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ASSESSING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF INFLUENCER MARKETING COMMUNICATION OF BEAUTY PRODUCTS ON SOCIAL MEDIA IN SOUTH AFRICA: A CONSUMER'S PERSPECTIVE

ABSTRACT

The impact of social media influencers has attracted much attention from researchers, resulting in an increase in literature on the topic. The objective of this study was to test empirically the influence of beauty product social media influencers. Their influence is measured based on trust/authenticity, image congruency, perceived popularity, number of followers, and likability. The study made use of quantitative methods to obtain the necessary results to make informed conclusions. A self-administered survey was prepared and used to gather opinions. Data was collected through convenience sampling from 287 willing participants in Braamfontein, a business district in Johannesburg, South Africa. The results show that trust and likability play a significant role in the influence on consumers when it comes to influencer/social media marketing.

Keywords: marketing communication, influencer marketing, social media, likability, electronic word-of-mouth

INTRODUCTION

The study of influencer marketing/social media has been an ongoing concept that has been investigated since the emergence of celebrity endorsements. It is a relatively new marketing phenomenon and, therefore, there is not much knowledge on how it can be created, maintained and measured (Lima *et al.* 2019). Influencer marketing involves marketing products and services to those who hold some sway over the products or services that others consider buying. It is a marketing activity that is used by many brands to raise awareness, to reach targeted audiences, and to a certain extent maintain customer relationships.

This study investigates the importance of influencer marketing in the beauty cosmetics industry in the South African market. The aim is to offer some insight into its effectiveness in

changing the buying behaviour of consumers in this market to give practitioners the opportunity to use this marketing activity efficiently. According to previous studies (Martensen *et al.* 2018), there has been some research on what influencer marketing is, to the extent of identifying the trend of using “citizen influencers” (CIs), who are consumers with crowds of online followers who represent a new type of opinion leader. According to Lima *et al.* (2019), there are approximately four billion internet users in the world, in other words, 60 percent of the global population, reconfiguring the human socialisation processes, social relationships and empowering consumers. This adds to the increased use of social media platforms and influencers to market a brand’s products. With the increase in the use of social media marketing it has become imperative for brands to understand how to use influencer marketing and how to use its ability to reach consumers to possibly change their buying behaviour.

Influencer marketing is considered a form of highly credible electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). This is particularly desirable for brands, as it appears to be more effective than traditional advertising tactics due to higher authenticity and credibility, which subsequently leads to lower resistance to the message (De Veirman *et al.* 2017). With previous studies, there has not been much focus on the beauty cosmetics industry when it comes to influencer marketing, and it has not been explicitly identified how this promotion activity helps in persuading or changing the buying behaviour of the target market nor if this remains effective when conducted via social networks. Hence, this study focuses on specific factors that could influence the buying behaviour of the South African market. The study focuses on factors such as the influencer’s authenticity, perceived popularity, likability, their number of followers, the image congruency between the beauty cosmetics brand and the influencer, and lastly, whether the effectiveness of influencer marketing is affected by the social network used to communicate the proposed message.

THEORETICAL GROUNDING

Influencer marketing is a hybrid of old and new marketing tools, taking the idea of celebrity endorsements and placing it into a content-driven marketing campaign. The main difference is that the results of the campaign are usually collaborations between brands and influencers. Consumers have always valued others’ opinions; however, the popularity of social media has amplified the effects of peer recommendations as it empowers consumers to share their opinions and experiences one-to-many (De Veirman *et al.* 2017). Consumers can freely share their opinions on products on all social platforms, which effectively increases the use of eWOM. eWOM is defined as “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet” (De Veirman *et al.* 2017).

South African beauty brands have taken an interest in the influencer phenomenon in the advertising world. As opposed to directly targeting the target audience through different kinds of advertising, beauty brands have been encouraging highly followed and admired influencers who are regarded as trustworthy, non-purposive opinion leaders to talk about, review and recommend their products on social media platforms. In this

way they take advantage of eWOM marketing and indirectly market their products. Today, consumers have a wide range of available sources from which they can gather information to make their buying decisions. The internet and social media have made it possible to assimilate large amounts of information in a very short time and without substantial costs to the user (De Veirman *et al.* 2017). However, these large amounts of diversified information make it difficult for consumers to determine the value of the information they have access to. Therefore, there are factors that should be effectively persuading consumers that the influencer they are looking into is the correct source of information, which will allow them or push them to change their buying behaviour. To clearly understand the reason for changes in the buying behaviour of consumers, this study is grounded in one specific theory, which is referred to as the social cognitive learning theory (SCLT). SCLT is a learning theory focused on the idea that people learn by watching what others do, and that human thought processes are central to understanding personality (Nabavi 2012). Several concepts relevant to this study are discussed next.

Trust/Authenticity (TA)

Trust is believing that someone is good and honest and will not harm you, or that something is safe and reliable. It is considered as a key element of the relationship marketing approach: a prerequisite for building long-term relationships between the company and its customers, intermediaries and suppliers, as well as all other members in its micro-environment (Sarantidou 2018). Authenticity is the quality to be genuine and real. Authenticity is seen not as a property of the object, product, event or experience, but as a socially constructed practice of individuals, via acts, and of groups, via performances (Gannon & Prothero 2016). From the perspective of the consumer, it is necessary for an influencer to appear as an authentic and trustworthy individual for their promotion efforts to be successful in changing the consumer's buying decision/behaviour. The influencer's ability to seem to be a good source of information will impact how the brand's products are accepted by the public market. eWOM is desirable for brands as it appears to be more effective than traditional advertising tactics due to higher authenticity and credibility, which subsequently leads to lower resistance of the message. It is for this reason that brands continue to use ordinary citizens to promote their products instead of celebrities. The citizens' opinions are valued more because they are believed to have the consumer's best interests in mind.

Image Congruency (IC)

Image congruency hypothesis is the concept that a consumer selects products and stores that correspond to their self-concept. It has to do with similarities between the brand and the influencer. This speaks to the fact that a partnership between an influencer and a brand should make sense for the appropriate message to be communicated. The brand's set image should be in line with that of the influencer, as they will reflect the brand itself. The beauty influencer, in this case, acts as the brand's agent. This indicates that his/her reputation and what he/she says reflects what the brand stands for. To determine congruency, cosmetic brands should have a clear and accurate understanding of their target market and what they want, and then correlate

this description with the influencer's personality, content and brand as a whole. In this way, there is relevance in the promotion activities that are aimed at positively impacting the potential, actual and former consumer's buying behaviour.

Perceived Popularity (PP)

Popularity refers to the fact that something or someone is liked, enjoyed, or supported by many people. An influencer's success in reach is determined by his/her number of followers. Combining the number of followers with the number of people or accounts followed by the influencer may affect a customer's perception of the influencer. South African beauty bloggers play a key role in reshaping perceptions around beauty because of their large following and ability to connect to audiences in a way that brands cannot. According to a study on marketing through Instagram, the number of followers that an influencer has contributes to their perceived popularity. The study states, "The number of followers, which reflects network size and serves as an indication for popularity, is frequently used to identify these influential nodes. Accordingly, higher numbers of followers may result in larger reach of the (commercial) message and may thus leverage the power of this specific type of word-of-mouth at scale" (De Veirman *et al.* 2017). The number of followers serves as a great indicator to brands who are looking to collaborate with an influencer because this not only guarantees great reach but also the possibility of a change in the potential consumer's buying behaviour.

Likability (LB)

Likability reflects the receiver's affection for the source because of the source's perceived social value, such as physical attractiveness, personality, behaviour and social status (Martensen *et al.* 2018). In this case it is the likability of the influencer to the consumers, who are observing their behaviour. For an influencer to be effective in their efforts the consumers on the receiving end need to have developed a liking for the influencer. This is one of the factors that brands need to consider when looking to identify an influencer to work with in reaching their market. An influencer's likability is also an indicator of the popularity of the individual.

Social Media Platform (SMP)

A social media platform describes a social network where individuals interact with the influencer. Social networking sites like Facebook allow users to create a profile as an individual or organisation and interact with other members by sharing their lives, interests, and desires (Lima *et al.* 2019). Currently, the most used social platforms for the promotion of beauty cosmetic products are Instagram and YouTube. Given the visual focus of these two platforms, it could be deduced that using visual stimuli could be more effective in marketing cosmetics. Brands need to identify the most used social networks and identify the audience who use the said network in order to choose to collaborate with the appropriate influencer on the most appropriate platform for the achievement of their promotion efforts. The conceptual model used for the study is presented in Figure 1.

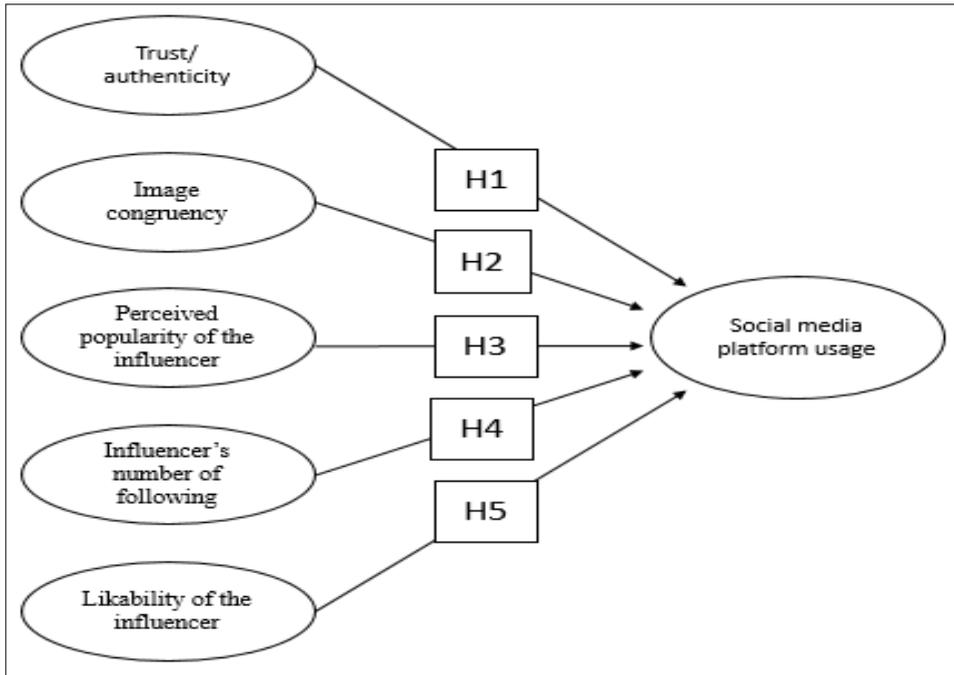


FIGURE 1: CONCEPTUAL MODEL

Generation Y

Generation Y refers to a group of individuals born between 1982 and 2005. This group of individuals is said to be technology savvy and advanced in readiness to use new technologies. This generation identifies with working in groups, while also being an individual; hence, the need to fit in with everyone around them while trying to remain unique. This generation is particularly concerned with what their peers think, making them believe that what their peers approve of is what is right or trendy/popular (Eckleberry-Hunt & Tucciarone 2011). A study conducted in 2012 found that members of Generation Y are more civically and politically disengaged, and more focused on materialistic values. They are more concerned about extrinsic values, like money, fame and image, instead of being concerned about intrinsic values. However, recent research has shown that this group has moved towards becoming more conscious of the greater good of the community.

HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Trust/Authenticity and buying behaviour

Trust plays a significant role in the decisions made by consumers, whether it be trust in the brand or in the source of recommendation. It indicates credibility and reliance. Previous research has shown that brand trust lowers ambiguity and it frequently affects

buying behaviour, depending on whether the trust exists or not. This phenomenon is the result of the fact that the element of trust increases one's belief about the performance of the brand (Goh *et al.* 2016). Other research has shown that the higher the level of trust consumers have in a brand or an individual representing the brand, the higher the possibility of repeat purchases. Morgan and Hunt (1994) state that brand trust has an influence on customer commitment; hence, it results in repeat purchases. Further, Hegner and Jevons (2016) found that brand trust has a strong influence on purchase and repurchase behaviour (Goh *et al.* 2016). Research on influencers' persuasiveness found that consumers are more likely to be persuaded when the source is perceived to be trustworthy and communicates in a reliable, honest and sincere manner, without bias. Based on the literature discussed, the following hypothesis has been developed:

H1: *Trust/Authenticity has a positive and significant relationship with a consumer's social media usage.*

Image congruency and buying behaviour

User image is a stereotypical perception of a generalised user of a particular product/brand. This principle/concept is transferable to the image of a social media influencer that uses beauty products from brands that share the same image and values. In a study based on the connection between self-image congruence and brand preference for store brands, the findings suggest that congruence between a consumer's self-image and celebrity image plays an important role in the endorsement process (Postica & Cardoso 2015). Similarity is a perceived resemblance between the sender and the receiver. Similarity of individuals predisposes them toward a greater level of interpersonal attraction, trust and understanding than will be expected among dissimilar individuals (Martensen *et al.* 2018). In a study on the persuasiveness of CIs (citizen influencers), similarity was used to identify if it has any relation to the persuasiveness of the influencer. Findings showed that a positive relationship is expected to exist between perceived similarity and the CIs persuasiveness. The literature above can be used to make inferences on the effectiveness of the relationship between the image congruence of the influencer's image, the image of the brand, and that of the consumers. Hence, the following hypothesis:

H2: *Image congruency has a significant and positive influence on a consumer's social media platform usage.*

Perceived popularity, number of followers, and likeability with buying behaviour

The number of followers and the perceived popularity of an influencer are indicators of the likeability of the influencer. These concepts work together in indicating the popularity of the individual, which some researchers have concluded to mostly have an impact on the decision to form a partnership with the individual or not, as a brand. De Veirman *et al.* (2017) through their research on marketing through Instagram showed that the number of followers was merely an indication of the CI's popularity rather than their influence on the behaviour of their followers. There has been a rise

in research on the effect of the number of followers that an influencer has, compared to their followers, as it may have a negative relation to buying behaviour when an influencer does not follow a large number of people. While there is a quest for the ideal “followers/followers ratio”, no study has investigated whether the number of followers is an important asset for consumers in the evaluation of an influencer. It is likely that the assumed positive effect of the number of followers on the influencer’s overall likeability might turn negative when the influencer follows only a few people.

Social media is used to spread information much easier and to raise awareness without the need to spend large amounts of money to achieve the marketing activity. Consumers often share their interpersonal experiences and information about products with one another. This aids in spreading awareness about a brand and its products (Tsimonis & Dimitriadis 2014). According to Berger (2014), eWOM has a significant influence on customer behaviour. Other studies have found that eWOM has a strong association with the customer’s satisfaction and dissatisfaction, and this can determine perceived quality and purchase intent/buying behaviour (Tsimonis & Dimitriadis 2014). Any information shared on social media platforms amplifies the reach and thus the influence that social media eWOM may have on the buying behaviour of a brand’s target market. This raises the following hypotheses:

- H3: *An influencer’s perceived popularity has a significant and positive influence on consumers’ social media platform usage*
- H4: *An influencer’s number of followers has a significant and positive influence on consumers’ social media platform usage*
- H5: *An influencer’s likability on social media has a significant and positive effect on consumers’ social media platform usage*

FINDINGS

Descriptive statistics

This section presents descriptive results for the study. The total number of number of participants were 300. Table 1 presents the sample profile.

TABLE 1: SAMPLE PROFILE

Gender	Representation
Female	73.52%
Male	23.69%
No response	2.79%

Age	
18-21	49.48%
22-25	39.72%
26-30	5.57%
31-35	5.23%
Social Platform Used	
Instagram	40.07%
Facebook	21.25%
YouTube	23.34%
Twitter	15.33%
Awareness of Social Media Influencers	
Yes	87.11%
No	12.89%

A total of 73.52% (211 respondents) is female with 68 respondents (23.69%) male. Respondents who chose not to disclose their gender totalled 2.79%. Most of the respondents belong to the 18-21 year old category (49.48%, n=142). The second largest group was the 22-25 year old category (39.72%), followed by the 26-30 year old category (5.57%). The 31-35 year old category represents 5.23% of the respondents.

In terms of social media platforms listed, Instagram is the most used by the respondents, with a total of 40.07% (115 respondents). YouTube is the second most used platform (23.34%, 67 respondents). As the information in Table 1 indicates, 87.11% of the respondents have come across or know of an influencer.

Prior to testing the hypotheses, the reliability of scales was assessed and it met acceptable criteria. The following section explores the findings of the proposed hypotheses followed by a discussion.

TABLE 2: HYPOTHESIS TESTING

Hypothesised Relationships		Path Coefficients	P-values	Significant/Insignificant
TA → SMP	H1	0.487	0.006	Significant and supported
IC → SMP	H2	0.270	0.023	Significant and supported

Hypothesised Relationships		Path Coefficients	P-values	Significant/Insignificant
PP → SMP	H3	-0.153	0.214	Insignificant and not significant
NF → SMP	H4	-0.251	0.751	Insignificant and not supported
LB → SMP	H5	0.316	0.001	Significant and supported

The first hypothesis (*H1 - trust/authenticity is positively and directly related to a customer's social media platform use*) has a path coefficient of 0.487 and a P-value of 0.006. This relationship is both supported and significant at $p < 0.01$. This finding suggests that the more consumers trust or believe in a social media influencer, the more they engage in continuous use of the particular social media platform. It should be noted that of all the relationships, this was the strongest.

The second hypothesis (*H2 - image congruency directly and positively influences a customer's social media platform use*) has a path coefficient of 0.270 and a P-value of 0.023. This finding suggests that the higher the image congruency, the more the consumer is inclined to use a specific social media platform.

The third hypothesis (*H3 - perceived popularity of an influencer is positively and directly associated with a consumer's social media platform use*) has a path coefficient of -0.153 and a P-value of 0.214. This relationship was neither supported nor significant. This implies that consumers who subscribe to or search for beauty product content on social media are not necessarily motivated by how popular the social media influencer is. This could mean that consumers do not necessarily follow an influencer because they are popular on social media.

The fourth hypothesis (*H4 - likability of an influencer is directly and positively associated with a consumer's social media use*) has a path coefficient of 0.316 and a P-value of 0.001. The relationship is therefore both supported and significant at $p < 0.01$.

Marketing contributions

South African beauty brand companies will have a broader understanding of their audience, as there has not been much research, which creates a clear understanding of the impact of influencer marketing in the context of the South African audience. Marketers can identify the influencers to use based on the likability of the influencer and the level of trust their audience places in his/her opinions. Previously, it was mainly based on the number of followers, but the study reveals that the number of followers has less of an impact compared to the influencer's likability. The information gathered could help marketers make informed decisions on the budgeting for their projects.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of the study was to investigate the impact that social media influencers have on consumers who intend to buy beauty products. The study relied on a conceptual framework that measured the impact of five predictors on social media platform usage. These predictors included trust or authenticity, image congruency, popularity of the influencer, the influencer's number of followers, and the likability of the influencer. In general, all the predictors had a certain level of impact on social media platform usage. This implied that these predictors influenced consumers' usage and following of social media usage when it comes to beauty products.

Limitations and future research direction

This study was limited in that the participants were all from a single geographic region. This could have created sample bias in that all the participants were exposed to the same environment; therefore, possibly limiting diversity in responses. Additionally, other researchers could consider looking at different beauty products that are promoted by influencers on social media. Conceptually, the study could also have established the socio-economic status of the participants. This could be incorporated in further research on the topic as this would advise on whether the income earned by a social media user influenced their decision-making, or the extent to which they were influenced. Theoretically, further research could involve relationships that were not tested in the present study. For instance, testing the relationship between trust or authenticity and image congruency. This could help explain the extent to which image congruency influences consumers' trust in social media influencers. Additionally, a correlation analysis test between the perceived popularity of the influencer and the influencer's number of followers could help to explain the relationship between how consumers perceive a social media influencer to be popular and the actual number of consumers who follow that social media influencer.

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