

Consumers' Perception of Social Media Influencers: A Study of Skincare Brands in Nigeria

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Abstract: In the highly competitive consumer market, brand owners are working tirelessly towards retaining their 'loyal' customers, and ensuring that the consumers of other brands make a switch to their products; all these are geared towards remaining relevant in the business world. Hence, social media has become a viable medium to pass these messages as a result of the increasing impact of modern technology and "know-how." The engagement of well-known personalities for social media brand influencing has become a viable tool employed by brand owners to give maximum visibility to their products. They are influential because online users, in most cases, adopt their personalities as role models while many others idolize them. Hence, their promotion of brands and products on social media is usually widely accepted by these groups of consumers. In recent times, there have been reports and cases of influenced skincare brands and products that have fallen short of efficacy and quality as purported by the influencers of the brands in question. Consumers have expressed dissatisfaction, frustration, and waste of money regarding the purchase and usage of some skincare brands that were purchased as a result of the content created around the products by their social media influencers. Therefore, this study seeks to examine consumers' perception of the engagement of social media influencers of skin-care products using Focus Group Discussion and a survey of female respondents who are known to use skincare products. Results show that the use of influencers does not necessarily inform their purchase or usage of certain skin care products. This is because, first, skin care products are sensitive and could damage customers' skin, which makes them purchase through referrals rather than depending on influencers' reports about the product. Second, the social media platform is commonly known as a medium that online users can easily manipulate for deception. The study suggests that Influencers should adopt credible means of creating awareness for their brand.

Keywords: brand influencer, social media, skincare brands, deception, consumers, and perception.

1. Introduction

Social media platforms in recent times have played a major role in promoting both product-based and service-based businesses. The use of social media platforms for business activities is gaining attention as organizations adopt it as a means of reaching potential customers and also for effective customer feedback. In addition, several users such as service brands and product-based brands have focused recently on marketing through the use of brand influencers on social media. Most brand influencers have social media platforms where they use their profile to express what they stand for as a person. In most cases, such influencer's use or engagement of the social media profile informs which influencer is used for their brand or service. In this case, the social media platform used by each influencer also matters to the brand as this informs their decision. Just as Ike, Omojola, and Aririguzoh (2021) stated that 'media seek to influence the decision-making dynamics of their audience' Hence, Hafez (2021) agrees that social media brand influencing effectively builds and supports a constant and effective flow of information between customers and brand influencers.

Elgheit (2018) explains that consumers' behaviors have been significantly affected in terms of purchase patterns due to the invention and impact of technology. Consumers now have the opportunity to search out and purchase products online because of the availability and workability of various social media sites and different mobile electronic devices such as phones. The advent of modern technology is directly affecting and shaping how consumers socialize and use social media platforms and online stores in their purchase decision-making process. He adds, that the increased activities of electronic marketing and social media brand influencing have not only impacted consumer behavior but organisations also, as business owners are now leveraging on the business side of social media.

The availability of product reviews online goes a long way in guiding consumers when making purchase decisions especially when the reviews are from other consumers who have used the product, this goes a long way in building trust for the product. Buechel and Berger (2017) explain that social media is very instrumental in shaping consumers' opinions as regards product purchase and usage as consumers decide whether to patronize a brand based on their perception of the marketing activities around the brand.

Patmawati and Miswanto (2022) state that using influencers in social media advertising has a great impact as it helps influence the purchase decision and intention of their fan base. Influencer marketing is another viable means that an organization can adopt to give massive visibility to their brands. This very marketing approach is viable because influencers usually have very large fan bases and followers online, just as their name implies, they have the skills to shape and influence the purchase decision of their fan base, based on the fact that they are always seen as respected personalities, people who have put in so much in their various fields and have carved a niche for themselves, people whose lifestyles have been seen to constantly align with their social beliefs, thereby building credibility and trust in the eyes and minds of the people. This implies that when such people are engaged to market a brand, the visibility rating will be high because of their huge fan base and followership. Olenski (2016) believes that because influential people are used in advertising a product there is a likelihood that people will buy the product.

However, lately, there are reports and cases of skin care products that were purchased online, through the brand influencers, and the products were not as potent or efficacious as purported by the skincare brands and their social media influencers. Customers of skin care products have in recent times experienced deception, frustration, and wastage of money over the effect of the skincare products they purchased online as a result of brand influence. This aligns with the view of Al-Bayati and Al-Rabaiwi (2020) who think that social media brand influencers adopt deceptive marketing tactics on purpose as a way of hiding the negative side of the products they influence, they go as far as fabricating or exaggerating the features or qualities of the products or even inputting qualities or features which the products do not possess, all in a bid to lure the customers into purchasing such products.

The involvement of social media skincare influencers in brand deception does not only mislead customers but could also be harmful to customers' health especially when truthful and accurate information about the product is concealed as in the case of skincare products. Gardener (1975) states that deceptive brand advertising not only violates advertising ethics but chances are that deceptive brand advertising could also pose a life threat to consumers. For this reason, skincare brand influencers must shun every form of deceit and intentional lies in the marketing and promotion of skincare brands.

Ansari and Gupta (2021) opine that in as much as social media reviews on products by brand influencers are vital and may be needed by customers for purchase making, it must be an objective review irrespective of the fact that it is an incentivized review. This will go a long way in helping the influencer retain his credibility, trust, and followership.

1.1 Objectives of the study

1. To examine customers' perceptions of engaging social media influencers and brand deception for skin care products.
2. To assess customers' opinions on the trend of adopting social media influencers as brand representatives of skin care products.

1.2 Research questions

1. How do customers perceive the engagement of social media influencers for skin care products?
2. What is the opinion of customers on skin care brand influencing and possible deception?

1.3 Significance of the study

This study will be beneficial to social media brand influencers, skincare brands, skin care vendors, skin care influencers, customers, researchers, and the general public.

Social media brand influencers which include skin care influencers will be able to understand through this study what factors induce the online purchase of products, this understanding will help determine the kind of content they create around skincare brands as explained by Mangold and Faulds (2009). (Bhatla 2020; Yartey, et al, 2020) is also of the view that brand influencers are supposed to understand the psychography of their audience which depicts mastery of the art of influencing.

The study provides insight into what skincare brands and skin care vendors need to do (both online and offline) in promoting and retaining sales. This is in line with the view of Durgam (2018) that beauty influencers such as skin care influencers are supposed to work in a specific niche as that will make their followers view them as being authentic and realistic

Customers of skin care brands will greatly benefit from this work as it provides them with a guide on the purchase of skin care products. Jin and Phua (2014) believe that social media reviews on products by brand influencers are vital and may be a guide for customers' purchase-decision making.

Conclusively, this study can be consulted at any time for research and reference purposes; it is an addition to existing intellectual works done in this field. Researchers who seek to carry out studies on topics relating to the brand engagement of social media influencers in deceptive advertising practices will find this study useful.

2. Scope

This study is centered on the engagement of brand influencers on social media as regards skin care products only.

3. Literature review

3.1 Conceptual framework

Social media brand influence has grown so much and has gained prominence in various industries ranging from food, sports, fashion, lifestyle, fitness, skincare, and many more. Skolova and Keffi (2020) state that the advent and growth of internet platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, and the rest have given room for influencing social media. The beauty industry just like many other industries has gained substantially from the rise of social media influencing, as Darke and Ritchie (2007) mention that beauty brands now turn to social media platforms to increase their visibility and increase sales volume

Sacksner, et al, (2022) describe social media skincare influencers as social media personalities who can create credible content on beauty-related topics and are considered experts in the beauty industry. Beauty influencers offer tutorials on the usage of the brand they influence, give product reviews, and provide beauty tips and advice to their audience. They maintain that skincare brand influencers owe it as a duty to their consumers to present information about their beauty products in the very possible credible way because the consumers are also members of their fan base or followers who love and hold them in high regard. This is in line with the view of Ohanian (1990) who states that the basis by which a brand influencer is judged as credible and fair is their expertise in brand influencing, how trustworthy they have grown to become, and their attractiveness in terms of their overall personality.

Skincare influencers are expected to carve a niche for their brands in terms of quality assurance and customer relations. This is in line with the view of Durgam (2018) who believes that owning or influencing a skincare brand goes beyond a beautiful brand name and brand logo, rather it should include. your value proposition. It would not sit well with your audience to see you promote skin-lightening beauty products when in actual sense you are a person of color, it doesn't correlate. Your audience will probably take you as a joker and possibly see you as a mere marketer. Durgam maintains the view that beauty influencers are supposed to work in a specific niche as that will make their followers view them as being authentic and realistic. This implies that as an influencer you can tell your customers what advantage your skin care product has over other competing brands.

It has always been the human desire to look beautiful and remain ageless and this desire cuts across all races, genders, and age groups. Joshi, Karrapati, and Krudamannil (2022) agree that physical appearance is an integral part of the human personal identity. They explain that it is natural and not abnormal that people search for products that could enhance their physical looks and delay aging. That is to say that looking beautiful and appealing not only consists of dieting, fitness, and other healthy practices but also skin care.

Skincare products are one of the many products that sell easily, this means that it is a product category that resonates well with people of all ages and circles. Although certain factors determine what category of skincare sells more, such factors as, lifestyle, age, budget, skin type, skin conditions, environment, and interest. Arumugan (2023) mentions that skin care could be age-specific because while the older generation seeks anti-aging beauty products, teenagers may tend to seek acne remedies. It could also be gender specific as women are always fighting to defy aging by all means.

However, Baltezarevie (2023) is also of the opinion that deceptive advertising is prevalent in the digital environment, consumers are exposed to products that in reality may not be of that level of quality and may not meet the needs and desires of consumers. He adds that deceptive brand influencing may cause consumer dissatisfaction, frustration, and financial loss. Gerrath and Usrey (2021) agree with this by stating that online brand deception could be possible

since organizations join forces or merge with their brand influencers to post only feedback and reviews that are considered positive about their products, hence, objectivity and transparency are lost in the process.

In addition, consumers have an experience of the product not being exactly as seen online after they must have purchased it, this situation is typical to online influenced or advertised products, where customers make orders and the product is delivered, in some cases, the color of the product or size may differ from the one shown online. That is one of the reasons consumers do not rely on the activities of skincare brand influencers and online marketers in the choice and purchase of their skincare effects. Pintu (2022) agrees with this view by clearly stating that there is an onus on the influencer to choose wisely what product to endorse or influence, in addition, social media brand influencers should not think that they are only serving as a means of passing sales or promotional information, bearing in mind that their fans could be affected either mentally or health-wise by the purchased and consumption of brands that they influence or endorse.

When it comes to skincare, consumers believe that the brand influencer does not necessarily use the very product in the actual sense, consumers are of the notion that influencers are paid advertisers to promote the skincare brand, therefore, the consumers do not see them as being credible and so do not patronize them. This agrees with the view of Al-Bayati and Al-Rabaiwi (2020) that organisations in collaboration with brand influencers embark on brand deception intentionally. They state that influencers who engage in brand deception do so to fabricate information and manipulate consumers into purchasing such products.

Furthermore, Al-Heali (2020) also sees brand deception as a practice used by influencers or marketers to propound false information about a product that possibly affects consumers' purchase intentions or improper purchase decisions. Consumers will have to purchase and ultimately consume products that do not have the qualities or efficacies presented by the brand influencer or advertiser. On the other hand, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) (2021) is also of the view that brand deception is prevalent online by stating that fake posts or reports and other deceptive brand endorsements are constantly adopted in the promotion of products, online. The commission believes that these practices are unethical and violate the rules of advertising.

Consumers consider skin care products delicate because it has to do with the skin which is a very sensitive organ of the body. Many times, consumers are perplexed and uncertain about which beauty brand to patronize especially as various beauty brands abound on social media. They tend to tread with caution as the danger of the purchase and usage of skin care products at random may cause skin damage such as skin rash, skin burn, skin discoloration, hyperpigmentation, and so on. Therefore, consumers are always very careful about the source of their skincare products as it goes a long way in determining the quality and efficacy of the product (Fasanya., et al, 2020). On this note, skin care influencers can do well in promoting a brand based on credible testimonials, that is to say, that the influencer has used the product, it has worked for him/her, and is willing to share the struggles of his/her skincare journey before him/her met the very product in question. Casalo, Flavian, and Ibanez-Sanchez (2022) think that credible and unbiased testimonials from skincare influencers could help organizations build communities of committed followers and customer base who also share the same skin care struggle. They opine that skincare brands can gain a lot of visibility if organizations leverage well with the existing beauty communities.

4. Theoretical framework

Theoretically, some ethical reasoning aligns with advertising (social media brand influencing as a form of advertising). They are the contractual ethical theory, the utilitarian ethical theory, and the deontologist ethical theory.

The contractual ethical theory is a framework that conceives right and wrong, good and bad as functions of agreements, understanding, or contracts. Product influencing as a form of advertisement is seen in the context of contractual ethical theory as a contract or agreement between the advertiser (skincare influencer) and the buyer (customer), in the sense that the product (skin care product) is as good as advertised thereby meeting the need of the buyer and fulfilling the intention and desire for which the skin care product was bought. If the skin care product does not meet the needs of the buyer as advertised, maybe in terms of quality or efficacy, then it is considered a breach of contract and morally wrong. The contractual ethical theory conceives advertising as the basis that helps to influence and form the purchase intention of customers. This is because brand influencers are capable of influencing the purchase intention of customers as observed by Harris and Rae (2009) who agree with this by stating that consumers are left feeling frustrated after realizing they have wasted money on a product that was falsely

advertised or influenced. Also, Healey (2021) advises that organizations and influencers should always come clean, and be objective and factual in the presentation, marketing, and influencing of products. It is believed that this will go a long way in building trust, credibility, and goodwill for the organization, the brand, and the brand influencer.

The utilitarian ethical theory seeks to analyze the rightness or wrongness of an action based on the effect it produces rather than the intention of the action. The utilitarian theory is consequentialist theory which pays more attention or lays more emphasis on the result and effect of an action other than the motive behind such action. Brand influencing from the utilitarian viewpoint is judged as bad only when it causes pain, regret, or dissatisfaction to the customer, in terms of brand deception (in the case of product quality or efficacy) also, brand influencing is perceived as good when customers are satisfied with purchased influenced product. Xie and Boush (2011) explain brand deception as the unethical use of claims by influencers that are usually intentionally propounded and crafted in a manner that could mislead customers towards purchasing a product. They maintain that influencers are well grounded in the field of product promotion, how they present the brand to the consumers may tend to sway them into purchasing or using the product that may end up not giving them the desired result.

The deontologist ethical theory is a duty-based theory that conceives the art of advertising practices such as product influencing as a 'call to duty' in making sure the advertised products are of good quality and are capable of meeting the needs and purchase intentions of customers, other than merely for profit making. The deontologist ethical theory gives a human face to brand influencing and maintains the view that customers should be placed above profit-making. This theory seeks the interest and satisfaction of customers at all times. The deontologists' perspective is that customer satisfaction is premium. The theory sees deceptive brand influencing as activities that are geared towards increasing sales volume which translates to more money coming in for the organization and not minding any adverse effect it could have on the consumers. This implies that organizations that are involved in deceptive advertising do not have the interest of consumers at heart. This is the reason Ukaegbu (2020) sees deceptive advertising as false, misleading, and coercing consumers to patronize products that may never be beneficial to them.

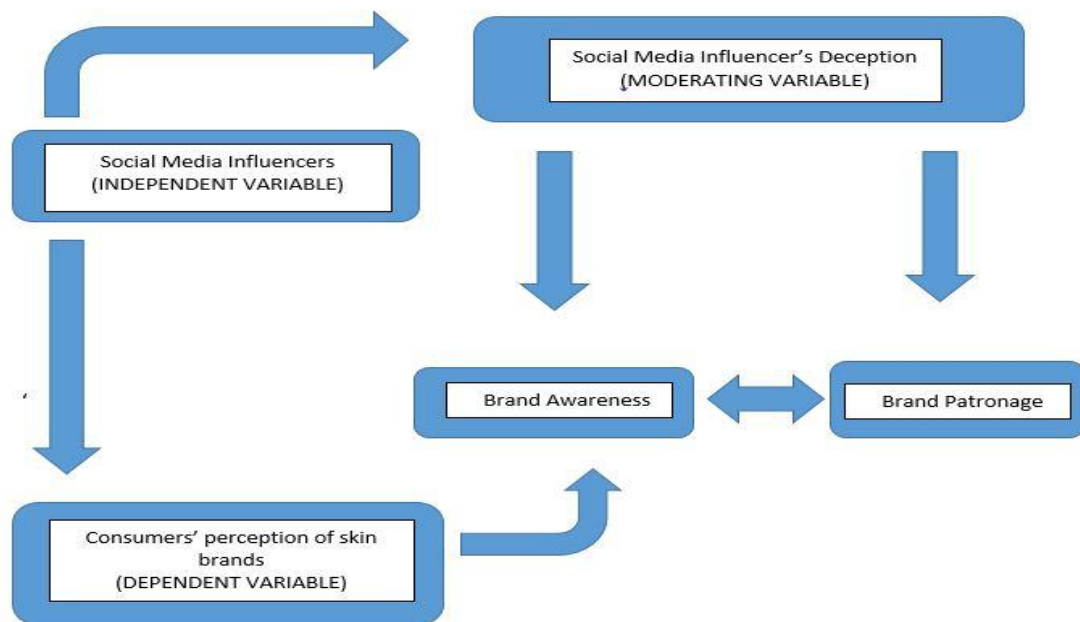


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Consumers' perception of social media influencers: A study of skincare brands

4.1 Methodology

The research design applied was qualitative and quantitative. The study on the perception of the role of influencers on skin care products warrants the opinion of the public, this calls for a survey as a method of collecting data on

respondents' opinions about the employment of influencers to create awareness for a brand. To explore more in-depth opinions of followers of skincare brands on Instagram social media, the research employed the use of a focused Group Discussion comprised of a middle-aged group of adults who are active on social media platforms, especially Instagram, and actively following any skincare brand. For this research, a total of 830 respondents participated in the survey and a total of 7 participants took part in the Focused Group Discussion session. The purposive sampling technique was first applied to identify respondents who actively follow and engage with the content of social media skincare influencers on Instagram since that is the primary focus of the study; then, participants were randomly selected to participate in either the survey or Focused Group Discussion session. Results are presented using percentage tables and Focused Group data will be presented using an argumentative approach justified with inserts from participants from the Focus Group Discussion.

4.2 Conduct of Focused Group Discussion and distribute of questionnaire

The Focused Group Discussion was conducted with a total number of 6 participants (2 male & 4 female) in January 2024. The process consists of a moderator and recorded with a tape recorder. The Focused Group Discussion was conducted by the moderator according to the question sequence while respondents took turns answering the questions. The session lasted for about 47 minutes to 1 hour.

The copies of the questionnaire were self-administered by trained researcher assistants, where in the research locations selected for the research. The distribution of the instruments to respondents lasted for about 30 to 37 days with the use of 15 research Assistants. Respondents' responses, which were collected using the questionnaire were inputted into the SPSS Application used for collating, organizing quantitative data, and generating the percentage tables.

5. Results

DEMOGRAPHY	
Gender	Percentage (%)
Male	35.1
Female	64.9
Total	100.0
Age	
16-20	85.1
21-25	12.7
26-30	1.7
31-35	.1
Above 36	.2
	n=830

Table 1: Demography Data of respondents

The demography of respondents for this study includes age and gender. Based on Gender demography, the females are represented more than the males. Based on Age demography, the highest number of respondent's age is between ages 16-20. Therefore, this could be interpreted as females being the dominant respondents and are majorly between a specific age range.

So, the reason behind the high turnout of females in the research is that it's more related to them and they use more skincare products and are more particular about looks and facial appearance than the male gender.

RESPONDENTS PERCEPTION					
	Percentage (%)				
Perception on Awareness	SA	A	U	D	SD
I believe the use of social media influencers will help create awareness for the brand	63.0	32.3	2.2	1.2	1.2
Perception on Purchase					
I believe the use of social media influencers will make people buy the product	34.9	53.4	7.1	2.8	1.8
Perception on Deception					
I believe the social media influencers used in the promotion of skincare brands are deceptive	22.8	24.8	31.8	15.5	4.6
Most social media influencers do not patronize the skincare they promote	22.9	44.5	18.8	9.9	3.3
I believe that social media influencers are deceptive because they do not patronize skincare brands, they promote	26.5	30.0	25.3	14.2	4.0
					n=830

Table 2: Audience perception of the engagement of Online Skincare brand influencers on Instagram

Perception of participants regarding their opinion on the use of influencers for awareness, purchase, and deception of skincare products on social media was tested using a survey. The result shows that participants believe that the use of social media influencers helps in creating awareness for skincare products and the purchase of the products. On the other hand, most of the respondents believe that these influencers deceive the public because they do not patronize or use the skincare brands they promote. Although some of the participants are undecided about whether the influencers deceive the public or not, a considerable number of participants who responded think that most influencers are deceptive.

However, the majority of the participants in the focus group (7) discussion strongly believe that social media brand influencers are not necessarily obliged to use the brand that they influence because they are only business people and promoters as social media influencers.

According to **Participant -5**, "I feel like most of the influences are just there to promote the whole thing. They have followers and skincare brands believe that if the influencer's followers see their use of these products, they are compelled to buy",

Participant -5 'Skincare brands make use of influencers for marketing and not necessarily for you to believe in the quality of the product'

Participant -4 'I believe the use of influencers is to package and sell your product to the people''

They argue that 'when social media skincare influencers are shooting their content, most of them don't use these skincare products when they do their skincare routine (**Participant 4**)' Participants claim that these skincare brands are attracted because of their fan base''. Such a fan base means the influencers have a lot of social media engagement, followers, likes, etc.

To examine the role of deception in the activities of social media skincare influencers, Participants generally feel the use of influencers is just for sales.

On the other hand, while a few of the respondents believe that influencers are not deceptive when marketing skincare brands online, others say 'the brand is deceptive on their own but they can't be blamed because the main aim of the brand in Nigeria is to sell and make a profit and not necessarily to provide the solution' ... the influencers are deceptive in their way too because they don't use the products they influence for but they promote the brand because of the money'' (**Participant 1**).

Participant 2, while agreeing that influencers could be deceptive, admonished that skincare brands should 'use people that have skin conditions because that way, people will see that there is progress'. Also, the brand should consider influencers with different skin types in marketing the products. In addition, participants believe that influencers should do basic research (Influencers should verify a brand and test how well it works) on the brand to protect their image as influencers too (**Participants 1 & 3**).

However, **Participant 6** concludes by stressing that the use of influencers in promoting skincare products 'is marketing strategy' and it is left for the buyers to take caution when purchasing any skincare product of their choice.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

Brand influencer engagement remains one of the several means of publicizing a product or service with the advent and popularity of the digital media space. With such avid usage comes the deceptive nature noted by brands in the bid to increase patronage and beat the market space. The research on consumers' perception of social media influencers: A study of skincare brands deduces that though some respondents are indecisive about the role of brand influencers in being deceptive about how they promote brands, they generally think that Influencers are only performing their duties of using their platforms to create awareness for the brands they influence.

Thus, social media influencers are used as a marketing strategy, because the influencers do not patronize the skincare brand they promote even though they gain a large audience's attention.

As stated, it is believed that using influencers on social media platforms has a great impact, as it helps influence the purchase decision and intention of their fan base. This discovery completely contradicts the belief that customers of

skin care products have in recent times experienced deception, frustration, and wastage of money over the effect of the skincare products they purchased online as a result of brand influence.

But conclusively, customers and influencers alike are admonished to focus on engaging in personal research on a brand, product, or service to make informed decisions to buy or not to buy.

On the other hand, skincare Brands are admonished to engage the use of ordinary consumers who already use the brands as marketing tools and also consider educating consumers about appropriate skin types for specific skincare products manufactured by the brand. Additionally, the use of influencers should be dependent on the appropriate skincare product for the Influencers' skin type. This means the use of any influencer should be informed by their skin type (appropriate skin type for the skincare product).

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