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Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) and Makeup Purchase Intention Among Gen-Z Females:

The Serial Mediating Effect of Brand Image and Brand Integrity

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ABSTRACT

Generation Z (Gen-Z) consumers have been averred to rely on electronic word of mouth (eWOM) for making purchase decisions and expect integrity in brand communication. A significant question bearing both theoretical and practical implications, however, is how the tendency of these consumers to associate brand image with brand integrity influences the impact of eWOM on their purchase intentions, which remains unanswered. Also, studies focusing on a specific gender of Gen-Z consumers are limited. Using the signaling theory and a survey, the study suggests that eWOM signals play a significant role in influencing purchase intentions among female Gen-Z consumers, as well as their perceptions of the brand image and the brand integrity of makeup brands. For female Gen-Z consumers, eWOM signals that enhance the perceptions of brand integrity and brand image tend to equally matter in their makeup purchase decision making. These findings have implications for an industry that is marked by increasing demand for transparency and responsible marketing communication.

KEYWORDS

Brand Image, Brand Integrity, Electronic Word of Mouth, Generation Z, Serial Mediation, Signaling Theory

INTRODUCTION

The growth of the global beauty industry has been astounding, with an estimated market value of almost $805 billion by the year 2023 (Cvetkovska, 2019). This can be attributed to the myriad makeup and cosmetic brands that produce and sell dozens of beauty products to consumers annually, using expert marketing communication and branding tactics. Numerous marketing strategies, including the utilization of sales promotions and brand communication, have been found to influence consumer responses towards brands, particularly in terms of their attitudes, purchase intention and loyalty (Krystallis & Chrysochou, 2014; Grace & O'Cass, 2005). Pasternak, Veloutsou and Morgan-Thomas (2017), identify electronic word of mouth (eWOM), as one of the prime means by which individuals communicate with each other and exchange information and opinions about different brands, products and services. EWOM refers to "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet" (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh & Gremler, 2004, p. 39). According

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to Appel, Grewal, Hadi and Stephen (2020), brand communication by this means is more effective in engaging consumers, since they consider it to be more trustworthy, authentic and helpful. Then again, extant literature suggests that eWOM has a positive relationship with brand-related outcomes such as brand image, brand integrity and purchase intentions or consumption behaviors (Ismagilova, Slade, Rana & Dwivedi, 2019; Baker, Donthu & Kumar, 2016).

Nonetheless, consumer responses to these forms of communication have been postulated in existing research to be significantly influenced by their age (Drolet, Williams & Loraine, 2007). For instance, younger generations of females such as Millennials (Generation Y) and Generation Z (Gen-Z), have been found to be more persuaded by brand communication that appeals to their emotions than those which appeal to their thoughts (Goodman, Morris & Sutherland, 2008). More so, Herrando, Jimenez-Martinez and Martin-De Hoyos (2019), found that Gen-Z consumers transfer trust to brands mainly from the trust that they repose in content posted and shared by other consumers online.

Thus, if a cosmetic brand is targeted at Gen-Z consumers, eWOM from other consumers should be taken into account (Saunter, Shin & WGSN Beauty & Insight, 2019). These findings on Gen-Z consumers are not unexpected. This is because Generation Z, also known as digital natives, centennials and post-millennials, are heavy users of technology, and love impermanence (Ng, Ho, Lim, Chong & Latiff, 2019; Southgate, 2017; Sparks & Honey, 2015). They also tend to be less receptive to digital advertisements on mobile and desktop devices but are drawn to eWOM generated through recommendations and referrals, ratings and reviews, as well as forums and virtual communities (Herrando *et al.*, 2019; Southgate, 2017). However, these effects of eWOM are yet to be sufficiently explored among Gen-Z consumers, and also especially in the beauty industry, where eWOM has become very prominent through the diversity of reviews, forums and virtual communities (Appel *et al.*, 2020; Herrando *et al.*, 2019). Thus, though marketing researchers and practitioners have explored the effectiveness of marketing and advertising strategies among Gen-Z consumers across different sectors (Scholz, 2019; Haddouche & Salomone, 2018; Southgate, 2017), a dearth of literature on the impact of eWOM on their perceptions of brand image, brand trust dimensions and purchase intentions in the beauty industry has been noted (Duffet, 2017). Further, studies focusing on a specific gender of Gen-Z are also few (Michon, Chebat, Yu & Lemarié, 2015; Guthrie & Kim, 2009). Exploring specific generational cohorts in the beauty industry, especially young female consumers, offers marketers an opportunity to understand better the dynamics of brand perceptions in relation to consumer groups and specific cosmetic brands (Guthrie & Kim, 2009). In addition, marketers have been advised to consider the distinct roles of the dimensions of trust in consumer-brand relationships (Li, Xu, Zhou, Miniard & Yang, 2011). The authors established that brand integrity tends to have a more significant effect on consumers who have a low propensity to trust. As Gen-Z consumers love impermanence and primarily tread cautiously in digital waters (Sparks and Honey, 2015), examining how eWOM influences brand integrity, brand image and purchase intentions among them, constitutes a vital knowledge endeavor for marketing researchers.

Drawing on the signaling theory, this study explores this knowledge endeavor with the question: how does eWOM affect makeup purchase intention among Gen-Z females, considering the serial mediating effect of brand image and brand integrity (a dimension of brand trust). To answer, this research examines six causal relationships and three mediating effects and establishes a conceptual model. By studying young female cosmetic consumers (Gen-Z) through the lens of signaling theory, the study seeks to develop a better understanding of how eWOM signals, brand image and brand integrity influence their purchase intentions. Though some studies have been done in South Africa (Duffet, 2017) and Indonesia (Ananda Hernández-García, Acquila-Natale & Lamberti, 2019), Gen-Z responses to brand communication and brand-related outcomes remain less understood, and calls for studies in other developing economies have been emphasized by these existing studies.

The remainder of this study is structured as follows. The next section presents a review of the literature to explain key concepts and develop the hypotheses in relation to the study. The third and fourth sections describe the research methods and detail the results of the analysis, respectively. The

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