to grow brands and enhance profitability. Moyo (2019) and Mpungose *et al.* (2024) add that these challenges are particularly pronounced in developing economies. Small and Medium-sized Enterprises are vital to local economies but often face disadvantages when competing with larger firms with greater access to digital expertise and resources.

Despite these barriers, Velempini and Kabanda (2024) argue that SMEs should view social media analytics as a worthwhile investment for driving growth and long-term profitability. Nugroho (2024) cautions that avoiding or neglecting these tools can lead to missed opportunities, as businesses without data-driven insights risk losing customers to more agile, digitally savvy competitors. Similarly, Nkosana (2022) explains that the absence of social media analytics can weaken customer engagement, diminishing retention and brand loyalty.

Tlapana et al. (2023) emphasise that without the ability to track and interpret customer behaviour and market trends, many SMEs struggle to make informed decisions, often resulting in misaligned marketing strategies. Moyo (2019) similarly points out that lacking analytic insights may lead to ineffective marketing expenditure, wasting already limited resources. McGuirk and Nunn (2024) further argue that real-time analytics are essential for responsiveness in a volatile marketplace, noting that SMEs are less adaptable to shifting customer expectations and economic conditions without such tools. As Nugroho (2024) concludes, failure to incorporate social media analytics can undermine competitiveness and long-term sustainability in today's evolving digital business environment.

### **1.3 Problem statement**

Small and Medium-sized Enterprises in South Africa, particularly in the Free State Province, face various challenges that hinder their ability to adopt social media analytics, ultimately affecting their growth and profitability (Velempini & Kabanda, 2024). Key barriers include the high costs of data and connectivity (Tarr, 2022), limited access to digital infrastructure (Akpan et al., 2024), a lack of awareness about the benefits of social media analytics (Swaartbooi, 2022), and inadequate digital skills and expertise (Nkosana, 2022). Collectively, these issues pose significant obstacles to SMEs' ability to harness data-driven insights that could inform more effective marketing strategies.

The impact of these challenges is particularly severe in resource-constrained environments, where many SMEs struggle to justify the financial burden associated with adopting new technologies. Mpungose et al. (2024) note that this situation often results in missed opportunities for innovation and market engagement, leaving businesses ill-equipped to respond to evolving consumer preferences and emerging trends. Consequently, the inability to leverage social media analytics contributes to ineffective marketing efforts, reduced competitiveness, stagnated growth, and ultimately, low profitability.

While previous research has explored the general adoption of social media analytics among SMEs, few studies have specifically examined the perceived impact of these

tools on business growth and profitability, particularly within sector-specific and regional contexts. Against this backdrop, the present study investigates the perceived influence of social media analytics on the growth and profitability of SMEs operating driving schools in the Free State Province of South Africa.

#### **1.4 Research objectives**

The study aimed to achieve the following objectives:

##### **1.4.1 Primary research objective**

- To explore the perceived impact of social media analytics on the growth and profitability of SMEs operating driving schools in Free State Province.

##### **1.4.2 Secondary research objectives**

- To explore the influence of social media analytics on the expansion of SMEs running driving schools in the Free State Province.
- To examine the relationship between social media analytics and profitability in SMEs that run driving schools in the Free State Province.
- To determine the challenges faced by SMEs operating driving schools in the Free State Province in utilising social media analytics.
- To examine the role of social media platforms in enhancing customer interaction for SMEs running driving schools in the Free State Province and its impact on profitability.
- To explore the efficacy of existing social media analytics instruments employed by SMEs operating driving schools in the Free State Province.

#### **1.5 Research questions**

The study sought to answer the following questions:

##### **1.5.1 Primary research question**

- What is the perceived impact of social media analytics on the growth and profitability of SMEs operating driving schools in the Free State Province?

### **1.5.2 Secondary research questions**

- What is the influence of social media analytics on the expansion of SMEs running driving schools in the Free State Province?
- What is the relationship between social media analytics and profitability in SMEs that run driving schools in the Free State Province?
- What are the challenges faced by SMEs operating driving schools in the Free State Province when utilising social media analytics?
- What is the role of social media platforms in enhancing customer interaction for SMEs running driving schools in the Free State Province and its impact on profitability?
- How effective are existing social media analytics instruments employed by SMEs operating driving schools in the Free State Province?

### **1.6 Significance of the study**

The study makes a two-fold contribution, namely theoretical and practical. Theoretically, the study expands the knowledge boundaries of the existing literature on social media analytics and its perceived impact on SMEs' growth and profitability endeavours. In particular, examining the unique challenges that SMEs in the Free State Province face in adopting social media analytics. The study fills a critical gap in understanding how social media analytical tools influence growth and profitability, particularly in resource-constrained environments. Practically, the findings of the study establish valuable insights for SME owners and management who seek to enhance their competitive edge in an increasingly digital business landscape. Moreover, the study informs stakeholders and policymakers about the specific barriers that hinder social media analytics adoption, providing a guide for the development of support mechanisms and targeted intervention to promote digital transformation. As SMEs play an important role in job creation and economic development, understanding how social media analytics impacts operation is important for fostering sustainable economic growth.

### **1.7 Research methodology**

As fully explored in chapter three, this study adopted a qualitative research methodology. According to Morse (2020), the primary aim of qualitative research is to explore people's experiences, opinions, and observations regarding particular issues. Thus, the findings of this study are grounded in the experiences and opinions of SME owners and managers who run driving schools in the Free State Province as far as adopting social media analytics for enhancing growth and profitability is concerned. The study was premised on the principles of the interpretivism research paradigm. Allan (2020) explains that interpretivism emphasises that reality is subjective; therefore, every individual experiences the social world differently. Therefore, the researcher assumed that the experiences and opinions of the SMEs owners and managers running driving schools in the Free State Province concerning the adoption of social media have some variation and are not the same, hence grounding the study in the interpretivism research paradigm. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used to collect data from 15 participants who were owners and managers of SMEs that run driving schools in the Free State Province. In-depth interviews, according to Morse (2020), remain the most effective way of collecting qualitative data, mainly because they allow participants to empty their minds regarding a particular issue. As Vaivio (2012) advise, the researcher uses the probing technique to delve deeper into participants' responses, enabling a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences and perspectives. The data was analysed using thematic analysis, which, according to Nassaj (2020), is a qualitative data analysis technique that focuses on identifying and establishing main themes or patterns that permeate across all interview or focus group transcripts.

### **1.8 Delimitations of the study**

The study was narrowed down to three delimitations, namely geographical, conceptual, and sectoral:

- i.) **Geographical delimitations:** The study focuses exclusively on the Free State Province of South Africa. This choice is important because it considers that the province has its own unique economic, social, and infrastructural challenges. This choice is important because it considers that the province has its own unique economic, social, and infrastructural challenges.

Therefore, by limiting the scope of the study to this province, it provides a detailed examination of local conditions, such as internet connectivity and access to technology.

- ii.) **Conceptual delimitations:** The study is grounded on three distinct main constructs, namely social media analytics, growth and profitability. Therefore, other sub-constructs explored in this study, in one way or the other, link back to these main constructs.
- iii.) **Sectoral delimitations:** The study focuses exclusively on driving schools as the specific type of SME under examination. Thus, by focusing on this sector, the study uncovers sector-specific insights into how social media analytics can facilitate growth and profitability.

### 1.9 Limitations of the study

The study was exposed to the following limitations:

- i.) **Limited generalisability:** The findings of qualitative research are usually based on small sample sizes, which minimises the ability to generalise the findings to larger populations (Patel & Patel, 2020).
- ii.) **Data complexity:** The descriptive and rich nature of qualitative data often makes analysis challenging and complex, complicating identification of clear patterns and conclusions (Nassaj, 2020).
- iii.) **Replicability issues:** Due to the context-specific and subjective nature of qualitative research, replacing studies is difficult because of variations in responses, the researcher's interpretation and the setting (Allan, 2020).

### 1.10 Dissertation structure

This study follows a five-chapter report structure as described below:

**Chapter one–Introduction:** The chapter introduces the main elements of the study, which include the problem statement, research objectives, research questions, and significance of the study.

**Chapter two—Literature Review:** The chapter reviews various scholarly opinions, observations, and submissions relating to the adoption of social media analytics by SMEs for business growth and profitability.

**Chapter three—Methodology:** The chapter presents the research methodology adopted to answer the research questions and achieve the research objectives.

**Chapter four—Presentation and discussion of findings:** The chapter presents and discusses the findings of the study guided by research objectives.

**Chapter five—Conclusions and recommendations:** The chapter presents the conclusion and recommendations of the study, drawing on the key findings of the study.

### **1.11 Chapter summary**

The chapter explores the importance of adopting social media analytics for SMEs pursuing growth and profitability. In particular, the chapter highlights the evolving role of social media analytics in business operations, the challenges faced by SMEs in adopting these tools, and the potential consequences of failing to embrace social media analytics in this digital era. This chapter presents a detailed overview of the research methodology employed in this investigation. The following chapter analyses the relevant literature related to the subject of the investigation.

## **CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter explores the concepts of social media analytics and digital transformation, highlighting their significance in driving growth and profitability, especially for SMEs. It discusses various theoretical perspectives and frameworks that support the use of social media analytics in the context of business development. The conversation emphasizes how digital transformation reshapes organizational processes, making social media analytics a key component of this change. Additionally, the chapter outlines the benefits and limitations of leveraging data-driven insights from social media platforms, focusing on how organizations can strategically use this information to enhance their competitive advantage and overall performance.

### **2.2 Theoretical framework**

Theoretical frameworks are fundamental to research as they offer a systematic and structured approach to understanding and examining phenomena of interest. A conceptual framework serves as a guiding template that outlines key concepts, variables, and the relationships among them within the context of a study (Kaniušonytė et al., 2021; Pearse, 2022a). One of the primary advantages of using a conceptual framework is that it allows researchers to clearly articulate the theoretical underpinnings of their work (Imura et al., 2014; Grant & Osanloo, 2014; Pearse, 2022b).

By anchoring the research in an established conceptual framework, the researcher ensures alignment with relevant theories and prior scholarship (Mugizi, 2022; Lara-Cinisomo et al., 2016; Abbott, 2015). This method enhances the rigor and credibility of the study by establishing a coherent foundation for the research design, data collection, and subsequent analysis (Sakalasuriya et al., 2018; Alam et al., 2018). This study draws upon three key theoretical frameworks, each discussed in detail in the following sections.

#### **2.2.1 Social media marketing theory**

Social media marketing has become crucial to contemporary marketing strategies (Cheung *et al*, 2021:362). It involves utilising social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram, “X” previously Twitter, and LinkedIn to market products, services, and brands (Ezhumalai & Vinoth, 2018). Numerous studies have examined the influence of social media marketing on brand development and equity. Stringfellow *et al.* (2019) investigated the mediating functions of brand equity and identity in the relationship between social media marketing, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), and willingness to pay. Lin *et al.* (2020) established a conceptual framework elucidating the relationship between social media marketing, the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), and the aspiration to sustain organisational competitiveness. Lilo *et al.* (2023:351) found that customers heavily rely on peer feedback on social media, leading marketers to focus on strategies that improve customer engagement on these channels. Stringfellow *et al.* (2019) assert that the criteria by which SMEs choose social media platforms emphasize functional dimensions like identification, discourse, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation, and group dynamics.

Chung and Cho (2017:482) established a framework for a performance assessment system to quantify social media contributions, address measurement challenges, and delineate a future research agenda. Cheung *et al.* (2020:363) identified five components of social media marketing capabilities: identity, discourse, sharing, presence, and relationships. These characteristics represent the diverse marketing strategies that can be implemented on social media platforms to improve business performance. Rowley and Keegan (2019:726) assert that studies are required to comprehend the effects of social media on purchasing selections, encompassing impulsive buying and the consumer’s progression through the decision-making phases.

### **2.2.2 Resource-based view theory**

The resource-based view (RBV) theory is a significant theory in strategic management that discusses how organisations can attain and maintain competitive advantage (Petružis, 2018; Ando & Ding, 2014). The RBV posits that the assets and skills of a company are the principal factors influencing its performance and competitive standing (Sirmon, Hitt, Ireland, & Gilbert, 2010; Kontesa & Lako, 2021). The fundamental

principle of the RBV is that organisations exhibit heterogeneity in their resources and competencies (Kumar, 2021; Ziyae & Sadeghi, 2020). Resources and competencies can be classified as tangible (physical assets, financial resources) or intangible (knowledge, skills, reputation) (Newbert, 2008; Cai *et al.*, 2010).

The RBV states a resource must be valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN) to confer a sustained competitive advantage (Hussain & Waheed, 2019; Cragg, 2008). Valuable resources allow an organisation to implement strategies that enhance efficiency and effectiveness, increasing its competitiveness (Sirmon & Hitt, 2003; Andersén, 2011). Scarce resources are infrequently possessed by current and potential competitors (Arbelo, Arbelo-Pérez & Pérez-Gómez, 2020; Lin, 2003), yet distinctive resources are difficult for rivals to replicate or acquire (Runyan *et al.*, 2007; Steensma *et al.*, 2005). Non-substitutable resources lack immediate strategic options (Das & Teng, 2000; Barney, 2001).

The RBV emphasises that businesses must own VRIN resources and adeptly manage and utilise these resources to generate value and attain competitive advantage (Riahi-Belkaoui, 2003; Connor, 2002). Companies must engage in resource management and orchestration if they want to properly exploit their resources (Wilk & Fensterseifer, 2003). Extensively used in many settings, including small and medium-sized firms (Barthélémy, 2022), international corporations (Ando & Ding, 2014), and family enterprises (Hayton, 2005), the RBV has also been used to clarify the relevance of resources like human capital, intellectual capital (Riahi-Belkaoui, 2003), and Research and Development (Wright, 2001) in improving corporate performance and competitive advantage. Though RBV has received notable empirical support, many studies have underlined the need of greater honing and integration with other theoretical frameworks (Newbert, 2006; Galpin, 2019). In terms of study and implementation in strategic management, the RBV is still a leading and powerful paradigm.

### **2.2.3 Dynamic capabilities theory**

Dynamic Capabilities Theory is a paradigm that explains how organisations can attain and maintain competitive advantage in swiftly evolving settings (Mukhtar, 2023; Teece, 2018). The theory asserts that organisations must consistently integrate,

develop, and reorganise internal and external resources and skills to respond to alterations in their business environment (Yung-Chul, 2021; Barreto, 2009). Dynamic Capabilities Theory posits that businesses must cultivate particular “dynamic capabilities” talents to adapt and respond to external changes (Yan *et al.*, 2022; Zou *et al.*, 2017). These dynamic capabilities empower organisations to identify opportunities and dangers, capitalise on opportunities, and adjust their resource base accordingly (Newey & Zahra, 2009; Fallon-Byrne & Harney, 2017).

The theory suggests dynamic skills are not fixed but develop via organisational learning and experience (Danneels, 2010; Yu *et al.*, 2022). Organisations can cultivate dynamic capacities through intentional activities, including knowledge management, organisational routines, and managerial decision-making (Olazabal & Avila, 2022; Rotjanakorn *et al.*, 2020). Dynamic skills differ from “ordinary” or “operational” capabilities, which concentrate on efficiently executing daily tasks. Conversely, dynamic capabilities are superior capabilities that enable organisations to modify and reorganise their operational competencies in reaction to environmental changes (Aggarwal & Kapoor, 2018; Ambrosini *et al.*, 2009).

The theory argues that the significance of dynamic capacities depends on environmental dynamism. Standard capabilities may suffice in stable situations, but in quickly evolving contexts, dynamic capabilities are essential for maintaining competitive advantage (Xing *et al.*, 2020; Soluk *et al.*, 2021). Empirical studies indicate that dynamic capabilities enhance business performance, innovation, and sustainability, especially in volatile markets (Zhang *et al.*, 2018; Bai & Guo, 2014). However, the theory recognises that developing and implementing dynamic skills may be complex and contingent upon prior paths (Ju *et al.*, 2016; Mudalige *et al.*, 2018). The Dynamic Capabilities Theory offers a paradigm for comprehending how organisations can adapt and prosper in fluctuating business environments by renewing their resource base and capabilities (Feng *et al.*, 2022; Li, 2022).

### **2.3 Empirical support of the theoretical framework**

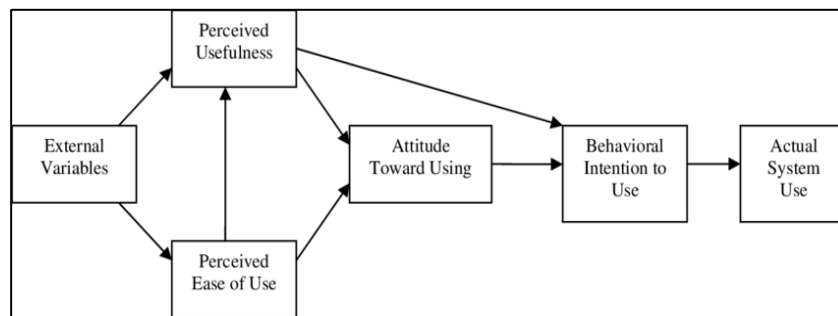
The amalgamation of these diverse theoretical frameworks offers a thorough comprehension of how SMEs can use social media analytics to improve their

performance and competitiveness. The theory of social media marketing emphasises using social media platforms to interact with customers, enhance brand recognition, and achieve corporate objectives (Alam *et al.*, 2023; Scuotto *et al.*, 2017; Brooks *et al.*, 2022; Ghazwani & Alzahrani, 2023; Prayudanti & Rohmah, 2018). The RBV theory underscores the significance of SMEs' internal resources and capabilities, such as social media data and analytics, as sources of competitive advantage (Shauri *et al.*, 2023; Kikawa *et al.*, 2022; Tajvidi & Karami, 2021). The Dynamic Capabilities Theory posits that SMEs must cultivate the capacity to identify opportunities, capitalise on them, and reorganise their resources to effectively utilise social media analytics in a swiftly evolving digital environment (Ahmad *et al.*, 2019; Qalati *et al.*, 2022; Yang, 2019).

The researcher analysed three additional conceptual frameworks to comprehend the utilisation and influence of social media analytics on the commercial performance of SMEs in the Free State Province: the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), Dynamic Capability Theory, and Diffusion of Innovation Theory. The TAM explains the determinants affecting SMEs' acceptance and utilisation of social media analytics tools, including perceived utility and ease of use (Vanninen *et al.*, 2022; Akgül and Tunca, 2018; Bruce *et al.*, 2022). The Dynamic Capabilities Theory illustrates how SMEs may adapt and respond to changes in their business environment, including adopting and utilising social media analytics (Ahmad *et al.*, 2019; Qalati *et al.*, 2022; Yang, 2019). The Diffusion of Innovation Theory clarifies the acceptance and spread of social media analytics tools within SMEs, highlighting factors such as relative advantage, compatibility, and observability (Ekanem & Erukusin, 2021; Solomon *et al.*, 2023; Durkin *et al.*, 2013).

These theories assert that SMEs must develop dynamic competencies, such as the ability to recognise opportunities, leverage them, and reorganise their resources to effectively employ social media analytics in a rapidly changing digital landscape (Ahmad *et al.*, 2019; Qalati *et al.*, 2022; Yang, 2019). These theoretical viewpoints collectively offer a unified framework for understanding the intricate function of social media analytics in strengthening SMEs' marketing, technological, resource-based, and inventive capacities, improving business performance and competitiveness.

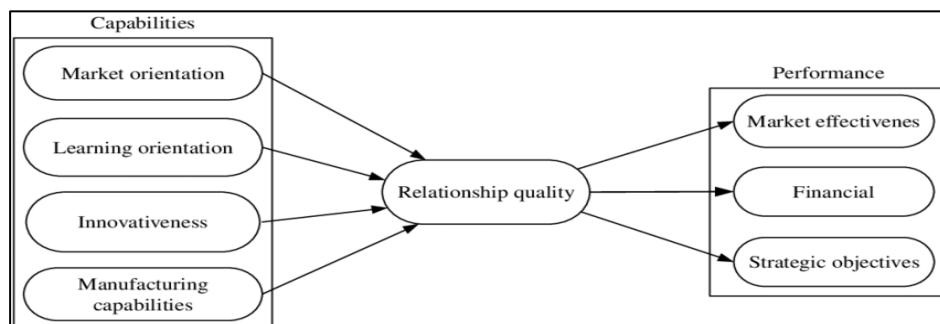
Figure 2.1 explains how TAM users form attitudes and intentions to use technology, particularly in SMEs' adoption of social media analytics.



**Figure 2.1: Theoretical framework of the Technology Acceptance Model**

**Source:** Davids (1989)

Figure 2.2 illustrates the RBV Theory, which emphasises the importance of an organisation's internal resources and capabilities in achieving competitive advantage (Shauri *et al.*, 2023; Kikawa *et al.*, 2022; Tajvidi & Karami, 2021). In the context of social media analytics for SMEs, this theory suggests that the effective utilisation of social media data and analytics capabilities can be a source of competitive advantage (Shauri *et al.*, 2023; Kikawa *et al.*, 2022; Tajvidi & Karami, 2021).

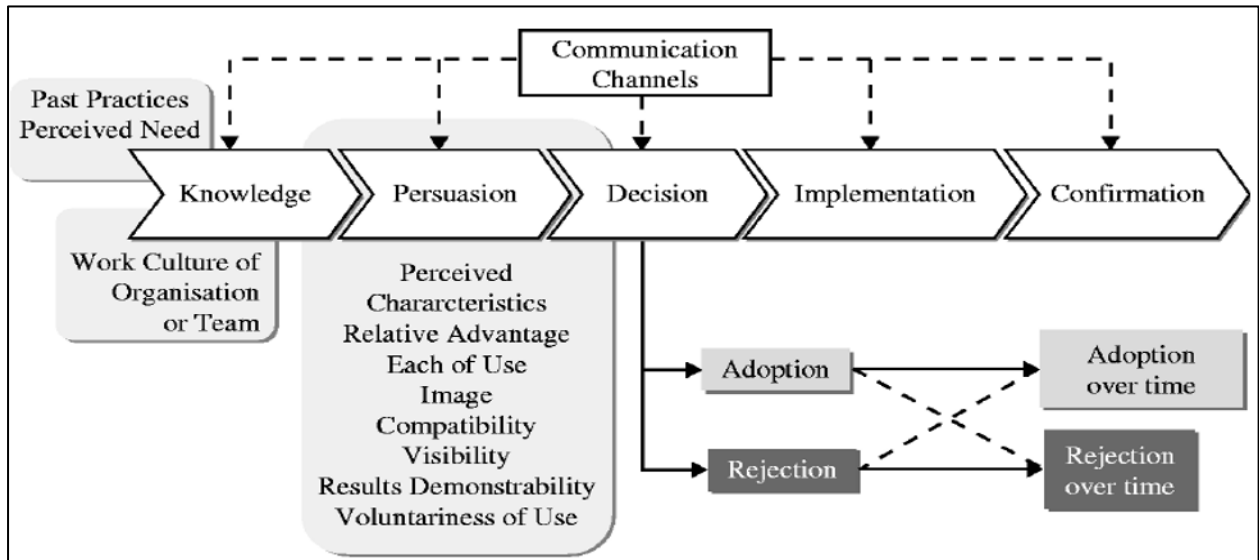


**Figure 2.2: Theoretical framework of the Resource-Based View Theory**

**Source:** Barney (1991)

Diffusion of Innovation Theory provides insights into how social media analytics technologies are adopted and spread among SMEs (Ekanem & Erukusin, 2021; Solomon *et al.*, 2023; Durkin *et al.*, 2013). Figure 2.3. explains how innovations spread

among organisations (Rogers, 2003:11). For SMEs, understanding the diffusion of social media analytics technologies can help them develop effective strategies to promote the adoption and use of these technologies within their organisations and the broader SME community (Ekanem & Erukusin, 2021; Solomon *et al.*, 2023; Durkin *et al.*, 2013).



**Figure 2.3: Theoretical framework of the Diffusion of Innovation Theory**

**Source:** Rogers (2003)

This study attempts to demonstrate the applicability of various theories to understanding and enhancing business performance through technology adoption and resource management in social media analytics in SMEs.

## 2.4 Analysis of social media analytics and small to medium enterprises

Social media platforms are integral to SMEs' marketing and operational plans; their cost-effectiveness and accessibility make them vital tools to compete with larger enterprises (Amoah & Jibril, 2021; Alam, 2023). Research indicates that social media engagement by SMEs positively influences customer awareness and perceptions of the company's products and services (Amoah & Jibril, 2021; Pellegrino & Abé, 2023). Social media empowers SMEs to increase awareness of their products and services, influence potential clients, and improve organisational performance (Alam, 2023;

Amoah & Jibril, 2021). It fosters business growth and sustainability for SMEs by promoting adoption and capitalising on opportunities (Amoah *et al.*, 2021; Ekanem & Erukusin, 2021; Shauri *et al.*, 2023).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, SMEs have had to dynamically adapt their social media strategies to the new normal, leveraging their sensing, seizing, and reconfiguration capabilities (Hu, Olivieri & Rialti, 2023:1675). Social media has been particularly beneficial for SMEs in developing countries, where it can help them overcome geographical boundaries and interact directly with customers (Qalati *et al.*, 2022; Patma *et al.*, 2021). Small and Medium-sized Enterprises must manage their social media presence effectively by learning to keep followers informed, respond to queries, and elaborate on feedback to grasp innovation opportunities (Carbonara & Tagliaventi, 2023). There is a need for more awareness and the development of social media analytics tools specifically tailored for SMEs to help them better utilise and manage their social media activities (Madila *et al.*, 2022:87).

## **2.5 Characterising social media analytics**

Social media analytics means collecting, analysing, and interpreting data from social media platforms to derive significant insights (Madila *et al.*, 2021:87). This interdisciplinary field integrates informatics, statistics, and computational linguistics to derive meaningful insights from the extensive user-generated content on social media (Drescher, 2023). A notable benefit of social media analytics is its capacity to swiftly explore community perceptions about a product, especially during pivotal events like the COVID-19 pandemic. By analysing social media data, companies can swiftly comprehend popular sentiments and concerns, facilitating more informed and community-oriented decisions (Yigitcanlar *et al.*, 2020:3). This feature allows companies to make informed decisions based on real-time data and public sentiment.

Social media analytics encompasses diverse methodologies and instruments, including sentiment analysis, topic modelling, and network analysis, to gather, monitor, analyse, summarise, and visualise social media data (Madila *et al.*, 2021; Batrinca & Treleaven, 2014:89). These instruments and methodologies can be employed to ascertain both quantitative and qualitative evidence of the prospective or actual social

impact of research disseminated on social media (Joan *et al.*, 2022). Social media analytics is essential in several fields, namely business, politics, and public health. In a corporate environment, it aids organisations in collecting customer insights, exploring the efficacy of marketing initiatives, and obtaining helpful consumer feedback (Madila *et al.*, 2021; Drescher, 2023). In the political sphere, social media analytics can explore sentiment, discern patterns, and enhance comprehension of voter preferences and behaviours (Darapaneni, 2023).

The use of social media analytics has been examined in diverse situations, such as the analysis of online hotel reviews (He *et al.*, 2017:922), the comprehension of food consumption trends (Drescher, 2023), and the investigation of social media's influence on product innovation (Cheng & Sheu, 2023:229). Furthermore, social media analytics has been employed to examine the utilisation of social media inside municipal government (Moss *et al.*, 2015:288) and the influence of social media analytics on SMEs (Nugroho & Angela, 2024; Madila *et al.*, 2022). Social media analytics allows organisations and researchers to understand public perceptions, behaviours, and preferences, improving decision-making and cultivating strategic advantages.

## **2.6 Overview of SMEs in Free State Province**

Small and medium enterprises play a crucial role in the economic growth and development of South Africa (Langton & Mafini, 2022:10). They contribute significantly to job creation, production, and export volumes (Viljoen & Struweg, 2016). However, SMEs in South Africa, including those in the Free State Province, have faced various challenges that have hindered their performance and growth (Langton & Mafini, 2022; Viljoen & Struweg, 2016). A primary concern for SMEs in the Free State Province is the effect of electricity shortages and load-shedding. Research indicates that a 1% reduction in energy usage can result in a 4.23% decline in GDP; since SMEs account for around 57% of the South African economy, the electricity crisis has substantially adversely affected their operations and performance (Viljoen & Struweg, 2016).

Alongside the electrical crisis, SMEs in the Free State Province and other provinces of South Africa have had difficulties concerning access to finance, resource limitations, and the economic climate (Doacă, 2022:26). The absence of financial access,

especially during economic downturns, can significantly affect the viability and expansion of SMEs (Doacă, 2022:26). The leadership and management styles of SME entrepreneurs and administrators are pivotal factors influencing the success and expansion of SMEs in South Africa. Research indicates that adaptable and entrepreneurial leadership styles can enhance tactical orientation and innovation in SMEs, which are crucial for their competitiveness and success (Dzomonda *et al.*, 2017; Buchanan *et al.*, 2022).

## **2.7 The role of social media in modern business practices**

The significance of social media in contemporary business practices is extensively recorded in the literature. Social media has evolved into a fundamental component of corporate operations, functioning as a potent instrument for communication, marketing, and customer engagement (Setiawan *et al.*, 2022; Putri & Kurniasih, 2020; Rohmawati & Winata, 2021; Kwayu, 2021; Gupta, 2023; Dwivedi *et al.*, 2019; Sutrisno, 2023; Gökerik, 2024). Social media offers businesses a cost-effective and efficient means to engage a broad audience and advertise their products or services (Putri & Kurniasih, 2020; Kwayu, 2021; Lupo & Stroman, 2020; Gökerik, 2024; Novandari, 2023). Social media platforms such as Facebook, X (previously Twitter), TikTok, and Instagram have emerged as prominent marketing channels, enabling businesses to enhance brand awareness, interact with customers, and execute targeted advertising campaigns (Rohmawati & Winata, 2021; Gupta, 2023; Gökerik, 2024; Javier, 2024; Novianti & Erdiana, 2020; Jeswani, 2023).

Social media allows organisations to obtain valuable customer insights and feedback, which can enhance their products, services, and overall business strategies (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2019; Simangunsong & Handoko, 2020; Prodanova & Looy, 2019; Pitafi, 2024). Through the analysis of social media discourse and engagement, companies can gain insights into their consumers' requirements, preferences, and challenges, thus enabling more informed decision-making (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2019; Simangunsong & Handoko, 2020; Prodanova & Looy, 2019). Social media has become essential for customer relationship management (CRM) (Rivanto & Novianti, 2019; Pitafi, 2024). Companies can use social media to engage with customers, resolve issues, and cultivate enduring relationships (Rivanto & Novianti, 2019; Pitafi, 2024). This may

enhance customer loyalty and satisfaction and improve corporate success (Wibowo *et al.*, 2020; Pitafi, 2024).

Social media significantly influences the digital transformation of organisations, aiding their adaptation to the evolving technological landscape (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2019; Simangunsong & Handoko, 2020; Prodanova & Looy, 2019). Integrating social media into business operations enables organisations to improve operational efficiency, stimulate innovation, and secure a competitive edge in the market (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2019; Simangunsong & Handoko, 2020; Prodanova & Looy, 2019). The importance of social media in modern business practices is highlighted by its impact on entrepreneurship and business sustainability. Social media can inspire entrepreneurs to enhance innovation, creativity, and audacity in pursuing new company ventures (Jeswani, 2023; Novandari, 2023). Incorporating social media into corporate plans can improve performance and ensure long-term sustainability (Jeswani, 2023; Novandari, 2023; Wibowo *et al.*, 2020).

## **2.8 Analytics of social media**

Social media analytics is a dynamic domain that employs diverse tools and approaches to comprehend and derive insights from the extensive data produced on social media platforms (Koohang, 2017; Shahbaznezhad *et al.*, 2021; Dolan *et al.*, 2019). These analytical methods and methodologies are utilised to judge, analyse, and interpret user engagement, content efficacy, and the overall influence of social media activities (Dolan *et al.*, 2019; Odiboh *et al.*, 2020). A crucial tool in social media analytics is using devices addressing privacy concerns. The tools, including those created by Koohang *et al.* (2017), explore users' apprehensions regarding acquisition, secondary utilisation, inaccuracies, unauthorised access, control, and awareness of their personal information on social media platforms. Understanding these privacy concerns is essential for organisations to establish trust and effectively connect with their audiences (Koohang, 2017; Koohang *et al.*, 2018).

## **2.9 Analysis of prominent social media analytics instruments**

Social media analytics is a growing and crucial field of study dedicated to analysing social media data to derive pertinent insights (Pääkkönen *et al.*, 2020; Darapaneni,

2023). It involves the systematic collection, monitoring, analysis, and visualisation of social media data to extract meaningful insights (Pääkkönen *et al.*, 2020; Mukti & Putri, 2021; Adnan *et al.*, 2021). A key component of social media analytics is its ability to evaluate quantitative and qualitative aspects of social media activities (Lee *et al.*, 2020:671). The process of social media analytics typically involves several steps, including data collection, preparation, analysis, and visualisation (Pääkkönen *et al.*, 2020; Andryani *et al.*, 2019; Stieglitz *et al.*, 2018). Data collection entails the acquisition of pertinent social media data, including posts, comments, and metadata, from many social media platforms (Pääkkönen *et al.*, 2020:791). Data preparation entails the cleaning, structuring, and organising data to render it appropriate for analysis (Stieglitz *et al.*, 2018:157). Data analysis entails utilising many methodologies, including text mining, sentiment analysis, and network analysis, to get insights from the data (Pääkkönen *et al.*, 2020; Dang *et al.*, 2020; Subroto & Apriyana, 2019). Data visualisation entails clearly and intelligibly presenting analytical results, utilising tools such as charts, graphs, and dashboards (Pääkkönen *et al.*, 2020; Andryani *et al.*, 2019).

Though social media analytics offers numerous advantages, various problems and ethical considerations must also be addressed (Petrescu & Krishen, 2020; Watson *et al.*, 2020). These concerns encompass data privacy, algorithmic bias, and the possible exploitation of social media data (Petrescu & Krishen, 2020). Researchers and organisations must acknowledge these problems and create suitable regulations and frameworks to guarantee the ethical and responsible use of social media analytics (Watson *et al.*, 2020:459).

## **2.10 Essential metrics and insights obtained from social media analytics**

Social media analytics has become essential for businesses to obtain information and make informed decisions. Organisations can use the extensive data produced on social media platforms to derive significant insights that inform their strategic and operational objectives (Ausat, 2023; Fitzpatrick & Weissman, 2021). A crucial statistic derived from social media analytics is audience engagement. This measure offers insights into user engagement with a brand's content, including the number of likes, shares, comments, and click-throughs (Madila, 2024:220). By analysing audience

engagement, organisations can determine which content resonates most effectively with their target demographics and subsequently modify their social media strategies (Dewi and Nugroho, 2024). Social media analytics can be essential for organisations, allowing them to make informed decisions, enhance consumer experiences, and secure a competitive advantage in the market (Davcheva & Benlian, 2018:1319). Organisations can use this data to improve their marketing strategies, refine product development, and ultimately stimulate corporate growth (Abu-Salih *et al.*, 2021).

### **2.11 Challenges in implementing social media analytics in Small and Medium-sized Enterprises**

Social media has become recognised as an essential component of SMEs' marketing and communication strategies (Alam *et al.*, 2023; Odoom *et al.*, 2017). Utilising social media platforms, SMEs can competently rival larger firms, augment their brand visibility, and increase overall organisational performance (Alam *et al.*, 2023; Odoom *et al.*, 2017). However, incorporating social media analytics in small and medium-sized enterprises poses numerous challenges. A significant challenge is the lack of knowledge and skills among SME managers and staff about social media analytics (Madila *et al.*, 2022:87). Numerous SMEs are unaware of the many social media analytics tools and frameworks that can enhance the use of social media analytics (Madila *et al.*, 2022:87). As a result, they often rely on basic metrics such as likes, comments, and shares, without a comprehensive understanding of how to analyse and utilise the data (Madila *et al.*, 2022:88).

A further barrier is the constrained financial and human resources SMEs can allocate to social media analytics (McCann & Barlow, 2015:274). Small and medium-sized enterprises frequently lack the time and staff to efficiently strategise, execute, and explore their social media initiatives' return on investment (ROI) (McCann & Barlow, 2015:274). This may result in the absence of a systematic methodology for social media analytics, which is essential for attaining desired results (McCann & Barlow, 2015:275).

Notwithstanding these limitations, SMEs possess considerable opportunities to use social media analytics. Social media enables SMEs to gain insights into customer

behaviour, discover new market opportunities, and improve their marketing and communication strategies (Alam *et al.*, 2023). Through the proficient application of social media analytics, SMEs can acquire significant insights into customer behaviour, preferences, and engagement, thereby informing their product development, pricing strategies, and promotional activities (Odoom *et al.*, 2017).

One of the primary obstacles is the lack of technical skills and knowledge among SME owners and managers (Qalati *et al.*, 2022; Effendi *et al.*, 2020; Madila *et al.*, 2022; Maharjan, 2024). Numerous SMEs doubt the advantages of social media analytics and are reluctant to embrace these technologies due to perceived complexity and ambiguity around their application. Resource limitations, including restricted financial and human capital, hinder SMEs from investing in and executing social media analytics tools and strategies (Qalati *et al.*, 2022; Maharjan, 2024; Istanto *et al.*, 2022).

Competitive pressures and market dynamics can affect SMEs' adoption of social media analytics, as businesses may feel obligated to implement these technologies to maintain competitiveness (Alsharji *et al.*, 2018; Burgess *et al.*, 2017). Moreover, in many developing nations, insufficient governmental assistance and inadequate technological infrastructure can present considerable obstacles to adopting social media analytics in small and medium-sized enterprises (Maharjan, 2024; Istanto *et al.*, 2022).

## **2.12 Deficiency in technical proficiencies and instruction**

Numerous SMEs are merely conducting fundamental social media metrics, such as tallying likes, comments, and shares, lacking a comprehensive grasp of how to use social media analytics for strategic decision-making (Madila *et al.*, 2022:88). This is due to SMEs' deficiency in requisite skills, knowledge, and implementation frameworks for efficiently executing SMA (Madila *et al.*, 2022:88). The recent rise of social media as a key marketing tool has led to a lack of necessary knowledge among both researchers and professionals about how to turn social media data into useful information. This deficiency arises from the necessity for certain organisational competencies to adopt modern social media marketing tactics that SMEs frequently lack, including expertise in data and customer analytics (Li *et al.*, 2021).

Studies indicate that SMEs lack a definitive plan for utilising social media and frequently underestimate its impact on their financial success (Belás, Amoah, Dvorský & Šuleř, 2021:119). This is intensified by the reality that SMEs typically possess constrained resources and experience relative to larger enterprises, making it difficult to invest in and utilise sophisticated social media analytics technologies (Willets, Atkins & Stanier, 2020). This underscores the necessity for specialised training and infrastructure enhancements to assist SMEs in addressing their shortcomings in technical skills and understanding of social media analytics (Maharjan, 2024:27).

### **2.13 Prospects for small and medium enterprises in Free State Province**

Research indicates that opportunities for SME development in the Free State Province are influenced by internal and extrinsic factors related to sustainable entrepreneurship in adjacent provinces, mainly Gauteng (Nhemachena & Murimbika, 2018:115). This indicates potential analogous reasons for sustainable enterprise in the Free State Province. Moreover, governmental regulations and initiatives, like the Small Business Act, have fostered entrepreneurial endeavours and enhanced resource accessibility for SMEs in South Africa (Akinyemi & Adejumo, 2018:3).

Research has underscored the significance of social entrepreneurship and the impact of social entrepreneurial role models on entrepreneurial aspirations and behaviours in South Africa (Maziriri, 2024:278). Promoting and facilitating social entrepreneurship may be a viable strategy for developing SMEs in the Free State Province, as it corresponds with the region's need to tackle social and environmental issues. Although concrete information about these sectors in the Free State Province is scarce, the research indicates that offering extensive training and education may enhance driving schools (Malkin *et al.*, 2021:1466). However, there is insufficient information to validate claims regarding the specific environmental conditions required by upholstery enterprises, such as drought, as the sources do not directly relate to this sector.

### **2.14 Utilising social media analytics for competitive edge**

The effective execution of social media analytics necessitates a synthesis of technological competencies, organisational innovation, and entrepreneurial mindsets

(Nugroho, 2024; Onngam & Charoensukmongkol, 2024; Abdurohim *et al.*, 2022; Venciute *et al.*, 2023). Organisations must integrate social media data with additional business intelligence sources to extract significant insights (He *et al.*, 2019; Santos, 2023). The utilisation of social media analytics has demonstrated a beneficial effect on organisational performance and competitiveness, particularly for SMEs (Macatumbas-Corpuz & Bool, 2021; Rambe *et al.*, 2019; Eze *et al.*, 2021). Using social media data, SMEs can surmount resource limitations and gain a competitive advantage in the marketplace (Macatumbas-Corpuz & Bool, 2021; Rambe *et al.*, 2019).

Social media analytics enables organisations to discern developing trends and observe competitors' activity (Horng *et al.*, 2022; Mehmood *et al.*, 2022; Madila *et al.*, 2022). This allows them to swiftly adjust their plans and maintain a competitive advantage (Sasmita *et al.*, 2023; Onngam & Charoensukmongkol, 2024). Social media analytics can assist firms in improving brand awareness, customer interaction, and online reputation (Jian *et al.*, 2021; Thaker *et al.*, 2020; Zulfikar *et al.*, 2022). It can also formulate more successful marketing strategies, enhance customer service, and facilitate more educated company decisions (Nugroho & Angela, 2024; Hruška & Marešová, 2020; Zulfiqar *et al.*, 2022).

### **2.14.1 Facebook**

Facebook (now Meta) is a leading worldwide social media platform. It offers businesses tools to analyse user behaviour, preferences, and interactions, facilitating the effective customisation of their marketing strategies. Businesses can leverage data from Facebook analytics to determine which demographic categories exhibit the highest engagement with their content, enabling them to concentrate their marketing efforts on these groups for optimal impact (Rahardja, 2022:176). Facebook's analytical features allow businesses to categorise their audiences according to demographic criteria, like age, location, and interest. This segmentation is essential for targeted marketing tactics since it enables organisations to customise their messages for certain groups, enhancing the relevance and efficacy of their efforts (Piranda *et al.*, 2022:2).

By analysing these measures, firms may ascertain which content types most effectively engage their audience and modify their strategy accordingly. If a specific post style, such as videos or infographics, receives much more engagement than others, firms might prioritise these formats in subsequent ads (Singh et al., 2023). This iterative content creation method improves user engagement and promotes a more dynamic interaction between brands and consumers.

### **2.14.2 WhatsApp**

WhatsApp enables significant user interaction, which can be quantitatively assessed using message frequency, response times, and group participation rates. Grebelsky-Lichtman *et al.* (2020:73) extensively examined WhatsApp profiles and user interactions, uncovering insights into the motives for user participation and the app's communication capabilities. Their findings suggest that individuals frequently reconcile their need for privacy with their tendency to share information, which can be quantitatively assessed by user behaviour analytics. WhatsApp facilitates individual and group communication, making it an essential instrument for social engagement, information distribution, and marketing tactics. Analytics obtained from WhatsApp usage can yield insights into user behaviour, communication patterns, and the overall influence of social media on numerous life elements.

Naeem and Ozuem (2021:1029) examined the role of instant messaging applications, such as WhatsApp, in facilitating information sharing among healthcare workers and augmenting productivity and engagement in public sector hospitals. This use case illustrates the application of social media analytics to evaluate the efficacy of communication tools in professional settings, yielding significant insights into user interactions and their consequent effect on organisational performance. Ohme et al. saw a notable rise in mobile messaging during pivotal periods of the pandemic, such as governmental pronouncements, demonstrating how real-time analytics can monitor user behaviour in reaction to external events (Ohme *et al.*, 2020:2). This situational analysis of messaging patterns can guide public health policies and communication initiatives, illustrating the capacity of social media analytics to impact real-world results. The research underscores the significant role of WhatsApp and similar platforms as potent marketing instruments for shaping consumer inclination and

behaviours instruments shaping consumer inclination and behaviour across diverse sectors (Diantoro, 2024:84). By analysing user interactions and responses to marketing communications, organisations may customise their strategies to address consumers' wants more effectively.

### **2.14.3 “X” previously Twitter**

A fundamental part of Twitter (X) analytics is measuring user engagement. Engagement indicators, including retweets, likes, and replies, reflect the resonance of content with audiences. Leary *et al.* (2018:1) assert that while engagement rates on “X” are low in absolute terms, they may be considered high relative to the platform’s norms, indicating that even a minor percentage of engagement can reflect substantial interest or influence. This corresponds with the findings of Sharp *et al.* (2020:523), who underscore the significance of retweets as an indicator of diffusion, highlighting their role in revealing the reach and impact of particular tweets. Moreover, the relationship between social media activity and organisational reputation has been documented. Triemstra *et al.* (2018) demonstrate a relationship between hospitals' social media participation and their reputation scores, suggesting that increased interaction can improve perceived trustworthiness.

By analysing the attitudes conveyed via tweets, scholars can explore public opinion on diverse subjects, ranging from political matters to consumers’ goods. Yang (2022:1) illustrates how social media sentiment may profoundly affect stock values, highlighting Twitter's importance in financial markets. This sentiment analysis encompasses financial circumstances, public health, and social issues. The research by Xue *et al.* (2024) emphasises that Twitter serves as a medium for raising awareness and facilitating discourse on sexual violence, thereby enhancing social capital among many communities. The capacity to analyse attitudes enables organisations to customise their communication strategies efficiently, address public issues, and improve involvement.

### **2.14.4 TikTok**

TikTok's distinctive algorithm and user-generated content (UGC) framework offer a fertile ground for examining social media interactions and trends. TikTok's technology

enhances user engagement by tailoring content distribution according to users' behaviours. The For You Page (FYP) of the platform employs intricate algorithms that explore user activities, including likes, shares, and comments, to create a tailored feed that optimises engagement (Bhandari & Bimo, 2020). This algorithmic method improves user experience and offers significant insights for marketers and content developers targeting specific groups. Research indicates that TikTok's user demographic primarily comprises younger persons, with around 62% of users aged 10 to 29 years (Fratlicelli *et al.*, 2021:2). This demographic knowledge is essential for brands targeting younger people via social media marketing.

The interaction metrics on TikTok, including views, likes, comments, and shares, are essential markers of content performance. Studies have shown that certain content characteristics, including humour and relatability, affect user engagement (Li *et al.*, 2021:262). During the COVID-19 pandemic, public health organisations used TikTok to convey information, with videos in engaging styles achieving excellent interaction rates (Li *et al.*, 2021:262). This underscores the significance of content planning in optimising interaction on the platform.

#### **2.14.5 Instagram**

Instagram's analytics functionalities, primarily via its Insights feature, provide users with essential data regarding audience engagement, content efficacy, and overall activity. This tool enables organisations and individual users to monitor metrics such as impressions, reach, and interactions, which are crucial for exploring the efficacy of their content initiatives (Alfajri *et al.*, 2019:42). Visualising this data will improve the decision-making process, allowing users to customise their content more effectively to align with the demands and interests of their audience (Alfajri *et al.*, 2019:42). Moreover, the incorporation of social media analytics into marketing plans has markedly enhanced engagement and brand recognition, as demonstrated by numerous studies that underscore the positive relationship between the effective use of analytics and marketing results (Kuntjoro, 2023; Soelaiman, 2023).

The influence of Instagram on users' behaviours and perceptions is significant. Studies demonstrate that the extent of Instagram usage can markedly affect users' self-esteem

and social connections (Sekarlangit *et al.*, 2022; Romero-Rodríguez *et al.*, 2020). Users frequently partake in social comparison, exploring their lives against the curated photos and lifestyles showcased by others on the platform. This phenomenon may result in beneficial and detrimental psychological effects, contingent upon the information consumed and the user's self-image (Trajković, 2022; Liesay, 2023). Thus, comprehending these dynamics via analytics can aid in creating material that promotes positive engagement and alleviates adverse impacts.

#### **2.14.6 YouTube**

YouTube is a leading place for sharing content and interacting with people, giving businesses and creators the information, they need to plan their strategies. YouTube measures performance mainly by looking at watch time and audience retention, which give an idea of how long people stay with a video. Goncalves (2017) proved that the length of time a video is watched relates to more likes, shares, and emotional reactions in comments, meaning that retention strongly reflects how involved the audience is. YouTube's algorithm gives a lot of importance to watch time when deciding which videos to suggest to people who are new to the platform.

Besides tracking views, YouTube offers creators useful insights about their viewers' age, how they find the channel, and what devices they are using. Organisations can use likes, comments, and shares to find out how their content affects people's emotions and actions (Claesson and Mars, 2024). If many people stop watching soon after the video starts, it might be a sign that the beginning or the speed of the video should be improved. It has been found in social media marketing that analysing these patterns frequently helps improve the way content is presented, the brand's messaging, and how long viewers stay engaged (Georgakopoulo *et al.*, 2020).

YouTube makes it possible for users to monitor the click-through rate on cards and end screens, so they can judge how well a video directs viewers to take actions like subscribing or visiting a site. As a result, marketers and communicators can make their strategies better by relying on data from users to increase visibility and engagement. For this reason, YouTube acts as a place for content and also collects a lot of

information, which is important for groups trying to reach and engage people from various age groups.

## **2.15 Emerging trends in social media analytics for small and medium enterprises**

Incorporating social media analytics into the operational structures of SMEs has become a crucial trend, influencing their strategic decision-making and overall business performance. Nugroho (2024:169) asserts that proficiently applying social media analytics can augment SMEs' strategic orientation and adaptability, enhancing their decision-making processes and overall market performance. Gupta (2023) emphasises the necessity of integrating developed design trends into social media plans to improve business efficiency and growth, especially among Indian SMEs. The fluidity of social media requires SMEs to consistently modify their strategies to correspond with changing consumer behaviours and market dynamics (Kwayu, 2021).

Li *et al.* (2020) contend that, although social media has evolved into a strategic marketing instrument, numerous SMEs lack the expertise to transform social media data into actionable insights. This gap highlights the necessity for SMEs to cultivate specific organisational competencies that enable the efficient use of social media analytics. By cultivating a culture that promotes innovation and data-informed decision-making, SMEs can more effectively leverage social media to improve their marketing strategies and consumer engagement initiatives (Li *et al.*, 2020). Khanal, Akhtaruzzaman and Kularatne (2021) propose that social media can augment knowledge and queries among stakeholders, improving the total engagement of SMEs with their communities. Nonetheless, they warn that social media may not consistently provide a comprehensive grasp of Corporate Social Responsibility issues, thus hindering crucial debates.

Trifiro *et al.* (2022:2) underscore that SMEs can leverage media events to enhance their exposure and engagement within their communities, indicating that involvement in prominent social and media events can produce considerable advantages for SMEs. This corresponds with Tiwasing's (2021:1897) results, which suggest that social media networks are essential for enhancing business performance and growth in SMEs.

Tajvidi and Karami (2021) contend that social media augments SMEs' capacities to improve their performance by generating value through efficient consumer involvement. Marolt et al. (2022:3) corroborate this claim, emphasising the intermediary function of relational social commerce capabilities and competitive advantage in utilising social media to enhance commercial results. Engaging clients via social media enhances brand loyalty and promotes recommendations and repeat business, which is essential for the viability of SMEs.

## **2.16 Analytics of social media in rural and semi-urban regions**

The analysis of social media in rural and semi-urban areas is a complex topic that includes communication patterns, health information distribution, community involvement, and economic growth. Studies demonstrate that social media platforms can facilitate information diffusion, enabling rural communities to obtain essential health information and participate in debates that geographical limitations would otherwise restrict (Wang *et al.*, 2021; Wigh *et al.*, 2018). During the COVID-19 pandemic, social media emerged as a principal information source for rural communities, enabling conversations regarding health guidelines and community solutions (Cuomo *et al.*, 2020; Ahmed *et al.*, 2023). This transition highlights the significance of social media as a medium for public health communication, especially in regions with restricted healthcare access (Boyd *et al.*, 2023).

The psychological effects of social media use in rural locations have been examined, indicating that persons in these locales frequently employ social media to mitigate feelings of loneliness and to obtain social support (Mehmet *et al.*, 2020; Coman *et al.*, 2023). Numerous research indicates that the augmented duration of social media usage during lockdowns underscores a dependence on these platforms for sustaining social connections and obtaining information (Mehmet *et al.*, 2020; Tiwari, Lane & Alam, 2019). This phenomenon indicates that social media can improve mental well-being in rural populations by offering a sense of community and belonging that may be absent in their physical surroundings (Ahmed, Vidal-Alaball & Vilaseca, 2021; Vos, 2023).

Social media analytics can substantially impact the economic outcomes of SMEs in rural regions. Social media for marketing and consumer involvement is essential for the sustainability and expansion of these enterprises (Escobar-Viera *et al.*, 2022; Tiwasing, 2021). Research indicates that women-led enterprises in rural areas frequently encounter digital barriers, hindering their engagement in social media business networks (Escobar-Viera *et al.*, 2022). Individuals who use social media can augment their visibility and outreach, facilitating local economic development (Jones *et al.*, 2021; Ali, 2023). Analytics obtained from social media interactions can guide business strategy, enabling rural firms to comprehend consumer behaviour and preferences more effectively (Subejo *et al.*, 2019:333).

Community participation constitutes a vital component of social media analytics in rural environments. Social media platforms enable community members to mobilise around local concerns, allowing their participation in decision-making processes that impact their lives (Zulfiqar *et al.*, 2022; Zhang, 2024). Social media has facilitated engagement in rural tourist development, enabling residents to disseminate their experiences and advocate for local attractions (Zhang, 2024; Sang & Ha, 2020). This participative method empowers individuals and cultivates a sense of ownership and pride among their communities (Joo *et al.*, 2020:2).

Notwithstanding the myriad advantages, obstacles persist in the efficient use of social media in rural regions. The digital divide, marked by inequalities in technology access and digital literacy, persists in obstructing the complete potential of social media (Boyd *et al.*, 2023; Liu *et al.*, 2023). Many rural inhabitants have inadequate internet connectivity, hindering their ability to interact successfully with social media platforms (Boyd *et al.*, 2023; Mehmet *et al.*, 2020). The prevalence of disinformation on social media presents considerable dangers, especially in health communication, where erroneous information can result in detrimental behaviours (Liegel *et al.*, 2019; Escobar-Viera *et al.*, 2020). To tackle these issues, focused measures are necessary to advance digital infrastructure and elevate media literacy within rural communities (Liu *et al.*, 2023:2).

## **2.17 Chapter summary**

This chapter on social media analysis for SMEs thoroughly examined social media's crucial impact on improving these businesses' performance and sustainability. The literature suggests that social media is an essential instrument for SMEs, facilitating consumer engagement, product promotion, and enhancement of market standing. This chapter consolidated findings from various research to clarify the diverse advantages of social media for SMEs, especially in marketing, customer interaction, and overall business performance. Social media platforms were widely acknowledged as economical marketing instruments for SMEs, enabling them to compete with larger entities despite constrained resources.

Still, some obstacles were also recognized. SMEs often find it hard to use the data they get from social media to make useful decisions. There are not many opportunities for training and using digital tools in rural and semi-urban communities. A lack of proper infrastructure and the absence of fast internet still prevent some people from using social media well. Besides, when people have low digital literacy and receive misinformation, it becomes a significant threat in public health settings. This means that even though social media has a huge potential, its advantages are not open to everyone, so extra help and regulations are needed.

The following chapter, Chapter 3: Methodology, outlines the study's methodology, how data was collected, and the ways it was analyzed. It outlines the study's approach and lets readers know how reliability, validity, and ethics were managed.

## CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the methodology that was adopted to achieve the set research objectives and answer the raised research questions. This entails that the presented methodology was considered the most appropriate to adopt for gaining insights into the research approach, the research design, the data collection method, the data collection analysis method, and ethical considerations.

### 3.2 Research paradigm

A research paradigm, according to Singh (2019), is a set of practices and beliefs that guide researchers in undertaking research, including the nature of knowledge, the nature of reality, and the methods used to explore phenomena. Kaushik & Walsh (2024) defines a research paradigm as a framework containing ways of thinking, basic assumptions, and methodologies commonly accepted within a scientific community, which shapes the way research problems are approached and understood. A common feature across these definitions is the emphasis that a research paradigm is a guiding framework that shapes researchers' methodologies, beliefs, and approaches to investigate and understand a phenomenon. Coe *et al.* (2021), Nassaj (2020), and Morse (2020) identify positivism, interpretivism, and pragmatism as three common research paradigms.

Positivism is grounded in the belief that knowledge is drawn from observable phenomena and empirical evidence (Muzari *et al.*, 2022). According to Nassaj (2020), positivism insists on the use of scientific methods to collect data, usually through measurable approaches such as surveys and experiments. Kaushik & Walsh (2024) highlights that positivism emphasises that reality is objective; therefore, it can be understood through measurement and analysis. Morse (2020) explains that positivism is mainly characterised by a focus on generalisation, causality, and theoretical development of outcome predictions. Allan (2020) points out that scholars operating within the positivism paradigm usually seek to establish principles and laws that have a universal application, relying on quantitative methods to validate findings. Patel and

Patel (2019) emphasise that positivism is instrumental in fields such as the social sciences and natural sciences, where objective data collection and analysis are important for establishing reliable conclusions.

On the other hand, as Morse (2020) highlights, interpretivism is centred on the subjective nature of human experience and the value of examining the meaning individuals attach to their interactions and actions. Nassaj (2020) explains that interpretivism is rooted in the belief that reality varies from person to person because it is socially constructed. Thus, Ugwu *et al.* (2021) clarify that interpretivism favours qualitative methods, such as interviews, focus groups, and case studies, to gain in-depth insights into participants' opinions, contexts, and experiences. Singh (2019) argues that, by focusing on the complexities of social phenomena, interpretivism seeks to get into the underlying motivations, cultural factors, and beliefs that shape human behaviour. Accordingly, as Patel and Patel (2019) indicate, interpretivism is valuable where the understanding of a research problem is grounded in understanding human experience, whether in society or the workplace.

Pragmatism offers a more practical and flexible approach, integrating elements from both interpretivism and positivism (Harris *et al.*, 2019). Morse (2020) explains that pragmatism emphasises that the truth of an idea or theory is determined by its applicability to real-world problems and practical consequences. This, according to Patel and Patel (2019), makes the researcher within this paradigm open to employing a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods, adopting the most reliable tools based on the research questions. Therefore, Nassaj (2020) views pragmatism as an adaptive approach that enables a more comprehensive understanding of complex issues, as it values both subjective interpretations and objective measurements.

This study is grounded in the principles of interpretivism, which, according to Patel and Patel (2019), emphasise that reality is subjective and varies from person to person. This paradigm allowed the researcher to delve deeply into the subjective interpretations and experiences of social media analytics in different SMEs driving schools in Free State. Thus, by adopting interpretivism, the study captured the contextual and rich insights that quantitative measures usually miss.

### 3.3 Research approach

Research approach, according to Harris *et al.* (2019), entails the general plan for undertaking a study, encompassing the overall strategy, data collection and analysis methods. Allan (2020) clarifies, noting that research approach is simply a framework that outlines the way or process of conducting research, which includes quantitative, mixed-methods and qualitative. Three research approaches that permeate across research methods are quantitative, mixed-methods and qualitative (Allan, 2020 & Muzari *et al.*, 2022).

Quantitative methods emphasise the systematic collection and analysis of numerical data to identify relationships, patterns, and causal connections across variables (Coe *et al.*, 2021). Rooted in positivism, as Kaushik & Walsh (2024) indicates, this approach embraces the assumption that reality can be objectively quantified and measured. Singh (2019) explains that when employing quantitative methods, researchers use controlled experiments, structured surveys, and statistical analyses to collect data from large samples, enabling the generalisability of findings to broader populations. Allan (2020) highlights that quantitative research involves applying statistical tools to establish correlations and hypotheses, providing a structured and rigorous framework for understanding phenomena.

In contrast, qualitative research focuses on understanding the richness of social contexts and human experiences (Patel & Patel, 2019). According to Kaushik & Walsh (2024), qualitative research is anchored on the belief that people, whether in society or the workplace, construct meaning through their perception and interaction. Therefore, Harris *et al.* (2019) establish that in qualitative research, researchers use methods such as focus groups and in-depth interviews to collect detailed accounts from individuals, allowing them to explore experiences and opinions regarding a particular matter. Patel and Patel (2019) explain that the depth of qualitative research uncovers insights that are often missed in quantitative research, such as reasons behind certain actions or the perceived impact of social dynamics. Nassaj (2020) points out that typically in qualitative research, the analysis involves identifying themes and patterns through coding, which helps to illuminate the complex realities of participants' experiences. Singh (2019) emphasises that qualitative research provides

an important lens for understanding the complexities of social phenomena, making it crucial for exploring under-researched and new areas.

Mixed-methods research combines the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative approaches, building a more holistic understanding of a complex issues (Morse, 2020). This approach, according to Nassaj (2020), embraces the notion that different aspects of a research question may call for different types of data, allowing researchers to use quantitative insights to inform qualitative analysis and vice versa. According to Muzari et al. (2022), the integration cements the richness of the findings, as it captures both personal narratives and statistical trends. Singh (2019) argues that triangulating data from various sources using mixed-methods research not only increases the validity of the findings but also provides a comprehensive view that can inform more informed conclusions and practical applications.

The study adopted a qualitative research approach. The decision to adopt qualitative research stemmed from the realisation that social media analytics was a subjective phenomenon. There are variations in the types of social media analytics and strategies each company uses. This decision is supported by Kaushik and Walsh (2024), who argues that qualitative research is the best fit for exploring subjective issues.

### **3.4 Research design**

The term research design has received varying definitions in literature (Allan, 2020; Coe *et al.*, 2021; Patel & Patel, 2019). However, Nassaj (2020), Muzari *et al.* (2022) and Morse (2020) identify qualitative research design as phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, case study and narrative inquiry.

Ethnography, according to Allan (2020), is a qualitative research design grounded in anthropology that involves the study of communities and culture. Coe *et al.* (2021) point out that, using ethnography, researchers engage in participant observation by spending long periods of time within a particular community to gain a close understanding of the social practices, beliefs, and behaviours of its members. Nassaj (2020) points out that in ethnography, data collection methods include interviews, field notes, and artefacts, providing a holistic view of the cultural dynamics at play. Ugwu

*et al.* (2021) emphasise that ethnography is more useful for exploring complex social interactions and understanding how cultural contexts shape individuals' experiences and behaviours.

The case study's research design is centred on an in-depth exploration of a particular individual, situation, and group within their real-life context (Patel & Patel, 2019). Researchers gather data from multiple sources, such as observations, interviews, and documents, to gain a comprehensive understanding of the case (Harris *et al.*, 2019). According to Coe *et al.* (2021), case study research allows for in-depth analysis of complex or unique issues. Allan (2020) adds that case studies can provide rich insights into specific phenomena and contribute to theory development by illustrating the way particular variables interact in the real-world setting.

Phenomenology, as Singh (2019) maintains, aims to understand and interpret the experiences of individuals. According to Kaushik & Walsh (2024), this design focuses on capturing the essence of a particular issue from the perspective of those experiencing it. Morse (2020) explains that using this design, researchers often use focus groups and in-depth interviews to tap into participants' experiences. The analysis of themes, according to Nassaj (2020), often involves identifying themes that emerge from particular narrations.

Grounded theory focuses on developing a theoretical framework drawing on data collected from participants (Patel & Patel, 2019). Morse (2020) explains that contrary to other qualitative designs that start with a predefined, grounded theory begins with data collection to generate theories that manifest from the research process. According to Allan (2020), interviews, observations, and focus groups are the main methods used to collect data in grounded theory. Singh (2019) argues that grounded theory is particularly valuable in areas where existing theories may not convincingly explain phenomena, making researchers build new theories based on real-world insights.

Narrative inquiry, as Allan (2020) explains, centres on the stories individuals tell about their experiences and lives. Muzari *et al.* (2022) maintain that narrative inquiry places an emphasis on the importance of personal narratives as a means of understanding

how people construct meaning and make sense of their experiences. Narrative inquiry, according to Morse (2020), is all about exploring how individual events and journeys shape them.

### **3.5 Target population**

According to Kaushik & Walsh (2024), a population entails the entire group of people, observations or entities the study seeks to study. Therefore, the target population of this study is driving schools in the Free State Province, South Africa. In particular, there are about 18 formally registered driving schools in this province.

#### **3.5.1 Sampling**

Sampling, as Allan (2020) defines it, refers to the process of choosing a subset of units or individuals from a larger population to draw conclusions about that population. According to Morse (2020), sampling methods are categorised as probability and non-probability sampling. This study used a non-probability sampling method, particularly the purposive sampling technique, to select participants from the target population. Singh (2019) defines purposive sampling as a sampling method where the researcher selects participants based on specific characteristics or criteria relevant to the study. The researcher engaged participants who have managerial roles in the 18 driving schools. The decision to employ purposive sampling for this study is supported by Nassaj (2020), who argues that it is appropriate for gathering in-depth insights from individuals who possess particular experiences, attributes, and knowledge that are critical to the research objectives. Regarding the sample size, Braun and Clarke (2012) and Morse (2020) agree that sample sizes in qualitative research are not determined by statistical calculations but by data saturation. Coe *et al.* (2021) define data saturation as the point at which no new information is emerging from the data collection process. Kaushik & Walsh (2024) further explains data saturation as a stage where the researcher feels confident that they have gathered sufficient data to understand the phenomenon being studied and that further data collection is unlikely to provide additional information. The researcher initially expected data saturation to be reached with just 10 participants. However, while conducting the interviews, the researcher observed data saturation when interviewing the 15th participant.

This study, therefore, was anchored on the phenomenology research design. Thus, by engaging SME owners and managers through in-depth interviews, the study sought to capture participants' lived experiences and insights concerning how social media analytics influence business growth and profitability. The decision to adopt this research design is supported by Morse (2020), who argue that phenomenology is the most appropriate design to adopt for issues that vary from person to person, society to society and organisation to organisation.

### **3.6 Data collection**

The researcher used in-depth interviews to collect data. As Allan (2020) advises, in-depth interviews were primarily chosen for their ability to gather rich, detailed insights from participants' experiences and opinions pertaining to the perceived impact of social media analytics on SMEs in Free State Province. The researcher realised that, as Nassaj (2020) explains, interviews enable a conversational format that encourages participants to express their thoughts freely, allowing the researcher to explore complex topics.

The interviews were conducted in English. Each session, as Morse (2020) advises, was recorded, allowing the researcher to focus on interviewing participants rather than taking down notes. The meeting took place at mutually agreed-upon locations, such as participants' offices or meeting rooms, ensuring a conducive environment for discussions. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes, allowing for sufficient time for in-depth exploration of the issues under investigation.

### **3.7 Data analysis**

The study used thematic analysis to analyse the findings. Thematic analysis, according to Muzari *et al.* (2022), is a qualitative data analysis method that involves identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns or themes within the data. Nassaj (2020) argues that thematic analysis provides a flexible framework for interpreting various aspects of the research topic, allowing researchers to organise and describe their datasets in rich detail. The researcher followed the six steps of thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

First, the researcher familiarised himself with the data through repeated readings of the interview transcripts, which enabled him to immerse himself in the content and start identifying initial ideas (Morse, 2020). Second, the researcher generated initial codes by identifying segments of data that are relevant to the research questions, systematically marking these segments (Patel & Patel, 2019). Third, themes were searched for by collating the codes into broader patterns, considering how different codes could be combined to form overarching themes (Coe *et al.*, 2021). In the fourth step, the researcher reviewed the themes to ensure they accurately represent the dataset, refining them as necessary and eliminating any that were weak or overlapping (Williman, 2024). The fifth step involved defining and naming the themes, providing clear descriptions that articulate the essence of each theme and its significance to the research questions (Lim *et al.*, 2024). Finally, the researcher produced the report, weaving together the themes and supporting data extracts to tell a coherent story about the findings, ensuring that the analysis relates back to the research objectives and highlights the participants' perspectives (Morse, 2020).

### **3.8 Trustworthiness**

According to Coe *et al.* (2021), trustworthiness in qualitative research refers to the rigour and credibility of a study's findings, which ensure that the results are reliable and valid. Morse (2020) and Singh (2019) agree that trustworthiness encompasses several key criteria: credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability. To ensure credibility, as Kaushik & Walsh (2024) advises, the researcher employed member checking, where participants were invited to review and validate the findings and interpretations drawn from their interviews. This process not only enhanced the accuracy of the data but also strengthened the relationship between the researcher and participants. For transferability, the researcher provided a detailed description of the research context, participants, and findings, allowing others to assess how the results apply to different settings or populations. This rich contextual information supported comparisons with other studies (Nassaj, 2020). In terms of confirmability, following Allan (2020)'s recommendation, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal to document their thoughts, decisions, and biases throughout the research process. This transparency helped ensure that the findings are based on participants' responses rather than the researcher's preconceived notions. Lastly, to enhance

dependability, drawing on Sim *et al.* (2024)'s suggestion, the researcher established a clear audit trail by documenting each stage of the research process, including data collection, analysis methods, and any changes made along the way. This thorough documentation allowed for external scrutiny and verification of the research process, thereby reinforcing the study's trustworthiness.

### **3.9 Ethical considerations**

Ethical considerations in research refer to the principles and practices adopted to protect the rights, safety, and well-being of study participants (Morse, 2020). Ethical considerations were vital in this research to ensure the well-being and protection of participants. The researcher outlined several key ethical principles that were upheld throughout the study.

- i.) **Ensuring that participants have given consent:** The researcher obtained informed consent from all participants. This entails providing comprehensive and clear information about the study's procedures, purpose, potential risks and benefits, and the rights of the participants. Only those who signed the consent letter were engaged (Nassaj, 2020).
- ii.) **Ensuring no harm comes to participants:** The researcher took measures to avoid any potential psychological, physical, or emotional harm to participants. Participation in the study was completely voluntary, and participants were allowed to withdraw at any time they felt doing so without any associated consequences (Allan, 2020).
- iii.) **Ensuring confidentiality and anonymity:** The researcher ensured privacy. Participants' personal information was protected, and their identities were kept confidential. In presenting the research findings, the researcher anonymised the participants' names to further protect their privacy (Patel & Patel, 2019).

#### **iv.) Obtaining Permission and Ethical Clearance**

The researcher contacted the right authorities and got formal approval to gain access to the study areas before collecting data. To guarantee the study was ethically correct, the university's research ethics committee gave its approval. It

was confirmed that all parts of the research, such as data gathering, analysis, and reporting, would be done responsibly and in an ethical way.

### **3.10 Chapter summary**

The study, as the chapter shows, adopted a qualitative research methodology grounded in the principles and assumptions of the interpretivist research paradigm. The study was premised on the phenomenology research design. In particular, the study used in-depth interviews to collect data from a sample of 15 participants. The chapter also reveals the adopted method of data analysis as thematic analysis. The following chapter, therefore, presents and discusses the findings of the study.

## CHAPTER 4 PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on presenting the findings from the qualitative study. The findings are presented guided by the thematic analysis approach. Furthermore, the findings are discussed making use of literature and theories reviewed in this study. The research questions and objectives represent the main themes of the study. The main purpose of the study was to assess the impact of social media analytics on the growth and profitability of SMEs in Free State Province. The subthemes emerged from the interview data. The chapter begins by presenting the background characteristics of the participants in the research.

### 4.2 Demographics of participants

The researcher successfully interviewed 15 owners of the SMEs operating in the Free State Province. The background characteristics of the participants are summarised in Table 4.1.

**Table 4.1: Background characteristics of participants**

<b>Background characteristics</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	9
Female	6
<b>Age</b>	
30-40 years	10
41-50 years	5
<b>Educational qualifications</b>	
Secondary education	2
Matric	7
Tertiary education	6
<b>Years of operation of the SME</b>	
Less than 5 years	3
5-10 years	7

<b>Background characteristics</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Over 10 years	5

Among the engaged participants, nine were males, and the other six were females. In addition, 10 of the participants were aged between 30 and 40 years, whilst the remaining five were aged between 40 and 50 years. In terms of educational qualifications, six had tertiary educational qualifications, including diplomas, undergraduate degrees, and master's degrees in various disciplines; seven had matriculation certification; and two had secondary education. The participants demonstrated sufficient education and literacy to comprehend the interview questions. Hence, they cooperated well.

In addition, seven participants reported that their SMEs had been operational for a period of 5 to 10 years, five reported that their businesses had been established for over 10 years, and three reported that their businesses had been operational for less than 5 years. These findings further show that the participants had in-depth knowledge pertaining to issues of sustainability and growth of their businesses. Furthermore, the participants were asked to indicate whether they employed social media in their businesses and all the participants highlighted that their SMEs employed social media, particularly in marketing products and services. The participants also showed that their SMEs were in different sectors, including retail, agribusiness, construction, services, automobiles, electronics, and manufacturing.

### **4.3 Influence of social media analytics on the expansion of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises**

The study aimed to assess the influence of social media analytics on the expansion of SMEs in Free State Province. The participants in the study highlighted that social media analytics had helped in the expansions of the SMEs. One of the interview participants stated:

*“Social media analytics have really helped my business as I have witnessed some notable growth by serving a wider market without geographical boundaries”* [Participant 1; Interview]

Another participant stated:

*“Well, my business has expanded over the few years both in terms of customers and size. I largely attribute this growth to the use of social media platforms mainly for marketing our services and communicating with both new and old customers”* [Participant 4; Interview]

Several other participants reported experiencing significant growth in their businesses due to the use of social media analytics. The following excerpts are some of the participants' quotations as verbatim evidence.

*“Personally, I would like to give all thanks to my marketing team for their expertise in social media marketing where we have seen an increase in market coverage due to the outcomes of social media analytics”* [Participant 5; Interview]

*“To my business, social media analytics have proved to be the engine as I have and I am still observing significant growth. Through social media, I now have opened another branch following gaining more customers through content marketing on various social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp”* [Participant 8; Interview]

*“I have no doubt that social media analytics have really helped my business in growing and expanding. I started my business with a few customers but now I have hundreds of customers and I am now serving other customers out of the district”* [Participant 11; Interview]

The aforementioned findings from the interviews indicate that the majority of the participants were in agreement that social media analytics have helped in the expansion of their SMEs. From these findings, it can be settled that social media analytics represent significant and effective tools for driving expansion and growth of the SMEs in Free State Province. This is because social media analytics help the SMEs in marketing their products and services without geographical boundaries such that they gain a larger market audience. Social media analytics also enhance customer experiences, leading to customer loyalty and ultimately expansion of the SMEs’

markets. The findings are consistent with findings from existing studies which found that social media analytics promote growth and expansion of SMEs by enhancing customer loyalty and satisfaction (Wibowo *et al.*, 2020; Pitafi, 2024).

Furthermore, other previous studies have shown that employment of social media in marketing is essential for the sustainability and expansion of SMEs (Escobar-Viera *et al.*, 2022; Tiwasing, 2021). Similarly, Chatterjee *et al.* (2021) found that adoption and effective use of social media marketing promotes sustainable growth and expansion of SMEs in emerging economies. Ghazwani and Alzahrani (2023) also found that SMEs' utilisation of social media positively influences their growth and expansion.

#### **4.4 Effect of social media analytics on profitability within SMEs in the Free State Province**

Furthermore, the study aimed to explore the effect of social media analytics on profitability within SMEs in the Free State Province. The participants in the study were therefore asked to share their perceptions and experiences regarding the effect of social media analytics on the profitability of their SMEs. The participants highlighted that social media analytics enhanced the profitability for the SMEs in terms of increased profits, sales, and reduced costs.

##### **4.4.1 Sub-theme 1: Reduced costs**

Furthermore, the findings from the interviews show that some of the participants highlighted that social media analytics enhanced the profitability of the SMEs through reduced costs. Reduced costs mean increased profits. One of the participants stated:

*“Well, social media has resulted in increased profits mainly due to its cost-effectiveness. Through employment of social media in marketing, we have realized reduced marketing costs which raised the profits of the business.”*

[Participant 4; Interview]

Another participant also mentioned that social media increased the profitability of the SME through low costs:

*“There are many ways in which social media increases profitability of small businesses like mine. Social media is one of the cheapest marketing tool we have been using and this has resulted in my business recording higher profits than ever.”* [Participant 6; Interview]

Participant 8, a business owner, also said:

*“Social media has several benefits to my business including increased profits through significant cost reductions in marketing our products”* [Participant 8; Interview]

The issue of reduced costs leading to higher profits was also mentioned by Participant 10, who stated that:

*“Yes, I can say that social media analytics have increased profitability of my business over the past few years. The main way they increase profits is through low costs associated with social media marketing compared to other traditional marketing were used to employ in marketing our products”* [Participant 10; Interview]

The findings reported indicate that there were agreements among participants regarding the influence of social media analytics on profitability through reduced marketing costs. The findings mean that social media also represent a significant tool for enhancing profitability of the SMEs. According to the profit-maximisation theory, cost-minimisation is a significant strategy for profit maximisation in firms. This is because high profits reduce firm profits. The findings support the results of Vos (2023), who found that social media represents a cost-effective strategy for firms seeking high profitability. Other previous studies also found that social media offers businesses a cost-effective and efficient means to engage a broad audience and advertise their products or services, leading to high profit margins (Putri & Kurniasih, 2020; Kwayu, 2021; Lupo & Stroman, 2020; Gökerik, 2024; Novandari, 2023).

#### **4.4.2 Sub-theme 2: Increased sales**

The other subtheme that emerged from the findings pertaining to the impacts of social media analytics on the profitability of SMEs was increased sales. The participants in the study highlighted that social media analytics enhanced the profitability of their firms through increased sales. The following are some of the substantiating interview responses pertaining to social media analytics and an increase in sales for the SMEs:

*“Social media has brought multiple benefits to my business enhancing profitability through increased sales. Our sales have been increasing due to use of social media in marketing particularly using social media influencers to market our beverage products.”* [Participant 1; Interview]

Participant 5 also had this to say:

*“Through social media, my business has gained profitability through increased sales as our market is now bigger and we get customers as far as from Gauteng and Mpumalanga Provinces.”* [Participant 5; Interview]

Participant 9 also remarked:

*“Social media analytics have proved to be significant drivers for profitability in my business. This is because, we gain new customers on a daily basis mainly due to e-word of mouth such that our sales have increased translating to increased profitability.”* [Participant 9; Interview]

From the findings, it can be concluded that social media analytics have significant positive influence on the profitability of SMEs in Free State Province through increased sales which translate to higher profits. Increased sales imply increased revenue for the SMEs and ultimately increased profits. The findings agree with Alfiqri et al. (2024) research which underscored the positive relationship between social media marketing and business profitability, particularly through sales growth. The research by Zhang (2022) also found that use of social media, especially Facebook and Instagram, can increase the profitability of SMEs through higher sales.

#### 4.4.3 Sub-theme 3: Increased profits

The participants in the interviews reported that their SMEs had witnessed significant profits through use of social media. One of the participants stated:

*“Since we started making use of social media, I have seen a significant increase in profits for my business due to high inflow of customers we get through social media marketing.”* [Participant 2; Interview]

Another participant also mentioned that social media analytics had enhanced the SME's profits, stating:

*“Social media has brought several benefits to my business but the major and notable benefit is through high profits we have been realizing following utilisation of social media as a marketing tool.”* [Participant 3; Interview]

Participant 7 also indicated that social media use had increased profits of the SME stating that:

*“For my business, I am seeing significant profits due to the outcomes of social media platforms. I have seen that my profit margins have increased from 10% to over 30% over the past few years. This is largely attributable to social media marketing which has helped us to gain more customers.”* [Participant 7; Interview]

These findings show that social media analytics have significant positive impacts on the profitability of the SMEs in Free State Province. The participants mentioned that their firms have reported higher profits due to social media use in their operations. The findings support the findings by Ghazwani and Alzahrani (2023) that use of social media enhances profits of SMEs. Similarly, other studies have found that social media analytics significantly influence the profitability of SMEs (Kumar, 2024; Amoah *et al.*, 2021).

## **4.5 Obstacles Small and Medium-sized Enterprises in the Free State Province encountered using social media analytics**

The study also aimed to determine the obstacles SMEs in the Free State Province encountered using social media analytics. The owners of the SMEs, who participated in the interviews, mentioned several obstacles. The widely mentioned obstacles included resource shortage, unawareness of effective social media analytics tools and frameworks, perceived complexity and ambiguity and inadequate technological infrastructure. These represented the subthemes for the study.

### **4.5.1 Sub-theme 1: Critical resource shortage**

A significant number of the participants highlighted a critical shortage of resources, including skilled personnel, financial resources and technological resources. One of the participants remarked:

*“The obstacles are countless. However, the major ones to my business are shortage of resources particularly financial resources to fund social media marketing as sometimes we face financial constraints in engaging social media influencers” [Participant 3; Interview]*

The obstacle of shortage of resources was also highlighted by Participant 5, who stated:

*“The key challenge we are facing in employment of social media is lack of technological resources such as laptops as well as financial constraints” [Participant 5; Interview]*

Participant 8 stated:

*“My business faces several obstacles in utilising social media in my day-to-day operations. The major one is lack of marketing personnel with digital and social media skills such that at some point we use outsiders to manage our social media platforms” [Participant 8; Interview]*

In the same vein, participant 9 stated:

“The issue of resource shortage is the leading obstacle making us not optimally using social media in our business. Lack of financial resources to meet costs associated with social media utilisation such as internet costs” [Participant 9; Interview]

According to the findings, resource shortages in terms of human, technological, and financial resources represent the key obstacles encountered by SMEs in Free State Province. These result in some SMEs not employing social media at all, whereas others use it to some extent. Similarly, literature shows that one of the primary obstacles is the lack of technical skills and knowledge among SME owners and managers (Qalati *et al.*, 2022; Effendi *et al.*, 2020; Madila *et al.*, 2022; Maharjan, 2024). Istanto *et al.* (2022) also reported that the issue of resource limitations, such as restricted financial and human capital, hinder SMEs from investing in and executing social media analytics tools and strategies. The problems faced by SMEs with social media adoption become more serious as they lack enough resources, according to Huđek (2022). Financial constraints prevent SMEs from funding the implementation of SMEs, leading to the reluctance to adopt modern technologies. More studies reviewed in this study also indicated that the further barrier is the constrained financial and human resources SMEs can allocate to social media analytics (McCann & Barlow, 2015:274). Others also found that small and medium-sized enterprises frequently lack the time and staff to efficiently strategise, execute, and assess their social media initiatives’ return on investment (ROI) (McCann & Barlow, 2015:274).

#### **4.5.2 Sub-theme 2: Complexity and ambiguity associated with social media**

The findings from the study indicated that complexity and ambiguity associated with social media are among the key obstacles faced by SMEs. Four of the participants stated:

*“Although social media may look like something easy, there are some complexities associated with its use. Social media require some skills which some of us don’t have such that its use becomes so complex”* [Participant 2; Interview]

*“A significant obstacle facing most of us who run small businesses is complexity associated with social media as it requires frequent posts and feedback.”*  
[Participant 6; Interview]

*“There are significant complexities and ambiguities as well as uncertainties associated with social media use as there are issues of content creation and timing of posting content on social media platforms.”* [Participant 11; Interview]

From the aforementioned verbatim accounts of the participants, it has been noted that complexities and ambiguities associated with social media use are so many and these represent obstacles to effective utilisation of social media in the SME sector. These findings concur with the UTAUT theory, which highlights issues of ease of use and complexity in the adoption and utilisation of technological tools. The findings are in agreement with previous studies. For instance, previous studies showed that numerous SMEs are reluctant to embrace these technologies due to perceived complexity and ambiguity around their application (Qalati *et al.*, 2022; Maharjan, 2024; Istanto *et al.*, 2022). A significant challenge is the lack of knowledge and skills among SME managers and staff about social media analytics (Madila *et al.*, 2022:87).

#### **4.5.3 Sub-theme 3: Inadequate technological infrastructure**

The participants in the study also mentioned that inadequate technological infrastructure was among the key obstacles to the SMEs' utilisation of social media in Free State Province. One of the participants stated:

*“The other key challenge is of inadequate technological infrastructure particularly internet infrastructure to support effective employment of social media.”* [Participant 4; Interview]

Participant 12 also stated:

*“In addition to resource shortage, lack of supporting infrastructure is another key challenge we face in implementing social media as a marketing tool.”*  
[Participant 12; Interview]

Participant 13 also stated:

*“The obstacles are countless, but we have the issue in internet infrastructure which is poor or non-existing such that we face connectivity issues which negatively impacts our efforts of utilizing social media.”* [Participant 13; Interview]

The findings indicate that inadequate technological infrastructure is a key obstacle to SMEs' utilisation of social media in Free State Province. This is because the effectiveness of social media application largely relies on technological infrastructure as social media require internet access and connectivity. The findings are in agreement with those from the literature. For instance, a significant number of studies reported that in many developing nations, inadequate technological infrastructure presents considerable obstacles to adopting social media analytics by small and medium-sized enterprises (Maharjan, 2024; Istanto *et al.*, 2022). The obstacle of insufficient technological infrastructure acts as a major impediment for SMEs trying to boost their social media digital presence.

#### **4.5.4 Sub-theme 4: Lack of awareness on social media analytics tools and frameworks**

The other theme that emerged from the findings is lack of awareness of effective social media analytics instruments and tools. There are several social media analytics tools and instruments that can be employed by firms. However, the choice of these instruments depends on knowledge and awareness about them. One of the participants stated:

*“Well, one of the challenges is that most SME owners like me are not technologically savvy such that we do not know the most effective tools which bring out positive outcomes to the business.”* [Participant 5; Interview]

Another participant had this to say:

*“The main challenge we are facing is of limited knowledge about the available tools such that we end up using some tools and instruments are less effective.”* [Participant 14; Interview]

Participant 15 also stated:

*“We face several real challenges which include lack of knowledge of effective social media platforms and social media analytics instruments.”* [Participant 15; Interview]

According to the findings, lack of knowledge or awareness of the most effective social media analytics instruments represents a significant challenge for SMEs in Free State Province. The lack of awareness is detrimental, as this results in the SMEs employing less effective tools, ultimately leading to unsatisfactory results. The study by Madila (2021) also found that unawareness of the many social media analytics tools and frameworks impacts the effectiveness of social media analytics.

#### **4.6 The functions of social media platforms in augmenting customer engagement for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises**

Moreover, the study aimed to examine the function of social media platforms in augmenting customer engagement for SMEs. The participants in the interviews indicated that social media platforms have several functions in augmenting customer engagement for SMEs. One of the SME owners who participated in the study stated:

*“The role of social media platforms stands essential for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) like ours to improve customer engagement practices. Through platforms such as Instagram and WhatsApp, we have management to communicate and engage with our customers.”* [Participant 2; Interview]

Another participant stated:

*“Social media platforms particularly Facebook and Instagram have significant functions in enhancing customer engagement as they permit effective and efficient B2C interactions.”* [Participant 4; Interview]

Participant 7 and Participant 10 also underscored the important functions of social media platforms in augmenting customer engagement:

*“Social media platforms such as Facebook have significant functions in augmenting customer engagement. Through Facebook, we have been capable of timely posting engaging content as well as responding to customers’ questions, enquiries and queries leading to enhanced customer relationship. Videos and attractive content promote customer engagement”* [Participant 10; Interview]

The findings show that social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram play significant functions in augmenting customer engagement among the SMEs in Free State province. This is largely due to the interactive nature of the social media platforms, which leads to effective customer engagement and ultimately improves customer relationship management. Rahardja (2022) also reported that SMEs can leverage data from Facebook analytics to determine which demographic categories exhibit the highest engagement with their content, enabling them to concentrate their marketing efforts on these groups for optimal impact.

Similarly, Grebelsky-Lichtman *et al.* (2020:73) reported that platforms such as WhatsApp facilitate individual and group communication, making it an essential instrument for customer engagement. Naeem and Ozuem (2021:1029) also reported that instant social media messaging applications, such as WhatsApp, facilitate information sharing, thereby aiding in augmenting engagement with customers. Other studies have reported that social media platforms, such as TikTok, enhance user engagement by tailoring content distribution according to user behaviour (Bhandari & Bimo, 2020). The For You Page (FYP) of the platform employs intricate algorithms that assess user activities, including likes, shares, and comments, to create a customised feed that optimises engagement (Bhandari & Bimo, 2020).

#### **4.7 Efficacy of existing social media analytics instruments employed by Small and Medium-sized Enterprises in the Free State Province**

Lastly, the research aimed to assess the efficacy of existing social media analytics instruments employed by SMEs in the Free State Province. The findings from the interviews reveal the efficiency of existing social media analytics instruments employed

by the SMEs in the Free State Province. One of the participants in the interviews stated:

*“Due to financial constraints, we only employ Google Analytics as one of the instruments. This instrument has proved to be efficient in terms driving customer engagement.”* [Participant 3; Interview]

Another participant stated:

*“The analytics instruments we employ are very effective and efficient particularly Google Analytics which has enhanced online presence of the SME leading to increased customer engagement.”* [Participant 6; Interview]

Participant 14 also stated that:

*“The analytics instruments we are currently using such as Google Analytics and Facebook Insights have proved to be efficient towards positive customer engagement and ultimately profitability and sustainability”* [Participant 14; Interview]

In conclusion, the results show that social media analytics instruments such as Google Analytics, Facebook Insights, and Sprout Social are effective at enhancing customer engagement. Studies such as Li *et al.* (2021) also support that social media analytics tools and instruments play significant roles in enhancing customer engagement. Other scholars have also reported that analytical tools enable organisations and individual users to monitor metrics such as impressions, reach, and interactions, which are crucial for assessing the efficacy of their content initiatives (Alfajri *et al.*, 2019:42). Similarly, existing studies have also shown that incorporation of social media analytics into marketing plans markedly enhance engagement and brand recognition, as demonstrated by numerous studies that underscore the positive relationship between the effective use of analytics and marketing results (Kuntjoro, 2023; Soelaiman, 2023).

#### **4.8 Chapter summary**

The chapter presented the findings from the qualitative study. The thematic approach has been employed in presenting the findings from the interviews. In addition, findings

have been presented as per each research objective. The following chapter focuses on summarising key findings and providing conclusions, implications of findings, recommendations for practice and further research as well as limitations of the study.

## **CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **5.1 Introduction**

The previous chapter presented and discussed the qualitative findings of the study obtained by interviewing SME owners in the Free State Province of South Africa. The results demonstrated substantial implications for practice, necessitating the provision of managerial implications recommendations in this chapter. This chapter presents the conclusions drawn from the primary findings as well as the limitations of the study, leading to suggestions for further research. The chapter begins by revisiting the research objectives, followed by a summary of the study and its key findings.

### **5.2 Re-cap of research objectives**

#### **5.2.1 Primary objective**

- i.) To assess the impacts of social media analytics on the growth and profitability of SMEs in Free State Province.

#### **5.2.2 Secondary objectives**

- ii.) To assess the influence of social media analytics on the expansion of SMEs in the Free State Province.
- iii.) To explore the effect of social media analytics on profitability within SMEs in the Free State Province.
- iv.) To determine the obstacles SMEs in the Free State Province encountered using social media analytics.
- v.) To examine the function of social media platforms in augmenting customer engagement for SMEs in the Free State Province.
- vi.) To assess the efficacy of existing social media analytics instruments employed by SMEs in the Free State Province.

### **5.3 Summary of the study**

The main of the research was to assess the perceived impacts of social media analytics on the growth and profitability of SMEs in Free State Province. The secondary objectives were to assess the influence of social media analytics on the

expansion of SMEs, to explore the effect of social media analytics on profitability within SMEs in the Free State Province, to determine the obstacles SMEs in the Free State Province encountered using social media analytics, to examine the function of social media platforms in augmenting customer engagement for SMEs and to assess the efficacy of existing social media analytics instruments employed by SMEs in the Free State Province.

To achieve the objectives, the study followed the qualitative approach under the interpretivist paradigm. The exploratory research design was employed. The study targeted SMEs in Free State Province, including driving schools. In-depth interviews were undertaken to gather qualitative data for the study. Data was analysed using a thematic analysis. The study purposively selected 15 owners of the SMEs in Free State Province. The findings from the thematic analysis are summarised in the following section:

#### **5.4 Summary of key findings**

According to the study's objectives, the following is a summary of the qualitative study's key findings:

##### **5.4.1 Influence of social media analytics on the expansion of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises in the Free State Province**

The findings from the study reveal that social media analytics play a significant role in the expansion of the SMEs in Free State Province. The findings show that social media analytics facilitate expansion of market coverage through social media marketing leading to the gaining of significant market. From the findings, social media market analytics promote expansion of the SMEs through market expansion, which further drives physical expansion and growth of the small firms.

##### **5.4.2 Effect of social media analytics on profitability within by Small and Medium-sized Enterprises in the Free State Province**

Furthermore, the findings of the study show that social media analytics exert significant influence on profitability of SMEs. The findings from the interviews show that social

media analytics enhance profitability of the SMEs through various ways, including increased profits, increased sales, increased revenue and reduced costs. All these manifest from the outcomes of the employment of social media analytics, such as enhanced market access through reaching a wider audience. In short, the adoption and employment of social media analytics can significantly enhance the profitability of SMEs.

#### **5.4.3 Obstacles encountered by Small and Medium-sized Enterprises in utilisation of social media analytics in the Free State Province**

The findings showed that SMEs encounter several challenges when utilising social media analytics. The main obstacles reported in the study include a shortage of resources, a lack of awareness of tools and frameworks for social media analytics, complexity and ambiguity associated with use of social media analytics and the absence of adequate technological infrastructure. These challenges represent significant barriers to the effective employment of social media analytics by SMEs.

#### **5.4.4 The functions of social media platforms in augmenting customer engagement for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises**

The findings of the qualitative study show that social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube and TikTok have several important functions and roles in augmenting customer engagement among SMEs. The social media platforms promote effective business-to-customer (B2C) interactions and communications leading to enhanced customer experiences and ultimately higher customer satisfaction. The social media platforms aid in building stronger relationships between the SMEs and customers and building customer loyalty, leading to enhanced customer engagement.

#### **5.4.5 Efficiency of existing instruments for social media analysts employed by Small and Medium-sized Enterprises**

The findings show that the existing instruments being employed by the SMEs in social media analytics, such as Google Analytics, Facebook Insights and Sprout Social, tend to be efficient in ensuring the effectiveness of the social media analytics. The findings

show various benefits of the existing instruments for social media analytics, such as enhanced positive engagement with customers, which led to increased SMEs' profitability, growth, and sustainability.

### **5.5 Conclusions from findings**

From the research findings, it can be concluded that social media analytics have the potential to drive expansion of the SMEs. In this regard, social media analytics represents a significant tool for the expansion, growth, and sustainability of small firms. The study also concludes that the existing instruments being employed in social media analytics are effective for driving the expansion and growth of SMEs. The other conclusion reached is that social media analytics represent effective tools for driving profitability and sustainability for SMEs in the Free State Province. In addition, increased use of social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp by SMEs can potentially drive growth and profitability through their implications for augmenting customer engagement. However, it can also be concluded that, despite the potential positive impacts of social media analytics on profitability and growth, there are internal and external factors that inhibit their effectiveness. These factors represent challenges or barriers to effective utilisation of SMEs in the Free State Province.

### **5.6 Recommendations**

Based on the interview findings, the following recommendations for managerial and policy implications were made are:

- 1) The study recommends the owners and management of the SMEs in Free State province to continuously invest in social media analytics to ensure survival and growth in this 21<sup>st</sup> harsh business environment coupled with rapid technological changes and intense competition.
- 2) The study also recommends government intervention through investments in ICT infrastructure to promote the increased adoption and utilisation of social media analytics.

- 3) The study recommends agencies or bodies for SMEs, such as the Ministry of Small Business Development, South African Small and Medium Enterprises Association (SASMEA) and non-governmental organisations, to consider supporting the SMEs through training programmes to equip the owners and managers of the SMEs with critical digital skills for effective employment of social media analytics.
- 4) The service providers, such as internet service providers and telecommunication companies in South Africa such as MTN are recommended to provide tailor-made packages for the SMEs and ensuring smooth connectivity. This will promote uninterrupted utilisation of social media analytics by the SMEs.
- 5) The study recommends the Government of South Africa and other agencies, such as the South African SME Finance Association (SASFA), provide financial support to the SMEs so that they can have adequate capital to invest in social media analytics.

### **5.7 Contributions of the study**

The study made significant contributions to both practice and theory. The findings of the study may be used by the owners and/or management of the SMEs, as they can help them in acknowledging the significance of social media analytics to their businesses. The findings and recommendations for the study can therefore be useful to the entrepreneurs in Free State Province in informing their strategic decisions towards growth and profitability of their SMEs in this 21<sup>st</sup> century where social media platforms have increasingly become global marketplaces. On the other hand, the study contributes to the existing body of literature on social media and the performance of SMEs. The research can be used by future scholars and researchers as a reference study for their studies. The study contributes to the limited empirical literature on social media analytics and SMEs in the context of African developing economies, such as South Africa.

### **5.8 Limitations and areas for further study**

The study had several limitations, which necessitate further research.

The study was qualitative in nature, focusing only on a few SMEs in Free State Province, thereby compromising the validity and generalisability of the findings. The findings cannot be applied or generalised to the entire SMEs in Free State Province and SMEs in other provinces. Hence, similar studies may be done using a large sample of SMEs in the province or in other provinces. Moreover, further research may be done utilising other methodologies, such as mixed-methods or quantitative methods.

The other limitation of the study was that it focused on self-reported data, which could have impacted the validity and reliability of the findings. Thus, further research can be done integrating both primary and secondary evidence. Secondary data such as the number of followers on social media platforms and actual sales and profit figures for the SMEs may be employed in further research to enhance the validity of the findings. Also, further research could involve other participants such as employees, customers, or community members to get a wider and more diverse picture of social media analytics use.

## **5.9 Chapter summary**

The study has successfully assessed the impacts of social media analytics on the growth and profitability of SMEs in Free State Province. In addition, the influence of social media analytics on the expansion of SMEs was determined, and the effects of social media analytics on profitability within SMEs in the Free State Province. Moreover, the obstacles facing SMEs in the Free State Province whilst using social media analytics have been explored, and the function of social media platforms in augmenting customer engagement for SMEs. The efficacy of existing social media analytics instruments employed by SMEs in the Free State Province has also been established. In short, the objectives of the study were met while the research questions were answered. This has resulted in the formulation of recommendations that represent empirical-based proposals to improve the adoption and utilisation of social media analytics by SMEs to promote their sustainability, profitability, and expansion. The study made significant contributions to theory and practice.

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# ANNEXURE A: ETHICS CLEARANCE



Private Bag X1290, Potchefstroom  
South Africa 2520

Tel: 018 299-1111/2222  
Fax: 018 299-4910  
Web: <http://www.nwu.ac.za>

Senate Committee for Research Ethics  
Tel: 018 299-484  
Feziwe.Mseleni@nwu.ac.za

11 April 2024

## ETHICS APPROVAL LETTER OF STUDY

Based on approval by the Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EMS-REC) on, 11/04/2024 the Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee hereby approves your study as indicated below. This implies that the North-West University Senate Committee for Research Ethics (NWU-REC) grants its permission that, provided the special conditions specified below are met and pending any other authorisation that may be necessary, the study may be initiated, using the ethics number below.

**Study title:** kkkj Assessing the impact of social media analytics on the growth and profitability of SMEs in Free State province

**Study Leader/Supervisor (Principal Investigator)/Researcher:** Dr Kaizer Ndlovu

**Student:** J Moloi (23962054)

N	W	U	-	0	0	5	7	8	-	2	4	-	A	4
Institution			Study Number					Year			Status			

Status: S = Submission; R = Re-Submission; P = Provisional Authorisation; A = Authorisation

**Application Type:**

**Commencement date:** 11/04/2024

**Risk:** Minimal

**Expiry date:** 11/04/2025

**Approval of the study is initially provided for a year, after which continuation of the study is dependent on receipt and review of the annual (or as otherwise stipulated) monitoring report and the concomitant issuing of a letter of continuation.**

**Special in process conditions of the research for approval (if applicable):**

- None.

### General conditions:

While this ethics approval is subject to all declarations, undertakings and agreements incorporated and signed in the application form, the following general terms and conditions will apply:

- The study leader/supervisor (principle investigator)/researcher must report in the prescribed format to the EMS-REC:
  - annually (or as otherwise requested) on the monitoring of the study, whereby a letter of continuation will be provided, and upon completion of the study; and
  - without any delay in case of any adverse event or incident (or any matter that interrupts sound ethical principles) during the course of the study.
- The approval applies strictly to the proposal as stipulated in the application form. Should any amendments to the proposal be deemed necessary during the course of the study, the study leader/researcher must apply for approval of these amendments at the EMS-REC, prior to implementation. Should there be any deviations from the study proposal without the necessary approval of such amendments, the ethics approval is immediately and automatically forfeited.
- Annually a number of studies may be randomly selected for an external audit.
- The date of approval indicates the first date that the study may be started.  
In the interest of ethical responsibility, the NWU-SCRE and EMS-REC reserves the right to:

# ANNEXURE B: INFORMED CONSENT

DEAR PARTICIPANT

## INFORMED CONSENT LETTER TO INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

You are invited to take part in a research study that forms part of a Master of Business Administration (MBA) degree. Please take some time to read the information presented here, which will explain the details of this study. Please ask the researcher or person explaining the research to you any questions about any part of this study that you do not fully understand. It is very important that you are fully satisfied that you clearly understand what this research is about and how you might be involved. Also, your participation is entirely voluntary, and you are free to say no to participating. If you say no, this will not affect you negatively in any way whatsoever. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any point, even if you do agree to take part now.

This study has been approved by the NWU Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EMS-REC) and will be conducted according to the ethical guidelines and principles of the North-West University and other international ethical guidelines applicable to this study.

**Title of the project:** Exploring the perceived impact of social media analytics on the growth and profitability of SMEs in Free State Province

**Institution:** NWU Business School

**Ethics Reference Number:** NWU-00578-24-A4

### Names and contact details of project staff

Supervisor	Researcher
------------	------------

**Supervisor:** Dr. Kaizer Ndlovu

**Email:** 35181680@nwu.ac.za

**Tel:** 0184994023



**Researcher:** Mr. Jerry Moloi

**Email:** matsemelamoloi79@gmail.com

**Tel:** 073 003 8031



## **ANNEXURE C: INTERVIEW GUIDE**

### **Demographic questions**

- i.) Could you please confirm your agenda?
- ii.) What is your age?
- iii.) Could you please share latest academic qualification
- iv.) For how many years have you been working at this company?

### **Main questions**

- 1.) How do you perceive the impact of social media analytics on the growth of your driving school in the Free State Province?
- 2.) In what ways have social media analytics contributed to the expansion of your driving school's market coverage?
- 3.) Can you share specific examples of how social media analytics have influenced the profitability of your driving school?
- 4.) How has the use of social media analytics affected your driving school's sales and overall revenue?
- 5.) What challenges do you face in utilising social media analytics effectively for your driving school?
- 6.) How do resource limitations impact your ability to use social media analytics for your driving school operations?
- 7.) How do you think social media platforms enhance customer interaction for your driving school, and what effects does this have on profitability?
- 8.) Can you describe how social media engagement strategies have improved relationships with your customers?
- 9.) What social media analytics tools do you currently use for your driving school, and how effective do you find them?
- 10.) What improvements or additional support do you believe would help you better utilise social media analytics to drive growth and profitability in your driving school?

# ANNEXURE D: TURNITIN REPORT

## Turnitin Originality Report

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## ANNEXURE E: LANGUAGE EDITOR CERTIFICATE

# REGCOR

## ENTERPRISES PTY LTD

(2015/375453/07)

Date: 11/03/2025

Dear Sir/Madam

This letter is to certify that I, Sarah Louise Cornelius, of Regcor Enterprises Pty Ltd, have completed the initial editing of a dissertation titled *Assessing the impact of social media analytics on the growth and profitability of SMEs in Free State Province* by Jerry Moloji.

I have ten years of experience in the field, having worked on multiple doctorates. Any changes done to the document after the editing process does not reflect the editing services provided. The onus is on the student to ensure the document is fully corrected before final submission, even if that requires multiple edits.

*Kind Regards*

*Sarah Louise Cornelius*

**Professional Editor's Guild**

Associate Member

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Contact no: 0768156437

Email: sarah@regcor.co.za