

Research Article

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The Effect of Social Media Influencers Brand Positioning in the Digital Era: A Case of Kay Yarms's Instagram Page

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ABSTRACT

The study is situated in the wider transformation of marketing communication brought about by social media, particularly in the beauty industry, where digital content, peer-like endorsement, and influencer credibility frequently substitute for or outperform traditional advertising. The authors argue that influencer marketing has become an increasingly dominant component of marketing budgets, noting a rise in business investment in influencer marketing and emphasizing that audiences often perceive influencer recommendations as more relatable and trustworthy than corporate messaging (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2024; Berger & the Keller Fay Group, 2016; Vrontis et al., 2021). The research uses a qualitative case study approach, employing reflective (reflexive) thematic analysis on a sample of Instagram content from Kay Yarms. Specifically, the study analyses follower comments on five selected posts promoting facial beauty products. It aims to clarify which communication strategies Kay Yarms uses to position products, how these strategies affect followers, and how Kay Yarms's influencer performance compares to traditional marketing approaches. The study positions itself as contributing to academic literature on influencer marketing and brand positioning in the South African beauty context, while also offering applied value for beauty entrepreneurs and brands exploring influencer partnerships in emerging markets.

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Introduction

The introduction frames social media in the digital age as a core communication channel and, in this study's context, a consulting platform for marketing and brand communication, especially within the beauty industry [1,2]. A key claim is that consumers often prefer influencer guidance because it feels personal, relatable, and more intelligible than complex corporate marketing jargon, with research indicating that 82% of consumers value influencer advice. The article emphasizes Instagram's role as a visual-first platform for photo and video sharing and its suitability for marketing via visual descriptions [3]. It is described as a major visual-oriented social networking site with "accurate target user positioning" [4].

The authors motivate Kay Yarms as a case because of her high visibility and perceived credibility in South Africa's beauty influencer landscape [5,6,7,8]. She is described as having a very large following (over half a million Instagram followers and substantial YouTube subscribers) and as being known for authentic and relatable facial beauty and lifestyle content [9,10]. The text also cites real-world effects: endorsements linked to stock shortages and increased product demand, and recognition by traditional and online publications (e.g., Forbes and Glamour). The introduction positions influencer-driven marketing as disruptive to traditional marketing and highlights that this shift challenges

beauty brands to improve communication strategies in the contemporary environment. Against this backdrop, the main aim is to understand Kay Yarms's communication strategies and how they relate to brand positioning and customer perception. The study's objectives are to:

- determine communication strategies used by Kay Yarms to position products she discusses,
- analyse the effects of these strategies on followers within the beauty industry, and
- understand influencer performance and compare it to traditional approaches.

Theoretical Perspective

The study's theoretical framework integrates social psychology, marketing, and communication studies via Social Cognitive Theory (SCT). The authors argue that SCT is relevant because influencer-follower relationships are a modern, concrete manifestation of SCT dynamics [11]. Influencers operate as role models whose behaviours, opinions, and routines are observed and potentially imitated by followers. Within the SCT framing, the study foregrounds three components:

- Influencer characteristics such as credibility, expertise, and attractiveness (as conditions that enable persuasive impact),
- Communication strategies used to convey brand messages and shape meaning, and
- Customer perceptions that emerge from exposure and interaction.

The authors describe influencer power as enabled by their ability to reach broad audiences and develop personal connections, which gives them “unprecedented power to shape consumer attitudes and behaviours” [12]. Brands are therefore advised (conceptually) to align communication strategy and positioning with influencer-promoted values and follower preferences. The study suggests that analysing follower comments can reveal how influencers shape attitudes and beliefs about brands and products [11]. SCT principles are invoked to imply that influencer marketing works through observation, modelling, vicarious reinforcement, and self-efficacy: followers see behaviours (skincare routines, product use), observe positive outcomes, and become more confident that they too can achieve similar results.

Literature Review

The literature review functions to synthesize existing research and identify how communication theories and social media dynamics collectively shape brand perception and consumer trust. The authors cite Knopf (2006) to clarify that a literature review involves a considered judgment of what is established, contested, inconclusive, and missing.

Communication and Strategic Communication

Defining Communication and Communication Strategy

Communication is introduced through Schramm's framing as establishing commonness and sharing information, ideas, feelings, or attitudes; it includes source, message, and destination [13]. Strategic communication is positioned as a purposeful and planned message use aimed at achieving specific objectives within contexts like organizations or projects. Communication can be formal or informal; formal communication tends to be strategic, requiring a communication strategy described as a carefully planned approach to communicating with diverse stakeholders [14].

Challenges in Communicating Strategy in the Digital Environment

The literature review claims that only a small fraction of employees understands organizational strategic direction [15]. It also suggests that marketing managers face difficulty adapting to digital platforms and influencers, and may understand traditional media better than digital media, which complicates decision-making in a shifting environment [16]. The review includes evidence that consumers exposed to Instagram influencer post's view endorsed brands as more trustworthy, develop more favourable attitudes, experience greater social presence, and may even feel more envy than those exposed to regular brand positioning [17]. These insights help justify the study's focus on influencer communication as a strategic tool in brand positioning.

Communication Strategies as Systematic Approaches

The authors caution that communication strategies can be conceptualized in different ways and argue that it is important to treat them as part of a systematic approach to achieving communicative goals rather than isolated tactics. Theoretical perspectives help categorize strategies by purpose and context, while Napoli emphasizes the diversity and adaptability of communication methods across audiences and media [18,19]. Game theory appears as an additional lens for analysing strategic interactions: Farooqui and Niazi argue that game theory can help interpret decision-making in competitive or cooperative settings, and this can also relate to communication strategy management [20].

Social Media and Social Media Influencers

Social media is defined as online platforms enabling users to create, share, and interact with content and each other [21,22].

Platforms support communication, entertainment, and information sharing in multiple formats [23]. The review also highlights the marketing utility of social platforms: increasing brand reach, targeting, and executing social marketing strategy [24]. Instagram is described as highly influential due to its visual nature and large user base, providing multiple content formats such as photos, videos, stories, reels, and live streams [24,25].

Influencers are defined as people with expertise in categories/items trusted by others who can influence viewpoints, behaviours, and attitudes via their platforms [26]. Influencers are portrayed as individuals who invest effort in creating quality content until recognized as experts [27]. The review distinguishes influencer marketing from celebrity endorsement: influencer marketing is likened to word-of-mouth by trusted professionals; celebrity endorsement relies more on fame and reputation [28]. Carnell is cited to argue that celebrities often serve as faces/messengers for brand-created messages, whereas influencers craft the message end-to-end, and audiences perceive the message as the influencer's own.

Branding and Brand Positioning

Brand positioning is presented as how businesses ensure their brand is easily identified and distinguished in the marketplace, shaping customer perceptions to align with intended product messages [29]. It is described as foundational: strong positioning is necessary even for good products, and without a communication strategy, positioning fails [29]. Azmat and Lakhani also argue that while intuition can help identify opportunities, effective positioning requires systematic research and analysis of strategic options, market trends, competencies, and customer needs and perceptions. Correct positioning helps attract and retain consumers and influences purchase behaviour [29].

Brand Modelling and Value Creation

Strong brands connect with customers at functional and emotional levels. By understanding customer-defined ideal experiences and perceptions, brands can identify unmet needs and claim “unclaimed territory” [30]. Strong brands add value and stand out from competitors [31]. Leadership can strengthen market position by examining weaknesses and aligning services with customer perceptions, while leveraging actual abilities [32]. For loyalty, the brand must keep promises and be true to itself [33]. Understanding brand messaging involves goal, strength, values, R&D, and customer impressions. The review also stresses influencer-brand value alignment: authenticity and credibility improve when influencer values match brand values.

Building Trust and Shaping Attitudes Via Influencers

Influencers build trust and loyalty by sharing honest, relatable content and personal experiences, which can translate into loyalty if brand experiences meet expectations [34,35]. Brand experience extends beyond physical products into online searches and digital interactions [36]. The digital era creates online brand experiences; providing exceptional experiences online matters due to information dissemination in electronic environments [37,38].

Methodology

The methodology chapter explains that qualitative methods and systematic procedures enhance robustness, reliability, and validity [39]. The authors stress the value of systematic approaches in case studies to derive meaningful and trustworthy conclusions [40]. A case study was selected to enable in-depth analysis of Kay Yarms's Instagram brand positioning practices, aligned with SCT's interest in influencer-follower relationships. The case study approach is

also justified as allowing detailed analysis without requiring broad generalization [41].

The study uses a combination of qualitative content analysis as a data collection technique to detect words, themes, and concepts in qualitative data and Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) as defined by Braun and Clarke, for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns/themes [42,43]. The sample comprises Instagram comments from Kay Yarms's followers. Five posts promoting facial beauty products were selected using non-probability purposive convenience sampling [44]. During analysis, predetermined criteria such as tone, language, and transparency were applied to comments to assess relevance and significance. Comments were coded using RTA, and recurring themes were identified to interpret how communication strategies influence brand perception and consumer behaviour.

Results

Engagement Metrics and Descriptive Statistics

The analysis covers five Instagram posts across seven months. Engagement varied widely across posts, with a mean total engagement of $19,716 \pm 14,896$ interactions per post, indicating substantial heterogeneity. The study reports strong positive skew: one post (Post 5) accounted for 43.8% of total engagement ($n = 43,164$ interactions), while Post 4 contributed only 6.9% ($n = 6,806$). Likes ranged from 6,676 to 42,000 ($M = 19,175$, $SD = 14,462$), comments from 88 to 395 ($M = 240$, $SD = 145$), and shares from 41 to 806 ($M = 302$, $SD = 322$). The authors interpret this variability as consistent with influencer marketing literature, suggesting that authentic personal narratives produce stronger engagement than standardized promotional messages.

Correlation Analysis: Interdependencies Among Engagement Types

A notable statistical result is a very strong positive correlation between likes and shares ($r = 0.998$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.987], [0.999]), suggesting that posts liked more are also shared more, reflecting a near-linear association and indicating that appreciation and amplification behaviours co-occur. The correlation between likes and comments is strong but not statistically significant ($r = 0.776$, $p = 0.123$), which the authors attribute to the small sample size ($n = 5$) and/or the possibility that commenting is driven by factors beyond general appreciation. Comments often involve product inquiries, such as "Hey, what pencil do you use for your eyebrows?" and "Which concealer did you use?", implying active information seeking.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis: Three Dominant Themes

The RTA produced three primary themes with strong evidence:

- Personal Storytelling (95%)
- Audience Engagement (90%)
- Visual Branding (85%)

Personal Storytelling: This theme includes first-person narrative, sensory descriptions, and relatable framing. The article highlights an example caption: "Oh, the beauty of an uncomplicated AM skincare routine, loving this Nivea luminous630 range, especially the day cream with SPF50, which melts into my skin like butter!" The authors interpret this as turning endorsement into a personal experience narrative through sensory metaphor ("melts into my skin like butter"), which positions the product as accessible and desirable while maintaining authenticity. The phrase "uncomplicated AM skincare routine" is read as aligning the product with contemporary preferences for minimalist regimens.

Visual Branding: Visual storytelling is described as containing four elements with proportional distribution of close-up photos (30%), brilliant lighting (25%), before-and-after comparisons (25%), and aesthetic consistency (20%). Close-ups emphasize texture and application results, enhancing desirability through near-sensory representation. Before-and-after comparisons demonstrate efficacy and provide cognitive cues facilitating observational learning, reducing perceived risk, and increasing confidence. The study explicitly links this to SCT: visual documentation supplies vicarious reinforcement because followers see positive outcomes attached to product use.

Audience Engagement and Reciprocal Interaction: The theme of audience engagement focuses on comment activity, follower questions, and influencer responsiveness. Comments are frequently product-specific queries (e.g., brows pencil, concealer, lip liner shades). The article notes Kay Yarms responds with direct information, transforming passive consumption into active interaction.

Communication Strategy Detail: "Hashtag Minimalism"

A distinctive finding concerns hashtag usage: only Post 1 used hashtags ($n = 4$), while Posts 2–5 used none. Contrary to typical strategies that rely on hashtags for discoverability, posts without hashtags produced the highest engagement (e.g., Posts 2 and 5 with 24,800 and 42,000 likes). The authors interpret this as suggesting that Kay Yarms's established audience values authenticity and conversational tone more than algorithmic optimization cues; the minimal hashtags may signal genuine connection rather than growth tactics.

Discussion

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) Mechanisms in the Influencer Context

The discussion argues that Kay Yarms's communication strategy illustrates SCT processes: her posts operate as social modelling demonstrations where followers observe routines, products, and outcomes. Kay Yarms is positioned as both consumer and reviewer, creating identification and relatability distinct from celebrity endorsement, which can be aspirational but less attainable. The discussion includes an example caption:

"Love my makeup routine, simple. I am so happy that I can shop for beauty products on Takealot. Let me know what you think about this look."

This is interpreted as combining personal satisfaction (affective endorsement) with feedback solicitation (interactive engagement), enhancing self-efficacy by demonstrating accessible behaviours (shopping availability, simplicity of routine) and inviting follower participation.

Vicarious Reinforcement and Behavioural Adoption

The discussion emphasizes that consistent positive outcomes shown in posts create vicarious reinforcement: followers anticipate similar benefits if they adopt the same routine/products. Comments such as

"Your skin looks so well taken care of! Need to get my hands on the mark serum soon, and You make everything look and feel so luxurious, like your skin is giving luxury. are treated as evidence of followers attributing desirable outcomes to products and routines, thus increasing purchase intent."

Visual mechanisms, close-up images, and before-and-after comparisons are argued to strengthen the reinforcement effect by making outcomes observable and attributable, lowering purchase risk and cognitive dissonance.

Authenticity and Emotional Connection vs Traditional Advertising

A central interpretive claim is that Kay Yarms diverges from traditional marketing by emphasizing authentic personal connection rather than polished commercial messaging. Traditional advertising is described as relying on professional models, scripted endorsements, aspirational imagery, and unidirectional messaging. Kay Yarms instead uses first-person storytelling, direct interaction, and relatable demonstrations, positioning products as accessible solutions. The sensory metaphor “*melts into my skin like butter*” is highlighted as a rhetorical technique that communicates experience without technical jargon, enabling mental simulation and thus persuasion.

Reciprocal Engagement as Community Building (Reciprocal Determinism)

The discussion argues that Kay Yarms’s responsiveness to follower questions and feedback fosters a reciprocal relationship and transforms the environment of persuasion into a community. Examples of her responses (e.g., naming specific brow pencil, lip liner shade) are used to show that she supplies actionable guidance, building perceived accessibility, and strengthening loyalty. This is connected to SCT’s reciprocal determinism: follower behaviours (commenting) influence influencer behaviours (responding and shaping content), which influences the environment (norms of participation), which in turn influences follower behaviours further.

Comparative Analysis: Influencer Approach vs Traditional Marketing Outcomes

The article reports comparative outcomes suggesting Kay Yarms’s approach produces stronger:

- emotional connection (95% vs 45%)
- audience activity levels (90% vs 30%)
- authenticity perception (95% vs 40%).

These differences are linked to stronger brand loyalty and purchase intention, supported by follower expressions like, “*Need all these products,*” and “*Need to get my hands on the mark serum soon.*”

Self-efficacy and Behavioural Confidence

Kay Yarms’s focus on simplicity and accessibility (“uncomplicated” routines) is presented as enhancing follower self-efficacy: followers perceive fewer barriers and believe they can replicate routines. The process is described as cognitive: followers mentally rehearse observed behaviours, judge their ability, and form intentions to act, leading to adoption and purchase behaviour consistent with SCT predictions.

Findings

The findings section synthesizes results into a set of core conclusions, emphasizing patterns across engagement data, thematic analysis, and SCT interpretation.

Authenticity Drives Superior Engagement

The study argues that authentic storytelling outperforms optimization tactics like hashtags. Post 5, described as narrative-rich without hashtags, generated 43.8% of total engagement, whereas Post 1 with four hashtags achieved only 12.2%. This supports an inverse relationship between hashtag use and engagement in this dataset and challenges assumptions that extensive hashtagging

is necessary. The implication is that community quality (loyal, engaged followers) may matter more than broad discoverability.

Personal Experience Narratives Enhance Desirability

Sensory metaphors and first-person endorsements increase product appeal and purchase consideration, with the study reporting product inquiries in 45% of analysed comments. This aligns with observational learning: followers do not merely receive product claims but see use, outcomes, and contextual integration into routines.

Visual Storytelling Supports Cognitive Processing and Risk Reduction

The balanced use of close-ups, lighting, before-and-after comparisons, and aesthetic consistency provides cues for comprehension and retention. Visual evidence of efficacy reduces perceived risk and supports follower confidence, strengthening the pathway from engagement to purchase intention.

Reciprocal Engagement Strengthens Loyalty

Two-way interaction is highlighted as a differentiator from traditional marketing, reinforcing engagement loops consistent with SCT reciprocal determinism. Follower validation and responses transform followers into community participants, fostering loyalty and sustained engagement.

Strategic Simplicity Resonates with Contemporary Consumers

Positioning products within “uncomplicated” routines is argued to match modern preferences for minimalist beauty approaches. Mentioning product features like SPF50 is also interpreted as signalling health-conscious selection and credibility, thus deepening trust.

Practitioner Implications for Beauty Brands and Entrepreneurs

The study recommends prioritizing authenticity, experiential language, interactive content, balanced visual storytelling, simplicity framing, and the use of follower testimonials (user-generated content) as credible social proof.

Theoretical Contributions

The study claims it extends SCT into influencer marketing by demonstrating observational learning, social modelling, and vicarious reinforcement within Instagram endorsements. It also argues Instagram’s interactive features allow reciprocal determinism “at scale,” turning parasocial connections into semi-authentic interactions that enhance influence effectiveness.

Limitations and Future Research

The article acknowledges limitations like (1) a small sample size ($n = 5$ posts), which limits statistical power and generalizability, (2) the single influencer case limits comparative insight; multi-influencer studies are suggested, (3) reliance on engagement metrics rather than direct purchase data; future studies should connect exposure to purchasing through experimental or longitudinal designs (4) qualitative emphasis could be complemented with quantitative content analysis to explore reliability and broaden pattern detection.

Recommendations

The recommendations are summarized as follows:

- **Prioritize Authenticity Over Optimization:** build genuine connections through personal storytelling and consistent voice rather than heavy hashtag usage.
- **Use Sensory Language and Experiential Descriptions:** communicate product feel and routine fit (“melts into my

skin like butter”) rather than technical lists.

- **Implement Interactive Content:** polls, questions, tutorials, and consistent comment responses to deepen reciprocal communication.
- **Balance Visual Elements:** combine close-ups, before-and-after comparisons, and coherent aesthetic presentation.
- **Emphasize Accessibility and Simplicity:** frame endorsements as lifestyle-compatible and manageable.
- **Leverage User-Generated Content/Testimonials:** incorporate follower experiences to increase credibility and social proof.

Conclusion

The conclusion reiterates that the study examined Kay Yarms's Instagram brand positioning strategy for facial beauty products using Atlas.ti principles, qualitative content analysis, and SCT. It reports that Kay Yarms's approach, built on authentic storytelling, reciprocal engagement, and strategic visual branding, creates strong engagement and shapes consumer perception and purchase intention. The study emphasizes that minimal hashtag use paired with high engagement challenges conventional influencer marketing assumptions and suggests that authentic community-building can be more persuasive than algorithmic discoverability tactics.

The conclusion also returns to SCT, indicating Kay Yarms operates as a social model whose behaviours followers observe and emulate, with interactive features enabling reciprocal determinism and strengthening loyalty. The article ends by encouraging future research expansions (larger datasets, multi-influencer comparison, purchase behaviour linkage, and longitudinal analysis of influencer strategy evolution) [45-122].

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