

# The influence of vlogging communities on brand image and loyalty

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to explore the influence of vlogging communities on brand image and brand loyalty for colour cosmetics among Generation Y women. The study followed a qualitative approach. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with twelve Generation Y women who engaged with colour cosmetics vlogging communities. The data was analysed using thematic analysis. Through participants' narratives, it was discovered that i) brand experiences shared on vlogging community sites shape the online image of brands and brand image at individual consumer level, ii) brand image does influence brand loyalty, and iii) the extent to which vlogging communities influence the brand image and brand loyalty of consumers depends on their personal experiences with brands and on the message valence, specifically as it relates to quality and ratio. The findings show the need for marketing managers to pay attention to sentiments expressed on vlogging community sites. Such sentiments can help them gain market intelligence to devise strategies aimed at building favourable brand image and ensuring brand loyalty towards colour cosmetic brands among Generation Y women. Despite the growing popularity of vlogging sites, studies looking at their influence on consumers are rare. This study contributes to literature by providing useful insights on the influence of vlogging communities on brand image and on brand loyalty.

**Keywords:** vlogging communities, brand image, brand loyalty, message valence, customer experience

The development and growth of the internet has had a significant impact on business in the 21st century (Mata & Quesada, 2014:60). This is particularly so in relation to marketing and consumer behaviour (Quester, Pettigrew, Kopanidis, Roa-Hill & Hawkins, 2014:68). In recent years the internet has also revolutionised the way consumers interact and communicate with one another (Kamboj & Rahman, 2017:307). The advent of Web 2.0, which refers to the second generation of the World Wide Web, enables the creation of user-generated content (UGC) (Mata & Quesada, 2014:61). UGC refers to various types of media content such as text, video, audio and the like. This content is created by consumers on an online platform and is available to other consumers (Kim & Johnson 2016; Silva & Panahi, 2017). UGC has been central to the conception and growth of social networking sites (SNS) (Zaglia, 2013: 218). Brand-related, user-generated content can contain user reviews of specific brands (Roma & Aloini, 2019).

Among the greatest users of SNS are Generation Y consumers (Mafini, Dhurup & Mandhlazi, 2014:3). Generation Y is a demographic group consisting of individuals born between the years 1980 and 2000 (Mafini et al., 2014:3). Duffet (2017:22) points out that one important aspect that distinguishes Generation Y consumers from other adult generation cohorts is their high levels of exposure to the internet from a young age. Termed 'hyper-connected consumers', many Generation Y consumers own a smartphone and/or other devices which they constantly use to access the Internet and SNS (Stephen, 2017:12). Generation Y consumers are more likely to use SNS to become aware of, search for and share information about brands and services (Mafini et al., 2014:4). Moslehpour, Wong, Pham and Aulia (2017:592) observe that referrals by other customers are the preferred source of information about product brands and services for most consumers, including users of personal care product such as colour cosmetics,

which are of interest in this study. The term 'colour cosmetics' refers to products used to beautify and enhance an individual's appearance (Parmar, 2014:1).

Product branding seeks to establish and foster strong connections between product brands and consumers (Punyatoya, Sath & Mishra, 2014). Duffet (2017:23) observes that researchers and managers alike have shown considerable interest in Generation Y's use of social media. The way Generation Y engages with social media may provide critical insights into how most consumers will behave in future, as more and more people are born into the information age.

Among the most commonly used forms of social media for colour cosmetic brands are blogs (Sykes, 2014:16). Blogs are websites that document personal activities, opinions and experiences. They are typically run by an individual or a small group (Ngu, 2014:11). The constant evolution of the internet has resulted in the emergence of a new form of blog known as a 'vlog', which is a video log that captures or documents an individual's thoughts, opinions or interests (Sykes, 2014:17). Vlogs combine audio and visual elements and imagery to gain and retain viewers' attention. According to Berryman and Kavka (2017:310), many young women rely on vlogs to gain and share information about colour cosmetics. Through this interaction that takes place between women with a mutual interest in colour cosmetics, online communities are formed.

The attractions of online community sites may result in users becoming attached to the community and potentially, to the brands discussed by the community (Balakrishnan, Dahnil & Yi, 2014:180). Yet despite their popularity and undeniable potential business value, a review of literature reveals that only few studies have empirically examined the influence of online communities, and vlogging communities in particular, on brand loyalty. Dessart, Veloutsou and Morgan-Thomas (2015:38) and Kamboj and Rahman (2017:307) call for further research on this topic due to its practical pertinence. This study addresses this need by exploring the influence of vlogging communities on brand image and brand loyalty for colour cosmetics among Generation Y women. As noted by Ruane and Wallace (2013:316), despite its value, Generation Y has been a largely neglected segment in online research studies, especially those that focus on a specific gender of Generation Y consumers.

Dessart et al. (2015:42) and Kim and Jang (2014:39) maintain that online communities have the potential to exert an influence on other consumers, mainly through information shared on such sites. Accordingly, in exploring the influence of vlogging communities, this study examines the information shared on such sites. The specific research objectives of the study aims can be formulated as follows:

- RO<sub>1</sub>: To explore the influence of messages shared on vlogging community sites on the brand image of colour cosmetic product brands among Generation Y women.*
- RO<sub>2</sub>: To determine the message-related factors that exert an influence on the brand image of colour cosmetics on vlogging community sites among Generation Y women.*
- RO<sub>3</sub>: To understand the influence of brand image, as portrayed on vlogging community sites, on loyalty to colour cosmetic product brands among generation Y women.*

The next section presents the theoretical framework informing the study and the propositions posited. Thereafter the methodology is presented, followed by the findings, discussion of the findings and their theoretical and managerial implications. Finally, the limitations of the study are outlined as well as suggestions for future research.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### ***The customer-based brand equity theory***

This study relies on Keller's customer-based brand equity theory (CBBE) to explore the influence of vlogging communities on brand loyalty. This is because what is shared on social media, including vlogs, has a potential impact on what customers think about brands. The CBBE theory comprises four building blocks which start with i) brand identity and encompasses brand awareness, ii) brand meaning or image of the brands, iii) brand response, which

refers to what customers think and feel about the brand and finally iv) brand relationships, which refers to brand resonance and is based on attachment, loyalty, sense of community and active engagement (Keller, 1993:2; Keller, 2001:9-10). Keller (2001:11) argues that in order to build brands with high equity, one needs to focus on increasing brand awareness and influencing what consumers think and feel about the brand, which is directly associated with brand image (Keller, 1993:2). The theory argues that when a brand has strong equity, customers will recommend the brand to others and will remain loyal to it (Keller, 1993:2; Aaker, 1996:113). Accordingly, in exploring the influence of vlogging communities on brand loyalty, this study examines the role of the foundational blocks, namely, brand awareness and brand image.

According to Atilgan, Aksoy and Akinci (2005:241), brand awareness refers to familiarity with a brand. Aaker (1996:114) points out that the higher the level of brand awareness, the greater the probability of the brand being included in the evoked set and therefore, being purchased. Research also shows that consumers often only purchase what they are familiar with, including well-established brands (Atilgan et al., 2005:242). Quester et al. (2014:345) note that brand awareness can also influence purchase intentions by affecting consumer attitudes and perceptions. It enhances the strength of brand associations, which are imperative in creating brand image (Kim & Kim, 2016:21).

Wang, Hsiao, Yang and Hajli (2016:58) note that brands have benefited considerably, in terms of enhanced brand awareness, from the advancement of online technologies, specifically the advent of SNS. For example, through SNS many brands have gained popularity due to information about them going viral on social networking sites (Wang et al., 2016:58). Balakrishnan et al. (2014:177) explain that Generation Y consumers contribute greatly to spreading brand information online.

While brand awareness is more about familiarity, brand image is about the impressions that current and potential customers have about a brand. Keller (1993:3) specifically defines brand image as the perceptions of a brand created by brand associations (Keller, 1993:3). This is complex in nature, and results from the types of brand associations held by individuals, the favourability of the associations, and their strengths and uniqueness (Pappu, Quester & Cooksey, 2005:144). Significant benefits are associated with positive brand associations. These include invoking positive feelings about the brand, providing reasons to purchase the brand and being able to differentiate the brand from competitors (Atilgan et al., 2005:241).

### ***Brand image and vlogging communities***

Hemsley-Brown, Melewar, Nguyen and Wilson (2016:3) suggest that vlogging community members can influence brand image through either favourable or unfavourable mentions of brands when they share information about them with other members. Often these mentions are a result of the consumer's experience (Gensler, Völckner, Egger, Fischbach & Schoder, 2015:120). Consumers are likely to develop a positive brand image for product brands and services with a high number of favourable mentions (Sengupta, Balaji & Krishnan 2015:2). A favourable brand image increases not only its popularity but also trust in the brand. This, in turn, can influence brand loyalty (Alhaddad, 2015:141). The CBBE theory maintains that brand image plays an important role in influencing brand loyalty (Keller, 1993:3). Studies by Hemsley-Brown et al. (2016) and Sasmita and Mohd Suki (2015:280) confirm the positive influence of brand image on loyalty. Accordingly, this study posits that experience with brands and favourable mentions of them are key to exploring the potential influence of vlogging communities on brand loyalty. The next section elaborates further on these factors.

### ***Brand experience***

Information shared on vlogging community sites can come from the vloggers themselves or members of the vlogging community. According to Fischer (2014:5), beauty vloggers are typically individuals with knowledge or expertise in colour cosmetic brands. Many are trained make-up artists or are experienced in using colour cosmetic brands. Sykes (2014:17) claims that the experience and expertise of these individuals can validate the credibility and reliability of the information that they provide. The information can come in different forms, such as recommendations of brands (Fischer, 2014:5). Generation Y women use beauty vlogs to gather information about colour cosmetics because the

beauty vloggers' experience helps reduce any perceived risk associated with trialling new product brands (Fischer, 2014:5; Sykes, 2014:17).

Apart from the vloggers themselves, the experiences and information shared by other members of the vlogging community may influence what others think about brands. Vlogging communities allow members to easily share their personal experiences of brands (Dessart et al., 2015:32). In the course of sharing information, participants might support or oppose the opinions of others (Hamari, Sjöklint & Ukkonen, 2016:2050). Such interaction can stimulate other members' eagerness to participate in the conversation, resulting in more customer engagement and more information shared about product brands or services (Dessart et al., 2015:31). According to Bianchi, Drennan and Proud (2014:96), when information shared by general members of vlogging communities is perceived to be based on personal consumer experiences with product brands or services, it is likely to be seen as credible. This may influence what customers think about different brands.

Experience is thus essential in enhancing knowledge and increasing the reliability of the information provided by vlogging community members (Yang, Li & Huang, 2017:157). This is because individuals who have used and experienced the brand become more familiar with it (Bianchi et al., 2014:95). Hamari et al. (2016:2051) contend that expressing satisfaction – or dissatisfaction – with a brand benefits other consumers, who become better informed when evaluating alternatives and making purchase decisions. They authors note that sharing of information can lead to greater commitment to the vlogging community and to brands that receive favourable evaluations. Accordingly, this study posits the following:

**Proposition 1:** *The perceived credibility of content sharers on vlogging community sites has an influence on the brand image of colour cosmetic brands among Generation Y women.*

However, the degree of influence of shared information on purchase decisions and commitment is likely to depend on the valence of the messages. The next section looks at the concept of message valence.

### **Message valence**

'Valence' is defined as the psychological value assigned to an event, situation or object on the basis of its attractiveness or lack of attractiveness (Koo, 2015:1164). Valence can thus be positive or negative, depending on the perceived attractiveness of the object of analysis. Positive valence messages are those that contain positive information about a particular object, whereas negative valence messages are those that contain negative information about a particular object (Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016:2). Valence becomes important for electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) as messages are generated by users themselves, through UGC (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016:193). It has been suggested that the type of valence significantly influences consumers' reception and acceptance of the message and therefore their attitudes towards the brand being discussed (Koo, 2015:1164). Users are motivated to share their experiences with other consumers regarding brands they purchased and consumed. Consumers rely on the eWOM, either positive or negative, shared by fellow consumers to inform their purchase decisions.

Fischer (2014:5) notes that although a beauty vlogger may often praise a specific colour cosmetic brand, other vlogging community members might feel indifferent or have had negative experiences with the brand or service, and post their own opinions. As a result, community members will often see both positive and negative messages about a brand (Fischer, 2014:5).

The types of messages posted about a brand are important as they can influence what customers associate the brand with. Negative valence eWOM messages may result in customers having negative perceptions of a brand, which could lead to a negative attitude towards the brand (Gensler et al., 2013:37). The same logic follows for positive valence eWOM messages. Charo, Sharma, Shaikh, Haseeb and Sufay (2015:115) observe that positive valence eWOM messages contribute to a favourable attitude towards the brand by creating a favourable perception of it.

Although these are the possibilities, empirical findings are mixed as to the degree of influence of positive

messages compared to negative messages. Some studies report that negative valence eWOM messages have more influence on consumers' brand evaluations than positive messages (Sweeney, Soutar & Mazzarol, 2014:341). This can be attributed to the fact that negative messages tend to be more diagnostic as opposed to positive or neutral messages (Charo et al., 2015:44). Gensler et al. (2015:115) observe that dissatisfied consumers tend to be angry and disappointed with their purchase and, based on their emotions, are likely to share more information about a negative experience. However, Sweeney et al. (2014:340) found that positive messages exert more impact than negative messages. In contrast, a study by Gensler et al. (2015:116) found that reviews that were only positive or only negative were both perceived to have an equally strong influence on behaviour, while mixed reviews were perceived to have much less influence than positive only or negative only reviews.

Mixed findings in relation to the influence of eWOM message valence highlights the need for more studies in this area. This study proposes the following in relation to brand experience and message valence:

**Proposition 2:** *Message valence on vlogging community sites influences the brand image of colour cosmetic brands among Generation Y women.*

The topic of this study is brand loyalty. The next section elaborates on this concept.

### **Brand loyalty**

Brand loyalty is defined as the tendency or the intention to purchase a product brand, brand or service repeatedly (Pappu & Quester, 2016:68; Matthews, Son & Watchravesringkan, 2014:26). It is a measure of the attachment that a consumer feels towards a brand (Veloutsou, 2015:408). Accordingly, there are two main ways to measure brand loyalty: attitudinal loyalty and behavioural loyalty. Pulligadda, Kardes and Cronley (2016:218) explain that attitudinal loyalty is a state of mind whereby a consumer has a preferential, positive attitude towards a brand and would therefore prefer to purchase that brand over competing brands. Behavioural loyalty, on the other hand, is based on consumers' actual conduct in purchasing the same brand repeatedly (Matthews et al., 2014:26). Behavioural loyalty is thus centred on repeated purchasing. Chan and Mansori (2016:15) stress that building brand loyalty is especially crucial in the use of colour cosmetics by Generation Y women. Given the focus of the current study on brand image and loyalty, research questions were designed to address both attitudinal and behavioural brand loyalty.

Generation Y women can easily switch to alternative brands should they consider them more likely to meet their needs (Chan & Mansori, 2016:16). This can happen as a result of personal experience or the experiences of others. Chan and Mansori (2016:15) observe that once Generation Y women have decided which brand works best for them, they tend, in time, to become loyal to that brand. At the same time, however, recommendations from family, friends and online communities have an important impact on attitude and brand image, and are the main reason for switching colour cosmetic brands (Chan & Mansori, 2016:17).

As proposed by the CBBE theory, brand loyalty creates 'brand resonance' which leads to the development of brand relationships. However, in order for consumers to feel 'in sync' with a brand, three other aspects must be present: i) engagement with the brand, ii) attachment to the brand and iii) a sense of community (Keller, 2001:15). Engagement refers to the willingness to interact with the brand and become its ambassadors by communicating about the brand as is done with vlogging communities (Pappu et al., 20015:145; Keller, 1993:5). Attachment to the brand is centred on a positive preference and affiliation to the brand; consumers might say that they 'love' the brand and will consistently select that brand over all others (Keller, 2001:15; Atilgan, 2005:240). Sense of community refers to the identification of consumers with a brand community, often based on similar characteristics and the ability to relate to fellow community members (Mikal et al., 2015:3; Keller, 1993:5).

Studies by Keller (1993) and Hemsley-Brown et al. (2016) show that brand loyalty is influenced by brand image. Accordingly, the following proposition is made:

**Proposition 3:** *Brand image strongly influences brand loyalty for colour cosmetic brands among Generation Y women users of vlogging community sites.*

## RESEARCH STRATEGY

The study followed a qualitative research approach. Data was collected from twelve South African Generation Y women using in-depth, semi-structured interviews. As noted by Husin, Evans and Deegan (2016:45), using a qualitative approach, and in-depth interviews in particular, is common in studies focused on information technology and consumer behaviour. This is especially so when it is necessary to gain deeper insights into a new or complex phenomenon (Zikmund & Babin, 2013:49). The vlogging community concept is fairly recent, and based on the limited existing studies, not much is known about its influence on consumer behaviour (Berryman & Kavka, 2017:311). The use of in-depth semi-structured interviews allowed for open and flexible discussion to flow between the participants and the researcher while exploring lines of enquiry that were of interest to the study. The semi-structured interviews were guided by an interview protocol using a deductive approach. This provided the opportunity to capture participants' sentiments and perspectives in their own words. This approach yielded in-depth insights into consumer perceptions about the influence of vlogging communities on brand loyalty, using the participants' own stories.

Participants were selected through non-probability sampling, using a purposive sampling technique. Purposive samples are constructed by choosing particular criteria based on specific characteristics or personal judgement (Bryman & Bell, 2015:325; Malhotra, Birks & Wills, 2013:320). In the current study, only South African Generation Y women were chosen, who had been using colour cosmetics and had engaged with beauty vlogging communities by reading or commenting on reviews. The researcher made face-to-face contact with participants as well as contacting them via telephone messages. A potential participant was then posed a screening question to help identify the actual South African Generation Y participants in the study. An explanatory statement outlining the purpose of the study as well as the ethical considerations was read out to each participant so as to ensure informed consent.

Face-to-face and Skype interviews were conducted, and an interview protocol was used to guide the discussions. The interviews were conducted at the participants' homes, where they felt most comfortable. The decision on sample size in the study was influenced by the need for saturation. As recommended by Fusch and Ness (2015:1410), the thickness and richness of data were the main factors used to determine point of saturation. By the twelfth interview, a large quantity of information had been collected and participants were not bringing in new insights but repeating what had already been said by other participants.

The interviews were voice-recorded and lasted about thirty minutes. Verbatim transcripts of the interviews were produced afterwards, and thematic analysis was used to draw meaning from the data using a deductive approach. The interview protocol comprised questions relating to established concepts and ideas which were used to identify themes. The steps recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006:80) were used to guide the thematic analysis. These steps included i) familiarisation with the data - the researchers read and transcribed the data verbatim to familiarise themselves with the content, ii) generating initial codes - the researchers used Nvivo version 11 to assist in identifying key words and codes pertaining to the topic at hand to organise the data in a systematic way, iii) searching for themes - the researchers used Nvivo version 11 to organise the key words and codes to create overall themes as presented by literature, iv) reviewing themes - the researchers determined the validity of the themes by identifying whether there was enough data to support them, v) defining and naming themes - the researchers aimed to capture the essence of each theme and what it represented in order to name and define the themes and vi) producing the report - the researchers drafted a report in the form of a findings section summarising the main findings, excerpts and arguments.

One of the research objectives of the study sought to identify what the participants felt about the vlogging contributors in terms of their knowledge of colour cosmetics in general, and their experiences with colour cosmetic brands. Participants were also asked to indicate if and how their image of colour cosmetic brands was influenced by what was said in vlogging communities, including negative, positive and/or mixed messages about brands. Another question required participants to explain the perceived influence of the brand image derived from the vlogging community on their loyalty towards colour cosmetics brands. Participants were probed further to discover how brand image influenced their brand loyalty.

In terms of profile, the participants were aged between 19 and 30, with 67% falling between the ages of 21 to 23. Nine of the twelve participants indicated that they watched beauty vlogs no fewer than three times a week, while five stated that they watched them daily.

## RESEARCH RESULTS

The findings are discussed in relation to each of the propositions previously stated.

**Proposition 1:** *The perceived credibility of content sharers on vlogging community sites has an influence on the brand image of colour cosmetic brands among Generation Y women.*

When participants were asked about the content contributors on vlogging community sites, they identified contributors as belonging to two main categories, namely, 'professionals' and 'average women'. Unlike professionals, average women were seen to lack expert knowledge of colour cosmetic brands, including their proper use. Nonetheless, many participants regarded them as credible sources of information based on their perceived objectivity. Most participants felt that 'average women' often shared from personal experience and not from the need to endorse a brand on behalf of colour cosmetics companies. Vloggers, on the other hand, were regarded by some participants as being prone to sharing information purely for marketing purposes. The description of an 'average woman' provided by a few of the participants captures what many thought about these contributors on vlogging sites:

*"...many of them who comment are like me... wanting to learn about makeup."*

*"...because they are average consumers like me who have no reason to endorse the brand, I believe that they're objective."*

*"You can never tell because some (vloggers) could be hoaxes, others endorse the brand."*

The majority of the participants felt that irrespective of the source of information, in general they did consider information shared on vlogging community sites to be credible. The participants nevertheless noted that evidence of first-hand experience with a brand helped to influence their perception of the credibility of information shared on vlogging sites. Members who shared content in a manner that showed they had first-hand experience with brands were seen as better-quality sources of information and were acknowledged to have some influence on what participants thought about brands. This was particularly the case for brand image, where they did not have first-hand experience with the brand. The comments below capture what participants said in this regard:

*"I have used it before and this is how it worked for me' ... then they definitely have experience with the brands which justifies their comments .... I am influenced ... because sometimes you don't have the time to go into the shops and try and find out from a sales consultant."*

*"If people take the time out to comment on the video then they must have some knowledge about what's going on. Often, if people have knowledge, experience and information to share, then they will share it and they contribute a lot to the discussion... it enhances my believability of the information."*

Apart from knowledge, the perceived objectivity of the sources of information was noted to play a part in influencing the perceived credibility of this information, shared on vlogging community sites and their influence on what people thought about brands discussed on such sites, namely, brand image.

*"Members are objective because they use the brands themselves and they've experienced it...The people commenting do provide objective sources of information...It does influence my believability of the information."*

In summary, the findings show that the perceived credibility of sources of content shared on vlogging community sites exerts an influence on consumers' image of brands, specifically brands with which they have not had first-hand experience. This is in line with Proposition 1.

**Proposition 2:** *Message valence on vlogging community sites influences the brand image of colour cosmetic brands among Generation Y women.*

From the interviews, it transpired that it was rare to find sites where community members had only positive or only negative things to say about the brands discussed. Instead, the norm was that the discussions included both positive and negative comments. This interplay of negative and positive comments determined the online image of brands. This was seen to be different from the brand image that individual consumers held in their minds.

When participants were asked to comment specifically about other peoples' positive experiences shared on vlogging community sites and the influence of these experiences on their own image of brands, the majority (eight of the twelve participants) indicated that in general, contributors who posted comments about their positive experiences did positively influence their perception of colour cosmetic brands. They specifically conveyed that their trust and willingness to trial the colour cosmetic brand are enhanced by other contributors' positive experiences. The excerpt below shows the potential influence of positive experiences on consumers.

*"Yes, I have seen a lot of people who boast about their brands and how it's worked for them, they have recommended it in ... comments. I also get tagged in comments ... and we tag each other when new brands come out. So, we encourage it to see what works or what doesn't. If there are a lot of ... good things said about the brand I would be more willing to try it ..."*

With regard to negative experiences, the sentiments expressed by participants were similar to those associated with positive experiences. The majority of the participants (eight of the twelve) felt that in general, contributors who shared their negative experiences did negatively influence their perceptions of the brand. This resulted in these participants often avoiding the brands completely. The excerpts below capture such sentiments:

*"Negative experiences ... influence my perception ... if they have negative experiences, then I am not going to go for that particular brand."*

*"If they've had a negative experience like a bad reaction then I steer away from the brand."*

The four other participants felt that in general, they did not simply accept the negative or positive comments that other made about a brand. These participants noted the importance of first-hand experience for forming better brand associations, especially ones associated with product brand performance.

*"It (brand image) would be based on my personal experience."*

*"I've had a lot of experience with the Mac brands and although people have the right to their own opinions, I would still vouch for Mac because everyone I know is happy with it."*

While similar sentiments were expressed about the influence of positive and negative experiences on brand image, it emerged that the intensity of the comments did determine what consumers felt was the online image of brands. There was general agreement that brands could have a positive or negative online image depending on the number of positive or negative comments. The intensity of negative comments in particular had a greater impact than positive comments on brand image. Ten of the twelve participants specifically indicated that the intensity of negative comments influenced their image of brands greatly. Participants remarked that when the number of people with negative comments about a brand was high, it made them question the brand, even if other people had positive things to say about the same brand. The findings also point to the importance of not only the number of negative comments



but their ratio in relation to positive comments. The findings therefore provided support for Proposition 2. The excerpts below show the influence of the intensity of negative messages on the perceptions of some participants:

*“I steer away ... but there would also have to be a significant number of negative comments... I look at the amount of the negative information versus the positive information. If there are 2/10 which are negative comments, I wouldn't let it get to me but if there are like 5/10 negative comments then I would back away.”*

*“If there are a number of positive messages, I will be willing to try the brand, negative messages would cause me to steer away from it and mixed messages I wouldn't even consider reading further.”*

**Proposition 3:** *Brand image strongly influences brand loyalty for colour cosmetic brands among Generation Y women users of vlogging community sites.*

The findings suggest that the influence of the online image of brands on the vlogging community site depends very much on whether or not the participants themselves had first-hand personal experience with brands as well as the outcomes of those experiences. The researcher probed participants by asking specific questions such as “Will you continue using current brands based on what people say?” and “How does your perception of the brand influence your loyalty towards the brand?” Eleven of the twelve participants indicated that for brands that they currently used and considered positive, a negative online portrayal of such brands would not deter them from using those brands. They further conveyed that this would continue to be the case until they became convinced that there was a new brand that could offer greater benefits than their current brand. The findings thus suggest that participants who have had a positive personal experience with a brand are less likely to be influenced by a negative online image of brands. The excerpts below reflect what participants specifically stated in this regard:

*“I prefer to go with personal recommendations and what I've experienced myself because a lot of vloggers are advertising for the brand. They wouldn't influence me because I would still want to go out myself and try it or rely more on friends and family. You can never tell because some could be hoaxes, others endorse the brand and others might even be true. So, no it doesn't influence my loyalty.”*

*“Every brand is different and has its own qualities so when they move from Mac to Essence, I would want to try other brands for the same effect. I would be willing to try new brands but Mac has been working for me and I like the brand and I wouldn't move from Mac. I won't change even if there are negative comments.”*

*“If I have a good perception of a brand, I would be willing to try it, if there are bad things said about the brand I won't refrain from purchasing it because I would want to try it myself...I would continue with my current brands but if I feel the new brand works better, I would be willing to change over.”*

*“If there are a lot of positive comments and good things said about the brand, I would be more willing to try it because I have a good perception of it and if I like the brand, I will become loyal to it. If there are negative ideas created about the brand, I will be sceptical to try it because of the negative perception however I want to see for myself whether it works. If it doesn't then I won't purchase it.”*

In terms of the positive online image of brands, the findings show that they exert a positive influence on loyalty by enhancing it. Participants felt that when many people held a positive image of their preferred brand and conveyed this on vlogging sites, this reinforced their own positive associations with the brand and made them confident about staying with that current brand.

The findings show that participants who do not have first-hand experience with a brand are more likely to be influenced by the online image of brands, as portrayed through sentiments shared on vlogging community sites. The majority of the participants (ten out of twelve) indicated that when they were new to a colour cosmetic brand, they relied on contributors in vlogging communities who had already trialled the brand. Participants also mentioned that although they would be more likely to be influenced by such comments, there would have to be a sufficient number of them to reinforce the dominant claims. Thus, in cases of a lack of first-hand personal experience, the participants indicated that the greater the number of positive sentiments, the more positive was their own image of the brand and the more willing they would be to trial it. Conversely, the more negative sentiments about a brand, the more negative their image of the brand and the less willing they would be to trial it. These findings are in line with Proposition 3.

## **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

Reliance on vlogging community sites to access and share information is a growing phenomenon, particularly for users of colour cosmetics. This study addressed a gap in literature on the influence of vlogging communities on brand image and loyalty. Focusing specifically on information-sharing on such sites by Generation Y women, the findings suggest that in general, vlogging communities do influence brand image and brand loyalty. It was found that contributors who had personal experience (both positive and negative) with colour cosmetic brands enhanced the perceived credibility of the information conveyed on the vlogging community sites. This, in turn, increased the likelihood of influencing Generation Y women's perception of the brands. This finding substantiates Proposition 1.

In general, the findings show that contributors who have had positive experiences with colour cosmetic brands influence Generation Y women's perceptions positively, whereas contributors who have had negative experiences with these brands influence Generation Y women's perceptions negatively, unless the participants had strong contrary personal experience with the brand. This finding is consistent with Keller's (1993) customer-based brand equity theory, which states that brand awareness has a positive influence on brand associations. The finding shows that personal experience with a brand helps to increase knowledge about a brand, which is a factor closely associated with brand awareness.

The results further indicate that this high level of awareness gained through personal knowledge strengthens people's images of brands at a personal level, which is not easily swayed by the general perception of a brand, as reflected by a mix of sentiments shared by other members of a vlogging community. On the other hand, when a participant has a lower level of awareness due to a lack of first-hand experience, then they are more likely to accept the image of the brand portrayed on vlogging sites.

In trying to understand the influence of vlogging communities from an information perspective, the findings also point to the importance of the quantity and ratio of positively and negatively valenced messages. These two factors reflect the perceived online image of a brand, and play an important role in determining the nature of the influence of vlogging communities on brand image from the perspective of individual consumers. This finding supports Proposition 2. In general, the findings show that positively valenced comments create a favourable perception of the brand, which translates into positive brand image for individual consumers. Similarly, negatively valenced messages create unfavourable perceptions of the brand, which results in individuals holding a negative brand image. These findings are consistent with those of Charo et al. (2015). However, the degree to which brand image is influenced by the sentiments of vlogging community members does depend on the ratio of negative to positive comments and on whether an individual consumer has had positive or negative personal experiences with a brand.

The findings show that the extent to which information shared in vlogging communities influences brand loyalty also depends on the prior experience of message recipients. The findings specifically show that while the brand image held at a personal level typically influences brand loyalty, consumers are less willing to move away from their current brands with which they have had positive experiences, irrespective of an unfavourable online portrayal stemming from comments on vlogging sites. However, this only holds true until they become convinced that a new brand may offer more benefits than their current one. A positive online image of brands was noted to enhance loyalty towards the brands that consumers currently use and like. This is in line with Proposition 3.

## ***Theoretical implications***

This study builds on existing literature in three main ways. Firstly, the study extends prior research on online social networking by consumers by examining the influence of vlogging communities on brand image and brand loyalty. While developments in information technology have led to the proliferation of many different types of social networking sites that are increasingly being used by consumers to share consumer-related information, research in this field has not kept pace in terms of investigating the effectiveness of these different platforms in influencing consumer perceptions and behaviour (Castro & Marquez, 2017:50). There is specifically a lack of studies on the influence of vlogging communities on consumer perceptions of brands and on brand loyalty. The present study contends that vlogging communities have the potential to influence consumers' image of brands and their long-term relationships with brands. In particular, the findings show that information shared on vlogging community sites influences Generation Y women's image of colour cosmetic brands. It also has an effect on building and strengthening brand loyalty.

Secondly, this study explored the influence of vlogging communities on brands with which consumers had personal experience as well as those with which they were unfamiliar. This provided useful insights into the influence of vlogging communities on brand image and brand loyalty from the building and strengthening perspective. Prior research on brand image and loyalty predominantly focused on actual users of brands, and not on potential users.

Thirdly, this study contributes to literature on social media and branding by exploring the different types of information shared on such sites as well as its influence. This included the perceived credibility of information, which depends on the type of source that creates the content as well as the role of message valence. The study therefore goes beyond simply addressing whether vlogging communities influence brand image and loyalty and provides an analysis of how this happens.

Lastly, the findings indicate that researchers in this area should consider the difference between a brand's online image and that which individual consumers hold in their minds. Most research on brand image focuses on what the individual holds in mind. Social media platforms such as vlogging community sites help to access information on the image that many individuals hold about brands. Through the content that they share, contributors reflect the positive image that they hold about brands while others convey the negative image they hold about the same brands. The sum of the communicated brand images makes up the online image of a brand. Therefore, researchers need to understand that the online image of a brand may or may not be the same as the image which an individual holds in their mind. The findings specifically show that where an individual has a strong favourable image of a brand based on past personal experience, a negative online image of the brand does not exert much influence on brand loyalty. However, the online image does exert an influence where the individual is unfamiliar with the brand or has no strong positive feelings about it. Either way, an individual's image of a brand does influence the creation and sustenance of brand loyalty.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The findings in this study have valuable managerial implications. The findings show the high potential of vlogging communities for influencing brand image and brand loyalty. Marketing managers interested in exploring new avenues to influence brand image and enhance loyalty should consider using vlogging community sites.

In order to influence brand image, marketers can persuade users of colour cosmetic brands who have had positive experiences with the brands to comment on beauty vlogs featuring the brand. Marketers can do this by offering incentives such as a discount on the user's next purchase. In addition, marketers of colour cosmetic brands could use social media personnel to search for mentions of their brands in vlogging communities to find out what customers are saying about their brands. The social media personnel can then respond to any negative comments and provide reviewers with support and advice where necessary.

Brand image was found to influence brand loyalty. However, marketers of colour cosmetic brands need to be cognisant of the difference between online image and the brand image individuals hold in their minds. Brand loyalty

can be reinforced by encouraging individuals to share positively valenced comments on vlogging sites to create a positive online brand image. Online brand image was also found to influence the purchase decisions of consumers who had not yet had first-hand experience of a brand. Accordingly, online brand image needs to be seen as important in the brand loyalty creation process. Consumers who were familiar with a brand were found to be less susceptible to the influence of online brand image on loyalty. Those who had positive personal experiences with a brand were willing to continue using the brand irrespective of negative comments about the brand. Marketers could offer interested consumers 'trial hampers' consisting of miniature product brands for consumers to gain first-hand experience with their brands. If satisfied with the brand, consumers would be less susceptible to other people's negative comments about the brand and be more willing to purchase it, thus ultimately influencing brand loyalty.

## LIMITATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Although this study contributes to understanding the influence of vlogging communities on brand image and brand loyalty, as with all research, it is not without limitations. Firstly, due to the methodology used in the study, the sample size used was not representative of the population. As a result, the findings may not be generalised to a wider population. Future research should consider exploring the relationships investigated in this study using a quantitative research approach. This would allow for data to be collected from a large sample of Generation Y women. Secondly, in line with the objectives of the study, the sample included only Generation Y women. Future research could investigate whether the findings can be generalised to other market segments. The beauty and personal care industry as a whole, has been impacted by developments in online technologies. It would thus be of value to include other industry segments as well such as hair care and skin care, so as to compare findings from different segments of the industry and identify what would and would not work with different product brand segments.

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