

The Cost of Creating Desire: Practitioners' Lived Experiences of Ethics, Pressure, and Responsibility in Beauty Marketing

Ananda Rizki Amalia¹, Formas Juitan Lasse²

^{1,2} Universitas Kristen Indonesia

e-mail : sayaananda.amalia@gmail.com

ABSTRAK

This article examines how Indonesian marketing communication practitioners make meaning of their practical experiences in the beauty industry. Beauty marketing does not operate only through product promotion, but also through claims, visual ideals, influencer work, and persuasive narratives that shape consumer desire. Using hermeneutic phenomenology, this study draws on in-depth interviews with six practitioners who had worked as brand and marketing communication specialists, product developers, strategic marketers, creative directors, brand strategists, and clinic marketing specialists. The findings show that practitioners understand their work through three interrelated meanings. First, professional identity is formed through the capacity to read consumers, translate products into meaningful messages, and negotiate brand visibility. Second, ethically ambiguous practices become normalized under industrial pressure, including sales targets, trend speed, claim adjustment, KOL management, and competitive visibility. Third, ethical discomfort emerges when practitioners recognize that beauty messages can affect consumers' hopes, bodies, money, trust, and vulnerability. The article argues that beauty marketing should not be read merely as commercial persuasion, but as a moral practice in which practitioners create desire while carrying the consequences of that desire.

Keywords: : marketing communication,; marketing ethics, consumer vulnerability, overclaim

1. PENDAHULUAN

The beauty industry is not sustained by product efficacy alone. It is also sustained by the capacity to make beauty desirable, urgent, and emotionally legible. In digital marketing environments, skincare and cosmetic products are not introduced merely as functional objects. They are translated into claims, before-after visuals, influencer narratives, lifestyle promises, and standards of appearance that shape how consumers imagine their bodies and the possibility of improving them. This gives marketing communication a central role in the beauty industry. It does not only inform consumers about available products, but also

organizes the meanings through which products become trusted, desired, and purchased.

Advertising has long been understood as persuasive discourse because it uses language, images, and symbols to influence consumer attention, emotion, and decision-making (Cook, 2001; Wijayanti, 2020). In beauty marketing, this persuasive function becomes ethically sensitive because the product category is closely tied to the body, gendered appearance, self-confidence, and social recognition. Claims such as brightening, glowing, instant results, clinical improvement, or anti-aging may appear as ordinary promotional vocabulary, yet they can also intensify consumer insecurity when

they are detached from realistic evidence. The issue is not simply that beauty advertising persuades. The deeper issue is that persuasion often works through desire, anxiety, aspiration, and the promise of bodily correction.

Recent discussions of advertising ethics show that practitioners often work in a gray area between legal compliance and moral responsibility. Richardson-Greenfield and La Ferle (2021) argue that deceptive advertising is not always experienced by practitioners as a clear ethical violation, especially when the message remains legally defensible or when responsibility is distributed across clients, teams, and organizational decision-makers. Drumwright and Murphy (2004) similarly describe moral myopia and moral muteness in advertising practice, where practitioners may fail to see ethical problems or may recognize them but avoid naming them openly. These studies are important because they shift attention from advertising as a finished message to advertising as a professional practice shaped by organizational pressure.

However, existing studies on beauty marketing ethics still tend to emphasize consumer responses, regulatory frameworks, or the textual analysis of claims. Less attention has been given to how marketing communication practitioners themselves make meaning of their work from inside the industry. This gap matters because practitioners are not passive transmitters of corporate messages. They are meaning-making actors who translate product benefits into stories, manage influencer briefs, soften claims, respond to trends, negotiate with superiors, and decide which version of beauty becomes visible to consumers. Their ethical experience therefore cannot be reduced to whether an advertisement is formally compliant. It must also be

understood through the lived pressure of producing persuasion while anticipating its consequences.

This article examines that lived experience through the research question: How do Indonesian marketing communication practitioners make meaning of their practical experiences in marketing beauty products? The study uses hermeneutic phenomenology to interpret the experiences of six practitioners who had worked in different positions within Indonesia's beauty marketing field. Rather than measuring moral development or judging practitioners as ethical or unethical, this article asks how they understand themselves, how they normalize certain marketing practices, and how they feel when those practices touch consumer vulnerability.

Theoretically, the article is informed by multidimensional consequentialism and Levinasian consumer ethics. Peterson's (2013) multidimensional consequentialism is useful because beauty marketing can produce several consequences at once: commercial success, brand visibility, consumer trust, consumer insecurity, professional guilt, and unequal distribution of risk. Hietanen and Sihvonen's (2021) Levinasian consumer ethics is used as a supporting concept to understand why the consumer cannot be treated merely as a target market. In beauty marketing, consumers appear as others with bodies, hope, money, trust, and vulnerability. This article therefore argues that the cost of creating desire is not only borne by consumers. It is also felt by practitioners who must live with the moral weight of the messages they help produce.

2. METODE PENELITIAN

This study used a qualitative approach with hermeneutic phenomenology to understand

Submit Date: 18 Juli 2026

Accepted Date: 28 Juli 2026

Published Date : 18 Oktober 2026

how practitioners interpret their experiences in beauty marketing. Following the phenomenological concern with lived meaning, the study focused not only on what practitioners do at work, but on how they narrate their professional identity, pressure, responsibility, and ethical discomfort. The research did not aim to generalize statistically across the beauty industry. Instead, it aimed to produce a contextual interpretation of how ethical meaning is lived by practitioners who work close to claims, consumers, products, trends, and brand visibility.

2.1. Informants and Data Collection

Six informants were recruited because they had worked for at least one year in Indonesia's beauty industry and had direct experience in marketing communication or closely related functions. Their roles included Brand and Marketing Communication Specialist, New Product Developer, Head of Strategic Marketing, Creative Marketing Director, Brand Strategist, and Marketing Specialist. These positions were selected because they provided different access points to beauty marketing: campaign planning, product claims, social media strategy, creative direction, strategic gatekeeping, and offline marketing in a beauty clinic.

The informants were contacted through professional networks, especially LinkedIn, and follow-up communication was conducted through WhatsApp to arrange interview schedules. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted online through Microsoft Teams and Google Meet between 12 December 2025 and 4 January 2026. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 85 minutes. With consent, interviews were recorded and later transcribed

for analysis. The interview guide began with open questions about work experience and then moved toward questions about claims, consumer trust, industry pressure, moral discomfort, and the consequences of marketing practice.

Anonymity was maintained because the topic involved sensitive professional experiences, including claim adjustment, KOL management, pressure from superiors, consumer complaints, and personal moral boundaries. Informants are therefore identified only by number and professional role. All interview quotations in this article have been translated from Indonesian into English by the author while preserving the meaning of the original statements.

Informant	Professional role	Experience	Main work area
Informant 1	Brand & Marketing Communication Specialist	2 years	Brand positioning
Informant 2	New Product Developer	2 years	Product claims
Informant 3	Head of Strategic Marketing	3 years	Social media
Informant 4	Creative Marketing Director	2.5 years	Creative direction
Informant 5	Brand Strategist	2 years	Strategic gatekeeping
Informant 6	Marketing Specialist	1 year	Offline marketing

Tabel 1. Informants' Identities

Note. Informant identities, company names, and client names are anonymized.

2.2. Data Analysis

The analysis was conducted through repeated reading, meaning grouping, and interpretive movement between parts of the transcript and the whole participant narrative. The process was influenced by interpretative phenomenological analysis as applied by Eatough et al. (2008), especially the movement from initial notes to emergent themes and higher-level thematic groupings. In this study, interview excerpts were first identified as raw meaning units. These meaning units were then coded according to recurring experiential structures such as professional identity formation, claim normalization, industrial pressure, responsibility shifting, guilt, consumer vulnerability, and moral boundary.

After initial coding, related codes were grouped into subthemes and then reorganized into three main findings. The first finding concerns how practitioners make meaning of themselves as professional actors. The second concerns how certain marketing practices become normalized under industrial pressure. The third concerns how practitioners feel about these practices and how they draw moral boundaries. The analysis was hermeneutic because each quote was interpreted in relation to the participant's wider story and then compared across informants to identify shared patterns and differences.

3. HASIL DAN PEMBAHASAN

The findings show that beauty marketing practitioners make meaning of their work through a movement from professional becoming, to normalized practice under pressure, to ethical discomfort. This movement matters because it prevents the analysis from portraying practitioners as either innocent

workers or manipulative agents. Their accounts show a more difficult position. They learn to create meaning for brands, participate in an industry that rewards visibility and speed, and later confront the consequences of messages that may shape consumer hope, insecurity, and trust.

4. PEMBAHASAN

4.1 Becoming Professional in Beauty Marketing

The first finding shows that practitioners do not enter beauty marketing with a stable professional identity already formed. Their identity is learned through practice. Several informants entered marketing through non-linear paths: psychology, management, communication, news anchoring aspirations, service work, or early career necessity. Once inside the industry, they began to understand marketing communication not merely as selling, but as reading consumers, building brand meaning, translating products into stories, and making beauty products emotionally recognizable.

For Informant 1, a background in psychology became meaningful only after she entered marketing. Although she initially preferred communication studies, she later understood that consumer psychology helped her read what consumers wanted and how messages could be positioned. Her path suggests that professional identity was not formed by educational intention alone, but by retrospective recognition. She became a marketer by discovering that the work required the very sensitivity to behavior and desire that psychology could provide.

Informant 3 also understood marketing through discovery rather than linear planning.

After being redirected by family expectations away from information technology, he encountered marketing and later described the work as something he loved. His identity was shaped by storytelling, audience understanding, and the effort to balance quick visibility with long-term trust. This account is important because love for the work did not remove pressure. Rather, it made pressure meaningful. Problems could become spaces for exploration when the practitioner still felt attached to the brand and audience.

The most distinctive account came from Informant 2, whose professional identity was grounded less in campaign visibility than in product responsibility. As a New Product Developer, she did not treat beauty products as abstract commodities. She understood that the product would be used on the consumer's body and that claims could not be separated from formulation, safety, BPOM requirements, and the lived diversity of Indonesian consumers. In this sense, professional identity was not only communicative but material. The message had to stand behind a product that could be responsibly used.

"I do not always have to chase trends. I still put quality first. The research must be deep, and the product must be long-term."
(Informant 2)

This quote condenses a broader pattern in the data: professionalism is not identical with responsiveness to trends. For some practitioners, being professional means being able to follow the market. For others, it means knowing when market demand should be resisted. Informant 2's account complicates the image of marketing as purely persuasive work

by showing that marketing practice also depends on upstream decisions about product safety and claim responsibility.

Across informants, professional identity therefore appears as the capacity to mediate between brand, consumer, product, and market. Yet the form of mediation differs. Campaign workers speak through visibility and positioning. Creative workers speak through stories and emotional appeal. Product developers speak through safety and quality. Clinic marketers speak through service, doctors, and consumer complaints. Brand strategists speak through gatekeeping and operational coordination. What unites them is not a single job description, but a shared experience of becoming the person who makes beauty products meaningful to others.

4.2. Normalizing Marketing Practice Under Industrial Pressure

The second finding shows that ethically ambiguous practices become normalized not primarily because practitioners lack awareness, but because they work within an industry that rewards speed, visibility, and commercial performance. Beauty marketing is experienced as a crowded field where brands must remain visible, follow trends, manage influencers, produce persuasive claims, and respond to competitors. Under these conditions, the boundary between persuasive communication and misleading suggestion becomes unstable.

Informant 1 described this instability through the language of tools. Practices such as black campaign, exaggerated claims, and aggressive tactics were not always narrated as extraordinary violations. They could be framed as available techniques within a competitive market. This does not mean the informant fully

celebrated such practices. Rather, her account shows how professional vocabulary can soften ethical discomfort. Once a practice is called a marketing tool, it becomes easier to discuss as strategy rather than deception.

“For now, I think it is acceptable. There is nothing wrong with it. Whether it is black campaign, exaggerated claims, and so on, I think all of them are marketing tools.”
(Informant 1)

This quote reflects what Drumwright and Murphy (2004) call moral myopia and moral muteness in advertising practice. Ethical issues may be recognized, but they are often translated into professional language that makes them appear manageable or ordinary. The informant’s statement is not simply an individual opinion. It reveals an industry logic in which competitive survival can make questionable tactics feel practical.

Informant 4 gave a more direct account of claim adjustment. She described situations where a claim known to be inaccurate could still be reworded, softened, or attached to a condition. For example, rather than saying that a product directly causes weight loss, the message could imply that the product supports the consumer when combined with a diet program. The statement may become technically safer, but its persuasive function remains close to the consumer’s hope for transformation.

“What I could do was say that this is a product that can help you lose weight if you are already on a diet program. Then

in every part, we slip in: do not forget to drink this.” (Informant 4)

This is where Peterson’s (2013) multidimensional consequentialism becomes useful. A claim may create commercial benefits and remain carefully worded, yet still generate risks by encouraging consumers to associate a product with an outcome that is not fully guaranteed. The practice may be partially defensible in one dimension, such as business effectiveness or legal caution, but still ethically problematic in another, such as consumer understanding or psychological vulnerability.

In clinic-based marketing, ambiguity appears differently. Informant 6 described how marketing could extend consumer concern from one bodily issue to another. A consumer might come with acne-related concerns and then be introduced to spider veins as another problem requiring treatment. The practice may be medically discussable, but the commercial logic depends on turning the body into an expanding field of correction.

“For customer retention, we targeted spider veins. At first, we talked about acne, then offered spider vein removal so they would come repeatedly.”
(Informant 6)

This quote shows that beauty marketing does not only respond to existing needs. It can also organize new needs. Critically, this is not the same as saying that every clinic practice is deceptive. The point is more precise: under retention pressure, consumer attention may be redirected toward new perceived flaws. This finding connects beauty marketing ethics to

body image literature, which has shown that repeated exposure to beauty ideals can contribute to dissatisfaction with the body and increased desire for cosmetic correction (Fioravanti et al., 2022; Frith, 2014).

Responsibility is also normalized through distribution across teams, superiors, regulations, influencers, and consumers. Informant 2 described how safe regulatory language can move part of the burden to the consumer. A brand may state that a product is BPOM-verified and safe, while also advising certain consumers to consult a doctor. This language is prudent, but it can also protect the company by locating the final decision with the consumer.

“The safe marketing answer is usually that the product has been verified by BPOM and is safe, but it is better to consult again with an obstetrician. This moves part of the responsibility to the consumer.” (Informant 2)

This is not a simple rejection of disclaimers. In regulated industries, cautious language is necessary. The ethical problem appears when disclaimers become a way to appear responsible while avoiding full accountability for how persuasive claims already shaped the consumer’s expectation. Richardson-Greenfield and La Ferle (2021) similarly show that advertising practitioners often process ethical issues through legal limits and distributed responsibility. The finding here extends that discussion into beauty marketing, where the consequence of persuasion may be carried by consumers’ bodies, money, and trust.

Thus, normalized practice in this study is not reducible to deliberate deception. It is

produced through a system of pressures: sales targets, viral trends, managerial approval, claim wording, influencer performance, retention strategy, and regulatory caution. Practitioners are neither outside this system nor fully identical with it. They participate in it while also learning its limits. This is why their ethical discomfort becomes central to the third finding.

4.3. Ethical Discomfort and the Consumer as Vulnerable Other

The third finding shows that ethical discomfort emerges when practitioners stop seeing consumers only as market segments, buyers, or engagement numbers. The consumer becomes ethically present as someone who hopes, believes, spends money, uses products on the body, and may be disappointed or harmed by unrealistic messages. This is where Hietanen and Sihvonen’s (2021) Levinasian consumer ethics becomes relevant. In their reading of Levinas, ethics is not grounded only in compliance, regulation, or calculation, but in personal responsibility toward the Other. In this study, the consumer appears as that Other when practitioners recognize that persuasion reaches a vulnerable person.

Informant 4 provided the strongest expression of this recognition. Looking back on her experience as a Creative Marketing Director, she did not describe beauty marketing only as narrative work. She described it as selling dreams to emotionally vulnerable people. Her discomfort was not limited to one false claim. It concerned the broader economy of aspiration in which beauty products are attached to hope, acceptance, transformation, and personal worth.

“I exploited people’s emotional vulnerability, where they wanted to be beautiful, by selling dreams. It was double exploitation, economically and emotionally.” (Informant 4)

This statement pushes the discussion beyond regulatory ethics. A message can be legally adjusted and still be morally troubling when it profits from insecurity. Levinasian consumer ethics helps explain why this discomfort is relational. The practitioner is disturbed because the consumer is no longer an abstract target. The consumer appears as someone who can be reached, persuaded, and hurt. In Peterson’s terms, the consequence is also multidimensional. The campaign may benefit the brand economically, but it can also deepen consumer insecurity and leave the practitioner with guilt.

Informant 6 expressed ethical discomfort in a more direct professional vocabulary. Working in a clinic context, she placed ethics above target achievement and connected this stance to her own experience as a consumer. If she would feel disappointed by a misleading product, she did not want to produce the same disappointment for others. Her moral reasoning was therefore not purely legalistic. It was relational and experiential.

“As consumers, we are disappointed if the product does not match what was promised. That makes me unwilling to lie to other people.” (Informant 6)

This position shows that ethical responsibility can arise from identification with the consumer. The practitioner recognizes the

consumer not as an object of persuasion, but as someone whose disappointment matters. It also challenges the assumption that practitioners normalize questionable practices simply because they work in the industry. The data show a more uneven picture. Some practitioners rationalize; some negotiate; some resist; some leave; some hold boundaries only when workplace conditions allow them to do so.

Informant 3, for example, rejected false claims but also acknowledged that his confidence was supported by work contexts that did not repeatedly force him into severe compromise. His account shows that ethical stance is not only a matter of personal virtue. It is also shaped by organizational conditions, authority, and the space available for refusal. This is important because it prevents the analysis from romanticizing individual ethics. A practitioner may have principles, but whether those principles can be enacted depends on the workplace structure.

“I have never wanted to lie to my audience. I do not like lying to people, especially when I know my product cannot do something but I say it can.”
(Informant 3)

Informant 5 showed another form of ethical boundary. Her concern was directed toward companies whose claims did not match product reality and could become public deception. She also linked commercialization to environmental and social consequences, suggesting that the harm of beauty marketing is not confined to the consumer-message relationship. It may also involve broader systems of production, waste, and profit-seeking. Her perspective widens the

meaning of responsibility beyond immediate persuasion.

Taken together, these accounts show that ethical discomfort is not uniform. For Informant 4, discomfort became guilt and eventually distance from the industry. For Informant 2, it became product safety and responsibility toward bodily dignity. For Informant 6, it became a refusal to deceive consumers. For Informant 3, it became a boundary against false claims. For Informant 5, it became value alignment and gatekeeping. For Informant 1, it remained more ambivalent because she could understand both consumer disappointment and marketer survival. This variation matters. It shows that the industry does not produce a single moral response. It produces different forms of negotiation depending on role, authority, economic need, work context, and personal values.

The argument of this article is therefore not that beauty marketing practitioners are simply victims of industry pressure or agents of manipulation. The stronger interpretation is that beauty marketing is a moral practice disguised as commercial communication. Practitioners create desire, but desire is never neutral in this field. It attaches itself to the body, confidence, social recognition, and hopes of becoming otherwise. The cost of creating desire is borne by consumers when messages intensify insecurity or unrealistic expectation. It is also borne by practitioners when they recognize that their work has helped produce those expectations.

5. KESIMPULAN

This study examined how Indonesian marketing communication practitioners make meaning of their practical experiences in beauty marketing. The findings show that

practitioners make meaning of their work through three connected movements. First, they become professionals by learning to read consumers, translate products into messages, and make brands visible and desirable. Second, they normalize certain practices under industrial pressure, including claim adjustment, KOL management, trend responsiveness, retention logic, and responsibility distribution. Third, they experience ethical discomfort when consumers appear not merely as target markets, but as vulnerable others whose bodies, hopes, money, and trust may be affected by marketing messages.

The article contributes to marketing ethics by shifting attention from advertising as a finished text to advertising as lived professional practice. It shows that ethical ambiguity is not only located in the message itself, but in the working conditions through which messages are produced. Sales targets, managerial pressure, competitive speed, legal caution, and consumer vulnerability intersect in ways that make ethical decision-making difficult. Peterson's multidimensional consequentialism helps explain why commercial success cannot be the only measure of ethical practice, while Levinasian consumer ethics clarifies why responsibility persists even when a message is legally defensible.

Practically, the findings suggest that beauty brands, agencies, and clinics need stronger internal mechanisms for ethical reflection. Claim review should not be treated only as legal risk management. KOL briefs, product claims, visual demonstrations, and consumer-retention strategies should also be evaluated according to how they shape consumer expectation and vulnerability. A more responsible marketing practice requires spaces where practitioners can question

Submit Date: 18 Juli 2026

Accepted Date: 28 Juli 2026

Published Date : 18 Oktober 2026

exaggerated claims without being framed as obstructing business performance.

This study is limited by its small sample and by its focus on six practitioners in specific professional and urban contexts. Future research can include beauty brand owners, top management, KOL specialists, influencers, beauty content creators, micro and small beauty businesses, and practitioners from non-urban regions. Consumer-focused research is also needed to understand how Indonesian consumers experience overclaim, influencer persuasion, body-image pressure, and beauty standards in everyday digital life. Comparative studies across fashion, wellness, fitness, supplements, and aesthetic clinics may further clarify whether similar tensions between persuasion, profit, and vulnerability appear beyond the beauty industry.

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Accepted Date: 28 Juli 2026

Published Date : 18 Oktober 2026

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Submit Date: 18 Juli 2026

Accepted Date: 28 Juli 2026

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