

## 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 fulfil 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.

### 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 idealize 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 Afri-

can 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-

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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 attributes, represented in a trademark, which may generate influence and value (Kotler and Armstrong 2010: 255). In the absence of brands, consumers would be unable to differentiate one product from another (Ponsonby-McCabe and Boyle 2006: 179).

### ***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 cluster of attributes and associations, usually organized 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 marketing 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 symbolic rather than purely functional aspects of products;
- ♦ An increasing variety of relatively homogeneous products often involving high product complexity and confusing messages which increase consumer reliance on the image aspects of products;
- ♦ The fact that technological innovation, increasingly susceptible to rapid imitation, may no longer offer previous levels of sustainable 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 consumers' brand evaluations and purchase intentions (Wan et al. 2013: 44).

Promotional messages that encourage consumers 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 individuals evaluate themselves whenever they experience some form of comparison (Wan et al. 2013: 38)..

### ***Generation Y Females***

Generation Y according to Valentine and Powers (2013: 597) is a unique and influential consumer segment where there has been limited understating of their consumer behaviours. Generation 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 treasure 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 concerned about image and lifestyle trends and influenced 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 segment of consumers is heavily influenced by technology such as the internet and has significantly 'evolved' from previous generations thus presenting a challenge in targeting them (Valentine and Powers 2013: 597).

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

Evidence supports the assertion that attractive people portrayed in various marketing communications affect female consumers' global perceptions 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 influence how women understand their bodies. According 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).

Cattarin et al. (2000) examined the effects of media-driven images of attractiveness on the level of body image and mood disturbance amongst females. Their findings suggest women experience distress (in terms of anger, anxiety and depression) when viewing media images that reflect the current societal bias towards thinness and attractiveness. Similarly, Stice and Shaw (1994) found exposure to ultra-thin models in advertisements and magazine pictures produced depression, stress, guilt, shame, insecurity and body dissatisfaction in female college students.

According to Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory, individuals engage in self-evaluation whenever they encounter a comparative other. That is, information about the comparative other is used as a basis for assessing their self-view. The key to understanding how women relate to advertising is to understand how they relate to themselves and the image they hold of their self when exposed to certain advertising images; whether the advertising makes them feel good or bad, which may then influence their propensity to buy the product. Secondly, is how women see the models that are used in the adverts, and again how that makes them feel about themselves (Borland and Akram 2007).

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 sam-

**Table 1: Respondent profile**

		<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Cumulative percent</i>
<i>Valid</i>	White	17	8.5	8.5
	Black	86	43.0	51.5
	Indian	93	46.5	98.0
	Coloured	4	2.0	100.0
	Total	200	100.0	

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

		<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Cumulative percent</i>
<i>Valid</i>	Highly disagree	24	12.0	12.0
	Disagree	72	36.0	48.0
	Neutral	75	37.5	85.5
	Agree	28	14.0	99.5
	Highly agree	1	.5	100.0
	Total	200	100.0	

ture) 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

**Table 3: Respondents’ satisfaction with own appearance**

		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent
Valid	Not at all	5	2.5	2.5
	Slightly	16	8.0	10.5
	Moderately	69	34.5	45.0
	Mostly	62	31.0	76.0
	Very satisfied	48	24.0	100.0
Total		200	100.0	

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 female-sand hence their consumer behaviour. This conclusion is in line with various image-related studies by Henderson-King and Hoffman (2001),

**Table 4: Correlations for a combination of factors**

Correlations		Appearance satisfaction	Importance of appearance	Believability of claims	Definition of beauty	Feelings post exposure
Appearance Satisfaction	Pearson	1	0.092	0.141*	-0.032	-0.427**
	Correlation		0.194	0.046	0.657	0.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)			0.046	0.000	200
Importance of Appearance	Pearson	.092	1	.214**	.124	.020
	Correlation			.002	.081	.779
	Sig. (2-tailed)			0.000	0.000	200
Believability of Claims	Pearson	.141*	.214**	1	.091	-.085
	Correlation	.141*	.214**	1	.091	-.085
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.046	.002		.200	.233
Definition of Beauty	Pearson	-.032	.124	.091	1	.171*
	Correlation			.200		.015
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.657	.081	.200		200
Feelings Pos Exposure	Pearson	-.427**	.020	-.085	.171*	1r
	Correlation		.779	.233	.015	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000				200

\*. 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 credence 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 glamour 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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