CONTROVERSY AS MARKETING STRATEGY: INDONESIAN CELEBRITIES PROMOTING SKINCARE THROUGH PUBLIC IMAGE POLARIZATION

1*Elfina Okto Posmaida Damanik, 2Mahaitin H Sinaga, 3Jusra Tampubolon, 4Hengki Mangiring Parulian Simarmata

1,2Management, Universitas Simalungun, Pematangsiantar
3Industrial Engineering, Universitas Prima Indonesia, Medan
4Management, Universitas Murni Teguh PSDKU Pematangsiantar
*e-mail: elfinaopdse83@gmail.com

Abstract: This study aims to determine the impact of controversial figures in marketing strategies in the skincare industry. The research focuses on three public figures: Nikita Mirzani, Dr. Richard Lee, and "Dokter Detektif." This study uses a qualitative study approach to explore the polarization of public image and the role of celebrities in influencing consumer perceptions, brand trust, and purchase intent. Data was collected through social media content analysis, online media documentation, and a literature review of previous studies. The findings reveal three core themes: (1) controversial personal branding attracts engagement and emotional resonance, (2) buzz marketing tactics trigger virality through peripheral cues rather than rational persuasion, and (3) consumer ambivalence emerges between entertainment value and brand credibility. However, the use of controversy also poses long-term reputational risks for the associated brands. Although this study is limited to qualitative methods, it offers theoretical insights and practical recommendations for ethically managing influencer campaigns in culturally sensitive digital markets.
Keywords: Controversial Marketing, Influencer Branding, Consumer Trust, Skincare Industry

Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui dampak figure kontroversial dalam strategi pemasaran di Indusri Skincare. Penelitian berfocus kepada 3 publik figure yaitu Nikita Mirzani, dr Richard Lee, dan "Dokter Detektif". Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi polarisasi citra publik dan peran selebriti dalam mempengaruhi persepsi konsumen, kepercayaan merek, dan niat beli dengan menggunakan pendekatan studi kualitatif. Data dikumpulkan melalui analisis konten media social, dokumentasi media online, dan kajian literatur dari penelitian terdahulu. Temuan mengungkapkan bahwa tiga tema inti (1) personal branding yang kontroversial menarik keterlibatan dan resonansi emosional, (2) taktik pemasaran buzz memicu viralitas melalui isyarat perifer daripada persuasi rasional, dan (3) ambivalensi konsumen muncul antara nilai hiburan dan kredibilitas merek. Namun, penggunaan kontroversial juga menimbulkan risiko reputasi jangka Panjang terhadap merek terkait. Meskipun studi ini terbatas pada kualitatif, namun studi ini menawarkan wawasan teoritis dan rekomendasi praktis untuk mengelola kampanye influencer secara etis dipasar digital secara berbudaya
Kata Kunci: Pemasaran Kontroversial, Branding Influencer, Kepercayan Konsumen, Industri Skincare

INTRODUCTION

The skincare market has experienced rapid growth in recent years, driven by increased consumer knowledge and the growing appeal of beauty trends, supported by easy access to various e-commerce and digital platforms (Peng et al., 2020; Wan et al., 2024). The dynamic growth of the beauty industry has created intense competition among brands, forcing marketers to adopt multiple strategies to attract consumers(Kumar et al., 2006). One strategy employed is using artists or public figures who endorse skin care products and leverage their image with their loyal fan base to influence consumer behavior in choosing beauty products (Erdogan, 1999; Knoll & Matthes, 2017).

The increasing polarization of public image has led to more controversial marketing techniques to attract consumers and strengthen brand loyalty. Therefore, the cosmetics industry

understands this dynamic and implements appropriate marketing strategies to increase revenue (O'Sullivan et al., 2009). With the digital economy becoming saturated with product competition, some celebrities are trying controversial strategies to differentiate themselves and the brands they promote. Some public figures take controversial actions and make provocative statements by commenting on or reviewing competitors' products or social issues that concern consumers, thereby gaining media and public attention (Kim et al., 2021; Kumar et al., 2006). This strategy is known as controversial marketing, aimed at attracting public attention, increasing brand visibility, and improving interaction metrics on platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook (Alfreya Shahla Witono & Fitri Aprilianty, 2024). However, while this tactic can quickly capture consumer attention, it often raises significant questions about brand integrity, consumer trust, and the ethical implications of amplifying conflicts and deception as tools in marketing.

Previous research findings are mixed, with some supporting and others opposing this strategy. Amin (2025) found that celebrity endorsement significantly influences online consumer behavior, particularly due to the strong emotional bond between the endorser and the audience. Similarly, Guntoro et al. (2024) explained that viral marketing and celebrity endorsement significantly impact consumers' willingness to purchase. The results of the above studies also warn that poorly managed issues can damage brand reputation, reduce customer loyalty, and trigger public outrage. One example of the controversy surrounding Cleora Beauty products is when a controversial social media post by a celebrity sparked significant participation alongside widespread criticism from the public (Noshad et al., 2021). While the campaign garnered immediate attention, it also raised questions about the long-term effects of such strategies on brand perception and consumer satisfaction.

Although there has been progress in research in this field, academic studies have not yet been able to investigate the relationship between celebrity-driven controversies and customer trust in skincare products in Indonesia. Previous research has explained the benefits of endorsement strategies and viral marketing (Knoll & Matthes, 2017; O'Sullivan et al., 2009). Still, it has failed to critically examine the impact of controversial strategies on brand image, especially in developing countries like Indonesia, which are highly sensitive to customs and culture. This high sensitivity impacts controversial marketing differently from Western countries. This study investigates the use of controversial strategies by Indonesian celebrities as a promotional strategy for skincare products and its impact on consumer perception, loyalty, and purchase value. The results are expected to provide references for marketing in developing policies with ethical and culturally relevant marketing tactics in the Indonesian context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The emergence of celebrity marketing in the beauty industry in Indonesia is in line with the development of social media, which has changed consumer interactions with brands (Fitriati & Siwi, 2022). In recent years, controversial marketing strategies such as scandals, public disputes, or divisive statements have emerged as a marketing tool to increase consumer awareness and stimulate interaction on social media (Macheka et al., 2023). Controversial strategies are marketing strategies that introduce provocative content to encourage consumer engagement. Previous research by Pardede & Aprianingsih (2023) explains that the marketing mix, which includes product, price, promotion, and place, is closely related to consumer behavior, particularly in the beauty industry. The positive image portrayed by celebrities can reduce negative perceptions and enhance consumers' favorable perceptions. Fitriati & Siwi (2022) explain that admiration for celebrities can increase public discourse surrounding their support for celebrities, which can be strategically leveraged for marketing purposes. This trend is growing in society, especially in developing countries like Indonesia, where the development of digital platforms, collective culture, and social values intersect and influence public discourse, thereby impacting consumer trust (McCracken, 1989). Celebrity endorsement for product marketing is a well-established method in marketing literature aimed at increasing brand awareness, legitimacy, and loyalty (Erdogan, 1999; Knoll & Matthes, 2017). Celebrities impart symbolic meaning to their products, enhancing brand affinity (Escalas & Bettman, 2017).

In Indonesia, the influence of public figures has become part of the culture and is highly effective for product marketing. However, the digital era has brought significant changes, where the

influence of public figures has become more exclusive, with influencers maintaining relevance through carefully crafted identities gradually built through strategic controversies. Recent studies explain that controversial content, ranging from unproven medical claims to emotionally charged social issues, can trigger high consumer responses on social media. Controversial marketing can surprise media fatigue and increase visibility (Chiu & Ho, 2023; Escalas & Bettman, 2017; Macheka et al., 2023; Zafar et al., 2021). It is important to note that this technique risks reputational damage if consumers perceive it as manipulative and insincere. These findings are also supported by religious and cultural sensitivities that can amplify reactions toward a brand if it is misleading or controversial.

The theoretical framework supporting this phenomenon uses the elaboration likelihood model proposed by Petty & Cacioppo (1986). According to this theory, controversial stimuli are needed to influence decision-makers if consumer involvement is minimal. This theory discusses the role of surprise value in attracting consumer attention, especially in saturated markets like skincare, where product differentiation is limited. Researchers Amin (2025)) emphasize that interactions may not be consistent. Still, electronic word-of-mouth triggered by controversial actions can spread quickly and does not always result in consumer attitudes or purchase intentions. Consumers using social media like TikTok drive strong emotional responses to issues raised. Escalas & Bettman (2017) asserts that social media inherently exacerbates polarization, encouraging influencers to adopt controversial identities. Platform-based antagonistic ideas create public disagreement and debate, increasing visibility through likes, shares, and comments. This significantly impacts marketing outcomes, considering that nearly 70% of the Indonesian population is active on social media (Kubin & Von Sikorski, 2021; Levy, 2020). Previous research data indicates that this method often yields inconsistent results for skincare sales in Indonesia. Alfreya Shahla Witono & Fitri Aprilianty (2024) found that controversial campaigns triggered a surge in consumer engagement exceeding 200%, despite only a slight increase in sales. Pardede & Aprianingsih (2023) explain that K-Pop celebrity endorsements increase brand visibility but polarize customer opinions, especially among local consumers who tend to be ethnocentric, necessitating alignment with local culture (McCracken, 1989). Local products are considered better than foreign products when linked to pride in domestic products. Controversial issues raised by artists can reduce consumer trust, triggering boycott actions such as those taken by celebrities who exposed overhyped beauty products, leading to public distrust in previously popular products.

Literature studies have identified three controversial motives commonly used in skincare marketing in Indonesia.
1. Contradiction: identifying three controversial motives commonly used in skincare marketing, such as "whiten your skin in 3 days," which attracts initial consumer interest but often faces strict regulatory scrutiny and skepticism.
2. Personal conflicts or public controversies are used to stimulate follower growth but have a temporary effect. They trigger prolonged discussions on visual media and create significant polarization.

Although these actions provide immediate marketing benefits, they can erode long-term trust and damaged reputation. (Levy, 2020) explains the "hangover-viral" phenomenon, where initial praise leads to erosion of trust and reputational damage. Researchers Alfreya Shahla Witono & Fitri Aprilianty (2024) explain that the controversial sustainability index includes criteria such as sentiment analysis, regulatory risk, and repeat purchase behavior to evaluate the impact of controversial strategies.

Several literature studies indicate that when implemented appropriately, controversial marketing can serve as a highly effective mechanism to attract consumer attention, particularly in the skincare industry in Indonesia. This strategy's use must be considered per the existing cultural, ethical, and regulatory context. To achieve sustainable success, there needs to be sensitivity and openness toward the product by creating innovations that build trust and foster consumer engagement on an ongoing basis.

METHODE
This study uses a qualitative exploratory case study approach to investigate how Indonesian celebrities utilize controversial marketing strategies in the skincare industry (Ponelis, 2015).

Qualitative methods were chosen because they capture the symbolic, contextual, and narrative dimensions of marketing controversies that quantitative approaches cannot explain (Boblin et al., 2013; Ponelis, 2015). The information sources were selected through purposive sampling, choosing three figures considered viral on social media in the skincare field: Nikita Mirzani, Dr. Richard Lee, and "Dokter Detektif." The selection of these celebrities was based on their active promotion of skincare products on social media, high visibility, and having over one million followers. Their consistent presence in media headlines due to controversial behavior is the rationale for exploring the dynamics of public image polarization in digital marketing.

Data collection was conducted from three primary sources: contextual information from promotional content and user social media interactions, social media content such as TikTok and Instagram, and media coverage related to controversial statements made to the public. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis involving data transcription, coding, key themes (controversial, brand trust, viral marketing), and interpretation guided by theories such as the Likelihood Elaboration Model and the Consumer-Brand Relationship Theory (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Triangulation of sources, verification, and journal references were applied to ensure the credibility of the research.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Several Indonesian celebrities have utilized controversy as a strategic marketing tool in the skincare business sector. With the rise of influencer marketing, some celebrities have deliberately exploited scandals, feuds, and divisive statements to strengthen their brand visibility. Through social media research and content analysis, three main themes emerged: (a) controversial personal branding as a promotional strategy, (b) buzz marketing and viral tactics, and (c) customer ambivalence regarding brand legitimacy and loyalty. These themes shed light on the research issue of how celebrity-driven controversies impact customer perceptions and brand communication effectiveness.

Controversial Personal Branding as a Marketing Strategy

Indonesian celebrities like Nikita Mirzani deliberately use controversial themes to attract public attention. Their aggressive and unapologetic communication approach, which is full of controversy, has attracted the attention of audiences, especially young people who value honesty and bold expression (Abidin, 2016). Content analysis of public comments on social media reveals that some customers perceive this controversial image as more authentic and emotionally resonant than conventional promotional representations. For example, a respondent commented, "I appreciate Nikita's way of speaking; it's unique and intriguing, and I always purchase skincare products based on the reviews she shares." This opinion reinforces the emotional resonance among the artist's followers. Kubin & Von Sikorski (2021) explain that emotional connections can provide advantages. In the skincare business context, differentiation through social conflict can be an alternative strategy challenging conventional marketing approaches (O'Sullivan et al., 2009).

Buzz Marketing and Virality: Capturing Attention

Social media analysis shows that Dr. Richard Lee engages more than twice as much as the average when presenting instructional skincare content filled with controversial perspectives, including criticism of competing products. Simultaneously, the social media influencer, a doctor known as "Dr. Detective," uses a theatrical approach characterized by sharp and humorous criticism, often exaggerating the shortcomings of competing skincare brands. This approach effectively promotes user-generated content, including responses to videos and remixes. This pattern aligns with Buzz's Marketing theory and the Elaboration Likelihood Model, particularly through the persuasion pathway (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Escalas & Bettman (2017) observed that customer reactions in a digital context are often influenced by emotional, sensational, or aesthetic cues rather than logical reasoning. Controversy in this context catalyzes consumer memory, prompting discussions about the company associated with strong emotional stimuli.

Although the polarization tactics generate short-term buzz and appeal on social media, they pose significant risks to long-term brand credibility and foster ethical skepticism. Therefore, marketers must carefully weigh the benefits against potential harm, striving to balance provocation and authenticity in their collaborations with influencers.

Consumer Ambivalence Navigating Entertainment Credibility and Ethics

Although these strategies generate visibility, observations show that consumer sentiment is ambiguous. Respondents recognized skin care promotions endorsed by celebrities, but most consumers reported that they validated product claims through third-party evaluations or support from trusted non-celebrities (Erdogan, 1999). This suggests that controversy can increase visibility but does not guarantee trust or conversion. Chiu & Ho (2023) explain that online social interactions do not inherently lead to sales conversions, especially when trust has not been established. Indonesian consumers are more knowledgeable about digital marketing and think more logically about independent information before purchasing skincare products. Consumers who follow controversial influencers find them entertaining but are more cautious in their decision-making.

Reputation Risks and Long-Term Brand Challenges

Topics emerging from media analysis include reputation risks associated with marketing due to controversies (O'Sullivan et al., 2009). Companies partnering with controversial celebrities may suffer reputational damage due to their association with legal controversies. The skincare industry has faced public backlash on several occasions, forcing them to halt collaborations to protect their brand image. This action is taken to reduce dependence on controversial figures. The effectiveness of controversial marketing depends on the city's image and reflects the existence of more significant social values and cultural dynamics in Indonesia (Pardede & Aprianingsih, 2023).

Collaborating with controversial artists may boost short-term consumer engagement but can increase the risk of long-term brand damage. These findings reinforce theoretical ideas about the relationship between consumers and businesses, where trust and credibility are considered fundamental in building loyalty and retention rather than visibility and entertainment value.

CONCLUSION

This study explains that controversial strategies employed by celebrities can increase both the benefits and risks to brand reputation in the Indonesian skincare industry. Case studies of celebrities Nikitamirzani, Dr. Richard Lee, and "Dokter Detektif" reveal three main patterns: controversial personal branding, sensational buzz marketing, and consumer ambiguity regarding trust and credibility. These findings reinforce the theory that peripheral persuasive cues such as provocative actions, dramatization, and public disputes can increase brand awareness in the short term but do not lead to sustained consumer loyalty. Indonesian society is increasingly tech-savvy and capable of integrating emotional reactions with rational verification methods before making purchasing decisions. This highlights the conflict between virality and legitimacy in influencer marketing.

Skincare companies must adopt risk-aware strategies, emphasizing originality, transparency, and cultural sensitivity when collaborating with public figures. Assessing public emotions and planning strategies to address crises are necessary to mitigate the potential impact of divisive campaigns. Given the large number of active internet users and diverse cultural backgrounds, these findings are highly relevant for developing countries, particularly Indonesia. Future research should delve deeper into the long-term impacts of these strategies in marketing.

REFERENCE

Abidin, C. (2016). "Aren't These Just Young, Rich Women Doing Vain Things Online?": Influencer Selfies as Subversive Frivolity. Social Media + Society, 2(2). https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305116641342

Alfreya Shahla Witono, & Fitri Aprilianty. (2024). The Impact of Skincare Short Video Promotion at TikTok For You Page (FYP) to the Skincare Product Purchase Decision. El-Mal: Jurnal Kajian Ekonomi & Bisnis Islam, 5(8). https://doi.org/10.47467/elmal.v5i8.3531

Amin, A.-. (2025). Examining the Impact of the Influential Factors of Customer Purchase Intentions: The Mediating Role of Electronic Word-of-Mouth. Journal of Posthumanism. https://doi.org/10.33182/joph.v5i1.3398

Boblin, S., Ireland, S., Kirkpatrick, H., & Robertson, K. (2013). Using Stake's Qualitative Case Study Approach to Explore Implementation of Evidence-Based Practice. Qualitative Health Research, 23, 1267–1275. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732313502128

Chiu, C., & Ho, H. (2023). Impact of Celebrity, Micro-Celebrity, and Virtual Influencers on Chinese Gen Z's Purchase Intention Through Social Media. SAGE Open, 13. https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440231164034

Erdogan, B. Z. (1999). Celebrity Endorsement: A Literature Review. Journal of Marketing Management, 15(4), 291–314. https://doi.org/10.1362/026725799784870379

Escalas, J. E., & Bettman, J. (2017). Connecting With Celebrities: How Consumers Appropriate Celebrity Meanings for a Sense of Belonging. Journal of Advertising, 46, 297–308. https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2016.1274925

Fadhila, A. M., Sukoco, I., Barkah, C. S. A., & Novel, N. J. A. (2024). Kajian Literatur Peran Brand Community Dalam Efektivitas Pemasaran Kosmetik Lokal X Melalui Strategi Amplified Electronic Word Of Mouth. Manajemen: Jurnal Ekonomi, 6(2), 237-247

Fitriati, R., & Siwi, I. S. M. (2022). Mega-Influencers as Online Opinion Leaders: Establishing Cosmetic Brand Engagement on Social Media. Journal of Promotion Management, 29, 359–382. https://doi.org/10.1080/10496491.2022.2143992

Guntoro, G., Wibisono, M. A. A., Rahmawati, A., Ali, H. A., & Saputra, S. T. (2024). Pemberdayaan Umkm Dan Peran Wanita Melalui Digitalisasi Pemasaran:Kegiatan Pengabdian Masyarakat Di Kecamatan Kebon Pedas, Sukabumi". Blantika: Multidisciplinary Journal, 2(3), 306–310. https://doi.org/10.57096/blantika.v2i3.107

Kim, Y.-J., Lee, J.-H., Lee, S.-G., & Lee, H.-H. (2021). Developing Sustainable Competitive Strategies in the Beauty Service Industry: A SWOT-AHP Approach. Sustainability. https://doi.org/10.3390/su131910852

Knoll, J., & Matthes, J. (2017). The effectiveness of celebrity endorsements: a meta-analysis. Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 45(1), 55–75. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-016-0503-8

Kubin, E., & Von Sikorski, C. (2021). The role of (social) media in political polarization: a systematic review. Annals of the International Communication Association, 45, 188–206. https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2021.1976070

Kumar, S., Massie, C., & Dumonceaux, M. (2006). Comparative innovative business strategies of major players in cosmetic industry. Ind. Manag. Data Syst., 106, 285–306. https://doi.org/10.1108/02635570610653461

Levy, R. (2020). Social Media, News Consumption, and Polarization: Evidence from a Field Experiment. Mass Communication EJournal. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3653388

Macheka, T., Quaye, E., & Ligaraba, N. (2023). The effect of online customer reviews and celebrity endorsement on young female consumers' purchase intentions. Young Consumers. https://doi.org/10.1108/yc-05-2023-1749

McCracken, G. (1989). Who is the Celebrity Endorser? Cultural Foundations of the Endorsement Process. Journal of Consumer Research, 16(3), 310. https://doi.org/10.1086/209217

Noshad, M., Behbahani, B. A., Jooyandeh, H., Rahmati-Joneidabad, M., Kaykha, M. E. H., & Sheikhjan, M. G. (2021). Utilization of Plantago major seed mucilage containing Citrus limon essential oil as an edible coating to improve shelf-life of buffalo meat under refrigeration conditions. Food Science & Nutrition, 9, 1625–1639. https://doi.org/10.1002/fsn3.2137

O'Sullivan, D., Abela, A. V., & Hutchinson, M. (2009). Marketing performance measurement and firm performance. European Journal of Marketing, 43(5/6), 843–862. https://doi.org/10.1108/03090560910947070

Pardede, B., & Aprianingsih, A. (2023). The Influence Of K-Pop Artists As Brand Ambassadors On Affecting Purchasing Decisions And Brand Loyalty (A Study of Skincare Products in Indonesia Consumers In Indonesia). Journal of Consumer Studies and Applied Marketing, 1(1), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.58229/jcsam.v1i1.35

Peng, L., Cui, G., Chung, Y., & Zheng, W. (2020). The Faces of Success: Beauty and Ugliness Premiums in e-Commerce Platforms. Journal of Marketing, 84, 67–85. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022242920914861

Petty, R. E., & Cacioppo, J. T. (1986). The Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion (pp. 123–205). https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(08)60214-2

Ponelis, S. (2015). Using Interpretive Qualitative Case Studies for Exploratory Research in Doctoral Studies: A Case of Information Systems Research in Small and Medium Enterprises. International Journal of Doctoral Studies, 10, 535–550. https://doi.org/10.28945/2339

Purba, J. W. P., Simbolon, P., & Girsang, R. M. (2023). Pengaruh Pemasaran Jejaring Media Sosial Dan Keterkaitan Konsumen Terhadap Niat Beli Konsumen. Manajemen: Jurnal Ekonomi, 5(2), 112-128

Wan, S., Zhang, K., & Ye, W. (2024). E-commerce Dynamics: Digital Marketing Trends Redefining Chinese Consumer Engagement. Profesional de La Información. https://doi.org/10.3145/epi.2024.ene.0322

Wirayanti, L. P. L. K. (2024). Digital Marketing: Penerapan Strategi Pemasaran Digital Melalui Media Sosial Instagram Dalam Meningkatkan Penjualan Produk Kasyaraa. CO. Manajemen: Jurnal Ekonomi, 6(2), 282-288

Zafar, A. U., Qiu, J., Li, Y., Wang, J., & Shahzad, M. (2021). The impact of social media celebrities' posts and contextual interactions on impulse buying in social commerce. Comput. Hum. Behav., 115, 106178. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2019.106178