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ORIGINAL

The influence of a popular South African influencer's Instagram content on Gen Z females body image

La influencia del contenido de Instagram de una popular influencer sudafricana en la imagen corporal de las mujeres de la Generación Z

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ABSTRACT

The effects of influencer culture on users have been the topic of various studies, with the findings highlighting the negative effects of social media platforms on younger generations of females. However, there is a paucity of studies exploring the type of content posted by influencers on Instagram and their effects on young women's body image identity. This study used exploratory qualitative research to explore the content analysis of Kay Yarm's Instagram posts, focusing on body image-related codes. Identity development theory was most applicable to the study because it elaborates that identity formulation is critical during the adolescent and early adult years and social media can have grave effects on this process. The findings revealed that although Kay Yarms' embraces her natural African body shape and dark complexion, her posts are dominated by unrealistic beauty associated with artificial hair and make-up. Her large followership is evidence of her expanse influence on females' perceptions of beauty. This study contributes to the understanding of influencer culture's effect on body image conceptions among Generation Z South African females, highlighting the need for responsible content creation and consumption.

Keywords: Instagram Influencer; Gen Z Females; Body Image; Beauty.

RESUMEN

Los efectos de la cultura de los influencers en los usuarios han sido objeto de diversos estudios, cuyos hallazgos destacan el impacto negativo de las plataformas de redes sociales en las generaciones más jóvenes de mujeres. Sin embargo, existe una escasez de estudios que exploren el tipo de contenido publicado por los *influencers* en Instagram y sus efectos en la identidad de la imagen corporal de las mujeres jóvenes. Este estudio empleó una metodología de investigación cualitativa exploratoria para analizar el contenido de las publicaciones de Kay Yarms en Instagram, centrándose en los códigos relacionados con la imagen corporal. La teoría del desarrollo de la identidad resultó ser la más pertinente para este estudio, dado que postula que la formación de la identidad es un proceso crítico durante la adolescencia y la adultez temprana, y que las redes sociales pueden ejercer efectos profundos sobre dicho proceso. Los resultados revelaron que, si bien Kay Yarms reivindica su morfología corporal africana natural y su tez oscura, sus publicaciones están dominadas por un ideal de belleza irreal, asociado al uso de cabello artificial y maquillaje. Su nutrida base de seguidores constituye una prueba de la vasta influencia que ejerce sobre la percepción de la belleza entre las mujeres. Este estudio contribuye a una mejor comprensión del impacto de la cultura de los *influencers* en las concepciones de la imagen corporal entre las mujeres sudafricanas pertenecientes a la Generación Z, subrayando la necesidad de fomentar una creación y un consumo de contenidos responsables.

Palabras clave: Influencer de Instagram; Mujeres de la Generación Z; Imagen Corporal; Belleza.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, influencer marketing on social media has grown, particularly on Instagram, where Generation Z (Gen Z) females rely on their preferred Instagram influencers for body image representation, often characterised by unrealistic standards of beauty.[1] As a result, these females suffer from a body image crisis caused by comparison, self-criticism and low self-esteem.[2] The discipline of strategic communication recognises the value of online content and digital engagement, as it allows brands to have interactive communication with their audiences that can influence behaviour and build meaningful relationships.[3] However, the discipline also acknowledges that depending on the content, the perceptions of the receivers of the communication can be negatively affected. Recent statistics reveal that one-third of South Africa's population are youth aged between 15 and 24 years,[4] and these young people use Instagram as their go-to social media platform for educational, haul and storytelling content.[5] A 2020 study explained that 44 % of Gen Z rely on their favourite influencer when making recommendations or purchasing decisions.[6] Moreover, this generation prefers to associate themselves with YouTube and Instagram influencers who share similar values. It is further elaborated that social media shapes the identity of these young people, whereby their need or desire to share similar experiences with their favourite influencer moulds their online and offline self-presentation.[7] Studies by emphasise that females especially, are negatively affected by social media content.[1,2,8] This is corroborated by SA female celebrities who stated that social media is toxic because of the social comparison that takes place and the subsequent body dissatisfaction women feel because of consuming curated content which represent body ideals.[9] Although there is an increase in studies in both the Global North and the Global South about how online content created by Instagram influencer/s affects females' body image, [8,2,1] there is a paucity of specific case studies in South Africa, particularly on Kay Yarms, a popular South African Instagram influencer. Kay Yarms' representation of beauty aligns with the 'slay queen' presentation of beauty, of concern is that her display of beauty can be unrealistic to many black South African young females. The danger of such unrealistic standards of beauty, are the increase in body dysmorphic disorder, contributing to the rise of cyberbullying based on body image culminating in suicide. It is on this premise that this study aimed to explore the influence of a popular South African influencer's Instagram content on Gen Z females' body image.

The theory of identity development is most applicable to the study. Erikson is the key author who formulated the theory of identity development, defining it as consistency in self over a period of time, in terms of goals, values, and beliefs.[10] Erikson further highlights that the theory is based on exposure to role models and different identity options.[10] Thus, individual identity is developed through exploring different identity options and committing to an option that one relates to, based on the outcome of the expectation. Identity development is the idea that facilitates the personality consistency of an individual by providing clear points of reference for life decisions that lead an individual's life in consistent ways with their identities. Adams et al[11] explain that identity formation provides five functions: a sense of consistency and coherence to beliefs, a sense of continuity for one's history and future, goals and direction, a structure and order to self-knowledge and a sense of personal control of one's choices and outcomes.

The theory links to the study because it elaborates how the identity of Gen Z females as always-connected and avid users of Instagram are increasingly likely to be shaped by the content they consume from their favourite social media influencers. This constant, and even obsessive consumption of the content, creates a self-identity 'similar' to that of the social media influencer that is then consistently portrayed as an ideal body image in their online and sometimes offline self-image.

METHOD

This research applied an exploratory qualitative approach to analyse body image related content posted by Kay Yarms on Instagram and the subsequent engagement by Gen Z females on the posts. The researcher analysed data from Kay Yarms' Instagram feed posts, @kayyarms, between November 2023 and August 2024. The data was analysed using thematic analysis following Miles and Huberman three-step process of data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing and verification.[12] To adhere to the rigour and trustworthiness of qualitative research, the principles of credibility were maintained by noting a detailed trail of the research process. Transferability was ensured through the purposive selection of the Instagram posts. The easily accessible and unaltered Instagram posts certified confirmability and follow the Miles and Huberman steps of thematic analysis, makes the findings dependable.[12]

The study complied with the ethical requirements of the University of Johannesburg REC-01-670-2024. The study also complied with the Instagram policy of internet research which states that "public information can be seen by anyone, on or off our Products (Facebook and Instagram). You, other people using Facebook and Instagram, and we can provide access to or send public information to anyone on or off our Products, including in other Meta Company Products, in search results or through tools and APIs. Public information can also be seen, accessed, reshared or downloaded through third-party services such as search engines, APIs and offline media such as TV, and by apps, websites and other services that integrate with our Products. People can also use our Products to create and share content about you with the audience they choose".[13] Thus the researchers merely explored Kay Yarms' Instagram profile to uncover body-image related codes and analyses these without alterations.

RESULTS

Table 1. Kay Yarms' Instagram Posts

Sub-theme	Operational definition
Wellness journey	The regular process of improving health
Skincare products	Products developed to maintain skin

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Make-up	Cosmetics applied to the face to enhance one's appearance
Haircare	Routine done to keep one's hair clean, neat and presentable.
Dress code	A selected style of dressing
Lifestyle	Visual representation of an influencer's life
Body representation	Showing the body image of the influencer including body shape, and body art

On her Instagram profile, as of 2026, Kay Yarms has a total of 1 436 posts and over 500 000 followers. From November 2023 to August 2024, Kay Yarms posted 73 posts. The table below displays the key themes uncovered from her Instagram posts:

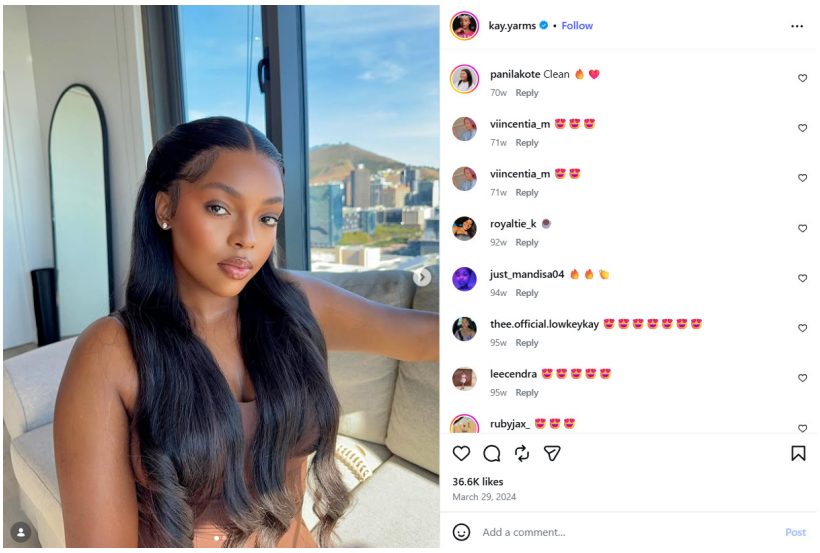

Figure 1. Kay Yarms' Post about Unrealistic African Beauty

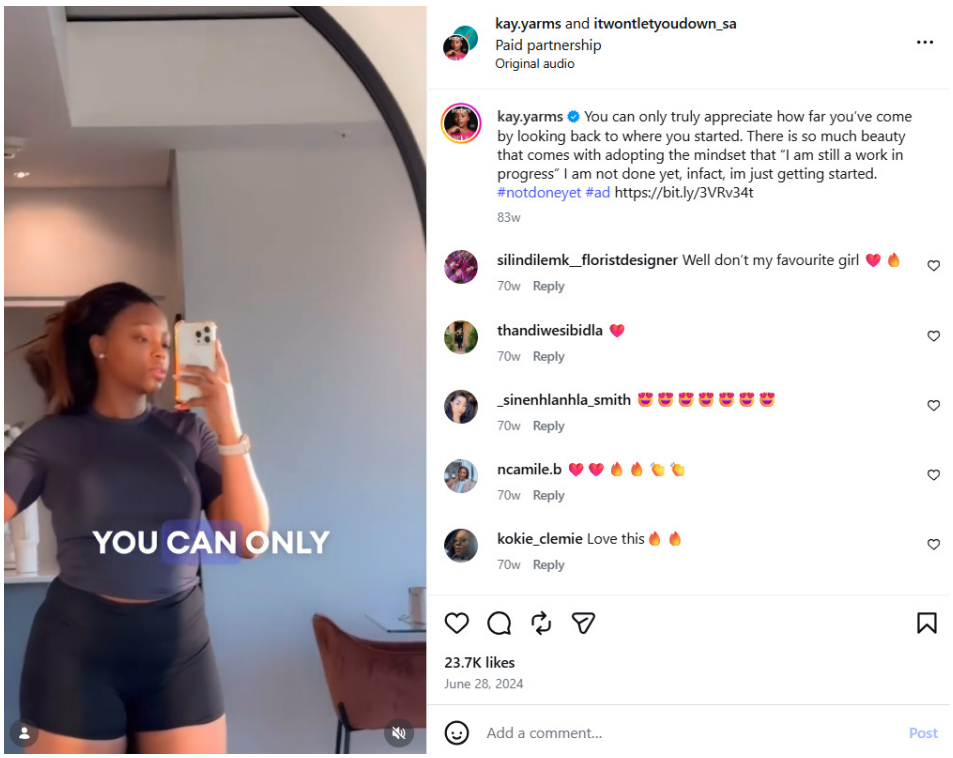

Figure 2. Kay Yarms' Post about African Body Image

DISCUSSION

The themes indicate that Kay Yarms' Instagram posts are predominantly focused on showcasing her external appearance supported by various cosmetic, hair and skincare endorsements. In her posts, Kay Yarms appears to embrace her dark skin tone and

natural African full-figured body by flaunting it in her posts as displayed in Figure 2, which counters the ubiquitous slim-figured, light skinned, European standards of female beauty. This positively contributes to the self-confidence of and a sense of belonging for her black African young women who engage with her Instagram posts. The depiction of the 'real' physical stature of African women, juxtaposes Eurocentric beauty standards, which is positive for black women whose body image has been devalued, stigmatised and sexually objectified.[14] However, conversely, Kay Yarms' posts display an 'unrealistic' standard of African beauty showing high-quality artificial hair and make-up couples with a luxurious and enviable lifestyle. An appearance that is often associated with 'slay-queens'.[15] Such 'unrealistic' standards perpetuate stereotypes that liken black African young women to 'prostitutes', 'gold-diggers' and 'sugar babies'.[15] Yet the posts amass a large followership and engagement from young women who regularly like the posts and comment with praise and perceived 'envy' as evidenced in the above 36 000 likes in Figure 1. This is indicative of the internalisation of the beauty ideals in the identity of these young women. Moreover, the shared intention to purchase the products Kay Yarms advertises also show how these young women hope to attain Kay Yarms' portrayed appearance. Of concern is that young women avidly consume this type of content which can negatively affect their self-perception and self-image, especially if they do not have the money to buy the superior quality artificial hair, cosmetics and desirable lifestyle. Studies reveal that the constant consumption of such content, which is often curated, can ignite or entrench feelings of low self-esteem and depression in young women.[1,2,4,7,8,15] These psychological problems, may be expressed through eating-disorders, substance use, seeking for wealthy, older men to fund the enviable appearance and lifestyle, as well as suicide.[15]

CONCLUSIONS

The study aimed to explore Kay Yarm's Instagram posts, focusing on body image-related codes. The results revealed that Kay Yarms' Instagram posts focus on display her outer image featuring an 'unrealistic' standard of African beauty and sought-after lifestyle. These posts garner great engagement from young women, who share their admiration and envy to look like Kay Yarms and use the products (skincare, and cosmetics) she uses. Although, her evident embrace of her voluptuous body and dark-skin may build the confidence of young black African women challenging long-standing stereotypes; her 'slay-queen' appearance can have a detrimental effect on the self-perception and self-image of these women. The dangers of this for women who cannot afford the superior quality of hair, clothing and cosmetics may be resorting to prostitution. The key limitation of the study is the limited time frame of the content analysed and the absence of the exploration of the actual perceptions of the Gen Z concerning Kay Yarms' posts. Future studies may 1) explore these perceptions to oppose or prove the findings of this study or 2) explore how educational programmes can be included into school curriculum to educate young adolescents about the dangers of influencer culture on their well-being

FINANCING

None.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None.

AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTION

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