

The Impact of Digital Cosmetic Advertising on Purchasing Decisions and Societal Expectations

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Abstract. The age of social media has fundamentally changed cosmetic advertising and its effects on modern consumerism. This research paper delves into the impact of cosmetic advertising through social media on purchasing decisions and societal expectations. It is important to recognize the psychological and cultural implications of excessive exposure to beauty on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. From an analytical approach, this paper utilizes past research papers and conducts an in-depth review to offer a conclusion. The results show that the rise in cosmetic advertising has a significant impact on body dysmorphia, creates overconsumption, and reinforces societal pressure on both men and women. In addition, problems such as misrepresentation and false advertising further contribute to these complex social phenomena. Overall, there is a continued need for increased media literacy, transparency, and ethical regulation to promote a healthier, more sustainable relationship between consumers and modern cosmetic advertising.

Keywords: Cosmetic Advertising, Social Media Marketing, Consumer Behavior, False Advertising, Digital Influencers

1. Introduction

Cosmetics and advertising have long shaped the way we view the world. Ever since the early twentieth century, the cosmetic industry has been employing visual and linguistic strategies to communicate the importance of beauty and self-worth, often reflecting and perpetuating social norms. Historically, print magazines and television commercials dominated the landscape, presenting beauty as both a moral and social obligation [1]. With the emergence of digital platforms in the 2000s, this dynamic expanded drastically. Social media networks such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube became key spaces where beauty ideals are constructed, negotiated, and sold through algorithmically targeted advertising and influencer marketing [2].

The global cosmetics industry, valued at over USD 600 billion, has continued to experience steady growth, driven by social media engagement and cross-promotional collaboration with the fashion section [3]. Consequently, modern cosmetic advertising not only stimulates more consumption but also embeds cultural meanings about worth, desirability, and expectations. This paper examines how contemporary cosmetic advertising influences consumer behavior and societal values, analyzing both the economic systems and psychological effects within today's digital media environment.

2. Status of cosmetic industries

2.1. The growth of the cosmetic industry

With the growth of the digital age, the cosmetics industry has also seen a surge in new consumers and consumption. The estimated market size was 295.95 billion in 2023, with a projection of reaching \$445.98 billion by 2030 [3]. Statistics show a robust potential growth in revenue. Moreover, this demand is also being amplified by influencers and celebrities leveraging their brand to market these products. Many celebrities have also reached out to create their own brand of cosmetics based on their public perceptions such as Fenty Beauty, Rare Beauty, and Haus Labs.

However, there is a difference in the audience regarding these cosmetics. Cosmetics made for women account for around 62.9% of the entire revenue share in 2023 [3]. The makeup demand for men is also expected to grow over the forecast period of 2030. There has been a gap between expectation and the attention put forth as approximately 27% of men surveyed expressed dissatisfaction regarding having adequate skincare for their concerns [4].

2.2. Common advertising strategies

Cosmetic advertising often employs a range of strategies targeted specifically to both the rational and emotional minds of consumers. One of the most prevalent techniques includes the use of scientific or professional medical language to legitimize claims. These labels often stretch the truth based on the lack of knowledge of their customers. In fact, pseudo-scientific appeals are especially persuasive in cosmetics because consumers likely associate key terms with health and safety, increasing their willingness to purchase the item [5]. Phrases including “clinically proven” or “dermatologist tested” are employed and printed on labels to appeal to the ethos and pathos, creating an aura of authority and credibility even when underlying evidence may be limited or ambiguous. A study by Chen and Chang revealed that consumers interpret such use of terminology as a guarantee of efficacy, despite lacking expertise to identify the validity of these claims [6].

There can also be “emotional triggers” or key terms that appeal to the emotions of consumers. Wu places significant emphasis on the idea that emotional cues are effective because they create a link between the product and the positive societal traits, such as self-confidence and acceptance, rather than purely functional benefits [2]. Slogans such as “confidence in a bottle” or “be your best self” confirm subconscious biases that many seek when buying products. Influencers can then amplify this effect by sharing personal experiences which frame cosmetic products as “lifesaving” rather than utilitarian [2].

Furthermore, before-and-after comparisons also remain a central part of advertising. By amplifying both the results and the above pictures, advertisers appeal to consumers’ desires by revealing tangible proof that their products work. Still, many of these images often rely on digital editing on apps such as Photoshop, which distorts the consumer’s perceptions of authenticity [7].

2.3. Digital advertising/media

The rise of advertising using digital media has fundamentally reshaped the advertising landscape from a large broadcast system led by technology such as TV and radio to more personalized and algorithmically driven content. Social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram allow companies to use consumer data such as browsing history, demographics, and purchasing behavior to create the best fit ads that optimize interaction and success. This shift allowed for an increase in

relevant advertisements while simultaneously heightening consumer susceptibility to impulsive purchases. Algorithmic targeting is particularly effective because consumers often interpret personalized recommendations as individualized advice rather than over-commercial persuasion [8]. Targeted promotions also achieve higher conversion rates precisely because consumers misattribute them as informational guidance rather than strategic marketing [8]. Thus, the newfound digital advertising blurs the lines between advertisements and content consumption, embedding cosmetic promotions into their daily life.

Content creators on social media platforms have become the nook for new customers to seek knowledge into cosmetics. As a consequence, many content creators have now become trusted intermediaries between the brands and customers themselves. For example, in China's Weibo platform, the top thirty fashion and beauty influencers collectively attract more than 90% of luxury consumers, illustrating the power held in the hands of only a few digital figures [2]. Due to the accessibility of these content creators, followers often feel a sense of closeness and relatability to these content creators, hence, leading to more “parasocial relationships.” They also regard products and service recommendations as more reliable, which can arouse purchase intentions [2]. For example, Jeffree Star, a famous makeup artist turned influencer with more than 28.2 million followers, regularly receives more than 616,000 engagements from all his posts [9].

Short-form content has also become a staple of advertising today. The fast-paced, aesthetic and attention-drawing videos mimic entertainment rather than conventional commercials, making it much more palatable than two-minute-long advertisement videos. Formats such as tutorials, “Get Ready With Me” routines, and transformation clips function as forms of native advertising, which blends seamlessly into social media feeds [10]. They note that the embedding of cosmetic promotion into aspirational narratives also normalizes consumption by presenting beauty routines as habitual practices rather than discretionary purchases [10].

3. Problems regarding the raise of social media cosmetic advertising

3.1. Body image dissatisfaction

Body image dissatisfaction has been widely documented as a negative outcome of cosmetic advertising, especially in the newly digital world where there is constant exposure to idealized imagery. The new standards of beauty are often also unattainable; the results are often only achievable through editing and cosmetic surgery. In fact, in the ten years, from 1997 to 2007, the overall number of cosmetic surgical and non-surgical procedures increased by a startling 500%, with women accounting for 91% of the recipients in 2007 [11]. In a world where advertisements feature an idealized, airbrushed, and unattainable physical beauty, it becomes impossible to escape the cold, harsh truth that we are constantly being judged by our appearance [11].

The theoretical mechanism can be attributed to the social comparison theory, which indicates that individuals evaluate social standing by comparing themselves to the perceived societal standards. Thus, more vulnerable populations, such as adolescents and young adults, are likely to internalize these standards and experience dissatisfaction when reality falls short.

A review of 25 studies involving more than 13,000 participants concluded that 70% of young women and 60% of young men reported dissatisfaction with their bodies following exposure to idealized or digitally enhanced images on social media platforms [12]. A survey of U.S. adolescents by Tiggemann and Slater confirms that high engagement with appearance-focused social media also correlated with greater body surveillance, internalization of thin ideals, and body dissatisfaction [13].

The influencer culture further intensifies this problem. Many influencers cultivate parasocial relationships with their followers using casual tones that treat them as equals, enhancing the perceived authenticity of product recommendations. A 2025 study of 285 consumers found that the perceived usefulness of influencer-shared information on TikTok significantly shaped how consumers judged cosmetic product quality and desirability [14]. Credibility increases the psychological impact of the highly curated images of influencers, further reinforcing unrealistic standards and deepening dissatisfaction when consumers fail to achieve similar results.

When cosmetic advertisements and influencers present idealized standards, consumers then engage in social comparison, which internalizes these ideas, bolstering the gap between self-perception and idealized portrayals and lowering self-esteem. The structural outcome of an industry that capitalizes from cultivating a cycle of continuous body dissatisfaction and dysmorphia is the increase of extreme behaviors such as cosmetic surgery or even eating disorders.

3.2. Overspending

The rapid expansion of the market can also be attributed to the economic pressures generated by advertising. According to Grand View Research, the global cosmetics market was valued at USD 295.95 billion in 2023 and is projected to reach USD 445.98 billion by 2030, with skincare products alone accounting for 43.3% of revenue [3]. This sustained growth illustrates the growing consumer demand and the marketing tactics used to optimize this growth. However, it reflects a negative social phenomenon of increased overspending and consumption.

Consumer psychology demonstrates that advertising fosters overspending by positioning cosmetics as having societal value instead of being a functional good. Cosmetic consumption can often function as a marker of identity, where the products are purchased to signal femininity, attractiveness, or professionalism [1]. Furthermore, recent data shows that U.S. consumers annually spend an average of USD 3,000–5,000 on beauty and personal care products, with women consistently outspending men [3].

Digital media is often fast paced in promoting new trends in cosmetics, such as strawberry girl makeup, brown latte makeup, or, commonly in China, aesthetic identity makeup which centers on different products promised to achieve the desired look. An incentive then arises to buy the products to keep up with ongoing trends and to fix new insecurities that advertisements create, thus fueling overconsumption. The financial consequences of this dynamic can then become specific, as studies show that aspirational advertising increases impulsive buying tendencies, particularly among young adults [15]. Cumulative costs can lead to consumer debt, especially when the purchases are motivated by insecurity or social comparison.

3.3. Gendered beauty expectations

Continued advertising can subconsciously reinforce the divide of beauty between genders. Lin and Yeh observed that “advertising can be powerful; it potentially creates diverse personal needs, changes attitudes, cognition, self-image, and personal preferences. The cumulative effect greatly impacts society and culture at large, and in the context of this study, feminine identity” [16]. Many campaigns marketed as empowering can still reproduce normative gender ideals or a phenomenon such as “feminism consumerism” [17]. In corporate workplaces, women also felt compelled to wear makeup to be perceived as professional whereas men’s grooming was framed as optional or a form of “confidence enhancement” [18].

Age can also be framed differently according to gender where advertisements associate aging as unattractive, contributing to age anxieties for women, while men can be framed as “distinguished.” A survey done by AARP in 2023 revealed that nearly 70% of women over fifty feel invisible in advertising, meaning there is consistent exclusion in the commercial narratives [19]. Lin and Yeh note that “advertising not only reflects the femininity of societies but also helps refine the images and associations that come to define body shape, beauty, sex appeal, and physical attractiveness” [16]. The asymmetry in beauty portrayal turns the use of cosmetic products into a compulsory part of the morning routine.

3.4. Representation bias

Despite the improvement of diversity in recent years, representation in advertisements continues to remain exclusionary. Around 70% of models in global campaigns are young, slim and light-skinned, a pattern that marginalizes diverse groups [7]. Such portrayals can also reinforce Eurocentric and heteronormative standards, sidelining women of color, older individuals, and those with disabilities [20].

Similarly, the AARP “Keeping Beauty Real” survey (2023), which included over 7,000 women, found that 68% of women aged 50+ and 51% of women aged 18–49 reported rarely or never seeing themselves represented in advertising [19]. The exclusion of marginalized groups creates exclusion on the social and commercial levels. The underrepresentation continually reinforces narrow standards of beauty, creating a cycle of exclusion where individuals who do not see themselves in advertisements feel less validated, contributing to diminished self-esteem and a sense of social invisibility [21]. Brands also risk alienating potential customers by not presenting adequate representation. Though inclusivity in advertising can improve brand perception and increase purchase intentions across diverse audiences [21]. Thus, the persistence of bias is socially isolating and short-sighted for future economic benefits.

3.5. False advertisement

When used well, advertising can make or break a product. However, false or misleading advertisements have been a rampant recurring problem in the cosmetics industry. Due to the accessibility to technology, techniques such as Photoshop, digital retouching, and exaggerated claims blur the link between false advertising and legal promotion.

There has always been discourse over advertising brought under section 43 of the Lanham Act, which allows companies to stop a competitor from running misleading television material [22]. As early as the 1960s, Sweeny noted that “cosmetic advertising has long been marked by extravagant claims and alluring promises, which often extend beyond what can be substantiated” [23]. Morrison later analyzed the Lanham Act, which prohibits “false or misleading descriptions of fact” in commercial advertising. While the statute provides competitors with a legal mechanism to challenge deceptive claims, Morrison emphasized its reactive character, noting that enforcement depends largely on rival firms bringing lawsuits rather than proactive regulatory intervention [24]. This structural weakness has historically allowed misleading practices to flourish.

4. Improvements on boundaries of cosmetic advertising

Though cosmetic advertising is associated with some harmful consequences such as body dissatisfaction, consumer deception, and the reinforcement of gender norms, there are systematic

ways to decrease the likelihood of these phenomena. Implementation of increased awareness and stronger regulations can be extremely impactful in minimizing negative societal effects.

4.1. Increased awareness for consumers

Consumer knowledge is an effective approach in mitigating the harms of cosmetic advertising. Having a degree in digital literacy can reduce the susceptibility of marketing techniques and engender skepticism when viewing campaigns. Buckingham emphasizes that media literacy education fosters “critical distance from media texts and greater resistance to commercial persuasion” [25]. Although campaigns marketed as empowering may just be reinforcing gender norms, they also provide many opportunities for public critique and resistance [17]. Awareness, therefore, can foster more critical thinking around the cosmetic agenda but also has the potential to incite change by providing more pressure for companies.

4.2. Increased regulation/bans

Stricter commercial regulations can also be implemented to curb deceptive tactics. Although historically there have been such laws implemented in place such as the Lanham Act, the impact of such tools remains negligible. More updated practices can be put in place. Internationally, some countries have already implemented regulations which target unrealistic portrayals in advertisements. For example, France passed a law in 2017 that requires all retouched images in advertising to carry a disclaimer “photographie retouchée,” with penalties for non-compliance. Many evaluations of such policies also suggest that increasing transparency about potential digital alterations can reduce consumer misconceptions and mitigate body dissatisfaction [26]. Furthermore, initiatives in the UK such as the Advertising Standards Authority have led to the banning of advertisements deemed misleading by regulators. Collectively, increased laws and regulations can serve as structural safeguards for consumers and constrain harmful practices, leading to a more positive commercial environment.

5. Conclusion

This paper mainly discusses the impact of modern influencer advertising on consumer behavior and societal expectations, with a focus on how digital media and influencer culture shapes culture and self-worth. In conclusion, cosmetic advertising drives overconsumption and body dissatisfaction but also reinforces gendered ideals and encourages unrealistic beauty standards. Furthermore, the study highlights how insufficient regulations are and deceptive marketing tactics that contribute to the vulnerability of consumers in the current digital space.

However, this research paper does not delve into the specific psychological mechanisms behind long-term exposure. There are also many more effects which are not specifically mentioned in the text. This paper also does not employ empirical research methods such as surveys or experimental data to quantify previous findings. Future research could incorporate more quantitative and qualitative studies to examine how demographic factors such as age, gender, and cultural background can affect general receptions of cosmetic advertising.

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