

A Conceptual Analysis of Social Media Influencers and Their Effectiveness in the Beauty Care Industry in Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT : *The emergence of social media influencers, or SMIs, as key agents in the marketing process, has dramatically transformed Sri Lanka's beauty care industry. This conceptual paper, therefore, assesses the roles, strategies, and effectiveness of SMIs against the local market context, grounded on a review of the literature, industry reports, and case studies. It qualitatively explores the value of influencers in personalized marketing, with a focus on their impact on brand perception, consumer trust, and eventual purchasing behavior. Key findings indicate that the influence of SMIs is mainly effective when the audience is properly aligned, the message is authentic, and the content is qualitatively sound and properly transparent about the presence of sponsored content. Notably, audience relevance and cultural relatability are essential, as influencers who resonate with Sri Lanka's diverse cultural beauty ideals tend to build stronger consumer connections. Authenticity and credibility further enhance influencer effectiveness, as consumers respond positively to transparent endorsements and personal product experiences. However, challenges like market saturation and the need for ethical practices, such as disclosure of paid partnerships, remain pertinent. This study concludes that while SMIs are effective assets in enhancing brand engagement, beauty care brands must prioritize influencer partnerships that align with brand identity, cultural expectations, and ethical marketing standards to sustain consumer trust and loyalty in the evolving digital landscape.*

KEYWORDS - social media influencers, beauty care industry, consumer trust, brand perception, audience alignment, ethical marketing practices

I. INTRODUCTION

Social media has redefined the dynamics of consumer engagement, especially in industries like beauty care, where personal endorsement, visual content, and credibility play critical roles. Sri Lanka's beauty industry has adopted influencer marketing to reach an increasingly digital-savvy consumer base. Social media influencers—individuals with a significant following who can affect audience opinions and behaviours—have emerged as powerful agents in shaping consumer decisions in Sri Lanka's beauty care sector (Lakmal et al., 2019).

This paper aims to provide a conceptual analysis of influencer effectiveness in Sri Lanka, examining key factors like credibility, engagement, and content authenticity. The specific research questions addressed are:

1. How do social media influencers impact consumer behaviour in the beauty care industry in Sri Lanka?
2. What factors contribute to the effectiveness of influencers in driving consumer engagement and purchase intention?
3. How do consumer perceptions of influencer credibility and authenticity affect their trust and loyalty towards beauty brands?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

a. The Rise of Social Media Influencers

Social media influencers (SMIs) have redefined traditional marketing paradigms by occupying a central role in digital advertising strategies across industries. Defined by Freberg et al. (2011) as individuals who "exert influence over potential buyers of a product or service by promoting or recommending the items on social media," SMIs facilitate a unique connection between brands and consumers through relatable, engaging content. Influencers leverage platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok to shape public opinion and purchasing patterns by creating a sense of trust, reliability, and intimacy with their followers. This shift has positioned influencers as intermediaries between brands and consumers, particularly in product-driven markets where endorsement by a perceived expert can significantly impact purchasing decisions (Abidin, 2016).

Moreover, the global rise of influencers is underpinned by evolving digital culture, where consumers seek information and validation from non-traditional sources (Godey et al., 2016). By engaging with influencers, audiences perceive themselves as part of a community, where influencers serve not only as promoters but as relatable figures who embody the brand's lifestyle and values. This is particularly effective in

the beauty industry, where influencers' personal branding and perceived authenticity make them ideal marketers for products that depend heavily on customer trust, personal endorsements, and aesthetic appeal (Godey et al., 2016).

Within the Sri Lankan context, increased internet access, smartphone penetration, and platform popularity have catalysed the adoption of influencer marketing. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok are not only popular among the youth but are also progressively attracting older demographics, thereby broadening the reach and impact of influencers across the beauty care market. According to Kaushalya and Ranaweera (2021), the rise of SMIs in Sri Lanka has created a shift in consumer behaviour, particularly in the beauty care sector, where local influencers promote both international and locally produced products, highlighting the importance of cultural and regional appeal in influencer marketing.

b. Influencer Marketing in the Beauty Industry

The beauty industry globally and within Sri Lanka is particularly well-suited to influencer marketing due to the nature of beauty products, which rely on visual appeal, trust, and demonstration of results. Social media influencers in the beauty sector often produce content such as tutorials, product reviews, and before-and-after comparisons, which not only provide product information but also help build trust among consumers. Consumers tend to value influencers' firsthand experiences, perceiving them as like peer recommendations, which effectively drive engagement and build brand loyalty (Steils et al., 2022).

Beauty influencers wield considerable influence by fostering brand credibility and cultivating long-term relationships with their followers. As noted by Evans et al. (2017), influencer endorsements significantly impact purchase decisions, particularly when influencers communicate their personal experiences with products. Consequently, influencer marketing has become indispensable in the beauty industry, with studies indicating that consumers exhibit stronger attachment and loyalty to beauty brands promoted by influencers (Schouten et al., 2020).

In the Sri Lankan beauty care market, influencers have a notable impact. Dissanayake (2023) conducted a study indicating that approximately 60% of young Sri Lankan consumers follow at least one beauty influencer, with a significant proportion acknowledging that influencers impact their beauty product choices. This trend is fuelled by the beauty industry's focus on relatable content and authentic endorsements, which resonate with Sri Lankan consumers who increasingly prioritize informed and transparent product recommendations. Influencers in Sri Lanka cater to these preferences by promoting culturally relevant beauty standards, which enhances their authenticity and appeal.

c. Influencer Marketing in the Sri Lankan Context

The effectiveness of influencer marketing in Sri Lanka is closely tied to perceived credibility, a concept central to communication theory. Hovland and Weiss (1951) defined credibility as the degree to which a communicator is perceived as trustworthy and knowledgeable, attributes that are crucial for successful influence. In the case of influencers, credibility hinges on perceived authenticity and relatability, as audiences favour endorsements from individuals they view as trustworthy and relatable. Kaushalya and Ranaweera (2021) found that Sri Lankan consumers, particularly in the beauty care industry, are more inclined to trust influencers who provide honest product reviews and share personal experiences, as these qualities strengthen perceived authenticity.

Credibility in influencer marketing also depends on cultural relatability. Unlike Western influencers, Sri Lankan influencers often address specific cultural and social nuances, such as traditional beauty standards and locally relevant product attributes. Influencers play a significant role in bridging the cultural and market gap, helping global brands connect with Sri Lankan consumers by aligning product marketing with local values and beauty ideals (Ratnayake & Lakshika, 2022). This local adaptation of global influencer marketing trends demonstrates that effective influencer marketing is contingent on cultural alignment and relevance, further emphasizing the importance of a tailored approach in diverse markets (Lakmal et al., 2019).

Sri Lanka's social media landscape is rapidly expanding, with approximately 7.5 million active users as of 2023, a significant increase from previous years, according to Statista (2023). This growing user base has amplified the reach of SMIs, particularly in urban and semi-urban areas where internet penetration is highest. Influencers are now pivotal in connecting beauty brands to Sri Lankan consumers, especially as brands increasingly utilize local influencers who can convey culturally resonant messages that appeal to a national audience. Consequently, influencer marketing in Sri Lanka's beauty care industry has evolved from a novel marketing tactic to a fundamental strategy, highlighting the role of SMIs in shaping consumer behaviour and product preferences within a culturally specific context (Kaushalya & Ranaweera, 2021).

III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative approach to explore the effectiveness of social media influencers (SMIs) in Sri Lanka's beauty care industry. Given the depth of analysis required in understanding consumer perceptions and the subjective aspects of influencer impact, qualitative research is ideal for unpacking complex dynamics and uncovering the nuances of consumer-influencer interactions in a specific cultural context (Creswell, 2014).

a. Research Design

The research design is centred on a qualitative content analysis of secondary data, which includes previous studies, case studies, and industry reports relevant to influencer marketing in the Sri Lankan beauty care industry. A qualitative design was selected to allow for a deeper understanding of existing literature and to capture recurring themes and patterns in influencer marketing. Secondary data were assessed based on the methods used, participant demographics, and regional focus to ensure the data's relevance and reliability for the Sri Lankan market (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). By integrating these varied sources, the study aims to synthesize insights on consumer perceptions, influencer credibility, and the broader cultural implications of influencer marketing within the local beauty care industry.

b. Data Collection

Data collection focused on obtaining comprehensive information from academic journals, market research reports, and reputable online databases, including Google Scholar, ResearchGate, and Scopus. Using secondary data enables the research to capture a broad spectrum of perspectives while maintaining methodological rigor through the selective use of peer-reviewed sources and industry publications (Silverman, 2015). Key search terms such as "influencer marketing," "beauty care industry in Sri Lanka," and "consumer behaviour" were used to locate relevant studies, which were then filtered for relevance to ensure that only those directly examining influencer marketing and consumer behaviour within Sri Lanka's beauty sector were included (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

To capture a holistic understanding, data was also drawn from recent market reports specific to Sri Lanka's digital marketing landscape. For example, insights on the growing number of social media users in the region were taken from Statista and the International Data Corporation (IDC), which provide contextual data for understanding the digital ecosystem in which influencers operate. This approach allows for a nuanced view that combines qualitative data with quantifiable trends, offering insight into how these variables intersect in the Sri Lankan market (Bryman, 2012).

c. Data Analysis

The data analysis was conducted through a qualitative content analysis approach, as it is particularly suited to examining subjective themes and patterns in existing literature and case studies. Content analysis involved identifying key recurring themes related to influencer effectiveness, including credibility, engagement, authenticity, and consumer trust. These themes were extracted using an inductive coding process, which allowed for an organic emergence of categories from the data rather than imposing pre-existing theoretical frameworks (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

The identified themes were subsequently examined in relation to established theories on social influence, credibility, and consumer psychology, particularly drawing on the work of Kelman (1958) on social influence and Hovland and Weiss (1951) on source credibility. The data was then organized and cross-referenced with these frameworks to ensure a robust understanding of how influencer marketing strategies align with or diverge from consumer expectations within the Sri Lankan beauty market (Guest et al., 2012). By drawing on these theoretical frameworks, the study seeks to build a comprehensive view of the factors contributing to influencer effectiveness and the extent to which these align with the cultural nuances of Sri Lankan consumers.

In addition to coding for thematic elements, attention was paid to interconnections between themes, such as the relationship between authenticity and trust, as these often serve as mediating factors in consumer decision-making processes. Finally, a synthesis of these insights was conducted to contextualize the findings within existing literature, identifying gaps in the current body of research that may inform future studies on influencer marketing in Sri Lanka and other similar markets (Patton, 2015).

IV. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

a. Factors Influencing Influencer Effectiveness

Audience Relevance and Targeting

One of the most critical aspects of influencer marketing success is the alignment between influencers and their target audience. Effective influencers are often segmented based on their audience demographics, ensuring their followers' values, interests, and, in the beauty care sector, beauty ideals align with the brand's

products (Steils et al., 2022). In Sri Lanka's multicultural and diverse social landscape, beauty ideals can vary significantly, and influencer selection must account for these nuances. When influencers share cultural, linguistic, or demographic commonalities with their audience, their recommendations appear more relatable and trustworthy, enhancing the perceived authenticity and relevance of the endorsements (Hamid et al., 2023).

According to Amelia et al. (2023) aligning influencer marketing campaigns with audience needs leads to more targeted and effective communication, particularly in beauty care, where products often have a specific appeal. For instance, an influencer who engages with environmentally conscious or culturally inclined Sri Lankan audiences can more effectively promote natural or traditional beauty products than a general influencer. This approach to precise targeting is supported by the concept of audience segmentation, which suggests that more focused, personalized campaigns yield stronger engagement and trust (Amelia et al., 2023).

Authenticity and Credibility

Authenticity is widely recognized as one of the most powerful factors influencing influencer effectiveness. In Sri Lanka, consumers are particularly sensitive to genuine endorsements and often rely on influencers perceived as trustworthy and honest. According to Audrezet et al. (2018), influencers who maintain consistent messaging and present authentic content foster long-term trust, which can lead to heightened brand loyalty. The concept of "parasocial relationships" – where consumers develop a one-sided sense of connection with influencers – further reinforces this trust. Influencers who openly share personal experiences and show transparency in their brand partnerships tend to cultivate these relationships, enhancing their influence over consumers' purchasing decisions (Lakmal et al., 2019).

In Sri Lanka, where influencer marketing is still emerging, consumers may be particularly wary of promotional content. As such, influencers who disclose paid partnerships are viewed as more credible and respectful of their followers' trust (Dissanayake, 2023). Research by Audrezet et al. (2018) underscores that when influencers are transparent, their followers perceive their endorsements as genuine, heightening engagement and positive brand associations. Given the importance of honesty, brands are increasingly emphasizing values-based partnerships with influencers, promoting an ethical and transparent image.

Content Quality and Engagement

The quality of content produced by influencers is central to engagement and, consequently, their effectiveness in marketing. In the beauty care industry, visual appeal is crucial, with influencers on platforms like Instagram and TikTok harnessing the power of imagery and video to showcase product benefits (Schouten et al., 2020). Research indicates that influencers who provide informative, visually appealing, and interactive content are more successful in capturing attention and promoting consumer engagement, ultimately enhancing brand connection (Kaushalya & Ranaweera, 2021). High engagement, often measured through likes, comments, and shares, serves as an indicator of consumer interest and sentiment toward a brand.

Moreover, content quality encompasses more than aesthetics. According to Farouk et al. (2023) influencers who craft informative and relatable narratives foster a stronger bond with their audience. In Sri Lanka, where beauty care consumers may prioritize peer-like advice, high-quality and engaging content acts as a bridge between influencers and their followers, offering a semblance of genuine personal recommendations.

b. Consumer Perceptions and Behavioural Shifts

The influence of SMIs in shaping consumer behaviour within Sri Lanka's beauty care industry extends beyond brand awareness to impact brand perception and purchase intentions. Consumers perceive influencers as akin to peers, making their opinions more relatable and credible. Research by Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) suggests that the visual and trend-oriented content created by influencers renders new products more appealing and accessible, thereby creating demand. In the beauty care context, influencers often provide tutorials, review products, and share beauty routines that appeal to consumers' desire for authenticity, which serves to drive behavioural shifts in purchasing.

Furthermore, a study by Evans et al. (2017) suggests that consumers often look to influencers for trends and inspiration, perceiving them as trusted voices in beauty. This "trendsetter" role positions influencers as critical to product discovery, especially for younger Sri Lankan consumers who are heavily reliant on social media for beauty-related information (Dissanayake, 2023). Consequently, influencer content effectively bridges the gap between awareness and purchase, shaping how consumers view and prioritize certain beauty brands.

c. Challenges in Influencer Marketing in Sri Lanka

Market Saturation

With the rapid growth of influencer marketing in Sri Lanka's beauty care sector, market saturation poses a significant challenge. As more influencers promote similar products, consumers may experience a phenomenon known as "advertising fatigue," where excessive exposure to sponsored content leads to desensitization (Casaló et al., 2018). Influencers endorsing multiple, often competing, beauty products can compromise their authenticity, diluting the trust that consumers have placed in their recommendations.

This saturation also raises questions about influencer differentiation. As Kotler et al. (2021) argue, brands may need to carefully select influencers with a niche appeal or unique personal brand to stand out in an increasingly crowded market.

Cultural Nuances and Relatability

Sri Lanka's rich cultural context introduces unique dynamics to influencer marketing in the beauty industry. Beauty ideals in Sri Lanka often emphasize features such as fair skin and clear complexion, and influencers who align with these traditional values may have a stronger impact on their audience (Dodanwala & Weerasekera, 2023). Yet, this alignment can also be limiting; audiences are becoming increasingly attuned to diverse representations of beauty, and there is growing advocacy for more inclusive standards that reflect a broader spectrum of skin tones and body types (Dodanwala & Weerasekera, 2023).

Cultural relatability also impacts influencers' perceived effectiveness. Those who promote luxury beauty brands or products that align with traditional beauty ideals can enhance their credibility among Sri Lankan consumers who view them as aspirational figures. However, balancing global beauty trends with local ideals is essential to maintain relatability without alienating specific consumer segments.

Transparency and Ethical Considerations

Transparency remains a significant challenge in influencer marketing in Sri Lanka. While international regulatory bodies have established guidelines for influencer disclosures, Sri Lanka's policies are still evolving. A lack of transparency regarding paid partnerships can erode consumer trust, as undisclosed endorsements may be perceived as deceptive (Kotler et al., 2021). In response, many Sri Lankan beauty brands advocate for clear disclosure practices, understanding that maintaining trust in an influencer's honesty is crucial for long-term brand loyalty.

According to Abidin (2016), ethical considerations in influencer marketing extend beyond transparency to include authenticity in content. In the Sri Lankan context, where consumers are increasingly critical of superficial marketing, influencers who prioritize ethical practices, such as authentic reviews and fair product comparisons, are more likely to sustain positive engagement. This ethical alignment is essential, as modern consumers place high value on honesty, integrity, and transparency, particularly within an industry as personal as beauty care.

V. CONCLUSION

Social media influencers hold significant potential in shaping consumer behavior and enhancing brand equity within Sri Lanka's rapidly evolving beauty care industry. The study highlights that influencers' effectiveness largely hinges on factors such as audience alignment, authenticity, content quality, and adherence to ethical marketing practices. Specifically, influencers who resonate with the local culture, communicate transparently, and share credible, authentic experiences are perceived as trustworthy, positively impacting consumer engagement and purchase decisions.

Audience alignment and targeting are especially pivotal, as influencers with a deep understanding of Sri Lanka's cultural nuances and beauty ideals have a greater capacity to connect with consumers on a personal level. Authenticity is also a critical factor, as consumers tend to favor influencers who provide genuine product recommendations and share personal insights over those who prioritize overtly promotional content. Content quality, encompassing visual appeal and informative narratives, further strengthens the influencer-consumer relationship, fostering a stronger sense of trust and brand loyalty.

However, the study also identifies critical challenges to influencer marketing in Sri Lanka, such as market saturation, cultural relatability, and transparency in sponsored content. As the market for influencer endorsements grows, consumers risk becoming desensitized to repetitive, highly promotional content, necessitating a more discerning approach from both brands and influencers. Addressing these challenges is essential to maintain the effectiveness of influencer partnerships and preserve credibility. Cultural relatability, in particular, remains crucial, with beauty standards deeply embedded in the country's socio-cultural landscape. The ethical considerations around transparency are equally important, as consumers expect influencers to disclose partnerships, ensuring honesty in their recommendations.

The study concludes that, while social media influencers are highly effective marketing assets for beauty care brands, brands should prioritize partnerships that align with their identity, values, and consumer expectations. Future influencer marketing strategies in Sri Lanka's beauty care industry will benefit from focusing on fostering long-term, authentic influencer relationships that value transparency and cultural relevance, ensuring sustained consumer trust and brand loyalty.

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