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**The Role of Digital Influencers as Opinion Leaders in Strategic Marketing
Communication among Boutique Owners in Nairobi, CBD, Kenya**

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The Role of Digital Influencers as Opinion Leaders in Strategic Marketing Communication among Boutique Owners in Nairobi, CBD, Kenya



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Abstract

Purpose: The objectives for the study was to establish the role of digital influencers as opinion leaders in strategic marketing communications.

Methodology: A descriptive research design was used. The population of study was boutique owners in Nairobi CBD, from which a sample were drawn. The sampling technique was purposive sampling based on the respondent's special characteristics necessary for the study. Questionnaires containing both open and closed ended were used as the research instruments for the study. The data collected was then processed and analyzed using SPSS software or Advanced Excel. Data was presented inform of tables.

Findings: The results indicated that descriptive statistics were used to evaluate the relationship between the roles of digital influencers as opinion leaders in strategic marketing. Respondents indicated that digital influencers were extremely influential as opinion leaders in strategic marketing. The inferential results further indicate that there was a positive relationship between the role of digital influencers as opinion leaders and strategic marketing however the relationship was found not significant ($\beta= 0.03$, $P\text{-value } 0,051 > 0.005$).

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: The study was anchored on elaboration likelihood model theory. The study recommends formulation policies regulating social media platforms so as to ensure more accountability and credibility of the information shared in those platforms.

Keywords: *Digital Influencers M37, Strategic Marketing Communications M31, Opinion Leaders D72.*

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INTRODUCTION

Corporate organizations are continually taking steps to effectively communicate and reach out to their audience. With constant changes in the way people transmit and receive messages, it is a giveaway that corporate must also keep up with new strategies in order to achieve their communication objectives. Hallahan et.al (2007), define strategic communication as the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission. Definitely, strategic communication is a multidisciplinary subject including management, advertising, and public relations among others. Specifically, strategic communication is applied in marketing activities to effectively persuade and get the attention of targeted audiences to a company's offerings. Believably, through effective strategic marketing communications, companies are able to experience consistency in sales of their products. Marketing is hereby defined as the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large (American Marketing Association). On the other hand, strategic marketing communication means the decision by organizations to conduct their specific marketing activities relatively and more efficiently than their competitors (Varadarajan, 2010).

Notably, strategic marketing communications generally aim at formulating marketing activities and decisions related to building and maintaining sustainable competitive advantage for an organization. It is also apparent that there are various strategies available for use by strategic marketing communicators like advertising in newspapers, radios and T.V. However, traditional strategies have been overtaken by modern ways of strategic marketing communications.

Opinion Leaders

Opinion leaders are well known individuals who are capable of influencing public opinion on a subject matter. They have an audience or following that trust them as a source of information for their interests (Winter & Neubaum, 2016). An opinion leader can make a career out of influencing their audience based on industry trends, current events, and consumer behavior within the market.

Opinions Leaders Spreading Word of Mouth Information

Basically, word of mouth communication involves the use of spoken communication as a means of transmitting information. Traditionally, word of mouth communication was used as a tool for people to exchange news. During this time people spread information by WOM in markets or even campfires. In the context of marketing communication, word of mouth was used in the exchange of marketing information between consumers to shape behavior and change attitudes towards products and services (Huete-Alcocer, 2017). It had the power to influence consumer decision making including their attitudes towards products and services, brands adoption and purchase intentions (Ismagilova, Dwivedi, Slade, & Williams, 2017). This is because users of products trusted other consumers more than sellers.

The rise and spread of the internet led to the emergence of a new form of WOM, the electronic word of mouth communication eWOM. It refers to all the informal communications through the internet addresses to consumers and related to the use or characteristic of goods and services (Huete-Alcocer, 2017). According to Huete-Alcocer (2017), eWOM is one of the most influential informal media among consumers, businesses and the population at large. Unlike traditional contexts where people trusted family and friends for WOM, today users look into comments from identifiable online opinion leaders for information about a product or service.

In this case, opinion leaders act as the source of reference for other consumers willingly providing information and recommendations on products and services (Haron, Joha, & Ramli, 2016). Specifically, consumers trust eWOM from online opinion leaders because they are appearing as expertise in their specific areas and are also considered knowledgeable (Haron, Joha, & Ramli, 2016).

Consumers perceive eWOM more than the traditional marketing communications such as TV advertising (Bao, 2018). Consequently, digital influencers are able to influence other people perceptions and opinions. They have mastered a specific market or industry and have established trust within a community as an industry insider or decision-maker. They have high personality strengths to convince others on the importance of a topic (Winter & Neubaum, 2016). They digest, clarify and communicate information from the media or organizations to their audience. They are masters at public relations efforts and have a way with words that can influence their audience. They do this to influence perceptions about the products and services they promote.

Opinion Leaders Share Professional Knowledge

According to Jin & Muqaddam, (2019) consumers react differently to product endorsement on social media depending on whether the influencers are present or not. Consumers prefer or react to messages when the influencers appear on posts with the products they endorse. Through the way in which they curate content and the methods they use in delivering a message, digital influencers influence audience attitudes and opinions thus shaping their opinions. Likewise, the reaction of consumers to influencer messages is dependent on how the message is delivered.

Digital influencers make appearances with the products they promote thus influencing audience attitudes. They also shape opinions through sharing their personal experiences with their followers. Digital influencer's personal experiences involve using company products and services then sharing their experiences on the effectiveness of the advertisement. Personal experiences showcase a level of credibility of the promoted products and support the trustworthiness and believability of a source of information (Sokolova & Kefi, 2019). Through personal experiences digital influencers are able to influence people's opinions about a product or service and persuade them to purchase the product.

Undoubtedly, audience opinions about a product or service are increasingly being influenced by other people's experiences about a product (Schouten, Janssen, & Verspaget, 2020). consequently, personal experiences as expressed by digital influencers goes a long way to allay the fears of consumers who would want to purchase from online because they feel someone important has guaranteed for the genuineness of using such a medium to transact business as indicated by one respondent (Owusu, 2008).

Opinion Leaders Influence Sales

Charisma is defined as a quality in certain people who easily draw the attention and admiration (or even hatred if the charisma is negative) of others due to a "magnetic" quality of personality or appearance. According to (Winter & Neubaum, 2016) people with high personality strength are usually characterized by charisma and have a self-perceived ability to persuade others. Undoubtedly digital influencers possess a personal charm and manifest characteristics which are usually irresistibly attractive to their followers. Additionally, Wielki, (2020) notes that consumers sometimes ignore digital advertisements by influencers due to the dissatisfaction

with the ways in which messages are presented. Digital influencers have the ability to structure their messages in a manner that is appealing to audiences. Proper messaging helps in building trust between influencers and their followers and this translates opinion change. Lou & Yuan (2019) define trustworthiness as the willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence in. This factor can easily influence the attitude and behaviors of followers and change their purchase intentions (Sokolova & Kefi, 2019). Furthermore, a trusted influencer is considered to have more persuasive power than untrustworthy ones.

Similarly, organizations must also consider the motivations of an influencer and understand the influencer's phenomenon before engaging and including them in marketing communication strategies (Sokolova & Kefi, 2019). Organization need to consider the quality of the message as designed by the influencer and the resultant perception of the audience member.

The aspect of charisma by digital influencers is also manifested through pragmatic communication. Pragmatic communication refers to the use of a set of sociolinguistic guidelines related to language within a communicative (Ciccia, 2011). It encompasses linguistic information such as choice of words and other non-verbal behavior such as facial expressions, body language and intonation. Pragmatics is used in communication to emphasize the communication of meaning and functions of language such as protesting, requesting and greeting among others. Digital influencers use pragmatic communication coupled with their knowledge and experience of the product or service, to appeal to their audiences. They use appealing messaging in their content to shape public opinions on the products being promoted.

Additionally, their perceived expertise also determines the words they use in their messages which helps in shaping opinions. This means that an influencer who portrays relevant skills, knowledge and experience in a product or service they promote is considered to be more credible than lack of it (Schouten, Janssen, & Verspaget, 2020). Sokolova & Kefi (2009) believe that the skills and experience of an influencer is necessary in creating credible perceptions in the minds of the consumer thus being able to influence follows through internalization process.

Undoubtedly, shaping opinions is an important role in affecting purchase behaviors of consumers. For brands to continue using the services of digital influencers they must continue to develop strategies accordingly in order to stay relevant (Suciu, 2019). It is also evident that companies consider the nature of influencer marketing as credible given that influencers promote products in authentic ways and in natural settings. The statement begets the question of the role of digital influencers in strategic marketing communications.

Statement of the Problem

Traditional marketing strategies like the use of TV and radio offered a platform for marketers to put up persuasive advertisements aimed at changing attitudes and influencing people to purchase specific brands. However, technological advancement has seen the emergence of a new tool for strategic marketing communication – the digital influencer (Borchers, 2019). Digital influencers are continually recommending brands via electronic word of mouth and establishing brand engagement (DavidJiménez-Castillo & RaquelSánchez-Fernández, 2019). Undoubtedly, organizations who engage digital influencers in their marketing strategies have experienced some relevance thus they continue setting aside budgets for the same (Wielki, 2020).

First, digital influencers continue to influence engagements on digital platforms and get people to gain trust with particular company products. They share their experiences in using company product and then recommend the same to their followers. For instance, the Chandaria industries have engaged influencers in a variety of their products to create talk-ability and influence people to buy. Similarly, Bonfire adventure's which is a tour company also works with various influencers to market their tour destinations. However, some companies still believe that influencers do not play a part in their business and have thus stuck with traditional methods of marketing communication (Stoldt, Wellman, Ekdale, & Tully, 2019). For this reason, it is necessary to point out the role of digital influencers in the strategic function of marketing communication.

Second, companies are using digital influencers to share important messages about company products and offerings. In this case, digital influencers create content about a company's product, package it in a manner that is appealing and creatively delivers it to their followers. In fact, (Sette & Brito, 2020) note that they are able to reach potential consumers in a more natural, organic way and promote attitudinal and behavioral changes in their followers. Thus, it is necessary to determine the specific strategic marketing communication role played by the digital influencers.

In the same breath, other organizations are still hesitant to engage digital influencers in their strategic communication efforts. This is because they are not sure how digital influencers can help them build favorable brand attitudes and improve product acceptance (Nafees, M.Cook, Nikolov, & E.Stoddard, 2021). For instance, The County Pension fund (CPF), has not engaged digital influencers in their strategic marketing communications. It is thus important to identify their role in strategic communication and provide this important information to corporates.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Review

Elaboration Likelihood Model

The elaboration likelihood model theory is believed to have been initiated by Richrad E. Petty and John T. Cacioppo in the early 1981. According to Littlejohn & Foss (2009), the name of the theory is derived from the likelihood that a person thinks deeply, or "elaborates" about a message when exposed to it. The theory is majorly concerned with changing the direction of attitudes through persuasion (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). The main argument presented by the theory is that the route through which a message persuades consumers depends on their involvement with the message. The theory notes that when a persuader presents information to an audience, a level of "elaboration" occurs (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Elaboration in this case refers to the amount of effort an audience member has to use in order to process and evaluate a message, remember it, and then accept or reject it.

The dual processes through which elaboration occur are the peripheral and the central route. The peripheral route of persuasion involves a low level of elaboration (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). This means that the audience is not scrutinizing the message for its effectiveness thus they can be influenced by other factors such as being distracted. This includes such users as those who know what they want, but do not know much about the details. Audiences persuaded through the peripheral route may lack the motivation or ability to evaluate the message and thus are more likely to respond to cues associated with the message. For instance, message cues such as entertainment value, celebrity spokesperson among other cues.

On the other hand, the central route of persuasion occurs when an audience member is persuaded by the contents of a message (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). In this case, audiences have both the motivation and the ability to evaluate the message and will therefore diligently process the message. For instance, they will look for and respond to strong arguments in favour of the message and counter what they perceive as weak arguments. Generally, high involvement with the message by the audience leads to central processing whereas low involvement leads to peripheral processing. Importantly, attitude change in terms of central processing is the result of thoughtful reflection on the message while attitude change in terms of peripheral processing results from effective cues or social compliance.

According to the theory, when people are confronted with a persuasive message, they want to assess the validity of the message's claims. It posits that although people want to hold correct attitudes, the amount and nature of issue-relevant elaboration in which people are willing or able to engage to evaluate a message vary with individual and situational factors.

Elaboration likelihood model theory overlaps with the role of digital influencers in shaping public opinion in strategic marketing communication in a constructive manner. Specifically, it relates to the peripheral route of processing information by audiences. With the understanding and ability of influencing their followers, influencers often - albeit unintentionally, use elaboration likelihood theory to influence how their audiences "elaborate" messages. Using social media, which (Borchers, 2019) explains as a communication channel which influences audiences' opinions, digital influencers typically package specific information and disseminate on social media platforms knowing too well that followers will internalize it socially.

Accordingly, persuasion relies not necessarily on information and logic alike but also on social and affective factors. As such, digital influencers take advantage of the peripheral route of processing to introduce peripheral messages to their audience. According to Cialdini (2005), peripheral messages rely on a receiver's emotional involvement and persuade through more superficial means. In this case therefore, digital influencers use various types of peripheral cues to curate their messages and ensure that it is influential and appealing. The types of peripheral cues include authority, commitment, contrast, liking, reciprocity, scarcity, and social proof.

For instance, digital influencers may use commitment as a peripheral cue to show their dedication to a product they are advertising. In this case, through attending the products launch, creating content around it and wearing, using the product they demonstrate their commitment, further, their demonstration of commitment may lead to persuasive messages that prompt the followers to take action by using the same product, therefore making the audience to commit to the product or campaign. Digital influencers may also use the peripheral cue of social proof to curate messages that sway the audience in a given direction.

Empirical Review

Varadarajan (2020) refers to strategic marketing management as the deliberate and strategic steps that organization take in the process of aligning the existing marketing framework with the long-term goals and objectives set. In hindsight, strategic marketing management is providing a facelift to the existing marketing plan so that it can be better, refined and productive – but within a long-term plan. As an imperative, businesses design marketing strategies which are aimed at improving the results of an organization. These strategies, which are principally organizationally-based, are often aimed at giving the organization an edge of competitors. This can be so through entering markets that they had hitherto failed to sway or keeping a firm grip

on their existing market share. Contrariwise, strategic marketing existing as field of study that is built on an in-depth assessment of critical marketing decisions that gives an organization sustained edge in the market. Thus, organization use digital influencers as opinion leaders, intermediaries and brand managers to strategically communicate their offering to target audiences.

In a study by Zou & Peng (2019), they consider influencers as opinion leaders in marketing communications. This study was conducted in China to analyze the phenomenon of Key Opinion Leaders (KOL) in the Chinese fashion industry. The researchers used Social Network Analysis to analyze the current key opinion leaders in the marketing industry in China. They also utilized focus group interviews to gain further insights on the phenomenon. Accordingly, they found out that key opinion leaders have great influence on the Chinese Fashion Market (Zou & Peng, 2019). They also note that the interactions generated by key opinion leaders satisfy the psychosocial experiences of consumers thus users can easily remain loyal to a particular brand as promoted by the opinion leaders. Furthermore, opinion leaders present their messages in lively formats including as stories thereby being able to influence people perceptions. For instance, they note that opinion leaders are able to broadcast live fashion shows to their followers, instead of plainly uploading photos online. This kind of message presentation appeals to the psychosocial element of audiences hence can influence their opinions.

Digital influencers as opinion leaders are acknowledged information resources who are able to propose innovative ideas and have impact on consumers decision making. They contribute to strategic marketing communications by sharing their real-life contents. Zou & Peng (2019) state that the role of digital influencers as opinion leaders can be identified through their strong personal design styling and identity. They use their unique styles of content production to actively interact with their followers thereby attracting millions of followers. They are able to shape opinions through the interactions and trust that they build with audiences over time. They are also able to convince their followers to purchase products through creative communication.

Another research by (Zhou, McCormick, Blazquez, & Barnes, 2019) shows that social media has offered a democratization of fashion opinion leadership from traditional gatekeepers to social media influencers, who emerge in each socio-economic group and influence the adoption, diffusion, and consumption of fashion. The researchers sought to identify the significance of electronic word of mouth (eWOM) in strategic marketing communication. They note that consumers are increasingly engaging in electronic word of mouth to exchange ideas and information about goods and services. Furthermore, they document that eWOM has significant effects on consumers purchase decisions making process and that organizations are taking advantage of eWOM by incorporating it in their marketing communications strategies. Furthermore, they have also realized the influential power of fashion opinion leaders and collaborate with them for eWOM marketing campaigns. In this case, opinion leaders introduce company's products within their private and personal contexts through eWOM messaging. Fashion opinion leaders have demonstrated influence on consumers through eWOM and manifest as a significant strategic marketing communication channel for organizations (Zhou, McCormick, Blazquez, & Barnes, 2019). They appear as fashion experts who are credible as compared to traditional methods of advertising.

Another study done by Owusu & Alam (2008) aimed to examine the impact of online marketing influencers on consumer purchase intention in Ghana. Semi-structured telephone

interview was conducted and data collected from ten participants of diverse background including age, educational background and professional career. According to the study influencers use social media platforms to influence the purchase intention and buying behaviour of consumers (Owusu & Alam, 2020). The study reveals that several firms are deploying different strategies to attract the young generation and deliver value for money. It also showcases that influencers play a significant role in shaping consumer purchase intentions as they continue to expand their fan base. Consequently, social media platforms are becoming more useful and brands and retailers are adapting to them. Additionally, brands are innovating and investing in digital influencers to remain relevant in the future while at the same time exploring to create a space that connects both the digital and the physical world.

Research gap

There is a glaring gap in literature involving the role of influencers in strategic marketing communications. With their proliferation, digital influencers have taken hostage of the internet and social media. Much as they are important in engendering discourses and affecting behavior, it is also important to an understanding of their specific roles in influencing attitudes and impacting strategic marketing communications. Despite the popularity and constant adoption of digital influencers by organizations, studies also reveal a constant growth in company disappointments associated with the roles of digital influencers in strategic marketing communication. Cases of missed desired results from influencers have been on the rise in the recent past. Nonetheless, most studies have failed to address the issue of the role of digital influencers. Future research should provide literature on the best of ways of regulating digital influencers. Equally, future literature should be able to discuss what qualifies as ethical in the context of digital influencing.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted descriptive research. The study targeted all the boutique owners operating in Nairobi County's four malls namely; Sawa mall, Sasa Mall, Star Mall and Imenti Mall. According to licensing record provided by Nairobi County licensing office (2023) there are a total of 415 registered boutiques operating in the four malls. The sampling technique for this study was purposive sampling. The sample size was 197. Data was collected using questionnaires. The Quantitative data was processes and analyzed using SPSS software. Data was presented in form of tables.

FINDINGS, AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Information

This section provides the demographic and social results of the respondents providing the age, gender, the type of business the respondent operates, information on whether they use influencers for their business, their preferred influencers, reason for preferring use of social media influencers rather than using traditional media, what drove them to selecting particular influencers and the particular platform of their preference.

Table 1: Demographic Information

Age Bracket	Frequency	Percent
18-35 Years	90	47.4
36-53 Years	60	31.6
54 Years and Above	40	21.1
Gender	Frequency	Percent
Male	70	36.8
Female	120	63.2
Type of Business	Frequency	Percent
Men's Clothes	30	16
Women's Clothes	100	53
Children's Clothes	40	21
Others fashionable items	20	11
Use of influencers	Frequency	Percent
Yes	140	181.8
No	50	64.9
Influencers /Platforms commonly used	Frequency	Percent
Mega influencers	30	15.8
Top influencers	70	36.8
Macro influencers	50	26.3
Micro influencers	30	15.8
Other(s)	10	5.3
Reason for Engaging Social Media Influencers	Applied	Percentage
Method of content delivery	150	79%
Perceived influence	140	74%
Personal choices	100	53%
Other businesses are doing so	30	16%
Selecting Particular Influencers	Frequency	Percent
Number of followers	160	84%
Methods they use to engage their followers	140	74%
Any other factor	100	53%
Particular Platforms Used by Influencers	Applied	Percentage
Facebook	160	84%
Instagram	150	79%
Youtube	90	47%
Others	130	68%

Source: Researcher (2024)

On the age of the respondents, the findings of the study indicate that the highest number of the respondents was aged between 18 and 35 years (47%). Respondents aged 36 to 53 years were (32%) while only 21% of the respondents were aged 51 years and above. This implies that majority of the respondent were young and middle-aged people who were much exposed to the developing technology the findings also reveal that there was no biasness in the distribution of the respondents.

On the gender of the respondents, the findings of the study indicate that majority of the respondents were female (63%) while male respondents were 37%. These implies that there were more women who operated business in Nairobi malls than those operated by men. According to Koch and D'Mello (2019), this gender difference is common in our society and it's acceptable.

On the type of the business operated, respondents operating women's clothes were the majority (53%), this was followed by children's clothes (21%), respondents operating men's clothes were (16%) and the least was those who operated other fashionable items (11%). These findings implied that most of the boutiques were specialized in selling women clothes.

On the question to whether the boutique owners use influencers, the findings of the study revealed that majority of the respondents (74%) while 26% of the respondents did not engage influencers in their marketing strategies. The findings further revealed that to the respondents who engaged influencer in their marketing strategies low cost of marketing and efficiency of the influencers were major reasons stated. However, in contrast respondents who did not engage influencers stated that influencers were expensive to hire and they were difficult to reach *"getting influencers is a long process"* (Respondent from Sawa Mall, 2024). The respondents also stated that influencers may cause more harm to the business than gains in cases where their reputations is destroyed *"Some influencers have bad reputations which chase away customers instead of attracting them"* (Respondent from Sasa mall, 2024).

On the question of influencers platforms commonly used, the findings of the study revealed that the most preferred influencers or platforms were the top influencers (upto 500 thousand followers) 36.8 %, 26.3% of the respondents preferred macro influencers (100-500 thousand followers). Other platforms/influencers were the least with only 5.3%. The findings further revealed that other preferred platforms/ influencers included other social influencers who are not much popular in social Medias.

On the reason for engaging social medial influencers, majority of the respondents indicated that the method of content delivery was the main reason for engaging social media influencer in strategic marketing communication (79%). Perceived influence of the social media influencers was second prevalent reason for engaging social media influencers (74%). This was followed by personal choices (53%). The most unpopular reason for engaging was because other businesses are doing so (16%)

On the factors considered when selecting particular influencers for their strategic marketing communication, number of the followers was the prevalent factor considered (84%), the second most considered factor was the method used by the influencers to engage their followers (74%) and other factors were least considered (53%). The results of the study further indicated that other factors that were mostly considered was the reputation of the influencers, the niche of the followers and the advertising costs charged by the influencers.

On the question of the preferred social media platform the findings of the study revealed that the most preferred social media platform was Facebook (84%) the second most preferred platform was Instagram (79%). YouTube was the least preferred social media platform (47%). The results further indicated that other preferred social media platform the most prevalent platform mentioned by the respondents was Tiktok.

Role of Digital Influencers as Opinion Leaders in Strategic Marketing Communication

The objective of the study was to investigate the role of digital influencers as opinion leaders in strategic marketing communication to assess the role responses were categorized in an ascending order from 1 to 5 with 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Undecided, 4= Agree, 5=Strongly Agree. The response was summarized using descriptive statistics namely mean (μ) and standard deviation (σ). Mean is a measure of central tendency used to inform conclusions. If the $\mu > 3$, it implies that the respondents agreed with the statement asked while $\mu < 3$ implies that the respondents are in dispute with the statement as shown in the Table 2 below

Table 2: Role of digital influencers as opinion leaders

Factor	Mean	Standard Deviation
Digital influencers influence the market communication	3.94	1.18
Digital influencers can easily be trusted by their followers	3.68	1.10
Digital influencers help brands in sharing word of mouth information.	3.84	1.20
Digital Influencers share more knowledge about products to their followers	3.64	1.05
Composite Mean		3.775

Source: Researcher (2024)

Based on the findings from the table 2 above respondents strongly agreed that Digital influencers influence marketing communication (M=3.94, SD=1.18). respondents agreed that digital influencers can easily be trusted by their followers (M=3.68, SD=1.10). Respondent strongly agreed that digital influencers help brands in sharing word of mouth information (M=3.84, SD=1.20). Similarly, respondents strongly agreed that digital Influencers share more knowledge about products to their followers (M=3.64, SD=1.05).

Digital Influencers as Opinion Leaders in Strategic Marketing Communications

To evaluate the role of digital influencers as opinion leader's respondents' opinion was sought on the level of agreement. Responses were categorized in an ascending order from 1 to 5 with 1= Not at all Influential, 2= Slightly Influential, 3= Somewhat Influential, 4= Very Influential, 5= Extremely Influential. The response was summarized using descriptive statistics namely mean (μ) and standard deviation (σ). Mean is a measure of central tendency used to inform conclusions. If the $\mu > 3$, it implies that the respondents agreed with the statement asked while $\mu < 3$ implies that the respondents are in dispute with the statement as shown in the Table 3 below

Table 3: Digital Influencers as Opinion Leaders in Strategic Marketing Communications

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Digital influencers as opinion leaders	4.0	1.0

Source: Researcher (2024)

Based on the findings from the table 3 above respondents expressed that digital influencer were extremely influential in acting as opinion leaders. The findings further revealed that the reputation of the digital influencer promoted the brands name greatly. Respondents indicated that digital influencers have a great impact on the brand value, "Digital influencers can promote brand value, build brand engagement, and encourage consumers to buy" (Respondent

from imenti mall, 2024). Respondents further explained that digital influencers have influence on the purchasing decision of their customers, *“Social media influencers can have a significant impact on their followers' purchasing decisions. For example, if a skincare influencer says they use a particular type of moisturizer, that product may see an uptick in sales”* (Respondent from star, 2024) mall.

These findings were in line with the findings of Zou & Peng (2019) which stated that the role of digital influencers as opinion leaders can be identified through their strong personal design styling and identity. The finding affirms the findings of (Zhou, McCormick, Blazquez, & Barnes, 2019) who showed that social media has offered a democratization of fashion opinion leadership from traditional gatekeepers to social media influencers, who emerge in each socio-economic group and influence the adoption, diffusion, and consumption of fashion.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

The objective of the study was to assess role of digital influencers as opinion leaders in strategic marketing communication among boutique owners in Nairobi, CBD, Kenya. Based on the findings the study concluded that the digital influencers had a significant role in influencing the market. Digital influencers play a key role in connecting brands with their target audience and promoting products and services. Their content can influence lifestyle choices, and purchasing decisions.

Recommendation

Based on the findings, the study makes the following recommendation to relevant groups of beneficiaries.

To the policy makers the study recommends formulation policies regulating social media platforms so as to ensure more accountability and credibility of the information shared in those platforms. The study also recommends formulation of policies governing the digital influencing market to ensure that there is fair playing ground for all market players.

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