Youth Consumer Behaviour: A Case of Beauty Product Consumption

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ABSTRACT When consumers go grocery shopping, their baskets end up filled with specific branded products. Why? These products carry a brand name which is a promise to deliver on sought aspects by the consumer. The beauty product industry is one of the fastest growing industries in the world and a multibillion-dollar market on the African continent. This paper sought to offer insights to consumption influenced by brand image and self-image in the context of the African beauty product market with special attention given to South African Generation Y females. A quantitative research design was adopted in order to fulfill the objective of this investigation into brand and self-images influence on consumption behaviour of the youth. A questionnaire was used to obtain insights from 200 females within the age group 18-22. The key findings suggested post-exposure to adverts influences appearance satisfactions. The findings further revealed that these female consumers may doubt the claims made in adverts however, they regard these communications as being reflective of their desired self-images and hence consume these beauty products. Recommendations that arose from this study were that marketers in their pursuit to profitably satisfy consumer needs would be advised to make use of realistic depictions of beauty and models in order to further guide the consumption of their branded products.

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INTRODUCTION

In modern popular culture, body image norms are preserved in the various forms of advertising, by preferential selection of “good looks” in companion-selection, and by the association of reduced aptitude in individuals not portraying “accepted” body proportions.

This issue of idealized images in advertising is so prevalent in society that young females have little chance of escaping messages that communicate these idealized images (Wan et al. 2013: 37). Further, the portrayal of beauty in beauty product advertising seems to be one-sided which has a direct positive influence on consumers’ behaviour (Dittmar et al. 2009; Grabe et al. 2008; Yamamiya et al. 2005) which can include personal, social, cultural and psychological factors of an individual’s life.

Questions relating to brand image and the advertising of beauty products in a South African context of Generation Y females have been limited in coverage yet this is a large, growing and profitable segment which in principal represents a potentially viable target. This, in an era where the beauty product market for items such as synthetic hair on the African continent has a value of seven billion dollars with countries such as South Africa, Nigeria and Cameroon spending one billion dollars (Euromonitor 2014).

Therefore, deeper insights into the consumer behaviour of Generation Y females in South Africa, who on being exposed to advertising of various brands and their associated images, tend to construct various images of ‘self’ that can shape their consumption behaviour.

Objective

The paper sought to provide insights on brand and self-images’ influence on consumption behaviour of the youth.

Theoretical Concepts

Branding

A brand is a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of these items intend-
ed to identify the goods and services of one
seller or groups of sellers and to differentiate
them from those of competitors (Keller 2008: 2).
In other words, a brand may be viewed as an
assortment of both tangible and intangible at-
tributes, represented in a trademark, which may
generate influence and value (Kotler and Arm-
strong 2010: 255). In the absence of brands, con-
sumers would be unable to differentiate one
product from another (Ponsonby-Mccabe and

**Brand Image**

Several definitions exist regarding the term
‘brand image’, the most common one being that
a brand image may be defined as, “the set of
beliefs, ideas, and impression that a person holds
regarding an object” (Kotler 2001: 273). Similarly,
Aaker (1991: 109), Zhang (2015: 58) and Biel
(1992: 8), considered brand image to be, “a clus-
ter of attributes and associations, usually orga-
nized in some meaningful way”. Keller (1993: 3)
instead deliberated brand image as, “a set of
perceptions about a brand as reflected by brand
associations in a consumer’s memory.”

**Brand Image and Beauty Products**

Meenaghan (1995: 23) is of the belief that,
“there is no objective reality and that people
trade in the realms of perception and image”.
The area of marketing involves the relationship
between consumers and business and therefore
brand images have formed an important aspect
in current times. A variety of reasons for this
increased emphasis on brand image in market-
ing can be suggested (King 1991: 43; Parker 1991:
22; Chung et al. 2012: 352):

- Marketing’s increasing cognizance of the
  behavioural aspects of consumer decision-
  making;
- Affluent society’s predilection with sym-
  bolic rather than purely functional aspects
  of products;
- An increasing variety of relatively homo-
  geneous products often involving high
  product complexity and confusing messag-
  es which increase consumer reliance on the
  image aspects of products;
- The fact that technological innovation, in-
  creasingly susceptible to rapid imitation,
  may no longer offer previous levels of sus-
  tainable competitive advantage.

In the beauty product industry, appearance
is everything and hence, similarity between a
brand’s image and a consumer’s self-image (self-
concept) can have significant effects on con-
sumers’ brand evaluations and purchase inten-
tions (Wan et al. 2013: 44).

Promotional messages that encourage con-
sumers to think about their own self-image while
evaluating a brand magnify the effects of brand
images this is further supported by Festinger’s
social comparison theory which states that indi-
viduals evaluate themselves whenever they ex-
perience some form of comparison (Wan et al.
2013: 38).

**Generation Y Females**

Generation Y according to Velentine and
Powers (2013: 597) is a unique and influential
consumer segment where there has been limited
understanding of their consumer behaviours. Gen-
eration Y, also known as the Echo Boomers or
Millenials (Belch and Belch 2010: 137), are the
children of the Baby Boomers generation and
were born after 1979. Generation Y females trea-
ure individuality though they still want to be
deemed as part of the group (Yarrow and
O’Donnell 2009: 137). Consumers between the
ages of 18 and 22 are the demographic most con-
cerned about image and lifestyle trends and in-
fuenced by, “what’s hot and what’s not” (Gluck
2009). In terms of spending power, they have
more money to spend than consumers of the
same age groups but from previous generations
(Morton 2002; Mafini et al. 2014: 1). This seg-
ment of consumers is heavily influenced by tech-
nology such as the internet and has significant-
ly ‘evolved’ from previous generations thus pre-
senting a challenge in targeting them (Valentine

**Self-image (Self-concept)**

Evidence supports the assertion that attrac-
tive people portrayed in various marketing com-
munications affect female consumers’ global per-
ceptions of their own facial attractiveness and
body (Englis et al. 1994). This view is further
supported by the findings of Smirnova (2012:
1242), which states that advertisements influ-
ence how women understand their bodies. Ac-
cording to Sharp et al. (2014: 482) there has been
a noticeable acceleration in the demand for cos-
metic surgery driven primarily by body image concerns influenced by socio-cultural influences such as media through programmes such as *Extreme Makeover* and *Embarrassing Bodies* and advertising.

Sharp et al. (2014: 484) study indicated that there was a positive correlation between internalization, comparison and body dissatisfaction. Catalin and Andreaa (2014: 104) and Hosany and Martin (2015: 685) state that generally consumers will tend to select a brand that is congruent with their self-image.

Baumann et al. (2015: 21) and Hosany and Martin (2015: 685) further state that the image portrayed by the brand can be an extension of the self-image. Brands can be regarded as a source of personal reassurance and indicate to others the kind of person they are.

### Consumer-Brand Relationships and Marketing Communication

In their exploration of the emotional significance of the relationships between consumers and brands, Reimann et al. (2011) suggest that close relationships are motivated by rapid self-expansion; this being the acquisition of resources, perspectives and identities that enhance one’s ability to accomplish goals. With rapid self-expansion, emotional arousal increases (Aron et al. 2000; Schmit 2011) and as such, brands can give consumers “ideal selves” to aspire to, since the presentation of self through possessions allow consumers to differ from what may be their “real selves” (Malär et al. 2011).

### Female Images in Marketing Communication

Young women are frequently exposed to messages and images that reinforce the body ideal, which become the standards (Wan et al. 2013: 37). They are made to feel as if their physical beauty determines how they and others judge their overall value (Smirnova 2012: 1242; Lykins et al. 2014: 404). These perceptions seem to result from a socialization process that begins at a very early age, continues throughout childhood, and is reinforced in adolescence (Berger and Luckman 1966; Smirnova 2012: 1242).

A heightened awareness of other people’s perspectives, along with a need to shape their own identity and conform to group expectations, results in more attention to the social aspects of being a consumer, making choices and consumption (John 1999).

Research to date, reports that some children, adolescents and young women are prone to internalization, high levels of body focus, a high degree of body size dissatisfaction, body image distortions, eating disorders and related self-perception and self-esteem issues partly as a result of the negative effects of thin media models (Halliwell and Dittmar 2004; Dittmar and Howard 2004a; Dittmar and Howard 2004b; Thompson and Stice 2001; Lykins et al. 2014).

Mask et al. (2014) in their study of how portrayals of women convey another ideal that women with little self-determination feel obliged to follow, revealed that adverts featuring thin female athletes engaged in various activities offered greater body dissatisfaction than adverts bearing normal weight athletes.

### Effects of Beauty Product Advertisements

In South Africa, the invasion of American and European images of beauty has severely impacted the concept of what it is. They brought
images which are very different to what beauty was known to be before, and therefore our images of beauty have been internationalized and this is reflected in the way that young women aim to look today. Driving the public’s conception of beauty by sending powerful messages about physical perfection everywhere we turn, the media is considered the most influential education medium in existence today (Hoffmann 2009). The media’s influence, combined with peer pressure and the heightened self-consciousness of young females can create an unflattering image in the mirror that’s simply not what everyone else sees (Webb 2005; Webb et al. 2013: 369).

The average woman sees 400 to 600 advertisements per day and by the time she is 17 years old, she has received over 250,000 commercial messages through the media (Croft 2011). Valentine and Powers (2013: 605) in their study of Generation Y values and lifestyle segments revealed that females in this generational cohort respond better to the visual aspects of marketing communication. With Generation Y females being predisposed to peer pressure and the desire to fit in, the marketing work behind the beauty industry is fiercely and intensely well thought out to influence consumption behaviour of beauty products.

Advances in digital technology make it possible for anyone with a computer and image-manipulation software to cut, paste, enhance, airbrush or otherwise alter a wide range of images. Digital techniques are so popular that it is becoming difficult to distinguish between real photography and digital imaging (Kershaw 2004).

**METHODOLOGY**

For this research, the sample of the study was drawn from females studying from the age of 18-22 at a tertiary institution in the KwaZulu-Natal province. The data was collected through the use of self-administered questionnaires over a two-month period. Non-probability sampling, in the form of purposive sampling was used. This form of sampling refers to the selection of candidates that are in the best position and provide the most relevant and applicable information required (Welman and Kruger 2005: 52).

Two hundred females between the ages of 18 and 22 responded to the questionnaire. The figure of 200 respondents was inline with sample sizes related to Generation Y research as expressed by Mafini et al. (2014: 1) who cited similar sample sizes in research conducted by Bakewell and Mitchell (2004), Drake-Bridges and Burgess (2010), Durvasula et al. (1993), Kim (2003), and Kwan et al. (2008) (Table1).

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**How Do Female Youth Consumers Perceive Beauty Product Brand Images?**

From the literature presented earlier, it has been established that an image is the mental construct developed by the consumer on the basis of a few selected impressions among the flood of the total impressions. Such impressions are gained when viewing marketing communications.

Table 2 indicates the extent to which consumers believe the statements or claims made in beauty product advertisements. Although the majority of respondents were neutral on the subject, a close second, with thirty-six percent disagree that the statements or claims made in beauty product advertisements are believable. Findings in Table 2 indicates that a significant percentage of consumers experience doubt with regards to the statement or claims made in beauty product advertisements, which can (from litera-

**Table 1: Respondent profile**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>43.0</td>
<td>51.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>46.5</td>
<td>98.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coloured</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2: Beliefs in the statements/claims made in the advertisement about beauty products**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highly agree</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>36.0</td>
<td>48.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>85.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>99.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highly agree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.5</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
YOUTH CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR

(continued)

culture) negatively affect the image of a brand. Cebisa (2007), Sharp et al. (2014: 484), Catalin and Andreaa (2014: 104), Hosany and Martin (2015: 685) and Baumann et al. (2015: 21) state that when customers purchase products, they also purchase the benefits associated with products. Though they may express doubt there is still the aspect of social comparison with the displayed image.

Does a Female’s Subsequent to Being Exposed to Images of the ‘Ideal’ Beauty through Advertising, are Females’ Self-Image Affected?

Table 3 revealed that thirty-four point give percent of the respondents were only moderately satisfied with their appearance. Consumers’ satisfaction largely depends on the way they perceive themselves as well as themselves compared to the advertisement (Wan et al. 2013: 37; Sharp et al. 2014: 482; Webb 2005; Webb et al. 2013: 369)

Table 4 indicated a p-value of less than 0.000 when appearance satisfaction and feelings post-exposure to a beauty product advertisement were correlated. This p-value is less than 0.05 and indicates a statistically significant correlation. The Pearson correlation coefficient (r-value) of -0.427 indicates a medium correlation between appearance satisfaction and one’s feelings post-exposure to beauty product advertisements.

The way in which respondents feel after seeing a beauty product advertisement depends negatively on respondents’ satisfaction with their appearance (Wan et al. 2013: 37; Smirnova 2012: 1242; Sharp et al. 2014: 482). The more satisfied one is with her appearance, the less inadequate she will feel after being exposed to a beauty product advertisement.

From the answers to the key questions above, it can be concluded that the advertising of beauty products provides inconsistent outcomes in relation to the usage, purchase and expenditure decisions of Generation Y females and hence their consumer behaviour. This conclusion is in line with various image-related studies by Henderson-King and Hoffman (2001),

Table 3: Respondents’ satisfaction with own appearance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slightly</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderately</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>34.5</td>
<td>45.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mostly</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>31.0</td>
<td>76.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very satisfied</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Correlations for a combination of factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Correlations</th>
<th>Appearance satisfaction</th>
<th>Importance of appearance</th>
<th>Believability of claims</th>
<th>Definition of beauty</th>
<th>Feelings post exposure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appearance Satisfaction</td>
<td>Pearson</td>
<td>Correlation</td>
<td>N</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.092</td>
<td>0.141*</td>
<td>-0.032</td>
<td>-0.427**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of Appearance</td>
<td>Pearson</td>
<td>Correlation</td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.092</td>
<td>0.194</td>
<td>0.046</td>
<td>0.657</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believability of Claims</td>
<td>Pearson</td>
<td>Correlation</td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.141*</td>
<td>.214**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.091</td>
<td>-.085</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of Beauty</td>
<td>Pearson</td>
<td>Correlation</td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-.032</td>
<td>.124</td>
<td>.091</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.171*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feelings Post Exposure</td>
<td>Pearson</td>
<td>Correlation</td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-0.427**</td>
<td>.020</td>
<td>-.085</td>
<td>.171*</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
Mills et al. (2002), Myers and Biocca (1992), Hawkins et al. (2004), Stice and Shaw (1994) as cited by Wan et al. (2013: 37). Beauty product advertisements that focus on the differences between consumers’ actual and ideal self, influence consumers to make decisions to fit in with the images of ‘ideal beauty’ by purchasing and using the beauty products promoted.

Managerial Implications

Advertisements for beauty products seem to make consumers feel that their current attractiveness levels are different from what they would ideally like them to be (Wan et al. 2013: 37; Sharp et al. 2014: 482). In order to shape consumer behaviour in terms of beauty products, it is proposed marketers provide realistic models in their communication to Generation Y females. This will allow for trust to be gained from consumers, thereby increasing the brands’ image and allowing for positive perceptions.

CONCLUSION

This paper presented the findings from both the literature review and the empirical survey on Generation Y female consumption behaviour and self-images, focusing on beauty product advertisements. The credance of beauty product advertising is veiled by exaggeration, retouching and reconstructed perfection and as such the female images represented in the various forms of media have moved from the spotlight and glamorous into research studies. These idealized female stereotypes affect young females’ self-esteem, confidence, body image and self-identity, especially given the fact that advertising messages are being received by a much younger audience these days.

The paper has endorsed that the brand images of beauty product brands are vital in promoting consumer behaviour in terms of usage, purchasing and expenditure as well as embedding the image of the company through truthful and unexaggerated advertising. Consumers’ self-images are closely related to consumer behaviour or perceptions in that individuals tend to buy products that could enhance their self-concept and they avoid those that do not.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study focused on a limited number of Generation Y consumers and in the future, a broader study should be conducted to offer generalizability. The influence of product attributes of the beauty products was not examined in terms of the influence the communication of this has on consumer behaviour of Generation Y female consumers. A focus on particular brands could offer greater insights into the actual influence they have on self-image and ultimately consumption.

Structural equation modelling was used to reveal which constructs actually shape the consumer behaviour of Generation Y female consumers when it comes to beauty products where image is an area of concern. The desire to express self-image through brands can be investigated to offer implications for marketers of products consumed by Generation Y females. A gender comparative study would be of value to ascertain if there are any differences in relation to male and female self-image and consumption behaviour of beauty products.

The various generational cohorts of consumers can be studied to offer greater insights on how marketing communication impacts on self-image and ultimately consumption behaviour of beauty products. Studies on the motivational differences in moderating Generation Y female’s responses to media body ideals could be examined to offer marketing practitioners avenues to further communicate their brands.

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