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Investigating the impact of social media marketing efforts on brand loyalty in South Africa: the moderating role of gender

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Abstract

Marketers are focusing on interactive relationships by adopting social media marketing efforts (SMMEs) to sustain growth. The study examines how SMMEs influence brand loyalty of young energy drink consumers in South Africa. Gender has been identified as a moderator of this study. Cross-sectional data were collected from 300 (n=300) young adults (18-35 years) through a face-to-face survey. Partial least squares structural equation modelling was used to analyse the data. The results show that SMMEs influence brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality, and subsequently, brand loyalty. On testing gender as a moderator, the findings show that gender moderates the relationship between SMMEs and the identified brand-related factors. This study informs marketers that social media marketing efforts have an influence on brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality, and brand loyalty. Since gender plays a moderating role, marketers should consider the role of gender when customising strategies.

Keywords: *Social Media Marketing, Social Media Marketing Efforts, Brand Awareness, Brand Association, Perceived Quality, Brand Loyalty, Energy Drinks Industry, Gender*

1. Introduction

Social media marketing (SMM) is a powerful tool that offers significant benefits and opportunities for businesses and is an essential component of a comprehensive marketing strategy (Jiang, 2023). The popular social media platforms include Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, WeChat; each offers unique characteristics and targets different audiences, providing brands with the opportunity to reach their customers through a variety of channels (Statista, 2024). Social media marketing efforts (SMMEs) are marketing communication tools using social media platforms that connect interactions between brands and consumers to determine consumer attitudes and behaviour (Hafez, 2023). Social media is being adopted by an increasing number of businesses for purposes, such as customer relationship management, marketing, and promotion, in addition to serving as an internal communication channel for employees (Ho et al. 2024; Yang et al. 2024; Arora et al. 2023; Hanaysha 2022). Social media platforms are increasingly becoming an important source for product and brand discovery (Beck et al. 2023). Although social media has provided new opportunities and benefits, one of the major challenges is being able to investigate the influence that SMMEs have on brand building and how gender can impact this relationship. Generation Y is more likely to support brands that connect with them on social networking sites (Islam et al. 2022). In South Africa, the millennial cohort accounts for an estimated 27% of the population of 60 million, and has significant purchasing power (Naderi & Van Steenburg, 2018). Young consumers are among the key factors driving the demand for energy drinks in South Africa (Mordor Intelligence, 2023). The energy drinks market is worth $57.4 billion and is projected to grow at an annual rate of 7% until 2027 (Mordor Intelligence, 2023). Similarly, this market is projected to grow at an annual growth rate of 3.9% in Africa until 2027 (Mordor Intelligence, 2023). South Africa is a flourishing market for energy drinks as it currently holds most of the share of the African energy drinks market. The demand for energy drinks in Africa is largely driven by changing lifestyles, increased income and the exposure to global media. This poses both opportunities and threats for brands operating in this market. Advertisers are now focusing their expenditure on interactive relationships with current and new brand consumers through SMMEs and therefore engaging with young consumers (Ibrahim & Aljarah, 2023). Gender has become a significant component in worldwide marketing

tactics as social media has grown in popularity (Horrich et al. 2024). Gender also influences consumer behaviour (Lee & Workman, 2021).

1.1 Purpose of the study

Branding experts, Keller and Swaminathan (2020) advocated for additional research into the functions of branding in a digital world. The social media marketing literature supports the assumption that social media marketing tools play a critical role in improving customer behaviour, increasing brand-enhancing commitment and strengthening brand equity loyalty (Ibrahim, Aljarah, Hazzam, Elrehail & Qalati, 2023).

Global statistics indicate that almost 4.2bn people are enthusiastically embracing social media networks (Statista, 2024). Therefore, social media has become an integral part of the lives of many individuals around the world (Sohaib, Safeer & Majeed, 2022). This growth rate has created an opportunity for energy drink marketers to utilise social media platforms as an instrument for communicating brand-related information to customers (Hafez, 2023). Energy drink consumption in South Africa is higher among young consumers (Mordor Intelligence, 2023).

SMMEs are considered an effective strategy for building mutual relationships with customers (Ho et al. 2024). For this reason, an examination of brand loyalty on social media platforms is crucial. Brand loyalty through social media has attracted increasing attention in the last few decades (Aljuhmani, Elrehail, Bayram & Samarah, 2023).

Despite the interest in social media and its impact on brand building (Ibrahim & Aljarah, 2023; Khan, Ahmed & Rashid, 2021), empirical research is scarce on how SMMEs impact brand loyalty and the effect of gender as a moderator.

Research objectives:

- To examine the impact of SMMEs on brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality, and subsequent brand loyalty.
- To investigate the moderating role of gender in the relationship between SMMEs and brand awareness, brand association and perceived quality.

Research questions:

- To what extent do SMMEs influence brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality, and subsequent brand loyalty?

- Does gender moderate the relationship between SMMEs, brand awareness, brand association, and perceived quality?

The paper progresses as follows: it begins with a review of the literature and theoretical foundation of the study succeeded by the conceptual model. The study's methodology and design, followed by data analysis and the account of results is presented, followed by the implications of the study, as well as the conclusion of the study, limitations and recommended areas of future studies.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Foundation

This section introduces and discusses the concepts, theories and models of the study. It begins by describing the concept of social media marketing efforts.

2.1 The concept of social media marketing efforts (SMMEs)

The interactive nature of social media platforms offers ample opportunities for the firms to deliver brand-related information (Hafez, 2023). Many companies have created their websites and are present with their profiles on social media platforms and try to engage consumers, providing them with online contents about their products, and services (Emini & Zeqiri, 2021). According to Cheung, Pires and Rosenberger (2019), social media has two interrelated promotional roles. First, social media allows companies to communicate with customers. Second, social media can be used by customers to communicate with other customers. Social media marketing can be of great benefit if it is leveraged to the fullest by brand marketers (Moedeen, Aw, Alryalat, Wei-Han Tan, Cham, Ooi & Dwivedi, 2023). Social media marketing (SMM) is therefore essential to building effective marketing strategies (Ibrahim & Aljarah, 2023). This study examines SMMEs from the perspectives of Kim and Ko (2012) as entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customisation and WOM.

2.1.1 Entertainment

Marketers aim to create experiences that customers perceive as fun and playful when using social-media platforms (Sharma, Dwivedi, Arya & Siddiqui, 2021). The entertainment experiences can lead customers to

participate in social-media-based brand communities (Cheung et al. 2019). Certain scholars also regarded entertainment as the main determinant of consumer-generating marketing on social media networks (Hanaysha, 2022). Entertainment has been proven to strengthen customers' purchase intention. For branded social media, entertainment represents the extent to which the brand platform offers interesting, exciting, and funny content and information to customers. Accordingly, it is suggested that marketing professionals should lay their emphasis on designing entertaining advertisements on different social media platforms in order to enhance consumers purchase intentions and brand image (Hanaysha, 2022).

2.1.1 Interaction

Interaction refers to the extent to which social media platforms offer opportunities for two-way opinion exchange and information sharing (Cheung et al. 2019). According to Cheung et al. (2019), firms that use social media networks for interacting with their target market and engage with them are likely to be considered in future purchase decisions. Interaction opportunities can lead customers to exchange ideas with like-minded others about specific products or brands on social media platforms. Due to interaction, involvement of the consumers increases as they are initiating most of the actions themselves (Gupta & Syed, 2022). Interaction has been proven to strengthen customers' attitude towards brands and purchase intention (Hajli, 2015), as well as consumers' impulse purchase behaviours (Zafar et al. 2021), brand loyalty (Jun & Yi, 2020), and improve brand engagement (Perera et al. 2023). Interactions are profoundly shifting the marketing communication dynamics among customers and brands and encourage the creation of consumer-generated marketing content on social media pages (Hanaysha, 2022).

2.1.2 Trendiness

Trendiness refers to the extent to which a brand communicates the latest, up-to-date, and trendy information about the brand (Cheung et al. 2019). According to Wang, Ahmed, Deng and Wang (2019), trendiness helps in engaging consumers via online social media, hence affecting their attitude. Marketers should strive to create and implement social media strategies that emphasise trendiness and stay up-to-date with consumer preferences. Additionally, they should focus on creating content that is

visually appealing and attention-grabbing and ensure it is trendy (Anas et al. 2023), as well as disseminating the latest and trendiest information (Luo, Zhu, Ni, Haodong & Zhang, 2022).

2.1.3 Customisation

Customisation refers to the extent of tailoring services, marketing efforts and messages to satisfy consumers' personal preferences (Cheung et al. 2019). Customisation has been proven to build trust in consumers' minds and to strengthen customers' purchase intention (Godey et al. 2016).

2.1.4 EWOM

EWOM refers to the extent to which consumers exchange, disseminate and upload information using social media (Kudeshia & Kumar, 2017). EWOM helps in building community, dialogue and social learning without physically being present and helps in facilitating the action of users (Gupta & Syed, 2022). The electronic word-of-mouth component of social media marketing can enhance consumers' attitude toward brand products and brand equity (Sun, Gonzalez-Jimenez & Wang, 2021).

2.2 Generation Y and Social Media Marketing (SMM)

The generational cohort theory was developed by Inglehart (1977) and later made widespread by Strauss and Howe (1991). The theory posits that different segments of the population can be divided into distinct groups, based upon historical events that fashion the behaviour and attitudes of members within each cohort (Inglehart, 1977; Strauss & Howe, 1991). According to Brosdahl and Carpenter (2011), the generational cohort theory is a practice used by marketers and academics to segment markets based on generational cohorts' attitudes, ideas, values, and beliefs. In terms of economics, Generation Y (Gen Y) has significant purchasing power and will steer the global economy for the next 20 years (Panich et al. 2024). They possess expertise in online communication and information technology (Panich et al. 2024). Generation Y mainly use social media to contribute, share, consume, search, participate and play (Liu, Wang, Zhang & Qiao, 2023; Bolton et al. 2013).

2.3 Theory underpinning the study

The Brand Equity Theory by Aaker (1991) has guided this study. It is explored in the following section.

2.3.1 Brand Equity Theory

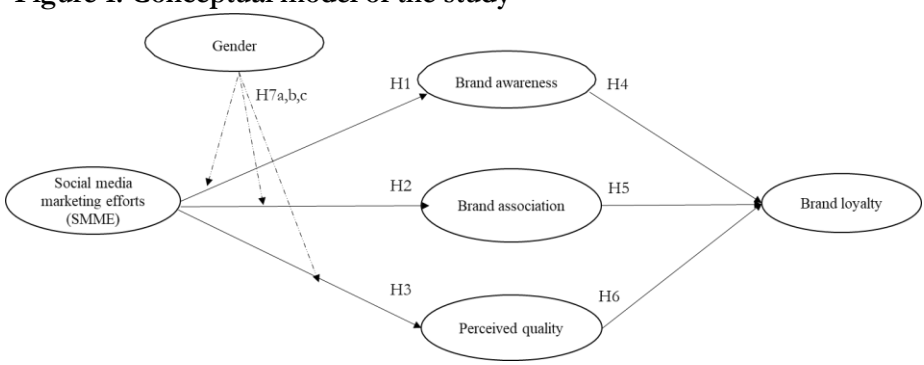
Brand equity is about providing customers with value in order to enhance their confidence and satisfaction in their purchase decisions, and also to enhance how they interpret and process information that helps them in those decisions (Aaker, 1991). It is also about helping the firm when it comes to having a competitive advantage, extending their brands, having trade leverage and having reasonable pricing in order to be able to make a profit. Aaker (1991) proposed that brand equity has some factors that are realistically intertwined with each other. Aaker (1991) defined four dimensions of customer-based brand equity: brand awareness, brand association, brand loyalty, and perceived quality.

2.4 Conceptual Model and Hypotheses Development

This section of the study details the development of the hypotheses statements that have been included in the conceptual model. In the analysis of the hypotheses, the following five constructs are discussed: SMMEs, brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality, and brand loyalty.

2.4.1 Conceptual Model

Figure 1. Conceptual model of the study



Source (s): Authors' own work based on the literature review

2.4.2 Hypotheses Development

Relationship between SMMEs and brand awareness

Brand awareness is created through consumers' repeated and memorable exposure to the brand (Aaker, 1991). According to Saputri and Syahputra (2022), the relationship between SMME and BAW is positive. Emini and Zeqiri (2021) found that social media marketing had a positive and a significant effect on brand awareness. Social media marketing plays a crucial role in building and enhancing brand awareness in today's digital landscape; it is therefore crucial to focus on creating meaningful connections with consumers (Cheung, Pires & Rosenberger, 2019). Thus, the following is hypothesised:

H_1: There is a positive relationship between SMMEs and brand awareness.

Relationship between SMMEs and brand association

SMMEs that are brand-based, increase the knowledge that consumers have on brands, thus reinforcing and increasing brand associations (Keller & Swaminathan, 2020). These brand associations will then allow consumers to form attitudes and future behaviour. This means that when brands craft compelling narratives and engage with consumers on social media, they can shape how consumers perceive and connect with the brand. Thus, the following is hypothesised:

H_2: There is a positive relationship between SMMEs and brand association

Relationship between SMMEs and perceived quality

Social media marketing strategy can enhance the perceived quality of a brand (Sari & Dermawan, 2023; Khan, Mehmood & Talat, 2022). The favourable awareness of the brand leads to positive quality perceptions of the brand and hence, favourable brand loyalty. Changani and Kumar (2024) demonstrated a substantial relationship between SMMEs and perceived quality. This means that the way a brand presents itself on social media platforms can influence how consumers perceive its product quality. Thus, the following is hypothesised:

H_3: There is a positive relationship between SMMEs and perceived quality

Relationship between brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality and brand loyalty

Brand awareness is an important part of brand knowledge, referring to the ability of potential consumers to recall a brand in their minds, thus helping to associate products with brands (Aaker, 1991). The more consumers perceive quality in a certain way, the more inclined they are to keep to that mindset. Once a consumer perceives a product or a service in a positive way, the more likely they are to become loyal to that brand. Thus, the following is hypothesised:

H_4: There is a positive relationship between brand awareness and brand loyalty.
H_5: There is a positive relationship between brand association and brand loyalty.
H_6: There is a positive relationship between perceived quality and brand loyalty.

Moderating role of Gender

The observation of differences between males and females in online communication, social media behaviour, and usage behaviours is supported by existing research (Karatsoli & Nathanail, 2020; Rahman et al. 2018). This includes variations in the kinds of posts they share, and the topics with which they engage (Dumford et al. 2023). Gender influences not only direct customer behaviour but also works as a moderator in marketing and consumer research (Horrich et al. 2023). Thus, the following is hypothesised:

H7a: Gender has a moderating effect on the relationship between SMMEs and brand awareness.
H7b: Gender has a moderating effect on the relationship between SMMEs and brand association.
H7c: Gender has a moderating effect on the relationship between SMMEs and perceived quality.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Sample and data collection

The sample size for the study was 300 responses from university students. By means of a survey-based questionnaire, data was gathered, using convenience sampling, a non-probability sampling technique. The convenience sampling technique enabled the researcher to select those

respondents who had consumed an energy drink in the past six months, as well as followed energy drink brands' social media fan pages.

3.2 Measurement instrument and questionnaire design

For this study, all the scale items were adopted from earlier studies, which had already been validated. Eleven items of SMMEs were adopted from Kim and Ko (2012), while five items of BAS, five items of BAW, and four items of PQ were adopted from Kim and Kim (2005). In addition, six items of BL were adopted from Yoo et al. (2000). All of the responses for the survey questions are based on a Likert scale that ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

4. Results and Findings

4.1 Respondents' profile

Table 1 presents the demographic information of the final valid sample. The study's population consisted of energy drink users who followed and engaged with energy drink brands activities on social media platforms. Three hundred responses were completed and considered for further data analysis. Overall, the majority of the respondents were male (63.3%). The majority of the respondents (80.3%) were between the ages 18-25, followed by those between the ages of 26-35 years. Based on the collected results, the majority of respondents reported having a degree. About 28.3% of the respondents only had a high school certificate and were currently undergraduates. A large proportion of these respondents spent less than R100 on energy drinks (66.3%). Finally, 38.0% of the respondents indicated that their favourite energy drink is Red Bull, followed by Monster energy drink at 37.0%.

Table 1. Demographic statistics

Gender		
	Frequency	**Percent**
Male	190	63.3
Female	110	36.6
Total	300	100.0
Age		
	Frequency	**Percent**
18 – 25	241	80.3

26 – 35	59	19.7
Total	300	100.0
Highest Academic Level		
	Frequency	**Percent**
High School	85	28.3
Diploma	0	0
Degree	185	61.7
Postgraduate	30	10
Other	0	0
Total	300	100.0
Amount Spent on energy drinks		
	Frequency	**Percent**
Less than R100	199	66.3
R101-R200	2	0.7
R201-R300	54	18.0
More than R301	45	15.0
Total	300	100.0
Favourite Energy Drink		
	Frequency	**Percent**
Red Bull	114	38.0
Play	1	0.3
Monster	111	37.0
MoFaya	74	24.7
Total	300	100.0

Source: Authors' own work

5. Results of the data analysis

To evaluate the hypothetical model presented in Figure 1, the partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) technique was used. SmartPLS 4.0 was used for model estimation. A bootstrapping procedure with 5000 samples and a two-tailed test was used to test the model (Hair et al. 2022).

5.1 Measurement model assessment: reliability, validity and model fit

Table 2. Accuracy Analysis

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Brand Association	0,789	0,857	0,551
Brand Awareness	0,951	0,963	0,838
Brand Loyalty	0,871	0,904	0,614
Perceived Quality	0,716	0,820	0,550
Social media marketing efforts	0,894	0,934	0,825

Source: Authors' own work

Construct reliability was tested using composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha. Convergent validity using factor loadings and average variance extracted (AVE) and discriminant validity using heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) correlation ratios (Henseler et al. 2015) were used to test validity. Table 2 presents the Cronbach Alpha, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE) values. The Cronbach alpha values ranged from 0.716–0.951, which was higher than the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Hair et al. 2022), indicating internal consistency reliability. All the extracted average variance (AVE) values were higher than the acceptable level of 0.5 (see Table 2) (Hair et al. 2022).

Table 3. Assessing Discriminant Validity: Fornell–Larcker Criteria

	Brand Association	Brand Awareness	Brand Loyalty	Perceived Quality	Social media marketing efforts
Brand Association	0,742				
Brand Awareness	-0,269	0,915			
Brand Loyalty	0,840	0,104	0,784		
Perceived Quality	0,545	-0,712	0,382	0,742	
Social media marketing efforts	0,228	-0,804	-0,059	0,735	0,908

Source: Authors' own work

Table 3 demonstrates the correlations of the latent variables. It shows that the root square of AVE at the diagonal matrix for each variable is higher than the non-diagonal values, satisfying the criterion of Fornell

and Larcker (Fornell & Larcker, 1981); therefore, discriminant validity is fulfilled.

Table 4. Discriminant validity using HTMT criterion

Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) - Matrix					
	Brand Association	Brand Awareness	Perceived Quality	Brand Loyalty	Social media marketing efforts
Brand Association					
Brand Awareness	0,568				
Brand Loyalty	0,973	0,282			
Perceived Quality	0,777	0,844	0,537		
Social media marketing efforts	0,466	0,854	0,206	0,854	

Source: Authors' own work

Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) has been examined to establish discriminant validity. All the HTMT values were below the 0.90 threshold (Table 4), suggesting that the measurement model achieved discriminant validity (Gold et al. 2001).

Table 5: Variance inflation factor (VIF)

	VIF
Brand Association -> Brand Loyalty	1,484
Brand Awareness -> Brand Loyalty	2,115
Perceived Quality -> Brand Loyalty	2,791
Social media marketing efforts -> Brand Association	1,341
Social media marketing efforts -> Brand Awareness	1,341
Social media marketing efforts -> Perceived Quality	1,341

Source: Authors' own work

The variance inflation factor (VIF) is a commonly used indicator to assess the collinearity of formative indicators (VIF). All the VIF values were less than 3, indicating no collinearity issues (Hair et al. 2022). Once it had been determined that there were no issues with collinearity, the proposed hypotheses were tested (see Table 5).

5.1 Structural model assessment

For the explanatory power assessment, the R^2 values were examined. Brand association has an R^2 value of 0.212, Brand awareness has an R^2 value of 0.709, Perceived quality has an R^2 value of 0.547 and Brand loyalty has an R^2 value of 0.866. Chin (2010) suggested an R^2 value of at least 0.10 to ensure a satisfactory model fit. All R^2 values exceeded the recommended threshold score and designating that the study model sufficiently represents the collected data (Table 6).

Table 6. R-square (R^2)

	R-square
Brand Association	0,212
Brand Awareness	0,709
Perceived Quality	0,547
Brand Loyalty	0,866

Source: Authors' own work

Table 7. Results from hypothesis testing

Hypotheses	**Relationship**	**Beta coefficients**	**Sample mean (M)**	**Standard deviation**	**T statistics**	**P values**	**Decision**
H1	Social media marketing efforts -> Brand Awareness	-0,675	-0,676	0,017	40,468	0,000	Supported
H2	Social media marketing efforts -> Brand Association	0,238	0,240	0,077	3,104	0,002	Supported
H3	Social media marketing efforts -> Perceived Quality	0,781	0,781	0,029	27,163	0,000	Supported
H4	Brand Awareness -> Brand Loyalty	0,594	0,594	0,045	13,228	0,000	Supported
H5	Brand Association -> Brand Loyalty	0,809	0,810	0,025	32,544	0,000	Supported
H6	Perceived Quality -> Brand Loyalty	0,332	0,332	0,043	7,760	0,000	Supported

Source: Authors' own work

The results in Table 7 show that all hypotheses were supported. The results show that social media marketing efforts (SMMEs) (β = -0,675, t = 40.468, p < 0.000) have a positive and significant effect on brand awareness, so H1 is supported. This implies that SMMEs have the ability to increase brand awareness which is centred on consumers' repeated and memorable exposure to the brand individual's belief in performing certain actions. This result is similar to that of Saputri and Syahputra (2022), who found that SMMEs have a positive effect on brand awareness. This means that SMMEs allow brands to reach a wider audience, especially young consumers who spend significant time online. Leveraging SMMEs can help businesses reach a broader audience, engage with potential customers, and build a strong brand presence. The results show that SMMEs (β = 0,238, t = 3.104, p < 0.000) have a positive and significant effect on brand association, so H2 is supported. This implies that SMMEs have the ability to increase brand association through positive association with the brand. SMMEs can help shape and reinforce brand associations in the minds of customers. The results show that SMMEs (β = 0,781, t = 27.163, p < 0.000) have a positive and significant effect on perceived quality, so H3 is supported. This implies that SMMEs have the ability to increase perceived quality. Brands can therefore enhance the perception of quality through SMMEs. The results show that brand awareness (β = 0,594, t = 13.228, p < 0.000) has a positive and significant effect on brand loyalty, so H4 is supported. The results show that brand association (β = 0,809, t = 32.554, p < 0.000) has a positive and significant effect on brand loyalty, so H5 is supported. This implies that positive brand associations can lead to brand loyalty. The results show that perceived quality (β = 0,332, t = 7.760, p < 0.000) has a positive and significant effect on brand loyalty, so H6 is supported. This implies that when consumers perceive a brand's products or services to be of high quality, it often leads to greater brand loyalty.

Table 8. Moderator analysis result

Hypotheses	Relationship	Beta coefficients	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation	T statistics	P values	Decision
H7a	Gender x Social media marketing efforts-> Brand Awareness	-0,415	-0,415	0,044	9,434	0,000	Supported
H7b	Gender x Social media marketing efforts-> Brand Association	0,277	0,273	0,102	2,729	0,006	Supported
H7c	Gender x Social media marketing efforts-> Perceived Quality	-0,190	-0,188	0,071	2,688	0,007	Supported

Source: Authors' own work

The results in Table 8 show that all moderation results were supported. Hypothesis 7a-c shows that gender moderates the relationship between SMMEs and brand awareness (β = -0,415, t = 9,434, p < 0.000). The results confirmed that gender moderates the relationship between SMMEs and brand association (β = 0,277, t = 2,729, p < 0.000). The results further confirmed that gender moderates the relationship between SMMEs and perceived quality (β = -0,190, t = 2,688, p < 0.000), so H7a-c is supported.

6. Implications of the study

6.1 Theoretical implications

The study makes several contributions to the literature of SMMEs and brand loyalty. A vital contribution by this study is the role of gender as a moderator. Therefore, this study proposes that a well-conceived and well communicated SMME accelerates brand loyalty by influencing brand awareness, brand association, and perceived quality in the energy drinks category. The study has revealed the understanding of the outcomes of SMMEs which adds value to the existing literature of SMMEs. The outcomes of this study contribute to the body of knowledge of the brand equity theory.

6.2 Practical implications

The findings of this study have critical implications for marketers. SMMEs can be used as tools to brand building, which will ultimately increase brand loyalty. The findings also proved that gender moderated the relationships between SMMEs and the identified brand factors. Marketers can stimulate engagement with posts and encourage customers to participate, interact with and share brands' social media fan pages. Marketers could offer entertaining strategies to customers. Further, energy drink marketers could consider offering customised information about products. Marketers should recognise that electronic WOM is an essential factor for success and that it can be used and spread by customers who have experience with specific products or before making a purchase. Marketers could aim to build a strong online presence and engage with young adults on social media platforms. As a result, managers could leverage social media to build brand loyalty, more specifically, brand awareness, brand association, and perceived quality. According to Barnhart (2021), creative content should incorporate more photographs, videos, and stories, which are considered to be more effective at image building.

7. Conclusion, limitations and future research directions

The purpose of the study was to examine the effect of SMMEs on brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality, and subsequently, brand loyalty. Also, the study sought to understand the moderating effect of gender. The study concluded that gender moderates the effect of SMMEs on brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality and subsequently, brand loyalty. However, as with all scientific research, some limitations are acknowledged, and recommendations for future studies have been suggested. This study is based on a specific beverage category. Future studies could look at different industries. This study involves cross-sectional research, future research could consider longitudinal studies.

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