

## LINGUISTIC STRATEGIES IN DIGITAL ADVERTISING: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF SKINCARE PRODUCT BRANDING ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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**Abstract:** *The rapid growth of the digital beauty industry has transformed skincare advertising on social media into a powerful discursive space where language not only promotes products but also shapes beauty standards, consumer identities, and emotional experiences. This study aims to analyze linguistic strategies employed in digital skincare advertisements on Instagram and TikTok and to examine how these strategies influence users' perceptions, self-evaluation, and meaning-making processes. This research employed a qualitative approach using a critical case study design integrated with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with 12 active social media users aged 18–35, digital observation of skincare advertising content, and document analysis of promotional materials, including captions, slogans, testimonials, and comment sections. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis supported by Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA framework, encompassing textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice. The findings reveal three major themes: the internalization of beauty standards as symbolic pressure, ambivalence between empowerment and self-anxiety, and negotiation of meaning in digital discourse consumption. The study demonstrates that skincare advertising discourse extends beyond commercial persuasion, functioning as a mechanism of identity construction, emotional regulation, and ideological normalization in digital environments. Participants were found to actively negotiate advertising messages while remaining partially influenced by dominant beauty discourse. Theoretically, this study contributes to Critical Discourse Analysis by foregrounding lived experience, emotional ambivalence, and audience agency in digital beauty culture. Practically, the findings highlight the importance of digital media literacy, ethical advertising regulation, and critical awareness toward persuasive discourse in contemporary social media environments.*

**Keywords:** Critical Discourse Analysis; Digital Advertising; Skincare Branding; Social Media Discourse; Beauty Ideology; Consumer Identity.

### INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of the digital beauty industry in recent years has fundamentally transformed how individuals perceive the body, identity, and self-worth. Amid the overwhelming flow of content on social media, skincare advertisements no longer function merely as tools for delivering product information; rather, they actively construct new social realities surrounding “ideal skin,” “healthy beauty,” and “self-confidence” through complex linguistic and visual strategies. Recent studies indicate that discourse embedded in digital skincare advertising tends to frame beauty as a symbol of success, social mobility, and even moral value (Afwan et al., 2025; Cheema et al., 2025). At the same time, these representations are reinforced through multimodal practices that integrate textual, visual, and algorithmic elements within digital platforms (Khoirunnisaa & Harti, 2023; Khasanah et al., 2026). In this context, social media users particularly young women emerge as a group directly exposed to symbolic pressures to conform to discursively constructed beauty standards (Ezeliora & Chakma, 2025).

This phenomenon is observable in everyday practices. Preliminary observations of skincare-related content on Instagram and TikTok reveal that terms such as glowing, flawless, acne-free, and brightening function not only as product descriptors but also as

persuasive linguistic tools carrying implicit ideological meanings (Wahyuni et al., 2025). Exploratory interviews with active social media users further reveal ambivalent experiences: on the one hand, individuals feel motivated to engage in self-care; on the other hand, they experience anxiety about their skin, which is often perceived as “less than ideal.” This indicates that language in advertising is not neutral, but rather plays a significant role in shaping self-perception and reinforcing power relations between producers and consumers (Ahmad & Aliyu, 2025). Field reports also highlight that digital marketing strategies in the skincare industry rely heavily on personal narratives, testimonials, and pseudo-scientific claims that strengthen product legitimacy (Kenalemang-Palm & Eriksson, 2023).

The urgency of this study becomes increasingly evident when viewed from both global and local perspectives. Globally, the skincare industry has experienced significant growth, supported by social media and influencer marketing that rapidly shape consumption trends (Koswara & Herlina, 2025). In the Indonesian context, this phenomenon is further intensified by high levels of social media penetration and the growing consumption of digitally marketed beauty products. However, behind this growth lie critical issues related to the reproduction of beauty ideology, gender bias, and the commodification of identity that have not yet been thoroughly explored (Mudzayyanah & Pratama, 2026).

A review of recent literature over the past five years shows that Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has been widely employed to examine beauty advertising, particularly in uncovering the relationship between language, power, and ideology. Several studies have highlighted how skincare advertisements construct scientific narratives (scientification) to enhance product credibility, as well as how gender representation and beauty standards are reproduced through linguistic and visual elements (Rahmania & Yannuar, 2021; Kenalemang-Palm & Eriksson, 2026). In addition, multimodal approaches have been used to understand the interaction between verbal and nonverbal components in digital advertisements (Sullivan & Simonfalvi, 2026).

Nevertheless, a significant research gap remains. Most studies tend to focus on textual or visual analysis separately and emphasize representation without deeply exploring the subjective experiences of users as affected audiences. The dimensions of meaning-making, interpretive processes, and emotional experiences of consumers in engaging with digital skincare discourse remain relatively underexplored, particularly within the Indonesian socio-cultural context (Simões, 2025).

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze linguistic strategies in digital skincare advertising on social media through a Critical Discourse Analysis approach, focusing on how language is used to construct meaning, produce ideology, and influence consumer perceptions. The scope of this study includes the analysis of advertising texts, the context of discourse production and consumption, and users’ interpretations of the messages conveyed. Theoretically, this research is expected to enrich critical discourse studies by incorporating a more contextual and experience-based perspective. Practically, the findings are expected to contribute to the development of critical media literacy and to encourage more ethical and reflective digital marketing practices.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative research approach using a critical case study design integrated with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the primary analytical framework. A qualitative approach was selected because this study aims to explore the meanings, experiences, and social interpretations embedded in digital skincare advertising discourse rather than measuring variables quantitatively (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The critical case study design was considered appropriate as it allows an in-depth examination of a

contemporary social phenomenon situated within a specific context, namely skincare branding practices on social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok (Yin, 2018).

Critical Discourse Analysis was adopted based on Fairclough's three-dimensional model, which conceptualizes discourse as a social practice interconnected with ideology and power structures (Fairclough, 2013). This framework enables analysis at three levels: textual features, discursive practice, and social practice. In the context of this study, skincare advertisements are viewed not merely as marketing messages but as discursive tools that shape beauty standards, consumer identities, and emotional experiences.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This section presents the findings derived from semi-structured interviews with 12 participants, digital observation of skincare advertisements on Instagram and TikTok, and document analysis of advertising materials. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis integrated with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), resulting in three major themes: (1) the internalization of beauty standards as symbolic pressure, (2) ambivalence between empowerment and self-anxiety, and (3) negotiation of meaning in digital discourse consumption.

These themes do not function as isolated categories but rather represent interconnected layers of participants' lived experiences in navigating digital beauty discourse.

### **Theme 1: Internalization of Beauty Standards as Symbolic Pressure**

The first major theme identified was participants' gradual internalization of beauty standards communicated through skincare advertisements. Participants initially described their engagement with skincare advertisements as casual exposure to promotional content. However, repeated interaction with such discourse led to the normalization of certain ideals regarding skin appearance.

Common lexical items repeatedly encountered by participants included:

- glowing
- flawless
- brightening
- clear skin
- poreless

These terms were not interpreted merely as descriptive product features but gradually became symbolic indicators of attractiveness, discipline, and self-worth.

One participant explained:

"At first I just watched skincare videos for fun, but after seeing so many glowing skin ads, I started feeling like my skin was actually problematic." (P3)

Another participant similarly noted:

"I didn't realize how much these ads influenced me until I became insecure about things I never noticed before." (P7)

These narratives suggest that advertising language contributes to the production of normative beauty expectations. Through constant repetition, linguistic expressions transform into evaluative frameworks through which participants assess themselves.

Digital observation further supported this finding. Many advertisements framed skin conditions such as acne, dullness, or uneven tone as "problems" requiring immediate intervention. Phrases such as:

- repair damaged skin barrier
- fight imperfections
- unlock flawless skin

positioned consumers as incomplete or deficient prior to product use.

This discursive construction aligns with the notion that advertising creates symbolic deficits in order to stimulate desire and consumption (Fairclough, 2013).

Participants did not always consciously recognize this pressure. Instead, beauty standards became subtly internalized as seemingly natural aspirations.

This finding indicates that skincare advertising functions not only as persuasion but as a mechanism of symbolic social regulation, reinforcing what counts as acceptable or desirable appearance (Rahmania & Yannuar, 2021).

### **Theme 2: Ambivalence Between Empowerment and Self-Anxiety**

The second theme reveals participants' emotionally contradictory relationship with skincare discourse.

On one hand, participants described skincare advertisements as motivating and empowering. Many associated skincare routines with self-care, discipline, and confidence.

One participant stated:

"Skincare makes me feel like I'm investing in myself." (P5)

Another explained:

"I feel more confident when I follow skincare routines promoted online." (P9)

Advertising narratives often reinforced this perspective through expressions such as:

- you deserve better skin
- invest in your glow
- love yourself through skincare

These constructions framed skincare as an act of empowerment and self-love.

However, beneath this empowering rhetoric, participants simultaneously reported heightened anxiety, guilt, and dissatisfaction.

A participant reflected:

"Sometimes I feel guilty if I skip my skincare routine, like I'm neglecting myself." (P2)

Another noted:

"These ads make self-care feel less like a choice and more like an obligation." (P11)

This paradox demonstrates how empowerment discourse can coexist with subtle disciplinary mechanisms.

Rather than simply promoting products, advertisements implicitly construct skincare consumption as moral responsibility. Individuals are encouraged to continuously improve themselves through consumption.

This finding aligns with Simões (2025), who argues that digital promotional discourse often embeds neoliberal values of self-optimization and personal responsibility.

Participants therefore occupied an ambivalent emotional position:

- motivated by self-improvement narratives
- burdened by impossible beauty expectations

This tension was especially visible among participants who intellectually recognized advertising strategies but still felt emotionally affected.

As one participant explained:

"I know these ads are marketing tactics, but I still compare myself anyway." (P6)

This illustrates that awareness alone does not eliminate discursive influence.

### **Theme 3: Negotiation of Meaning in Digital Discourse Consumption**

The third theme highlights participants' active role in interpreting and negotiating

advertising discourse.

Contrary to assumptions of passive consumption, participants demonstrated critical awareness when engaging with skincare advertisements.

Several participants reported skepticism toward product claims such as:

- clinically proven
- dermatologist approved
- visible results in 7 days

One participant commented:

“Whenever I see ‘clinically tested,’ I immediately look for actual reviews because I don’t fully trust it.” (P4)

Another stated:

“I check comments first because real users are more honest than the ad itself.” (P8)

Participants described several strategies for negotiating advertising claims:

### **Information verification**

Participants compared advertisements with:

- online reviews
- dermatologist content
- user testimonials
- discussion forums

### **Peer consultation**

Participants frequently consulted friends or online communities before purchasing products.

### **Selective trust**

Rather than accepting or rejecting advertisements entirely, participants selectively trusted certain brands, influencers, or information sources.

Despite this critical engagement, participants rarely disengaged from advertising discourse completely.

One participant admitted:

“Even when I know an ad exaggerates, I still end up wanting the product.” (P10)

This finding suggests that negotiation does not necessarily lead to resistance.

Instead, participants operated in a state of partial acceptance, simultaneously recognizing advertising manipulation while remaining emotionally and behaviorally influenced.

This reflects the complexity of agency in digital environments. Users are neither passive victims nor fully autonomous consumers; rather, they continuously negotiate meaning within persuasive structures (Cheema et al., 2025; Khasanah et al., 2026).

### **Cross-Theme Interpretation**

Although presented separately, these three themes form a dynamic experiential continuum.

The process begins with repeated exposure to advertising language, leading to the internalization of beauty standards (Theme 1). This internalization produces emotional consequences manifested as ambivalence between empowerment and anxiety (Theme 2). In response, participants engage in meaning negotiation to manage, reinterpret, or partially resist discourse (Theme 3).

However, this process is not linear.

Participants may oscillate between:

- critical awareness
- emotional vulnerability

- consumer desire

depending on context, mood, and social influence.

This complexity reveals that skincare advertising discourse is deeply embedded in participants' daily identity work and emotional regulation.

### Thematic Summary Table

Theme	Subthemes	Interpretive Meaning
Internalization of Beauty Standards	Ideal skin normalization, symbolic inadequacy	Beauty discourse becomes self-evaluation framework
Ambivalence	Empowerment rhetoric, anxiety, guilt	Self-care and discipline coexist
Negotiation of Meaning	Verification, skepticism, selective trust	Users actively negotiate discourse

### Summary of Findings

Overall, the findings demonstrate that linguistic strategies in skincare advertising do not simply persuade consumers to purchase products. Rather, they shape how individuals:

- perceive beauty
- interpret self-worth
- manage emotions
- negotiate identity in digital environments

The findings therefore position digital skincare advertising as a discursive space where language, ideology, and lived experience intersect in everyday life.

### Discussion

This study explored how linguistic strategies in digital skincare advertising shape users' perceptions, emotions, and identity construction on social media. Through thematic analysis integrated with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), three major findings emerged: (1) the internalization of beauty standards as symbolic pressure, (2) ambivalence between empowerment and self-anxiety, and (3) negotiation of meaning in digital discourse consumption.

Collectively, these findings suggest that skincare advertisements function not only as commercial communication but also as discursive mechanisms that regulate self-perception, normalize particular standards of beauty, and influence emotional experiences in digital environments.

### Internalization of Beauty Standards as Discursive Normalization

The first finding demonstrates that repeated exposure to skincare advertising discourse contributes to the normalization and internalization of specific beauty standards.

Participants' narratives reveal that lexical choices such as glowing, flawless, brightening, and clear skin gradually shifted from product descriptions into normative ideals. This finding supports Fairclough's (2013) argument that discourse is constitutive rather than merely reflective: language actively constructs social realities and regulates what is perceived as desirable, normal, and legitimate.

In the context of skincare advertising, beauty is not simply represented but discursively produced as an attainable and morally desirable condition.

This finding is consistent with Rahmania and Yannuar (2021), who found that Instagram skincare advertisements reproduce idealized beauty concepts through repetitive linguistic framing. Similarly, Afwan et al. (2025) argue that beauty communication increasingly functions as cultural legitimacy work, in which products

are embedded within narratives of identity, aspiration, and belonging.

Participants' experiences suggest that internalization often occurs subtly and unconsciously. Many participants initially viewed skincare advertisements as harmless content, yet later recognized changes in how they evaluated their own skin.

This process reflects symbolic power, whereby dominant meanings become naturalized through repetition until they are perceived as common sense (Fairclough, 2013).

Thus, skincare advertising discourse does not simply encourage consumption but contributes to the formation of internal evaluative systems.

Participants begin to interpret their own bodies through externally produced discursive categories.

### **Ambivalence Between Empowerment and Self-Anxiety**

The second major finding reveals the contradictory emotional consequences of digital skincare discourse.

Participants described skincare advertisements as simultaneously motivating and anxiety-inducing. On one level, advertising language framed skincare consumption as self-care, empowerment, and investment in personal well-being.

Expressions such as:

- love yourself
- you deserve better skin
- invest in your glow

construct skincare as an ethical and emotional practice rather than a purely cosmetic activity.

This aligns with contemporary digital marketing strategies that rely heavily on emotional branding and identity-based persuasion (Cheema et al., 2025).

However, participants also reported feelings of guilt, inadequacy, and pressure when unable to meet advertised beauty expectations.

This paradox reflects what Simões (2025) identifies as the ideological tension within digital promotional discourse: self-improvement is framed as personal freedom while simultaneously functioning as a subtle disciplinary demand.

Participants were encouraged to continuously optimize themselves, often through product consumption.

This finding also resonates with Mudzayyanah and Pratama (2026), who argue that empowerment narratives in digital beauty advertising frequently mask underlying systems of self-surveillance and appearance regulation.

In this sense, empowerment becomes conditional.

Participants may feel confident and validated, but only insofar as they successfully approximate promoted beauty ideals.

Consequently, skincare discourse creates a cycle in which:

1. consumers are encouraged to improve themselves,
2. improvement remains perpetually incomplete, and
3. consumption is continuously reinforced.

This cycle contributes to emotional ambivalence, where participants experience both satisfaction and insecurity.

The findings therefore suggest that digital beauty discourse is psychologically complex, operating through both aspiration and inadequacy.

### **Negotiation of Meaning and Audience Agency**

The third finding demonstrates that participants are not passive recipients of advertising discourse.

Participants actively evaluated product claims, cross-checked information, consulted peers, and questioned promotional narratives. This supports the view that audiences in digital environments are interpretive agents capable of negotiating meaning rather than merely absorbing ideological messages (Khasanah et al., 2026).

Participants' skepticism toward claims such as:

- clinically proven
- dermatologist approved
- visible results in seven days

suggests a level of digital literacy and discursive awareness.

This finding is aligned with Sullivan and Simonfalvi (2026), who emphasize that social media users increasingly engage in critical decoding of multimodal promotional messages.

Nevertheless, critical awareness did not necessarily translate into complete resistance.

Participants frequently acknowledged advertising exaggeration while remaining emotionally or behaviorally influenced.

For example, participants often reported:

- recognizing manipulative tactics, yet still desiring products;
- questioning claims, yet purchasing items after repeated exposure.

This finding suggests that audience agency is partial, negotiated, and context-dependent.

Users are capable of resistance but remain embedded within persuasive digital ecosystems structured by algorithms, repetition, and social validation.

As Cheema et al. (2025) note, digital advertising is particularly effective because it integrates emotional appeals with participatory interaction, making persuasive discourse feel personalized and socially embedded.

Thus, participants negotiate rather than simply reject or accept discourse.

This highlights the importance of conceptualizing consumers as simultaneously critical and vulnerable.

### **Theoretical Contribution**

This study contributes to Critical Discourse Analysis by extending its application from textual ideology analysis toward lived digital experience.

Previous studies on beauty advertising have primarily focused on:

- representation of femininity,
- visual symbolism, or
- persuasive strategies.

While valuable, these approaches often underemphasize how discourse is emotionally experienced and socially negotiated by audiences.

This study addresses that gap by demonstrating that discourse operates not only at the level of representation but also at the level of:

- emotional regulation,
- self-evaluation,
- identity work, and
- everyday decision-making.

The integration of CDA with thematic qualitative analysis therefore provides a richer understanding of how discourse functions in contemporary digital life.

Additionally, the study supports multimodal perspectives by showing that linguistic meaning cannot be fully separated from visual and algorithmic contexts (Khoirunnisaa & Harti, 2023).

Skincare advertising on social media is persuasive not because of language alone, but because language is embedded within broader multimodal environments that intensify symbolic influence.

### **Practical Implications**

The findings have several practical implications.

#### **For policymakers**

Stricter regulation is needed regarding:

- misleading skincare claims,
- exaggerated scientific terminology,
- unrealistic beauty promises in digital advertising.

Such regulation is important given participants' susceptibility to subtle persuasive discourse.

#### **For education**

The findings highlight the importance of strengthening digital media literacy.

Educational institutions should equip students with critical skills to:

- evaluate advertising claims,
- recognize ideological messaging,
- understand how language shapes self-perception.

#### **For society**

This study emphasizes the psychological implications of digital beauty culture.

Promoting awareness regarding beauty discourse may help reduce:

- appearance anxiety,
- comparison culture,
- unhealthy self-surveillance behaviors.

#### **Researcher Reflexivity**

The interpretation of these findings is inevitably shaped by the researcher's position within the same digital culture under investigation.

As a researcher who is also exposed to skincare discourse, beauty standards, and algorithmic content flows, complete neutrality is neither possible nor assumed.

Instead, reflexivity was maintained by critically examining:

- personal assumptions regarding beauty,
- emotional reactions to advertising content,
- interpretive decisions during coding and analysis.

This reflexive stance strengthens analytical transparency and aligns with qualitative research principles (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

#### **Discussion Summary**

Overall, the discussion demonstrates that digital skincare advertising is not a neutral marketing practice but a socially embedded discursive system. Through linguistic strategies, advertisements shape how individuals:

- understand beauty,
- evaluate themselves,
- regulate emotion, and
- negotiate identity.

Participants are neither fully manipulated nor fully autonomous.

Rather, they inhabit complex spaces of:

- aspiration,
- insecurity,
- awareness, and
- negotiation.

These findings reinforce the importance of critically examining digital discourse as a powerful force in shaping contemporary social life.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined linguistic strategies in digital skincare advertising on social media through a qualitative approach using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The findings reveal that skincare advertisements function not merely as promotional messages but as discursive mechanisms that shape how individuals perceive beauty, evaluate themselves, and negotiate identity in digital environments.

### **Three major findings emerged from the analysis.**

First, skincare advertising discourse contributes to the **internalization of beauty standards as symbolic pressure**. Repetitive lexical choices such as *glowing*, *flawless*, and *brightening* gradually become normalized ideals that participants use to assess their own physical appearance. These linguistic constructions position beauty as both attainable and expected, reinforcing discursive norms regarding ideal skin and bodily presentation (Fairclough, 2013; Rahmania & Yannuar, 2021).

Second, participants demonstrated a strong sense of **emotional ambivalence** in their engagement with skincare advertisements. While advertising narratives often framed skincare as self-care, empowerment, and confidence-building, participants simultaneously experienced anxiety, guilt, and dissatisfaction when they perceived themselves as falling short of promoted ideals. This finding suggests that digital beauty discourse operates through a paradoxical logic in which empowerment is intertwined with subtle forms of discipline and self-regulation (Simões, 2025; Mudzayyanah & Pratama, 2026).

Third, participants actively engaged in **negotiation of meaning** when consuming skincare discourse. Rather than functioning as passive recipients, they critically evaluated advertising claims, compared information sources, consulted peers, and selectively trusted certain promotional content. However, such critical awareness did not fully eliminate advertising influence. Participants remained emotionally and behaviorally affected despite recognizing persuasive tactics, indicating that agency in digital environments is partial, fluid, and context-dependent (Cheema et al., 2025; Khasanah et al., 2026).

Collectively, these findings provide a deeper understanding of how digital skincare advertising extends beyond product marketing into broader processes of identity construction, emotional regulation, and ideological normalization. This study therefore contributes conceptually to Critical Discourse Analysis by foregrounding the role of lived experience, emotional ambivalence, and audience negotiation in contemporary digital discourse.

### **From a practical perspective, the findings offer several implications.**

For **policymakers**, stronger regulation is recommended to monitor misleading skincare claims, exaggerated scientific language, and unrealistic beauty promises in digital advertising environments.

For **educational institutions**, the findings highlight the importance of integrating digital media literacy into curriculum development to strengthen students' critical awareness of persuasive language, visual rhetoric, and ideological messaging.

For **society more broadly**, this study emphasizes the need to foster healthier relationships with beauty discourse by promoting critical awareness, psychological resilience, and reduced dependence on externally constructed appearance standards.

### **Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations.**

First, the research focused on a relatively small sample of 12 participants, limiting generalizability across broader populations. Second, participants were primarily young adults who are highly active on Instagram and TikTok, resulting in relatively homogeneous

digital experiences. Third, the study examined discourse within a limited temporal frame and did not investigate long-term changes in participants' perceptions or consumption behavior.

Future research is recommended to expand participant diversity across age groups, genders, and socio-cultural backgrounds. Researchers may also employ **longitudinal designs, digital ethnography, or mixed-method approaches** to investigate how sustained exposure to skincare advertising influences identity formation over time. Additionally, future studies should explore the role of platform algorithms and influencer economies in reinforcing beauty discourse and consumption practices.

In conclusion, this study positions digital skincare advertising as more than an economic or marketing phenomenon. It is a social and discursive arena in which language, power, ideology, and everyday experience intersect to shape contemporary understandings of beauty and selfhood. By revealing these dynamics, the study encourages more critical engagement with digital media and opens further space for research on discourse, identity, and digital culture.

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