

From Vague Claims to Transparency: Confronting Stealth Marketing Practices on Social Media in Japan

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ABSTRACT: With the rapid development of technology and the widespread use of social media, the line between paid promotions and genuine reviews has become exceedingly vague. Stealth marketing is a market strategy that promotes a product to consumers without them realizing that they are being targeted. This research paper discusses the issue and current regulations of stealth marketing, specifically for beauty and health-related products, highlighting the importance of proposing a potential solution for consumers to perceive deception within misleading advertisements on social media such as TikTok and Instagram. It is hypothesized that most consumers are unaware of the existence of stealth marketing and are unable to distinguish between authentic reviews and illegally paid promotions without proper disclosure. Data collection was carried out from an interview on: 1) samples with histories of purchasing a product online through misleading promotion, and 2) TikTok influencers that explicitly oppose stealth marketing products. In addition, prior research reveals that authenticity and accountability in online promotion are demanded by consumers; hence, this research proposes a solution: a dedicated platform where products are promoted with verified transparency.

KEYWORDS: Social and Behavioral Science, Sociology and Social Psychology, Social Media, Stealth Marketing, Consumer Trust.

■ Introduction

In this digital era, social media has significantly impacted the marketing style in businesses. Studies highlight the crucial role of social media, including trendiness, customization, and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) in shaping online buying decisions. It is indicated that comments or reviews shared on social media or e-commerce sites are effective on consumer actions, accounting for 59.1% of the variation in online purchase intention.¹

Correspondingly, technological advancement has been contributing significantly to the prevalence of false advertisements, particularly on social media platforms favored by teenagers. AI-generated advertisements demonstrate flexibility and customization for personalized content, features that contribute to the potential customer deception through undisclosed promotions. Vogue recently astonished the public with new Guess commercials showcasing AI-generated image models, among the over 1,000 AI-generated advertisements accessible online. “Ads” labelling is implemented barely fifty percent of the time to deliberately engage consumers favorably, thus attracting them without their awareness.² On a global scale, the Japanese market has been significantly impacted by “*stealth marketing*” practices, a marketing strategy that promotes a product to consumers with deceptive promotions and fraudulent advertisements.

Kobayashi’s research examines the recent rise of stealth marketing on social media, highlighting the controversial practice of “Sakura,” where company employees pose as consumers and post favorable reviews to attract potential customers.³ The issue of stealth marketing presents significant risks in online

information dissemination, given the widespread adoption of technology and the decreasing age at which individuals engage with social media platforms. This underscores the necessity of developing critical skills and knowledge to perceive accurate information. Without such competencies, many youths may remain vulnerable to misinformation and unable to develop independent judgment. However, many adolescents remain unaware of the persuasive intent behind influencer content and therefore often fail to recognize sponsored videos as advertising.⁴ It is especially relevant in Japan, where social media use among teenagers has expanded considerably, despite limited educational exposure to advertising risks. Okayama’s research indicates that explanatory manuals show advertising-related content to account for approximately 25% of instructional material in elementary school, but only 1.8% in junior high school and 2.9% at the high school level. This pattern suggests that formal exposure to advertising education decreases during adolescence, precisely when students become more exposed to social media.⁵

With respect to products, premium-priced goods are generally less affected by inauthentic advertising, as such companies maintain strict online branding policies that safeguard their reputations. In contrast, less differentiated or lower-priced products are more correlated to consumers’ income levels, as individuals with limited purchasing power may be unable to afford high-end alternatives and instead resort to products with lower reputations. Moreover, luxury brands are generally less inclined to rely on stealth marketing because their reputation and perceived authenticity are central to consumer trust, whereas mass market brands, facing lower product dif-

ferentiation, often resort to such tactics more frequently.⁶ This highlights that ethical lapse damage in luxury brands is more severe, incentivizing them to maintain transparent practices.

Based on a survey incorporating twelve distinct scenarios, Yamaguchi clarified that sponsorship disclosure can enhance consumer favorability, contrary to the conclusions of many previous studies. This finding indicates that consumers have developed heightened awareness and reduced tolerance for stealth marketing, perceiving it as an unacceptable practice.⁷ For instance, some posts embed links that direct consumers to external websites, a strategy known as “affiliation.” This is commonly accompanied by comment sections containing exclusively positive feedback, suggesting that employees may be impersonating consumers.

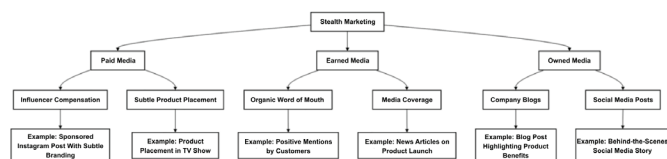


Figure 1: Subsegments within stealth marketing. The figure highlights the increasing complexity of common stealth marketing strategies used on digital platforms. “Stealth Marketing on Social Media.” Springer Texts in Business and Economics, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-69518-6_16. 2024.

Figure 1 presents various examples of stealth marketing across three media types: paid, earned, and owned.⁸ Each tactic ultimately aims to generate buzz subtly without consumers recognizing it, while utilizing resources and time efficiently. In general, stealth marketing refers to promoting products in ways that conceal persuasive intent.⁹ However, in this study, the focus is limited to online marketing where product promotions are undisclosed.

Therefore, stealth marketing misleads consumers, particularly the younger demographic, who struggle to differentiate between truthful and false claims, resulting in their purchase of overpriced products. To address this issue, it is hypothesized that a dedicated platform offering authentic feedback on health and beauty products would enable informed purchasing decisions by incorporating verification methods such as receipt submission, proof of product use, and expert medical advice. Consequently, this may increase trust in product reviews, reduce post-purchase dissatisfaction, and diminish the influence of stealth marketing on social media.

■ Methods

Primary Research:

This primary qualitative research aims to explore how stealth marketing practices on social media platforms affect perceptions of trust and ethical responsibility among the key stakeholders: consumers and influencers. The sample techniques employed were judgmental sampling, which targeted seeking people who have either purchased the product that was advertised by the stealth marketing method or influencers on TikTok who have created certain content addressing stealth marketing to raise awareness and avoid deception. Emails and direct messages were sent via TikTok and Instagram to 19 individuals, 7 consumers, and 12 influencers; among those, interviews were conducted with 3 consumers and 5 influencers.

The demographic consists of Japanese residents, with a broad age range from teenagers to mid-30s, where influencers are predominantly adults and customers are primarily teenagers. Four out of five influencers obtained a Cosmetic Ingredient Licensing, a certification conferred by the Seibun Kentei Association in Japan, which signifies their expertise in the beauty industry.

Table 1 shows two different collections of interview questions, each of seven questions, were presented to consumers and influencers, in addition to extra follow-up questions when responses required clarity:

Table 1: Interview questions. These questions were used to obtain detailed qualitative insights aligned with the research topic.

For consumers	For influencers
1. We think that stealth marketing and misleading promotions on social media are a frustration for consumers like yourself. Is this true, and what are your pain points?	1. With stealth marketing becoming more common on TikTok, how do you feel this is affecting the relationship between creators like you and your audiences?
2. What are your biggest challenges when trying to purchase products online?	2. In your view, what contributes to the widespread use of stealth marketing in the health and beauty industry?
3. How do you determine that the product is high quality and the seller is legitimate?	3. How did you first encounter stealth marketing and what influenced you to speak out against it, even though it could be financially rewarding?
4. Were there any shortcomings of the solution that you used?	4. Have you ever received an offer that emphasized you not to disclose sponsorship clearly? If so, how did you respond?
5. When buying a product based on online content, what matters the most to you? (Price, trust, influencer credibility, results etc.)	5. Is there anything you are doing to maintain trust with your audience? If so, what do you focus on?
6. Have you ever been a victim of stealth marketing? If so, what did you buy?	6. Are there specific red flags when evaluating a brand's credibility before accepting a promotion?
7. On a scale of 0 to 5, how likely would you be to use an app that helps you verify whether a post was paid to create untruthful content or not?	7. On a scale of 0 to 5, how likely would you be using an app that allows influencers like yourself to prove the honesty and trustworthiness of your promotions to your followers?

Secondary Research:

Secondary data were obtained from academic journals addressing the themes of “stealth marketing,” “social media,” and “cosmetics,” in addition to the associated ethical and legal considerations. Some of the sources were derived from Japanese journal articles to specifically address the research question, to assess the prevalence and awareness of stealth marketing, and to synthesize findings from prior scholarly studies. Through large-scale research and specific quantitative data, which are not attainable through primary research, this approach facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the current situation, underlying causes, and representative examples of stealth marketing on social media in Japan, as well as its consequent influence on individual consumers’ consumption intentions.

The majority of relevant sources were restricted to publications from the past five to six years in order to mitigate the use of outdated information. However, obtaining detailed case studies specifically addressing online deception within the Japanese context proved to be challenging; consequently, the data may not be directly applicable to the precise objectives of this research.

■ Results

Primary Data: [Consumers]

In general, consumers demonstrated similar trends in their responses, albeit there were only a small number, with three participants, and their wants and needs were anticipated, alongside the expectation to provide online guidance, distinguishing between truthful content and paid promotions intended to deceive customers.



Figure 2: Consumer satisfaction with online advertisements. Indicates varying levels of consumer satisfaction, highlighting differences in perceived satisfaction among consumers.

Figure 2 illustrates consumer satisfaction with online advertisements based on survey responses to question one, analyzed based on consumers' tone and answers; a smiley face represents high satisfaction, while a frowning face indicates high dissatisfaction. This sentiment analysis shows that consumers generally view online advertisements negatively, largely due to brands intentionally implementing deceptive practices to increase sales. The feedback highly emphasized their dissatisfaction, with one responding that "Frustration is an understatement. The main pain points are the time and resources spent trying to determine what is real and what is not."

Participants consistently relied on multiple sources to identify trustworthy brands, including WOM recommendations, product reviews, and company profiles. This suggests that consumers actively seek verification when making purchasing decisions. However, several shortcomings of the methods were the prevalence of fake reviews generated by bots or paid influencers, and the shortage of peer recommendations that limit the effectiveness of WOM verification.

Overall, despite participants actively attempting to assess product reliability, they are still exposed to deceptive content. Therefore, this highlights the demand for a platform that could enhance informed decision-making, improve consumer trust, and mitigate the impact of stealth marketing within the health and beauty industry.

[Influencers]:

With a participant group of five, the responses demonstrated consistent patterns. Participants emphasized that, despite the fact that content is neither promotional nor sponsored, users frequently show skepticism about whether their videos are stealth marketing or not. Consequently, the increasing caution among teenagers presents both advantages and disadvantages, as they continue to have difficulties in effectively distinguishing authentic from counterfeit content, given that social media is a primary information source and provides a wide range of advice for reference.

Figure 3 illustrates several underlying factors that lead to the prevalent cases of stealth marketing in the beauty industry. Notable responses are "it is a tactic that exploits everyday concerns

and insecurities", "Promoted products are often categorized as necessities, thereby increasing their perceived indispensability and enabling them to reach a broader target audience." Others additionally responded that: (1) such products are easily accessible to a wide age range of consumers; (2) outcomes are difficult to visualize as results vary between individuals, encouraging the creation of buzz to attract broad audience attention; (3) WOM and reviews spread rapidly, making it challenging to determine whether a message constitutes advertising; and (4) from a firm's perspective, stealth marketing can be more cost-effective and efficient than conventional advertising. In fact, recent marketing strategies indicate a shift from paying influencers a fixed rate per post toward performance-based (pay-per-sale) arrangements, which incentivize influencers to frequently use exaggerated expressions to maximize views and sales.

Q2: As an influencer, why do you think stealth marketing is prevalent in the beauty industry?

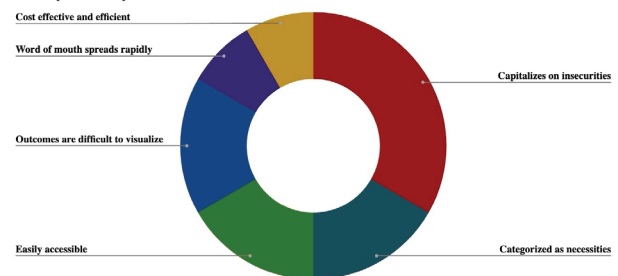


Figure 3: Interview responses from influencers to question two, "In your view, what contributes to the widespread use of stealth marketing in the beauty and health industry?" Responses indicate several perceived causes of stealth marketing issues, highlighting concerns raised by consumers.

The primary motivator for their opposition to stealth marketing was their personal experience as victims of misleading promotions, which led to the purchase of products advertised through stealth marketing strategies. After acquiring knowledge regarding such illegal practices and the information on ingredients in certain cosmetic products, they recognized that numerous videos contain fabricated information designed to attract customers and increase financial gain. Their personal principles are such that "money cannot buy trust," "money earned through deceiving customers cannot be used without regret," and "having once been a victim of stealth marketing, I do not wish other consumers to repeat my experience; I want to convey messages that would have protected my past self."

Most participants reported having been approached by businesses that requested they refrain from disclosing promotional content or from including a #PR (Public Relations) tag. All participants stated that they either rejected such offers or ignored the messages entirely. Before declining, they informed the companies that failure to provide clear disclosure, or providing ambiguous disclosure, is illegal to prevent further cases of stealth marketing promotion. However, in cases where the companies were foreign, which are mostly based in Korea, they often insisted that such laws did not apply within their jurisdiction.

Moreover, they clarified that maintaining sincerity and honesty in reviewing content has become essential for their identity as influencers. Demonstrating credibility by acquiring certifi-

cation in Cosmetic Ingredient Licensing and testing products for a specific period before introducing them publicly suggests that authenticity is to respond to audiences with transparency. Furthermore, by limiting the frequency of promotional posts, participants attempt to make sponsorship more visible, implying: “I am being paid to introduce these products, but I have thoroughly verified them beforehand.”

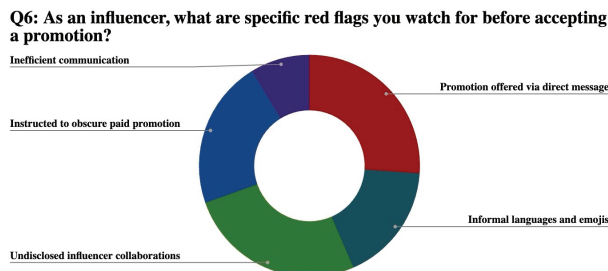


Figure 4: Interview responses from influencers to question six, ‘Are there specific red flags you watch for when evaluating a brand’s trustworthiness before accepting a promotion?’ Results indicate that specific common features are representative of firms engaged in stealth marketing.

Figure 4 indicates that companies initiating offers via TikTok direct messages, despite explicit instructions on their profiles stating, “For work inquiries, contact via email,” are most perceived as red flags. Thus, their responses included investigating the company’s prior promotional activities with other influencers and examining whether the content or images are identical in order to determine whether the company is engaging in stealth marketing or employing a performance-based compensation model.

However, there was an outlier who promoted a product well known within the industry for employing stealth marketing strategies. His purpose was to examine the societal impact if a product widely associated with stealth marketing was instead promoted with honesty and sincerity. To mitigate the risk of producing a misleading advertisement, honest reviews and accurate product ingredient information were included. Although the positive effects of products were introduced, as there was a disclosure with #PR, consumer purchases declined. Thus, this act concluded that companies employing stealth marketing methods primarily focus on financial gain and attracting customers with appealing promotional lines rather than fostering genuine relationships with consumers.

On the scale of 0 to 5, how likely are you to use the app?

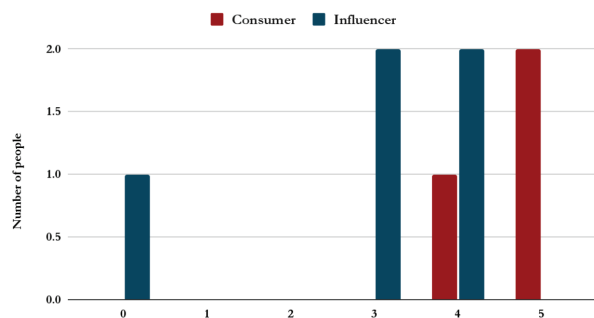


Figure 5: Interview answers to question seven from consumers and influencers. Participants’ feedback reflected a moderately favorable impression of the app.

Figure 5 illustrates the responses to question seven on the possibility of consumers and influencers adopting the potential app developed to tackle stealth marketing on social media. Despite most responses being favorable to neutral, one outlier claimed that such an app may not be feasible due to possible deficiencies in trust and accuracy.

Therefore, the convergence of primary data emphasized the significance of the ongoing stealth marketing issue on social media from both consumer and influencer perspectives, while the divergence of opinions concerning the app’s potential adoption prompted discussion on several possible solutions to address it.

Secondary Data:

The analysis of prior research and case studies indicated an insufficient focus on stealth marketing within the beauty and health industry and demonstrated the limitations of existing solutions in effectively addressing the issue.

The regulations across different countries are that developed economies, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany, possess robust advertising transparency laws despite certain enforcement gaps. In contrast, emerging economies such as India, Brazil, and South Africa experience regulatory delays, largely attributable to weaker enforcement mechanisms and limited consumer awareness.¹⁰ In addition, the study proposed a solution aimed at empowering consumer initiatives with media platforms and awareness campaigns, thereby facilitating more effective communication between consumers and regulatory authorities.

On 1 October 2023, the Japanese Cabinet Office issued Notification No. 19 of 2023 pursuant to Article 5, Item 3 of the Act. This stipulates that “representations made by an entrepreneur regarding transactions for its goods and services which would be difficult for ordinary consumers to recognize as such representations” are subject to regulation as stealth marketing.¹¹ In addition, the Consumer Affairs Agency establishes guidelines under Article 5, Item 3 of the Act against Unjustifiable Premiums and Misleading Representations, to protect consumers and prohibit business operators from engaging in transactions that do not clearly disclose their origin, thereby misleading consumers for financial gain.¹²

Regardless of these regulations, stealth marketing in the cosmetics industry poses urgent challenges that extend beyond simple consumer dissatisfaction. Alnazzawi *et al.*’s research examined the FakeAds corpus, which was annotated using AMT and manual inspection according to guidelines incorporating both account-related and lexical or syntactic features.¹³ Annotation was conducted at two levels: first, at the tweet level, where each post was classified as real or fake; and second, at the word level, where tweets were categorized by market segment. Analysis of the dataset revealed that cosmetics accounted for 83% of all annotated product mentions within the 5,000 tweets, in which merely 55.7% were associated with real information.

Nonetheless, over 80% of Japanese consumers occasionally experience difficulty in making rational purchasing decisions within digital environments. It is identified that age is the most significant factor contributing to their sense of vulnerability in

commercial transactions, followed by economic conditions and social experience.¹⁴ This issue is especially common in the cosmetics industry, where social media advertisements are frequently aimed at younger audiences and designed to promote products relevant to their daily lives and interests. Moreover, research indicates that societal pressures to preserve a youthful appearance contribute to increased demand for anti-aging products, potentially incentivizing companies to adopt exaggerated or misleading marketing strategies to appeal to consumers.¹⁵

In contrast, Natsir *et al.*'s research proved that stealth marketing in cosmetics successfully increases buying interest; buying interest scores dropped after viewers learned the video was a promotion.¹⁶ However, according to the hypothesis, such behavior is regarded as a natural human tendency; when a communication is explicitly identified as promotional, the content is often perceived as a biased opinion, thereby diminishing consumers' willingness to purchase the product.

Consequently, stealth marketing raises three primary ethical concerns: deception, intrusion, and the exploitation of social relationships.¹⁷ The ethical analysis presented that misleading audiences into perceiving a message as unbiased when it is commercial, interfering in consumers' personal digital spaces without informed consent, and exploiting the personal trust between influencers and followers for commercial advantage without transparency result in adverse social consequences, despite potential short-term advantages for brands.

Findings

Various measures have been implemented to address this issue, one of which is the use of filtered review systems employed by platforms such as Google and Yelp. These systems combine automated algorithms with human moderation to identify and suppress fraudulent reviews, thus promoting the visibility of more trustworthy, content-based feedback. Google's guidelines explicitly prohibit misinformation or the misleading of consumers through false representations regarding the quality or characteristics of goods and services.¹⁸ Therefore, these services are regarded as indirect competitors, offering different features but fulfilling the same needs for the same target customer base.

Al-Ramahi's research sought to establish a systematic, automated technique for identifying insincere content on social media, thereby enhancing the quality and reliability of user-generated content. It suggested that a combination of automated filtering with a highly advanced model and human moderation is optimal for performance.¹⁹ Likewise, eBay has implemented a "Verified Purchase" tag on buyer feedback to enhance transparency for customers by clearly indicating authentic reviews, thereby encouraging the platform's reliability.²⁰ Figure 6 illustrates an example of the "Verified Purchase" tag as it appears alongside buyer feedback.²¹

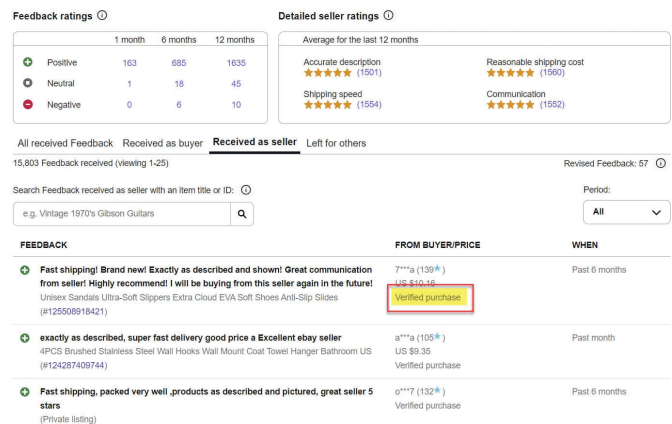


Figure 6: Feedback page on eBay website with the "Verified purchase" tag. This provides an immediate distinction between verified and unverified purchases. "eBay Feedback Shows Verified Purchases - But What Does Verified Mean?" Morton, 2024. <https://www.valueaddedresource.net/ebay-feedback-verified-purchase/>.

Alternatively, Japan has the largest cosmetic review website named '@cosme', which is highly recognized by users who seek honest and reliable reviews.²² It provides a space where products are evaluated based on real-world use by a community of beauty enthusiasts.

Figure 7 shows the official website for @cosme, the largest and most trusted beauty product review platform in Japan, which features over 22 million user reviews.²³ Nevertheless, it may be subjected to popularity bias, whereby established or trending brands dominate rankings and limit visibility for smaller brand products. In addition, partnerships with the platform may involve sponsored placements or advertising that influence ranking outcomes. Although @cosme contains extensive user reviews, limited expert verification of product claims or ingredients raises questions regarding the overall reliability of the information provided.



Figure 7: Official @cosme Website, <https://www.cosme.net/>. The platform provides cosmetic information and user reviews to support genuine evaluations.

Discussion

Limitations:

This research aimed to address the growing trend of stealth marketing on social media platforms, specifically on TikTok, and proposed strategies for its improvement. It was hypoth-

esized that the development of a transparent and precise application would enhance the trust and interaction among consumers, influencers, and brands.

However, interviews were conducted with parties opposing stealth marketing, which leads to confirmation bias that only produces responses aligned with the research focus. To eliminate any biases, future research could have diversified samples of groups who have employed stealth marketing strategies, as well as groups who are not aware of such practices. In addition, the primary data were derived from a small set of three consumers and five influencers, which weakens the generalizability of the results obtained. Finally, this research is limited to the Japanese context; thus, literature reviews and proposed solutions are primarily applicable only within Japan. Consequently, future studies should employ larger samples to enable more robust testing of populations relevant to stealth marketing and examine how these findings may be adapted in cross-cultural comparisons, with advanced quantitative testing of consumer awareness.

Implications:

The interviews with potential users suggest that the proposed service is likely to benefit, thereby offering substantial support for the underlying hypothesis. The findings reveal that consumers remain particularly vulnerable in digital purchasing environments, where rapid developments in AI technologies, the widespread circulation of ambiguous content, and the growing use of financial incentives create additional barriers to making rational and informed decisions.

Survey data further indicate that consumer skepticism toward online product information is strongly associated with concerns over deceptive promotional practices.²⁴ As illustrated in Figure 8, one of the prominent factors contributing to diminished trust in online reviews is the suspicion that employees are posing as customers to produce positive evaluations; an activity that constitutes a form of stealth marketing. Reducing these sources of doubt, therefore, represents a key objective of the proposed platform and aligns with further efforts to improve transparency and accountability within the beauty and health industry.

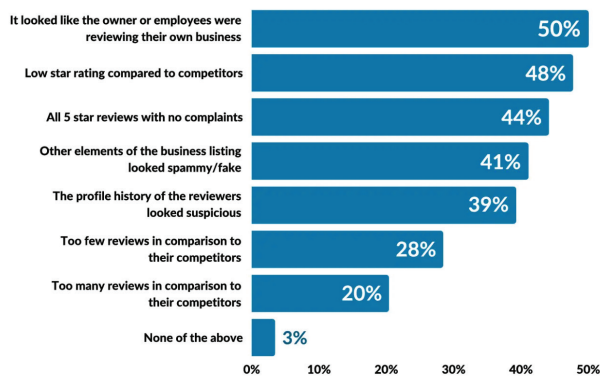


Figure 8: Survey Answers Moz, “What makes you lose trust in a business’s reviews?” This highlights the attributable characteristics that may undermine consumer trust in a brand. <https://moz.com/local-business-review-survey-report/habits-of-review-readers>.

Solutions:

The findings from primary and secondary data indicate that stealth marketing in Japan’s beauty and health sector predominantly impacts Generation Z consumers who experience difficulties in distinguishing authentic from deceptive information. Particularly, consumers with moderate or unstable incomes are more inclined towards buying affordable products marketed through stealth practices, thus falling into such deceptive practices. Correspondingly, participants consistently emphasized that it is crucial to explicitly demonstrate transparency, sincerity, and credibility in influencer reviews on social media: therefore, manipulated or exaggerated content breaks trust and misleads consumers utterly.

Although the study explored technological interventions as a potential outcome, participants’ responses revealed mixed opinions regarding their feasibility of implementation, such as potential resistance from industry and effectiveness. Some influencers suggested that, along with transparency, efforts should focus on establishing consumers’ critical judgment with the long-term goal of reducing the prevalence of marketing strategies that exploit vulnerable youths. While technological solutions offer structured guidance, they are unable to fully replace consumer education, as overreliance on technology may undermine the development of critical thinking and independent decision-making skills.

To apply these findings, the platform may offer verified product information, expert advice, and monitored influencer content. This could improve transparency in review and provide accessible educational resources, which help consumers make informed purchasing decisions and gradually establish their critical judgment. However, this proposed application is a solution design rather than direct testing; hence, future research could explore the feasibility and adoption of such a platform, as well as its effectiveness in combination with educational support, which strengthens consumer literacy and resilience against stealth marketing practices.

Conclusion

This study highlights the potential solution that assists consumers in distinguishing authentic and misleading reviews of health and beauty products, fostering long-term trust among brands, influencers, and consumers. Incorporating an educational component would further enhance consumers’ critical judgment, helping them recognize paid or deceptive content and make informed decisions, while also encouraging more sustainable consumption patterns. The service could feature a model similar to ChatGPT, allowing users to ask through a chatbot-style Q&A system, which would provide essential product reviews and relevant influencer feedback.

Along with this, Japanese regulators could collaborate with such social media to establish strict advertising standards, monitor compliance, and maintain transparency in online advertising. This could further strengthen consumer protection, support ethical influencer practices, and mitigate the risk of stealth marketing.

To protect consumers in the beauty industry with reliable information, it is essential to combat deceptive practices such as stealth marketing and strengthen ethical standards among influencers on social media. Nevertheless, the issue may also be relevant to other countries, and its implications could extend beyond the Japanese context, but to further cross-cultural research.

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