

Deceptive claims in cosmetics advertising

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If you're sceptical about the claims made by cosmetics firms about the attributes of their lotions and potions, you're not alone. A study by US academics just published in the *Journal of Global Fashion Marketing* shows how little truth there seems to be in those glossy magazine ads – as well as how unlikely we are to believe them anyway.

Jie G. Fowler, Timothy Reisenwitz and Les Carson examined 289 full-page cosmetics ads from the April 2013 issues of seven fashion titles such as Vogue, Glamour and Marie Claire. The ads studied covered a wide range of product categories, such as make-up, facial skincare, body products, fragrance, hair and nail products.

The researchers first divided the claims made in the glossy ads into categories, including 'environmental claims' ('no testing on animals'), endorsement claims ('recommended by dermatologists') and 'scientific claims' ('clinically proven'). A panel of three judges then classified the claims made into one of four categories of truthfulness: 'outright lie', 'omission', 'vague' and 'acceptable'.

In the end, only 18% of all claims made by the cosmetics companies were deemed 'acceptable' by the panel. Just 14% of 'scientific' claims were deemed acceptable, as opposed to 50% of those made about a product's environmental attributes. Even more troubling for women worried about their wrinkles, the panel judged only 25.1% of performance claims to be acceptable, with 23% deemed to be an 'outright lie'.

In addition to how unlikely consumers seem to be persuaded by the claims made in glossy magazines, the research also draws attention to the quirks of the regulatory processes by which 'grey-area' products like cosmeceuticals are considered to be a drug or a cosmetic – which in turn influence how a product can be marketed. "Categorization as a drug subjects the product to extensive regulatory requirements for new drugs," the authors write, "so, ironically, cosmeceutical marketers do not want to prove the efficacy of their product, since drug regulation would then apply. Consequently, cosmeceutical advertising needs to attract consumers, but not regulators."

The authors also note that given their results and the clear disbelief expressed by the judges regarding the cosmetic claims put before them, consumers (at least as represented by the judges) are already sceptical of product claims and are likely to consider them lies, omitting important information, or too vague to be of use. Their observations thus have implications for advertisers, who, it seems, need to promote their products to customers increasingly distrustful that miracles can really be found in a jar.

More information: "Deception in cosmetics advertising: Examining cosmetics advertising claims in fashion magazine ads." *Journal of Global Fashion Marketing: Bridging Fashion and Marketing*. DOI: [10.1080/20932685.2015.1032319](https://doi.org/10.1080/20932685.2015.1032319)

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