

# The role of influencer marketing in building rural brand equity among generation Y customers

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## Abstract

In the current fast paced competitive digital marketing era, businesses explore every possibility to differentiate their brand, retain customers and remain resilient. Contrary to the popular usage of conventional celebrity endorsements, modern businesses are often turning to social media influencers for their brand marketing initiatives, using popular social media platforms. Currently, it is unknown how successful local non-celebrity influencer endorsements are in building brand equity among generation Y. The purpose of this paper was to explore the perceptions of generation Y customers on building local beauty brand equity through influencer marketing. A questionnaire using Google form was given to generation Y customers, recruited using a convenience sampling technique. A total of sixty-two (62) generation Y customers were recruited in the study. The results indicated that only few of the generation Y customers (n = 16; 25.81%) had positive perception about building local beauty brand equity through influencer marketing, while (n = 28; 45.16%) said that influencer marketing is sustainable. Furthermore, 45.55% (n=27) felt that influencer marketing is important for beauty brand industries. The study concludes that authenticity is a crucial factor in determining the impact of influencer marketing on building brand equity. Moreover, authentic influencers who genuinely interact with their audience and conform to local preferences greatly contribute to fostering strong brand connections.

**Keywords:** *generation Y, brand loyalty, brand equity, influencer marketing*

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## 1. Introduction

In the current fast-paced competitive digital marketing era, businesses explore every possibility to differentiate their brand, retain customers and remain resilient. They aim to establish a link between their customers and their brand to construct enduring customer-based brand equity (CBBE) (Khan et al., 2022; Sijabat et al., 2022). Contrary to the popular belief of conventional celebrity endorsements, most businesses are often turning to social media influencers for their brand marketing initiatives, using popular social media platforms (Leban & Voyer, 2020; Sing et al., 2020; Delbaere et al., 2021; Wright, 2021). The popularity of social media has prompted businesses to employ online personalities who endorse the brand and influence perception of followers with their content. These social media influencers have amplified the popularity of influencer marketing in businesses both locally and globally (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Martínez-López et al., 2020; Leung et al., 2022). Moreover, apart from existing social networkers, micro, small, medium, large enterprises, and government bodies are also aligning themselves with social media platforms as communication and marketing tools (Fetais et al., 2023).

The beauty brand industry, on the other hand, is becoming saturated with brands and companies thriving to gain favour from the market (Dong, 2022; Le & Aydin, 2023; Liu, 2023). To enter this constrained market, traditional marketing appears to be somewhat no longer effective as it used to be. Monotony in the competition keeps rising along with the rapid digitalization happening in the last decades. This then puts an urge in local companies to expand their strategies beyond traditional mass media marketing such as newspapers, magazines, and billboards to social media influencers (Andhini & Ramadhan, 2023). Local businesses need to learn how to use social media in a way that is consistent with their business plan, current market trends and customer needs.

Moreover, these businesses, which represent a part of small and micro enterprises (SMEs) critical to township economies and job creation, are no exception to the current narrative. However, they are confronted with multifaceted constraints that include financial constraints, inadequate infrastructure, and land unavailability, among others. In addition, celebrity brand endorsement is popular among successful and reputable institutions (Sutia et al., 2023), in the context of township market and other emerging small enterprises. This notion is cost in-effective, given the financial constraints faced by the industry (Febrian et al., 2022).

Current studies on influencer marketing focus on well-established companies, and tourists' attraction, among others (Ingrassia et al., 2022; Tsai & Hsin, 2023; Dewi & Hidayat, 2024). However, emerging township beauty brand markets are not accommodated for in literature. Hence, this study contributes to the on-going literature on building brand equity through influencer marketing by underpinning the perception of generation Y customers regarding building local beauty brand equity using local social media influencers, contrary to the already accepted narrative of using well-known influencers who are cost ineffective in the already financially constrained township markets.

## **2. Literature review**

### ***2.1. Customer-based brand equity***

The concept of customer-based brand equity dates to the early 90's and consists of two dimensions, that is, brand awareness and brand image, and are defined as the differential effect of brand knowledge resulting from customers on product marketing (Aaker & Keller, 1990). Various researchers argue that these two dimensions are appropriate to be used to dissect online consumer behavior (Febriyantoro, 2020; Deepa, 2021; Bonus et al., 2022; Febrian et al., 2022). When social media influencers take advantage of good social media, it can increase brand equity, especially brand awareness and brand image (Khan & Fatma, 2019; Kumar & Singh, 2020) because there is a significant relationship to maintaining the continuity and growth of local beauty brands. Furthermore, brand awareness is a fundamental aspect of brand equity (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 1993). When brand awareness of the customers is high, it provides potential benefits for social media influencers because it contributes to customer considerations when choosing which products to buy (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Ardiansyah & Sarwoko, 2020; Jaitly & Gautam, 2021). Another component of brand equity is the brand image. Brand image influences customers to act on certain products or services on social media. Moreover, brand image is defined as the perception of a particular brand that is in the memory of consumers (Barreda et al., 2020; Budiman, 2021; Savitri et al., 2022). However, the effectiveness of a brand on social media can be attributed to the quality of information, the credibility of information, and attitudes towards information (Saima & Khan, 2020; Nafees et al., 2021). Therefore, social media influencers need to be able to create accounts to attract customers to view the content of the products and services being rendered by various brands they endorse.

## *2.2. Township influencers*

In township businesses, most customers especially generation Y have negative perceptions concerning building brand equity using local influencers, this is due to assortment of factors. According to Bilgihan (2016), perception of generation Y concerning influencer marketing depends on the trust they have on influencer. Jun and Yi (2020), on the other hand, underpin that influencer interactivity with followers serve as a catalyst for customer loyalty and attachment to the influencer. Ki et al. (2020) also concur with the finding of Jun and Yi (2020) that customer attachment to influencers is an important variable influencing their perception about influencer endorsements. However, in South African township beauty brand market such a realization is far-fetched, business have resorted to selling counterfeit product instead of original products (Ahen et al., 2023; Garas et al., 2023). According to Hassan et al. (2021), knowledge, relatability, and articulation are among the determinants of customer positive perception about the beauty brand product and the likelihood to make future purchases.

Persuasiveness of the influencer conditions the attitude and mentality of the customer concerning the brand marketed by the influencer (Mgiba & Nyamande, 2020). Sijabat et al. (2022) report that social media influencers significantly influence customer perceptions and brand engagement. In the South African township context, generation Y customers are mainly loyal to prominent or celebrity influencers with a larger following compared to local influencers (Chang, 2023; Macheke et al., 2024). Also, locally there is no saturated market for influencers to flourish due to lack of support and availability of funding and secure infrastructure (Belova, 2023; Kauffmann, & Vaičiūnaitė, 2024).

The importance of township influencers in literature underpins age and gender disparities. Females felt that local influencer marketing is important for the beauty brand industry; this is because females use more cosmetic products than males (Liu et al., 2013; Nguyen Thi Nhu, 2020; Park et al., 2018). Al-Nasser and Mahomed (2020) highlight the importance of social media influencers by their level of persuasiveness and professional in the ecosystem of business and consumers. On the other hand, authenticity, reliability, and information quality positively influence the credibility of influencer marketing, which thus affects their relevance in the industry. Some of the reasons generation Y customers could be hesitant to local influencer marketing in the beauty brand industry could possibly include online scams (Dupuis et al., 2023; Mupangavanhu & Kerchhoff, 2023), deceptive and

misleading endorsements (Harris, 2018; Arop, 2023), selling of fake branded products or counterfeit (Chaudhry, 2022; Lee, 2022), and ghost brands and influencers using fake identification (Biagioli, 2022). Regarding age disparities, older generation Y purchase due to beauty enhancement in contrast to younger generation Y (Ilunga, 2018).

Concerning the perception of generation Y customers on the role of influencer marketing in sustainability of beauty brand profitability, literature finding pinpoints that female generation Y felt that social media influencer marketing can sustain beauty brand profitability (Sadiq et al., 2023; Akto, 2024). Similarly, Mouyassir et al. (2023) report the criticality of social media influencers in sustaining e-commerce profitability while Haenlein et al. (2020) point out two lines of thoughts which affect profitability. The first line is that famous clothing brand and cosmetic brand highlight profitability when influencer marketing is done right, and the other line of thought entails testing of drug, highlighting the case of profit loss when influencer marketing is non-adherent. Ye et al. (2021) concur with business profitability through social media influencers by highlighting the dependence on credibility, following and articulation, specifically that influencers with a strong fan base are critical for business profitability.

The hesitancy of generation Y to the endorsement of social media influencers in the local setting stem from the overarching crime rates and overexploitation of the black community in the country (Bateman, 2019; 2024). Furthermore, identity theft, phishing has surged in the vulnerable black communities compromises the reliability and authenticity of the already existing township influencers and most generation Y followers have fallen prey, hence generation Y is reluctant in the endorsing social media influencers in the townships. Apart from criminality occurrence in the local market, adequate support, infrastructure, market access and exposure and collaboration among businesses is lacking in this communities and hence, the use of social media influencers does not proliferate in the region (Enaifoghe & Vezi-Magigaba, 2023; Enaifogh et al., 2023).

### **3. Methodology**

#### ***3.1. Study design***

This study adopted a quantitative descriptive cross-sectional study design, which was carried out among generation Y customers. It was conducted between October 2023 to February 2024.

### ***3.2. Study setting***

This study was conducted in region 1 of the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality which is divided into seven regions. The City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality has a land area of 6,368 square kilometres (2,459 sq mi) with approximately 3 million population. Region 1, which has five sub-regions was conveniently sampled from the seven regions. It has a population of 811570 and 59 secondary schools (DoH, 2011). The townships where the beauty brand enterprise was randomly sampled include Mabopane, Soshanguve, Winterveld, Ga-Rankuwa and Pretoria North.

### ***3.3. Study population***

The study population consists of generation Y males and females' customers between the ages of 25 to 40 years in region 1 of the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality. The generation Y customers in the age group 25-40 years who consented to participate on the online survey were considered for inclusion in the study. Generation Y customers outside the inclusion age group and not residing in Tshwane Region 1 were excluded. Participants who did not consent were not included in the study.

### ***3.4. Sample size and sampling technique***

Convenience sampling method, a non-probability sampling, was used to collect data, since the individuals in the target population sample, which would be around 80 individuals, were not based on demographics, such as age, gender, among others, but was chosen on the basis of access to the participants, which gives unbiased results about the impact of influencer marketing on building brand equity in the beauty industry (Leavy, 2022). However, the two requirements for the participants were that they needed to be on social media and exposed to at least one social media brand influencer.

### ***3.5. Data collection***

The survey was conducted online since this approach provided several benefits and delimitations. The benefits of an online survey are that it allows the research to have a large sample size, that can be easily found through sharing a link. Also, anonymity of the participants is upheld, meaning participants need not provide their personal information and can stay anonymous. Moreover, this method of data collection is cost effective and very flexible, the

design is easily adaptable, and formattable (Lo et al., 2020). However, a couple of delimitations to the online survey are that participants who received a link may not be on social media or may not have an exposure to social media brand influencers, and another disadvantage may be that those who want to participate may not have access to Wi-Fi, therefore cannot participate in the survey. Moreover, technical issues could also lead to poor respondent experience and may lead to incompleteness of the survey. Lack of control over the environment and personal interaction are delimitations beyond reach for the researcher.

Data were collected using a Google form questionnaire which included a total of ten (10) questions. The questionnaire was categorized into four themes focusing on demographic profiles, building brand equity, sustainability, and importance of influencer marketing in the beauty brand industry. The questions asked were “what is your *perception on the role of influencer marketing in building beauty brand equity*”, “what is your *perception on the role of influencer marketing in the sustainability of beauty brand profitability*”, and lastly, “*what is your perception on the importance of influencer marketing in the beauty brand industry*”. The Google form was shared using a link among Tshwane generation Y individuals on famous social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp. Interested participants first needed to accept and consent to be part of the survey. Only those who consented were allowed to proceed to the actual survey. The survey took approximately 10 – 20 minutes to complete.

### ***3.6. Data analysis***

Data were captured using Microsoft Excel and exported to the STATA for analysis. The results were summarized using frequencies and percentages for categorical variables. A chi-square test was applied to compare age and gender with role of influencer marketing, sustainability and importance of influencer marketing. A p-value of less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

### ***3.7. Ethical considerations***

All participants were informed of the voluntary nature of their participation. They were informed of their rights to withdraw from participating anytime they wished to do so. Permission was requested from the local beauty brand enterprises after providing a full outline of the study and possible study benefits. Moreover, there was no harm to or direct contact with the participants, and the participants’ identity was never disclosed throughout the study.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

### 4.1. Findings

The study included 62 generation Y customers of local beauty brands. Of these 43 (69.35%) were females, while 19 (30.65%) were males. Over half 54.84% were aged between 30 – 40 years, and 28 (45.16%) aged between 25 – 29.

**Perception of Generation Y customers on building beauty brand equity through influencer marketing.** The results were not statistically significantly different for all variables ( $p > 0.05$ ), both male and female generation Y customers had negative perception about the role of influencer marketing in building local beauty brand equity.

**Table 1**

Summary of generation Y customer perception on the role of influencer marketing in building local beauty brand equity

Variables	Perception (n = 62)		p-value
	Negative (n = 46)	Positive (n = 16)	
<b>Gender</b>			
Female	32 (74.42%)	11 (25.58%)	0.951
Male	14 (73.68%)	5 (26.32%)	
<b>Age</b>			
25-29	19 (67.86%)	9 (32.14%)	0.301
30-40	27 (70.41%)	7 (20.59%)	

**Perceptions of Generation Y customers on the importance of influencer marketing in the beauty brand industry.** Concerning the importance of influencer marketing in the local beauty brand industry, females and older generation Y customers i.e. 30 – 40 years felt that influencer marketing is important for the local beauty brand industry, however the results were not statistically significant ( $p > 0.05$ ).

**Table 2**

Summary of generation Y customer perception on the importance of influencer marketing in the beauty brand industry

Variables	Importance of influencers (n = 62)		p-value
	Importance (n = 27)	Not important (n = 35)	
<b>Gender</b>			
Female	22 (51.16%)	21 (48.84%)	0.069
Male	5 (26.32%)	14 (73.68%)	
<b>Age</b>			
25-29	10 (35.17%)	18 (64.29%)	0.259
30-40	17 (50%)	17 (50%)	

Statistical test: Chi-square test



*Perceptions of Generation Y customers on sustainability of beauty brand industry profitability through influencer marketing.* Regarding the sustainability of local beauty brand profitability, females felt that influencer marketing can sustain the profitability of beauty brand industry. Furthermore, there was no difference between age categories ( $p > 0.05$ ).

**Table 3**

*Summary of generation Y customer perception on the role of influencer marketing in the sustainability of beauty brand profitability*

Variables	Sustainability (n = 62)		p-value
	Sustainable (n = 28)	Unsustainable (n = 34)	
<b>Gender</b>			
Female	21 (46.84%)	22 (51.16%)	0.382
Male	7 (36.84%)	12 (63.16%)	
<b>Age</b>			
25-29	12 (42.86%)	16 (57.14%)	0.741
30-40	16 (47.06%)	18 (52.94%)	

Statistical test: Chi-square test

#### **4.2. Discussion**

The paper explored the perceptions, importance and sustainability of local influencers in building beauty brand industry. The results revealed no statistically significant difference between demographic profiles and perception of generation Y customers on building brand equity using local influencers. However, most of the participant had negative perceptions concerning building brand equity using local influencers. This finding was consistent to that of Bilgihan (2016), who said that perception of generation Y concerning influencer marketing depends on the trust they have on influencer. Furthermore, Jun and Yi (2020) also underpinned influencer interactivity with followers as a catalyst for customer loyalty and attachment to the influencer. Moreover, persuasiveness of the influencer conditions the attitude and mentality of the customer concerning the brand marketed by the influencer (Mgiba & Nyamande, 2020). Inconsistent to the study finding, Sijabat et al. (2022) found that social media influencers significantly influence customer perceptions and brand engagement. Some of the reasons for this inconsistency could be attributed to the fact that generation Y customers are more loyal to influencers with a larger following compared to local influencer who have smaller fan-based and verified accounts. Also, locally there is no saturated market for influencers to flourish due to lack of support and availability of funding and secure infrastructure.

Concerning the importance of local influencers, the study revealed age and gender disparities, females felt that local influencer marketing is important for the beauty brand industry, this is because female use more cosmetic products than males (Liu et al., 2013; Nguyen Thi Nhu, 2020; Park et al., 2018). Inconsistent to the study, Al-Nasser and Mahomed (2020) report the importance of social media influencers by their level of persuasiveness and professional in the ecosystem of business and consumers. Meanwhile, authenticity, reliability, and information quality positively influence the credibility of influencer marketing which thus affects their relevance in the industry. Some of the reasons generation Y customers are hesitant to local influencer marketing in the beauty brand industry include online scams (Dupuis et al., 2023), deceptive and misleading endorsements (Harris, 2018; Arop, 2023), selling of fake branded products or counterfeit (Chaudhry, 2022; Lee, 2022), and ghost brands and influencers using fake identification (Biagioli, 2022). Regarding age disparities, older generation Y purchase due to beauty enhancement and convenience in contrast to younger generation Y (Ilunga, 2018).

Lastly, the study cross examined the perception of generation Y customers on the role of influencer marketing in sustainability of beauty brand profitability. The results pinpointed that female generation Y felt that social media influencer marketing can sustain beauty brand profitability. Similarly, Mouyassir et al. (2023) also found that gender disparities among consumers influence their perception about social media influencers regarding the sustainability of e-commerce profitability while Haenlein et al. (2020) pointed out two lines of thoughts which affect profitability. The first line is an example of famous clothing brand and cosmetic brand is used to highlight profitability when influencer marketing is done right, and the other line of thought entails testing of drug, highlighting the case of profit loss when influencer marketing is non-adherent. Ye et al. (2021), on the other hand, agree with business profitability model through social media influencers marketing by underpinning its dependence on credibility, following and articulation, specifically that influencers with a strong fan base are critical for business profitability.

The hesitancy in the generation to the endorsement of social media influencers in the local setting stem from the overarching crime rates and overexploitation of the black community in the country (Bateman, 2019; 2024). Identity theft, phishing has surged in the vulnerable black communities compromises the reliability and authenticity of the already existing township influencers and most generation Y followers have fallen prey, hence the

reluctance in the endorsement of social media influencers (Kariyawasam, & Wigley, 2017; Hund, 2023; Mupangavanhu, & Kerchhoff, 2023). Apart from criminality occurrence in the local market, other impeding factors includes, adequate support, infrastructure, market access and exposure and collaboration among businesses is lacking in this communities and hence, the use of social media influencers does not proliferate in the region (Enaifoghe & Vezi-Magigaba, 2023; Enaifogh et al., 2023).

## **5. Conclusion**

This study focused on the perceptions of generation Y customers on building township beauty brand business through social media influencer marketing. The study highlighted the gender and age disparities in the perceptions of generation Y customers concerning influencer marketing in building brand equity and sustainability. The study also assessed the customer perception on the importance of influencer marking in the beauty brand industry. Results demonstrated that most generation Y felt that social media influencers were not important for township beauty brand businesses.

The study pinpointed online scamming, phishing, exploitation of the black community, adequate financial support and infrastructure, among others as determinants of generation hesitancy and reluctance to endorse township influencer marketing, highlighting the enduring negative ramifications on consumer brand loyalty, and customer retention. The study then concludes that authenticity is a crucial factor in determining the influence of influencer marketing on the township beauty brand equity. Moreover, with proper funding and support the township beauty brand businesses can proliferate in the market and create job opportunities and uplift township. Moreover, workshops on sustainability of SMEs and funding applications is imminent for township owners to remain resilient. Furthermore, organizations who already initiated the use of social media influencers should utilize social proof to strengthen their credibility, brand loyalty and trustworthiness, and to exert influence on customers decision-making, and reinforce their brand.

This study contributes to the limited knowledge base on local township influencer marketing by examining the dynamics, delimitations and successes within the township beauty brand industry. The study's context-specific underpinning can guide future research efforts and contribute to the promotion of township influencer marketing in the township beauty brand industry.

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