

The Role of Digital Literacy in Shaping Students' Perceptions of Exaggerated Claims in Skincare Advertisements

¹Sabrina Wandani Hutabarat, ²Mesra Sinambela, ³Rita Hartati

¹⁻³Universitas Negeri Medan, Indonesia

Address: Jl. William Iskandar Ps. V, Kenangan Baru, Kec. Percut Sei Tuan, Kabupaten Deli Serdang, Sumatera Utara 20221

Author's correspondence: sabrinawandani@gmail.com

Abstract. This study aims to investigate the role of digital literacy in helping students assess the validity of skincare product advertisement claims, particularly exaggerated or hyperbolic claims often found in beauty product advertisements on social media. Using a qualitative approach with a cross-sectional survey design, this study involved 30 students of the English Literature Study Program at Medan State University as respondents who had basic knowledge of digital literacy and familiarity with skincare product advertisements. Data were collected through an online survey using a Likert scale to measure students' perceptions of advertising claims and the influence of digital literacy in evaluating those claims. The results showed that the majority of respondents had the ability to distinguish between valid and invalid claims thanks to their digital literacy. In addition, most students use the internet as the main source to verify advertising claims. However, there are still a small number of students who have not utilized digital literacy optimally. Overall, this study confirms the importance of digital literacy in helping students develop a critical attitude towards advertisements and can play a role in encouraging them to become smarter consumers who are skeptical of unrealistic claims in beauty product advertisements.

Keywords: Digital literacy, advertising claims, skincare products.

1. INTRODUCTION

In today's digital era, digital literacy has become a very important skill, especially for the younger generation who have grown up with abundant access to information through the internet. Digital literacy includes not only the ability to use technology, but also the ability to critically evaluate and analyze available information. Howard Rheingold (2012) in his book *Net Smart: How to Thrive Online* explains that digital literacy involves critical assessment of information and the use of technology for productive purposes. In the context of advertising beauty products, especially skincare, an understanding of digital literacy can help students to assess claims that are often exaggerated and misleading.

Along with the increasing use of social media as a promotional platform, many skincare products are marketed with unrealistic claims. This phenomenon, known as overclaiming, has caught the attention of the Food and Drug Administration (BPOM) in Indonesia. According to Mohamad Kashuri, Deputy for Supervision of Traditional Medicines, Health Supplements, and Cosmetics at BPOM, people need to be smart consumers and not be easily tempted by irrational advertisements (Detik Health, 2024). This suggests the need for a better understanding of how to assess the validity of advertising claims in the context of skincare.

Perception Theory, developed by Richard E. Petty and John Cacioppo (1986) through the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), is also relevant in understanding how students process information conveyed through advertising. This model explains that individuals can process advertising messages through two pathways: a central pathway involving deep thinking and a more superficial peripheral pathway. In the context of skincare advertisements, college students may be more likely to critically evaluate claims if they have good digital literacy skills, or conversely, may be swayed by the emotional and aesthetic factors presented in advertisements.

The problem arising from the phenomenon of overclaims in skincare advertisements not only affects consumers, but can also affect the beauty standards internalized by society. Skincare product advertisements often feature models with seemingly “perfect” results, creating unrealistic expectations among college students. Therefore, it is important to explore college students' views on beauty product advertisements and how they assess the claims made in these advertisements.

Against this background, this study aims to investigate the role of digital literacy in helping students assess the validity of claims in beauty product advertisements, particularly skincare, and to understand students' views on these advertisements. By emphasizing the importance of digital literacy and a better understanding of advertisements, it is hoped that students can become smarter and more critical consumers in choosing skincare products that suit their needs.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction to Simulated Realities in Advertising

The proliferation of digitally enhanced advertisements in the beauty and skincare industry has fundamentally transformed how products are marketed and perceived by consumers. According to Drenten and Gurrieri (2021), the widespread use of digital manipulation in beauty advertising has created a complex landscape where the boundaries between reality and simulation become increasingly blurred. This phenomenon is particularly evident in skincare advertisements, where digital enhancement techniques are routinely employed to showcase idealized skin textures, tones, and transformative results that may exceed the actual capabilities of the products being promoted. The purpose of simulated realities in beauty marketing extends beyond mere product presentation, operating as a

powerful tool for shaping consumer desires and expectations. In the context of skincare advertisements, these simulated images often create what Shields and Heineken (2019) describe as a "hyperreal" representation of skincare outcomes, where the digital enhancement of before-and-after images can potentially mislead consumers about realistic product efficacy.

The analysis of these simulated realities through the lens of digital literacy has become increasingly crucial in contemporary consumer culture. Research by Jenkins et al. (2023) suggests that consumers' ability to critically evaluate digitally enhanced advertising content significantly influences their purchasing decisions and overall satisfaction with beauty products. This intersection between digital manipulation techniques and consumer literacy raises important questions about the ethical implications of using advanced digital technologies in beauty advertising, particularly when such technologies can create unrealistic expectations about product performance (O'Neil and Eisenmann, 2022). The need for enhanced digital literacy in navigating these simulated realities becomes paramount as technology continues to advance and the line between authentic and enhanced imagery becomes increasingly sophisticated.

Digital Literacy Theory

Digital literacy, as conceptualized by Howard Rheingold in *Net Smart: How to Thrive Online* (2012), emphasizes the importance of critical evaluation of information and the productive use of digital technologies. Rheingold highlights that individuals equipped with digital literacy skills can discern the credibility of information encountered online and utilize digital tools for meaningful purposes. In the context of skincare advertisements, this theory provides a framework for understanding how students assess exaggerated claims. Digital literacy enables them to analyze these advertisements critically, identifying misleading or inflated statements through the application of technological tools and informed reasoning. This perspective underscores the need for students to develop competencies in filtering vast amounts of digital content, which is crucial in discerning the validity of promotional messages and avoiding susceptibility to persuasive but deceptive marketing tactics.

Perception Theory

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), proposed by Richard E. Petty and John Cacioppo (1986), provides a dual-route framework for understanding how individuals process persuasive messages. This model identifies two primary routes: the central route, which

involves analytical and thoughtful processing of information, and the peripheral route, which relies on superficial cues such as aesthetics, emotional appeals, celebrity endorsements, and brand reputation. Petty and Cacioppo (1986b) further elaborated the ELM through a "multiple roles postulate," which organizes the mechanisms of persuasion into a finite set, specifying when each operates. Processes like expectancy-value logic and cognitive response dominate when the likelihood of critical thinking is high (central route), while heuristics, evaluative conditioning, and self-perception are more influential when the likelihood of thinking is low (peripheral route).

This dual-route framework is particularly relevant for analyzing students' perceptions of skincare advertisements, as it highlights whether students engage cognitively with the claims or are influenced by peripheral factors. By integrating the ELM, this study underscores the importance of cognitive engagement in interpreting marketing messages and provides insight into how varying levels of involvement shape perceptions of exaggerated claims. The ELM, as a metatheory, offers a comprehensive structure to synthesize prior research and explain how persuasive variables impact attitudes.

Digital Literacy and Critical Media Literacy

Digital literacy has evolved beyond basic technological competencies to encompass critical evaluation skills essential for navigating today's media-saturated landscape. As Buckingham (2015) argues in "Digital Media Literacies: Rethinking Media Education in the Age of the Internet," digital literacy now includes the ability to analyze, evaluate, and critically reflect on media messages, particularly in advertising contexts. This expanded definition emphasizes not just technical proficiency but also the capacity to understand how digital manipulation shapes commercial messages and influences consumer perceptions. In the context of beauty advertising, digital literacy serves as a crucial filter through which consumers process and interpret increasingly sophisticated visual claims (Livingstone & Third, 2017).

Critical media literacy, as a subset of digital literacy, provides consumers with analytical tools to decode hyperreal elements in advertising. According to Potter's (2019) work in "Media Literacy," consumers with higher levels of critical media literacy are better equipped to identify manipulated imagery and question unrealistic beauty standards perpetuated through digital enhancement. This awareness is particularly relevant in the beauty industry, where Mihailidis and Thevenin (2013) found that digitally altered images can create unrealistic expectations about product efficacy. Their research suggests that critical media literacy skills enable

consumers to distinguish between authentic product benefits and digitally enhanced results, leading to more informed purchasing decisions.

The intersection of digital literacy and simulated realities presents a complex dynamic where consumer interpretation is significantly influenced by their level of media sophistication. Research by Jenkins et al. (2020) in "Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture" demonstrates that digitally literate consumers are more likely to approach beauty advertisements with healthy skepticism, recognizing the role of digital manipulation in creating idealized outcomes. However, Kellner and Share (2019) argue that even with strong digital literacy skills, the increasingly sophisticated nature of digital manipulation in advertising can blur the lines between reality and simulation, making it challenging for consumers to fully discern authentic product claims from hyperreal representations. This understanding highlights the ongoing need for enhanced digital literacy education specifically focused on commercial media interpretation.

Over Claims in Beauty and Skincare Advertising

Over claims in beauty and skincare advertising represent a phenomenon where product benefits and results are exaggerated beyond realistic expectations, often through digitally enhanced imagery and carefully constructed messaging. In the context of skincare advertisements, over claims manifest not only through verbal promises but also through manipulated visual representations that showcase idealized, often unattainable results. As Miah and Rich (2019) argue in their analysis of digital beauty culture, these advertisements no longer simply represent reality but construct an entirely new reality that precedes and shapes consumers' understanding of beauty.

The presentation of hyperreal ideals in skincare advertisements frequently centers on the depiction of flawless, poreless skin that transcends natural human features. Research by Thompson and Üstüner (2021) in the *Journal of Consumer Research* demonstrates how contemporary beauty advertisements utilize advanced digital manipulation techniques to create what they term "techno-mediated perfection" - skin textures and luminosity that are impossible to achieve with any real product. This manipulation extends beyond mere photo retouching; it involves creating entirely simulated skin surfaces that serve as the new standard against which consumers measure both products and themselves.

Gill (2018), in her comprehensive study of beauty advertising, notes that these simulated realities create a "perpetual state of aspiration" where consumers constantly pursue an ideal that exists only in the digitally enhanced realm of advertisements. This phenomenon is particularly problematic in the age of social media, where the line between advertisement and reality becomes increasingly indistinct. The proliferation of these hyperreal images, as analyzed by Elias and Gill (2021), contributes to what they term "beauty surveillance culture," where digitally perfect skin becomes normalized as an expected standard rather than an artificial construct.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative approach with a cross-sectional survey design to explore the role of digital literacy in shaping college students' perceptions of exaggerated claims in skincare advertisements. Cross-sectional surveys are widely used in the social sciences to collect data on behavior, attitudes, understanding, and opinions at a specific point in time (Polit & Beck, 2014; Sedgwick, 2014). This design is versatile and allows researchers to study various aspects of human behavior and situations across different populations. The efficiency of cross-sectional surveys in providing timely and relevant data makes them particularly suitable for this study.

The respondents in this study are 30 English Literature students from Universitas Negeri Medan, who are selected based on their familiarity with skincare advertisements and basic knowledge of the concept of digital literacy. These respondents will be recruited through online platforms to ensure accessibility and inclusivity while minimizing logistical constraints. Data collection will be conducted using an online survey consisting of ten Likert-scale questions designed to assess students' perceptions of exaggerated claims in skincare advertisements and the influence of their digital literacy skills. The Likert scale is often used in surveys to measure the extent to which respondents agree or disagree with a particular statement, and allows the creation of an interval measurement scale (Carraffio & Rocco, 2007).

The choice of an online survey is justified by its efficiency, cost-effectiveness and ability to reach a wide range of participants. The survey also provides easy access to data and ensures the relevance of the findings to the local student population. The data collected will be analyzed to determine the relationship between students' digital literacy and their perception of exaggerated claims in skincare advertisements. This analysis aims to highlight the importance

of digital literacy in fostering critical consumer awareness and skepticism towards advertising claims.

4. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

First Finding

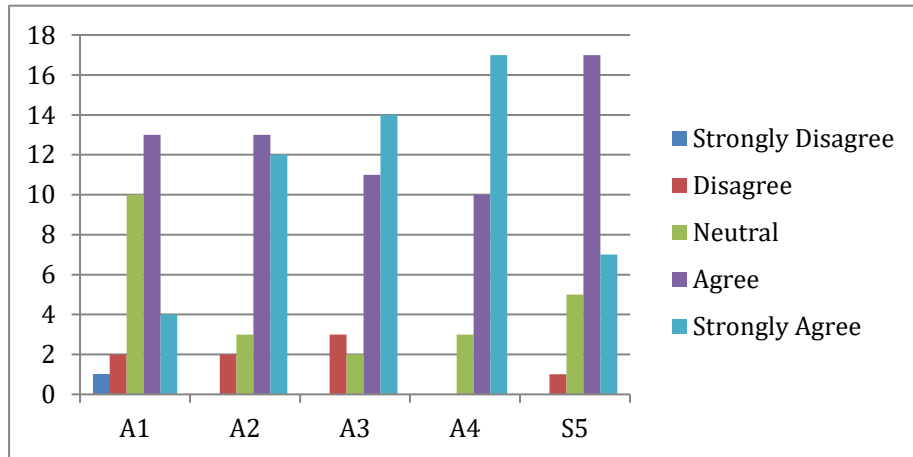


Figure 1 Digital Literacy and the Validity of Advertising Claims

Table 1 Digital Literacy and the Validity of Advertising Claims

Code	Statement	Criteria (%)				
		SD	D	N	A	SA
A1	I feel able to distinguish between valid and invalid advertising claims in skincare products	1	2	10	13	4
A2	Digital literacy helps me understand whether an ad's claims are supported by clear facts	0	2	3	13	12
A3	I often use information from the internet to verify the authenticity of skincare product claims	0	3	2	11	14
A4	I believe that knowledge of digital literacy can protect me from misleading advertising claims	0	0	3	10	17
A5	I feel that digital media provides enough information to assess the accuracy of skincare product claims	0	1	5	17	7

In the first statement (A1), 43.3% of respondents agreed that they are able to distinguish between valid and invalid claims in skincare product advertisements. In contrast, only 13.3% strongly agreed, while 33.3% chose neutral, indicating that most respondents have this ability, but are not yet fully confident. There were also 6.7% who disagreed, and 3.3% who strongly disagreed, indicating that a small proportion of respondents find it difficult to distinguish advertising claims. The second statement (A2) shows that 43.3% of respondents agreed that digital literacy helps them understand whether claims in advertisements are supported by facts. This percentage is almost equal to the respondents who strongly agree (40%). Only 10% were

neutral and 6.7% disagreed, indicating that the majority of respondents saw digital literacy as a very helpful tool.

The third statement (A3) shows 46.7% of respondents strongly agree that they often use information from the internet to verify product claims, while another 36.7% agree. A total of 10% of respondents disagreed, and 6.7% were neutral. This confirms that the habit of utilizing the internet for information verification is quite common, although some still do not do so. In the fourth statement (A4), 56.7% of respondents strongly agreed that digital literacy can protect them from misleading advertisements, and another 33.3% agreed. A total of 10% were neutral, with no respondents disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. This data confirms a strong belief in the role of digital literacy as protection from misleading ads. Finally, in the fifth statement (A5), 56.7% of respondents agreed that digital media provides enough information to assess advertising claims, and 23.3% strongly agreed. A total of 16.7% chose neutral, while only 3.3% disagreed. This shows that the majority find digital media useful, although some still doubt its comprehensiveness.

Second Finding

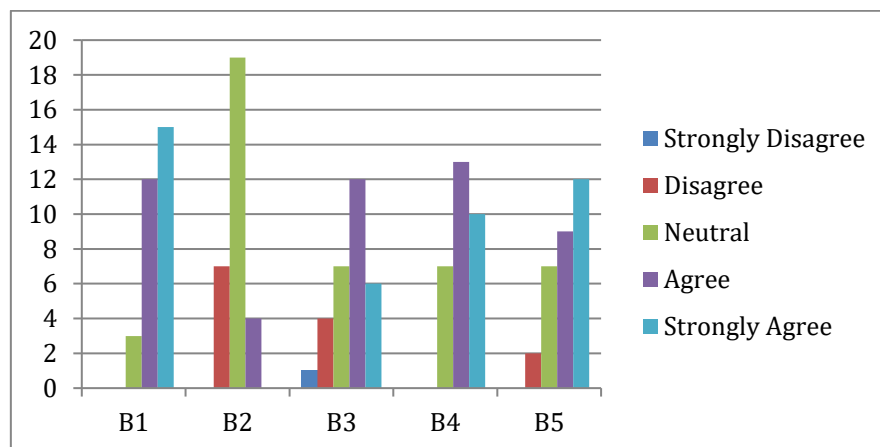


Figure 2 Students' Views on Beauty Product Advertisements

Table 2 Students' Views on Beauty Product Advertisements

Code	Statement	Criteria (%)				
		SD	D	N	A	SA
B1	I feel that skincare product advertisements often exaggerate the benefits of their products	0	0	3	12	15
B2	I tend to believe the claims made in skincare product advertisements	0	7	19	4	0
B3	Skincare product advertisements influence my view of beauty standards	1	4	7	12	6
B4	I feel that skincare advertisements focus more on attracting attention than providing factual information	0	0	7	13	10
B5	I am skeptical of skincare advertisements, especially those that use models or results that look “perfect”	0	2	7	9	12

The first statement (B1) shows that 50% of respondents strongly agree that skincare product advertisements often exaggerate product benefits. Another 40% agreed, while 10% were neutral. There were no respondents who disagreed or strongly disagreed, indicating a critical majority view of advertising. The second statement (B2) revealed that 63.3% of respondents chose to be neutral towards trust in product advertising claims, while 23.3% disagreed and 13.3% agreed. There were no respondents who strongly agreed or strongly disagreed, signaling that although many distrusted the claims, most chose a neutral stance.

The third statement (B3) showed that 40% of respondents agreed that advertising influenced their views on beauty standards, and another 20% strongly agreed. A total of 23.3% were neutral, 13.3% disagreed, and 3.3% strongly disagreed, indicating the influence of advertising on most respondents, although some remained skeptical. In the fourth statement (B4), 43.3% of respondents agreed that ads focus more on attracting attention than providing factual information, while 33.3% strongly agreed. A total of 23.3% were neutral, with no respondents disagreeing or strongly disagreeing, indicating the majority's perception of less informative advertising strategies. In the fifth statement (B5), 40% of respondents strongly agreed that they are skeptical of ads that feature models or results that look “perfect,” while 30% agreed. 23.3% were neutral, and only 6.7% disagreed. This shows a fairly high level of skepticism towards the idealized image often used in advertisements.

The results of this study show that digital literacy plays an important role in helping students understand and evaluate advertising claims for skincare products. Most respondents admitted to using information from the internet to verify the validity of advertising claims and felt that digital literacy protected them from misleading advertisements. This is in accordance with the Digital Literacy theory proposed by Howard Rheingold (2012), which emphasizes that the ability to filter and critically assess information is an essential skill in the digital age. In the context of this study, students who have a good level of digital literacy are able to utilize these

skills to identify exaggerated claims in advertisements, making them wiser in receiving information.

In addition, students' perceptions of advertisements can also be analyzed through the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) framework developed by Petty and Cacioppo (1986). The research data shows that the majority of students are skeptical of ads with claims that look “perfect,” indicating that they tend to use the central processing route in evaluating ads, namely by thinking critically and evaluating content based on facts. However, the minority of respondents who believed the ad's claims indicated a peripheral route of processing, where decisions were based on the emotional or aesthetic elements of the ad. ELM theory helps explain how different levels of critical thinking among respondents influenced the way they processed the advertising messages.

5. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that digital literacy has a significant influence in helping students assess the validity of skincare product advertising claims. The majority of respondents felt they could distinguish between valid and invalid claims thanks to digital literacy. In addition, most students use the internet as the main source to verify advertising claims. This shows that digital literacy not only plays a role in improving understanding, but also encourages critical behavior in assessing information. However, there is a small group that is neutral or has not optimally utilized digital literacy, indicating the need for further education on the importance of this skill.

On the other hand, students' views on beauty product advertisements showed a fairly high awareness of the hyperbolic nature of advertisements, with the majority of respondents acknowledging that advertisements often exaggerate the benefits of products. However, there was a duality of attitudes towards believing in advertising claims, with most respondents being neutral, while others were skeptical or believing. In addition, advertisements were shown to influence students' perceived beauty standards, although not all students felt directly affected. Overall, the results of this study emphasize the importance of digital literacy in shaping students' critical attitudes towards advertisements and how continued education can help them become smarter and more critical consumers.

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