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## Between Education and Marketing: A Semiotic Analysis of Skincare Advertising on TikTok and Instagram

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.56480/jln.v6i2.72>

Received: May 05, 2026

Revised: May 26, 2026

Accepted: June 04, 2026

### Abstract

*Social media has intensified the circulation of skincare messages that combine health education with product promotion. This study examines how skincare advertising content on TikTok and Instagram constructs meanings of education and marketing through visual, verbal, and audiovisual signs. The study applies a qualitative semiotic approach based on Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model of sign, object, and interpretant. The research objects are skincare-related advertising and review contents from Instagram @skincarewanita.id and TikTok @hallo.manis, selected purposively because they display product comparison, recommendation, and educational claims. Data were collected through content observation, screenshot documentation, caption analysis, and audience-comment reading. The results show that Instagram tends to construct skincare messages through static visual comparison, carousel narratives, product labels, and concise claim texts, whereas TikTok builds persuasion through creator performance, spoken testimony, trending audio, facial expression, and fast-paced editing. Both platforms use educational signs such as ingredient explanations, skin-type categories, and usage tips; however, these signs often operate simultaneously as promotional cues that direct audiences toward particular products. The study concludes that the meaning of skincare education in social media advertising is not neutral, because it is shaped by persuasive commercial codes, influencer credibility, and platform-specific forms of attention.*

**Keywords**– Semiotics, Skincare Advertising, Tiktok, Instagram, Health Communication



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## 1. Introduction

Social media has become a vital space for the public to access health information, including skincare routines and product usage. Platforms like TikTok and Instagram function not merely as entertainment media but also as educational channels connecting users with influencers, beauty creators, and product recommendation accounts. In the context of health communication, delivering information that is easy to understand, relevant to the audience's experience, and visually engaging can help the public recognize daily health issues (Schiavo, 2014; Nutbeam, 2019). However, when health information is intertwined with commercial interests, the boundary between education and promotion can become blurred.

Skincare content on social media typically presents messages in the form of product application tips, ingredient breakdowns, recommendations based on skin types, usage testimonials, and side-by-side product comparisons. These message structures appear informative because they incorporate educational terms such as ingredients, skin barrier, acne-prone, brightening, sunscreen, and exfoliation. Yet, at the same time, these messages double as advertisements when geared toward building interest, trust, and purchase decisions for specific brands. In digital marketing communication literature, influencers possess a unique ability to build credibility and intimacy with their audience through personal and seemingly authentic communication styles (Freberg et al., 2011; Lou & Yuan, 2019).

The core academic problem is not simply determining whether skincare content is purely educational or promotional, but rather understanding how the meanings of education and promotion are constructed through communicative signs on social media. These signs can manifest as product claim texts, packaging visuals, facial expressions, video flows, captions, audience comments, and product comparisons. Consequently, this study moves beyond a merely descriptive approach, employing semiotic analysis to interpret the relationships among signs, objects, and meanings within skincare advertising on TikTok and Instagram.

Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics was selected because it elucidates the meaning-making process through three triadic elements: the sign, object, and interpretant. In skincare advertising, the sign can be a product image, a claim sentence, an influencer's gesture, or visual components; the object refers to the actual product or the targeted benefits; and the interpretant represents the meaning formed in the audience's mind—such as perceiving the product as safe, effective, affordable, scientifically backed, or worth purchasing (Short, 2007; Chandler, 2017). Through this framework, skincare content is analyzed not just as raw information, but as a systematic construction of meaning linked to health, beauty, and consumerism.

Prior research has extensively highlighted the role of influencers in shaping consumer attitudes, the necessity of advertising transparency, and the efficacy of digital promotion on social media (Boerman et al., 2017; De Veirman et al., 2017; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Nevertheless, comparative studies analyzing how promotional and educational signs operate across distinct platforms like TikTok and Instagram remain scarce. TikTok relies heavily on short-form videos, spoken narratives, creator performances, and audio rhythms, whereas Instagram prioritizes static visuals, carousels, captions, and curated design compositions. These differing platform characteristics potentially generate divergent structures of advertising meaning.

Based on this gap, this study analyzes skincare advertising as a communicative text that merges health education with digital marketing strategies. The focus is directed toward the underlying meaning of skincare advertising on TikTok and Instagram rather than merely cataloging content types. Accordingly, this research illuminates how skin health messages are constructed, how promotions are embedded, and how platform-specific forms affect audience interpretation. The research question is formulated as follows: How do educational and promotional meanings in skincare advertising manifest under a semiotic analysis on TikTok @hallo.manis and Instagram @skincarewanita.id?

## 2. Method

This study adopts a qualitative method using Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic analysis approach. A qualitative approach was chosen because the study is oriented toward interpreting meanings, symbols, and message constructions rather than statistical measurements. Semiotic analysis is employed to decode the visual, verbal, and audiovisual signs present in social media skincare ads. Peirce's framework centers on the triadic relationship of sign, object, and interpretant, making it highly suitable for examining how health education messages and product promotions are simultaneously constructed within digital content (Short, 2007; Chandler, 2017).

The research objects consist of advertising, review, recommendation, and product comparison content extracted from the Instagram account @skincarewanita.id and the TikTok account @hallo.manis. Both accounts were selected purposively because they routinely publish skincare content that blends elements of skin education, product benefit claims, persuasive language, and audience interaction. The units of analysis encompass product visuals, on-screen text, captions, spoken narratives, creator gestures, background audio, product comparison structures, and audience comments relevant to content interpretation.

Data collection was carried out through social media content observation, upload documentation, recording visual text and captions, and examining audience comments. Observation focused on content displaying educational elements (e.g., explanations of benefits, ingredients, skin types, or usage instructions) alongside promotional elements (e.g., recommendations, calls-to-action, superiority claims, product comparisons, and brand highlights). The gathered data were then categorized by platform to allow a comparative analysis between TikTok and Instagram.

Data analysis proceeded through four distinct stages:

1. Identification: Identifying dominant visual, verbal, and audiovisual signs within the content.
2. Object Mapping: Linking these signs to the objects they reference (e.g., a specific product, benefit, quality, price, or skin health image).

3. Interpretant Decoding: Interpreting the interpretant, or the potential meaning constructed in the minds of the audience.
4. Comparative Analysis: Comparing findings from TikTok and Instagram to map differences in format, strategy, and semantic tendencies.

Analytical validity was maintained through repeated content readings, consistency in sign categorization, and continuous cross-referencing with health communication and digital promotion theories.

**Table 1.** Semiotic Analysis Units for Skincare Advertising

<b>Platform</b>	<b>Data Format</b>	<b>Signs Analyzed</b>	<b>Semantic Focus</b>
<b>Instagram</b> <b>@skincarewanita.id</b>	Carousels, product images, captions, comments	Color, composition, claim texts, product labels, comparison structures	Visual educational meaning and promotion through graphic design
<b>TikTok</b> <b>@hallo.manis</b>	Short-form videos, creator narratives, audio, captions, comments	Spoken words, expressions, gestures, editing tempo, on-screen text	Audiovisual persuasive meaning and influencer credibility
<b>Both Platforms</b>	Skincare reviews and recommendations	Benefit claims, testimonials, comparisons, calls-to-action	Boundaries between health education and digital marketing

### 3. Result and Discussion

#### **Educational and Promotional Meanings in Instagram Skincare Advertising**

On the Instagram account @skincarewanita.id, educational meaning is constructed through neat, concise, and easily digestible visual signs. The dominant content formats are static images or carousels showcasing product packaging, benefit descriptions, skin type categories, and product comparisons. Visual signs like product photos function as representamens that immediately direct the audience's attention to a specific object—the skincare brand being discussed. Meanwhile, textual cues like recommendations, benefits, or

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comparisons reinforce the interpretation that the product possesses genuine health and beauty value.

From Peirce's semiotic perspective, images of product packaging can be read as icons due to their direct physical resemblance to the advertised object. Claim texts such as "suitable for acne-prone skin," "helps brighten," or "safe for sensitive skin" function as symbols because their meaning relies on language conventions and the audience's existing familiarity with skincare terminology. Concurrently, the strategic use of visual cues—such as bright color palettes, bold typography, highlights, and placing the product in the center of the design—acts as an index that steers the audience's gaze toward the highlighted item.

The educational value on Instagram manifests through the presentation of practical, informative knowledge. Audiences are guided to understand a product based on skin classification, ingredients, or targeted benefits. However, these educational signs simultaneously double as marketing devices. When a specific product is given a more favorable description, a larger visual scale, or positioned as the superior choice in a comparison chart, the resulting interpretant is that this particular product is more worth buying. Thus, education on Instagram does not remain neutral; it operates in tandem with visual marketing logics.

Because Instagram prioritizes static visual assets, persuasion operates heavily through graphic design. The audience does not merely read data; they absorb an underlying impression that a product is professional, clean, safe, or modern. This aligns with the view that social media visuals shape brand perception through presentation, aesthetics, and visual credibility (Voorveld et al., 2018; Tafesse & Wood, 2021). Therefore, skincare ads on Instagram subtly forge promotional meanings under the guise of structured skin health education.

### **Educational and Promotional Meanings in TikTok Skincare Advertising**

On the TikTok account @hallo.manis, skincare advertising meanings are built through audiovisual signs. Unlike Instagram's reliance on static design,

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TikTok capitalizes on creator performance, vocal intonation, facial expressions, bodily gestures, on-screen text overlays, trending music, and rapid editing tempos. These signs establish a spontaneous, personal, and highly intimate atmosphere with the viewer. Semiotically, the creator's body and voice serve as complex signs that not only relay information but also cultivate viewer trust toward the message.

Spoken narratives recounting product recommendations, personal usage history, or item comparisons serve as verbal symbols that steer the audience toward particular meanings. When a creator shares a personal journey, the generated interpretant is that the message is honest and rooted in real-world experience. Enthusiastic facial expressions, convincing vocal tones, and catchphrases like "worth it," "auto glowing," "a must-try," or "don't pick the wrong one" act as persuasive signs that validate the product's premium value.

TikTok also enhances promotion through the logic of speed and trends. Short video durations compress the message, causing the audience to readily accept the creator's conclusions without conducting deep verification. In product comparison videos, items granted longer screentime or paired with more positive expressions naturally attain a superior meaning. Here, promotion does not always surface through blatant purchase commands; instead, it is driven by narrative choices, vocal emphasis, and the mood constructed by the creator.

Compared to Instagram, TikTok is much stronger at building meaning through interpersonal closeness. Audiences feel as though they are receiving advice from a peer rather than watching a corporate advertisement. This phenomenon matches influencer marketing studies showing that perceived closeness, authenticity, and trust are primary capitals in shifting audience attitudes (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Consequently, TikTok skincare ads seamlessly fuse health education with marketing by utilizing natural, relatable creator performances.

### **Signs, Objects, and Interpretants in Skincare Advertising**

The analysis reveals that skincare advertising on both TikTok and Instagram produces three overlapping layers of meaning:

1. **Health Meaning:** The content presents information regarding skin types, ingredient safety, product utilities, and application methods.
2. **Beauty Meaning:** The content connects skincare utilization with achieving bright, clear, glowing, healthy, and confident skin.
3. **Consumption Meaning:** The content channels the audience toward selecting or purchasing a specific product through claims, testimonials, and comparisons.

These three meanings are deeply intertwined. When a piece of content details how a product accommodates sensitive skin, the message appears to be health education. However, if that explanation is coupled with brand highlighting, superiority claims, and calls-to-action, the message functions simultaneously as promotion. This duality is precisely what blurs the lines between education and marketing. In Peircian terms, the audience's interpretant is formed not just by raw information, but by how signs are arranged, stylized, and emphasized.

The user comments section shows that meaning-making does not terminate with the creator's upload. Audiences actively receive, interrogate, or negotiate the message. When users question uneven or unfair product comparisons, a critical interpretant emerges. Thus, the comments section acts as a dynamic arena where meanings are negotiated among creators, products, and social media consumers.

**Table 2.** Peircian Semiotic Decoding of Skincare Content

<b>Sign</b>	<b>Object</b>	<b>Interpretant</b>	<b>Dominant Meaning</b>
<b>Product packaging photo</b>	The reviewed skincare product	The product appears real, accessible, and credible	Visual Promotion
<b>Benefit claim text</b>	Product effect or utility	The product is perceived as capable of solving skin issues	Simultaneous Education & Promotion
<b>Creator's personal</b>	Product usage by the influencer	The review feels authentic, intimate,	Influencer Credibility

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<b>narrative</b>		and honest
<b>Product comparison</b>	Two or more competing skincare items	One product is interpreted as distinctly superior to others
<b>Audience comments</b>	User feedback and reactions	Meanings are either accepted, adapted, or challenged

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### **Comparative Formats of TikTok and Instagram Skincare Ads**

Comparing TikTok and Instagram proves that each platform possesses distinct mechanisms for forming skincare advertising meanings. Instagram favors highly structured, planned visual layouts, whereas TikTok values creator performance and rapid message delivery. Instagram prompts audiences to read and scan signs statically, whereas TikTok pulls viewers into a fast-moving narrative arc. This infrastructural difference heavily dictates how education and promotion are processed by consumers.

On Instagram, promotion is embedded within graphic design choices, color schemes, short captions, and visual product hierarchies. Products given structural prominence naturally secure a stronger meaning as the prime recommendation. On TikTok, promotion is driven through voice modulations, facial expressions, verbal emphasis, screentime distribution, and personal storytelling. Hence, TikTok relies primarily on trust toward the creator's persona, whereas Instagram leans on trust toward the clarity of visual data presentation.

This distinction proves that skincare messages cannot be analyzed solely based on textual content; the platform architecture actively shapes the final meaning. The exact same product review yields highly divergent interpretative effects if presented via an Instagram carousel versus a TikTok video. Instagram imparts an organized, authoritative, and informative impression, while TikTok radiates a spontaneous, unscripted, and personal vibe. Both are remarkably effective at merging education with marketing, yet they achieve this through entirely different sign mechanics.

**Table 3.** Structural and Semantic Comparison Between Platforms

<b>Feature</b>	<b>Instagram</b>	<b>TikTok</b>
<b>Primary Format</b>	Images, carousels, captions, static designs	Short videos, creator narratives, audio, text overlays
<b>Dominant Signs</b>	Color, layout, text claims, product photography	Voice, expressions, physical gestures, editing tempo
<b>Educational Style</b>	Concise, visual, informative, bulleted points	Personal, verbal, rapid, experience-driven
<b>Promotional Style</b>	Product highlighting via design and comparison charts	Soft-selling through testimonials and creator charisma
<b>Constructed Meaning</b>	Product appears informative, clean, and credible	Product feels personal, reliable, and highly recommended

### **Health Education as a Digital Marketing Strategy**

The findings indicate that within skincare advertising, health education cannot be fully uncoupled from digital marketing strategies. Incorporating skin health terminology lends a scientific veneer to the content, making the audience feel they are receiving valuable, objective health data. However, the moment this data is channeled to polish the image of a specific commercial item, education morphs into a promotional tactic. This condition showcases that social media health communication resides in a highly complex zone caught between informative duties and commercial motivations.

On one hand, skincare content genuinely aids audiences in understanding how to match products with their skin types, analyze ingredients, and stay wary of exaggerated claims. On the other hand, hyper-persuasive content can trigger impulsive consumerism, particularly if audiences accept influencer testimonials as absolute truths.

Literature on ad disclosures indicates that corporate sponsorship transparency is vital for empowering audiences to evaluate promotional messages critically (Boerman et al., 2017; Hudders et al., 2021). In the realm of skincare, transparency is even more critical because the applied products directly impact the user's dermatological health and bodily well-being.

Consequently, the meaning of skincare ads on social media does not rest solely inside the product container. It lives in the structural relationships among platforms, creators, corporate brands, and audiences. Influencers function as bridges translating health language into marketing prose. When detailing chemical formulations or health benefits, an influencer plays the role of an educator. Yet, when steering that narrative to cultivate purchase intent, they operate as a marketing communicator. This systemic ambiguity of roles lies at the absolute center of the education-versus-promotion phenomenon.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Based on the semiotic analysis of skincare advertising on TikTok @hallo.manis and Instagram @skincarewanita.id, this study concludes that social media skincare content manufactures meaning by blending educational and promotional signs. Instagram constructs meaning through graphic layouts, benefit claims, product compositions, and carousels that project an informative and highly organized image. TikTok constructs meaning via creator performances, spoken testimonies, expressions, audio cues, and personal anecdotes that project an intimate and convincing image. While both platforms showcase skin health education, this education consistently operates alongside commercial promotional goals.

Under Peirce's semiotic framework, signs like product photos, benefit claims, creator testimonials, comparative structures, and user comments collectively yield interpretants that position specific products as safe, effective, recommended, or superior. These meanings are never neutral; they are forged via visual, verbal, and audiovisual communication strategies engineered to exploit platform architectures. The broader implications of this study highlight an urgent need for heightened digital and health literacy, enabling social media audiences to critically differentiate objective skincare information from covertly packaged promotional campaigns.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding

**Acknowledgments:** The authors would like to express their gratitude to all parties who have contributed to the completion of this article, including colleagues who provided valuable input during the discussion process and the academic community at the respective institutions of the authors for their administrative and moral support.

**Declaration of Conflicting Interests:** The authors declare no conflict of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; or in the decision to publish the results.

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