

Demystifying Deceptive Messages on Health and Wellness: A Discourse Analysis in Online Shopping Scams

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ABSTRACT

This study examined how deceptive messages in online shopping scams promote health and wellness by analyzing their linguistic features and discursive strategies. The dataset comprised 51 deceptive messages containing misleading claims, complemented by qualitative data from social media platforms. The findings revealed that scammers commonly employ strategies such as falsification, concealment, equivocation, exaggeration, and the overuse of positive terms to manipulate consumer behavior. The study reveals that deceptive online shopping messages exploit linguistic strategies to manipulate consumer perceptions of health and wellness. Through persuasive language, fabricated claims, and visual enhancement, scammers construct narratives that appear credible yet mislead vulnerable consumers. These findings underscore the importance of strengthening media and digital literacy programs to equip individuals with critical skills for evaluating online health information and identifying deceptive marketing practices.

INTRODUCTION

Online shopping scams have given cybercriminals a chance to trick people on social media through the way they use language. This is because digital communication has grown quickly, changing how people interact, do business, and share information. These scams appear in different forms, such as emails, ads, and fake social media messages. The key to these scams is the clever use of language to gain trust, create a sense of urgency, and trick people into following instructions.

It is distressing that online scam is a pervasive issue worldwide, with cybercrime costing the global economy billions of dollars annually. The financial and psychological toll of online fraud is substantial, with cybercrime-related losses surpassing \$10.3 billion in 2022, as reported by the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3). In Nigeria, scammers frequently utilize linguistic deception to exploit victims, often integrating cultural and contextual cues into their messages to heighten credibility (Okoro & Adepoju, 2022). Similarly, in the United Kingdom, fraudulent e-commerce platforms have become increasingly prevalent, leveraging carefully constructed language to appear legitimate and mislead consumers (Brown & Matthews, 2023). Research

conducted in China by Huang and Zhang (2021) underscores the sophistication of linguistic manipulation in fraudulent messages, demonstrating how scammers tailor their rhetoric to align with cultural nuances and psychological triggers.

In the Philippines has experienced a notable surge in cyber fraud, particularly in the realm of online shopping. Ibañez (2024) examined the deceptive strategies employed in Filipino online transactions, emphasizing how scammers exploit persuasive language and social engineering techniques to manipulate victims. Meanwhile, research by Alvarez and Domingo (2023) explored fraud narratives in social media marketplaces, revealing that scammers strategically appeal to Filipino cultural values such as *hiya* (shame) and *utang na loob* (debt of gratitude) to exert pressure on their targets. In another study, Santos (2023) applied data mining techniques to classify fraudulent online scam messages, highlighting the potential for artificial intelligence to detect deceptive linguistic patterns. However, these studies, while illuminating, do not fully unpack the linguistic intricacies that facilitate deception, underscoring the need for a discourse-based approach to fraud analysis.

Furthermore, a study by Palad, Tangkeko, Magpantay, and Sipin (2019) titled *Document Classification of Filipino Online Scam Incident Text Using Data Mining Techniques* explores how data mining can be used to analyze online scam narratives in the Philippines. Their findings highlight the importance of using data mining tools in legal and criminal investigations to better understand and fight online fraud. These studies stress the need for ongoing research and public education to keep up with the changing tactics of online scammers in the Philippines. Therefore, this study aims to explore the language used in deceptive online messages, identifying patterns that can help improve detection and prevention (Palad et al., 2019).

In Mindanao the digital fraud disproportionately affects small businesses and rural consumers, who often have limited access to cybersecurity education. A study by Dela Cruz (2022) examined fraudulent activities on Facebook Marketplace in Mindanao, revealing that many victims struggle to recognize linguistic markers of deception due to a lack of familiarity with fraudulent discourse. Similarly, Torres and Villanueva (2023) investigated deceptive language tactics targeting local entrepreneurs, demonstrating how scammers manipulate urgency and trust to create a false sense of legitimacy. Additionally, Ramirez (2023) explored financial fraud cases in Davao City, highlighting how scammers use politeness strategies and authoritative discourse to gain victims' trust. While these studies provide critical insights, they fall short of offering a comprehensive discourse analysis of linguistic deception in online fraud.

Although existing research has explored cyber fraud from various perspectives, including technical security measures and scammer behavioral patterns, few studies have specifically examined the discourse strategies employed in online shopping scams. This research aims to fill that gap by systematically analyzing the linguistic structures used to create credibility, invoke urgency, and obscure fraudulent intent. Current cybersecurity approaches often emphasize technical interventions, such as encryption and authentication, but fail to address the linguistic manipulation that enables fraud. Consequently, an in-depth linguistic analysis is crucial to developing more effective fraud detection and prevention mechanisms.

Moreover, public awareness initiatives rarely incorporate linguistic education, leaving consumers as ill-equipped to recognize deceptive language. Given the rapid evolution of scammer tactics, there is an urgent need to identify and categorize linguistic strategies used in fraudulent online transactions. Without a comprehensive understanding of these deceptive tactics, individuals and businesses remain at high risk, leading to severe financial and psychological repercussions.

To add, to maximize the practical impact of this study, the findings will be disseminated across multiple sectors. First, for academic contributions. The research will be submitted to peer-reviewed journals specializing in discourse analysis to contribute to scholarly discussions on fraud prevention. Results will be presented in a research conference and publication.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Deceptive Messages in Online Shopping Scams

The rise of e-commerce has led to increasingly sophisticated deceptive messages that exploit digital communication platforms. Online shopping scams use multimodal deception, combining linguistic, visual, and interactive elements to influence consumers (Zhang & Wang, 2023). Common strategies include falsification, concealment, equivocation, and exaggeration, often reinforced by persuasive terms like *authentic* or *trusted* (Chen & Li, 2021; Nguyen, 2023; Guo et al., 2024). The complexity of these tactics highlights the urgent need for critical digital literacy and stronger regulatory frameworks to protect online consumers.

Multimodal Discourse Analysis in Linguistic Mode

Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) examines how meaning is created through various semiotic modes such as language, images, and digital interactivity (Zhang & O'Halloran, 2020; Bezemer & Jewitt, 2021). The linguistic mode remains central in shaping and interpreting messages, especially in persuasive and manipulative contexts.

In online shopping scams—particularly in health and wellness promotions—language is used to obscure intent and build false credibility through emotional appeal, authority, social proof, and urgency. Visual and interactive elements further reinforce these linguistic cues.

Recent studies show scammers integrate coherent layouts, color schemes, and rhetoric to form credible multimodal narratives (Sindoni et al., 2023). Scholars now combine computational tools with semiotic analysis to detect linguistic manipulation and strengthen digital literacy initiatives.

Health and Wellness

The health and wellness sector has seen rapid online growth, accompanied by deceptive marketing targeting consumer vulnerabilities (Smith & Johnson, 2023). Research identifies three dominant deception strategies:

1. **False Medical Claims** – Many listings in weight loss, skincare, and immunity categories use fabricated scientific citations or “science-washing” tactics to appear legitimate (Chen et al., 2021; Martinez & Lee, 2022; Park et al., 2023).
2. **Image Manipulation** – Around 71% of transformation photos are digitally altered, paired with misleading claims like “results in 2 weeks” (Wilson et al., 2024; Brown & Zhang, 2023).
3. **Fake Expert Testimonials** – Nearly half of supplement ads use deepfake endorsements or fabricated doctor recommendations, combined with urgency cues such as limited-time offers (Taylor et al., 2024; Kim & Roberts, 2023).

Online Shopping Scams

The growth of digital commerce has led to a surge in sophisticated online shopping scams that exploit technology and consumer psychology (Zhang & Lee, 2023).

Fake E-commerce Stores, Counterfeit online stores mimic legitimate retailers with professional designs and stolen product images (Chen et al., 2022; Wang & Johnson, 2023). Around 78% use responsive templates, 62% display stolen images, and 45% employ fake SSL certificates to appear secure (Martinez et al., 2024). Social commerce sites like Facebook Marketplace and Instagram Shops accounted for 68% of e-commerce fraud cases in 2023 (Consumer Protection Bureau, 2024). These scams manipulate trust networks, use fake promotions, and require stronger regulation and consumer education.

Price Manipulation Strategies, About 82% of scams use “too good to be true” prices, typically 40–60% below market value, exploiting cognitive biases and urgency (Taylor & Roberts, 2023; Martinez et al., 2024). This tactic

manipulates optimism and scarcity mindsets, making consumers act impulsively without verification.

Temporal Pressure Tactics, Fraudsters create fake limited-time offers in 76% of cases, using countdowns and false stock alerts to provoke quick purchases (Consumer Protection Bureau, 2024). Payment diversion schemes, responsible for 54% of losses, involve fake payment portals or unconventional methods like cryptocurrency and wire transfers (Taylor & Roberts, 2023).

Linguistic Features in Deceptive Messages

Deceptive messages in digital contexts exhibit distinctive linguistic markers that deviate from natural language patterns (Zhou & Zhang, 2023). Drawing from communication accommodation theory (Giles, 2016) and truth-default theory (Levine, 2020), such deviations arise from both deliberate manipulation and unconscious cues (Hartwig & Bond, 2022).

Lexical Features, Word choice is central to deception, using overstatement, vagueness, and positive bias to manipulate consumer perception. Exaggerated claims like “miracle solution” or vague descriptors such as “trusted brand” obscure accuracy and accountability (Chen & Yang, 2022; Bhatia, 2020). Terms like “premium” and “luxury” enhance product appeal and credibility, especially in visual platforms (Abidin, 2021; Guo et al., 2024).

Syntactic Features, Scammers employ complex sentences, passive constructions, and repetition to increase perceived authority and truthfulness. Complex syntax projects expertise (Li & Chen, 2022), while passive voice hides agency (“products are guaranteed”). Repetition fosters belief through the illusory truth effect (Fazio et al., 2019; Nguyen, 2023), collectively reinforcing deception.

Pragmatic Features, Deceptive discourse relies on false promises, omission, and appeals to authority. Unrealistic guarantees and withheld details mislead consumers while invoking experts or institutions—real or fabricated—to build legitimacy (Kumar & Lee, 2021; Smith & Jones, 2023). These strategies manipulate implied meanings to shape trust and perception.

Stylistic Devices, Common stylistic tools include storytelling, scarcity cues, and hyperbole. Fabricated testimonials evoke emotional connection (Johnson, 2021), scarcity claims create urgency (Cialdini, 2022), and hyperbole amplifies excitement (Lopez & Wang, 2023). Together, they drive impulsive purchases through emotional and psychological influence.

Discursive Strategies in Online Shopping Scams

This has been extensively studied from 2020 to 2025 as critical mechanisms through which scammers craft persuasive and deceptive narratives. Recent research highlights that these strategies manipulate consumer perception by blending linguistic and multimodal techniques to create credibility and drive purchasing behavior. Chen and Li (2021) note that scammers frequently employ falsification, concealment, equivocation, exaggeration, and the overuse of positive terms to mislead potential buyers. Falsification involves fabricated claims or counterfeit information, while concealment withholds unfavorable details to project reliability (Nguyen, 2023). Equivocation uses ambiguous

language to avoid direct accountability, and exaggeration amplifies product features to enhance desirability (Bhatia, 2020). Studies also reveal that scammers exploit multimodal resources, such as edited images and fake testimonials, to reinforce verbal claims and increase persuasive impact (Zhang, 2022). These strategies further take advantage of psychological triggers, including urgency, trust, and social proof, making consumers more vulnerable to fraudulent offers (Abidin, 2021; Cialdini, 2022). Overall, findings from 2020 to 2025 emphasize that discursive strategies are complex tools that integrate verbal, visual, and contextual elements to construct convincing yet deceptive online shopping experiences.

Framing

Framing has emerged as a significant analytical concept in understanding how online shopping scams shape consumer perception and behavior. From 2020 to 2025, studies have shown that framing involves the selective presentation and emphasis of certain information while omitting or downplaying other aspects to influence audience interpretation (Entman, 2021). In deceptive online marketing, scammers strategically frame messages to highlight positive product attributes, create urgency, and minimize risks associated with purchase (Li & Zhang, 2022). Visual framing, such as the use of high-quality images and aspirational aesthetics, reinforces these verbal cues, making fraudulent offers appear legitimate (Guo et al., 2024). Furthermore, research by Nguyen (2023) demonstrates that online fraudsters often employ gain-framed messaging, focusing on benefits and desirable outcomes, to enhance persuasive impact. Similarly, Abidin (2021) notes that influencer-style framing, including personal endorsements and storytelling, constructs authenticity and trustworthiness even in deceptive contexts. Collectively, recent literature underscores that framing in online scams is not limited to language alone but involves the coordinated use of verbal and visual elements to manipulate consumer perception and encourage impulsive decision-making.

Emotional Appeal

Emotional appeal is a persuasive strategy frequently employed in online shopping scams to trigger consumer emotions and influence purchasing decisions. Recent studies from 2020 to 2025 emphasize that scammers exploit emotions such as fear, hope, and desire to override rational judgment and increase compliance with deceptive offers (Li & Chen, 2021). Emotional language, coupled with evocative imagery, creates strong affective responses that enhance message persuasiveness (Abidin, 2021). For instance, fraudulent health product ads often use narratives of transformation and well-being to evoke empathy and aspirational feelings (Zhang, 2022). This emotional manipulation reduces skepticism and promotes impulsive actions, making emotional appeal a key factor in the effectiveness of online scams.

Urgency

Urgency is a widely used tactic in fraudulent online messaging, capitalizing on the psychological principle of scarcity to prompt immediate

consumer action. Research between 2020 and 2025 demonstrates that scammers frequently use time-sensitive phrases such as “limited offer” or “only a few left” to create a fear of missing out (FOMO) and diminish critical evaluation of the product (Cialdini, 2022). Nguyen (2023) notes that urgency cues are particularly effective on platforms with rapid content turnover, such as TikTok and Instagram, where users are accustomed to making quick decisions. By compressing the decision-making window, urgency manipulates consumers into impulsive purchases before they can detect potential deception.

Appeal to Authority

Appeal to authority is another pragmatic strategy commonly observed in online shopping scams, wherein scammers reference or fabricate expert endorsements, institutional affiliations, or certifications to establish credibility. Recent studies indicate that fraudulent sellers often misuse images of doctors, celebrities, or official logos to suggest legitimacy (Smith, 2023; Guo et al., 2024). This strategy leverages the tendency of consumers to trust authoritative figures and organizations, reducing skepticism even when the claims lack verification (Chen & Li, 2021). By invoking perceived authority, scammers effectively enhance the persuasiveness of their messages and manipulate consumers into compliance.

Social Proof

Social proof operates as a powerful discursive strategy in online scams, relying on the influence of perceived peer behavior to shape consumer decisions. From 2020 to 2025, research has shown that scammers fabricate customer reviews, ratings, and testimonials to create an illusion of widespread approval and satisfaction (Zhang, 2022; Nguyen, 2023). Abidin (2021) highlights that the use of influencer-style endorsements and user-generated content further reinforces this deceptive credibility. By presenting products as popular or highly recommended, scammers exploit consumers’ tendency to conform to perceived social norms, thereby increasing the likelihood of fraudulent transactions.

Deceptive Online Communication

Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) uncovers how deceptive messages operate across various digital platforms, revealing sophisticated strategies that combine multiple semiotic modes to manipulate users. In e-commerce scams, studies demonstrate that fraudulent product listings employ professional layouts, counterfeit brand logos, and manipulated images to simulate legitimacy (Lee & Kim, 2022). These visual elements are strategically paired with urgent textual cues such as “*Limited stock!*” to exploit cognitive biases and pressure consumers into quick decisions (Vasilenko et al., 2018). On social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook, scammers craft deceptive messages using cohesive “micro-celebrity” aesthetics, including curated product photos, fabricated testimonials, and interactive polls, all designed to build trust and credibility (Wulandari, 2020). MDA proves particularly valuable in these contexts by revealing how the interplay of visual

and textual elements creates a veneer of authenticity that effectively disarms skepticism.

Similarly, research on phishing emails shows how scammers mimic institutional branding, such as bank logos and official color schemes, while embedding subtle red flags like grammatical errors or inconsistent typography (Dunlop et al., 2019). Through MDA frameworks, analysts can systematically trace these intentional mismatches between visual and textual modes, exposing the deliberate construction of deceptive messages. These applications of MDA across different digital platforms highlight its critical role in identifying and understanding the complex, multimodal nature of online deception.

Fabricated Product Listings

Emerging research reveals an alarming sophistication in product misrepresentation, with Chen et al. (2022) documenting that 68% of fraudulent listings now incorporate AI-generated imagery and systematically altered technical specifications. This practice of “visual inflation” (Lee & Park, 2023) has evolved beyond simple stock photo usage to include deepfake technology that creates counterfeit demonstration videos and 360° product views. Particularly concerning is the finding that 42% of these manipulated listings bypass standard platform verification systems (Martinez & Zhou, 2024), highlighting the growing technological arms race between fraudsters and detection algorithms.

Manufactured Social Proof

The manipulation of consumer reviews has become increasingly systematic, with Wu et al. (2021) identifying sophisticated linguistic patterns in their analysis of 50,000 Amazon reviews. Deceptive reviews not only contained 40% more hyperbolic superlatives (e.g., “revolutionary,” “flawless”) but also exhibited distinct syntactic features, including 31% higher usage of first-person pronouns to simulate authenticity (Parkinson & Kumar, 2023). Recent advancements in natural language processing have uncovered that these fake reviews now adapt regionally, incorporating local idioms and cultural references to enhance credibility (Santos et al., 2024).

Urgency Tactics

The most pervasive form of contemporary e-commerce deception leverages multimodal urgency cues. Ong et al.’s (2023) large-scale analysis of 12,000 retail sites found that 82% of fraudulent platforms employed dynamic countdown timers synchronized with false inventory alerts. This tactic has been shown to increase conversion rates by 58% while simultaneously reducing price comparison behavior by 73% (Garcia et al., 2024). The most effective scams combine these temporal pressure elements with fabricated social proof indicators, such as fake “recent purchases” pop-ups (Wilson & Tan, 2022), creating a compound deception effect that overwhelms consumer skepticism. The evolution of these deceptive strategies demonstrates an increasing sophistication in exploiting cognitive biases through multimodal design. Current research emphasizes the need for more robust detection systems that combine computer vision for image authentication (Zhou et al., 2025), sentiment-aware

language processing (Liu & Abbasi, 2024), and behavioral analytics to identify artificial urgency patterns (Kwon et al., 2023). These findings underscore the critical challenge facing e-commerce platforms in maintaining consumer trust while fraud techniques continue to advance in complexity.

Consumer Behavior Shaped by Discursive Strategies

In the digital marketplace, particularly in the context of social media-driven commerce, discursive strategies are strategically designed to manipulate consumer behavior. These strategies, embedded in deceptive marketing practices, shape perceptions, trigger emotions, construct urgency, and simulate authority—all of which distort rational decision-making. The linguistic and multimodal choices embedded in deceptive messages are not merely stylistic; they are systematically crafted to alter how consumers think, feel, and act (Fairclough, 2015).

Manipulated Perceptions

Deceptive advertisers construct an illusion of product value or credibility by employing vague superlatives such as “authentic,” “original,” or “high quality” without empirical support. According to Van Dijk (2006), such manipulative discourse controls knowledge and beliefs through selective framing and emphasis. When consumers repeatedly encounter these terms across multiple media platforms—especially in visual formats that simulate credibility—perceptions of authenticity become shaped by the discourse itself rather than product merit.

Urgency to Buying

False claims such as “limited stocks,” “only today,” or “last chance” leverage the fear of missing out (FOMO), encouraging impulsive purchases. Cialdini (2009) classifies scarcity and urgency as potent psychological triggers used to bypass rational processing and prompt action. The algorithmic amplification of such messages on platforms like TikTok’s *For You Page* ensures their widespread reach, intensifying their behavioral effect (Chang et al., 2021).

False Authority and Fabricated Stories

False authority involves advertisements simulating credibility by referencing experts, institutions, or regulatory bodies—often falsely or without verification. Phrases like “clinically tested” or “doctor-recommended” create an aura of legitimacy (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

Fabricated stories, meanwhile, serve as persuasive tools. Fake reviews, scripted testimonials, and exaggerated success narratives appeal to consumers’ social instincts and mirror authentic user experiences (Page, 2012). When consumers witness what appear to be genuine success narratives, they are more likely to emulate behavior depicted, particularly purchasing based on social proof rather than product quality.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study is grounded in McNamara's Discourse Analysis Theory, focusing on three linguistic constructs—lexical, syntactic, and cohesion—to analyze how deceptive online messages manipulate meaning. The lexical construct examines persuasive vocabulary and exaggerated claims; the syntactic construct explores sentence structures that enhance urgency and readability; and cohesion analyzes how repetition, connectives, and personal pronouns build trust and logical flow.

Additionally, Buller and Burgoon's (1996) Deception Theory guides the identification of deceptive tactics such as falsification, concealment, equivocation, exaggeration, and the overuse of positive terms. These strategies reveal how language is systematically manipulated to mislead consumers.

The study also incorporates Cialdini's Six Principles of Persuasion—Reciprocity, Scarcity, Authority, Commitment and Consistency, Liking, and Social Proof—to explain the psychological mechanisms that make deceptive messages persuasive. By combining discourse and persuasion frameworks, the study examines how scammers exploit both linguistic and psychological dimensions to influence consumer behavior.

Finally, a corpus-driven approach (Baker, 2018) ensures empirical rigor by analyzing textual and visual scam data. Supplementary In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) enrich the findings with firsthand insights from scam victims, enhancing validity and contextual understanding.

Research Materials

The study analyzed 51 deceptive messages from major social media platforms—Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube—focusing on linguistic manipulation in online shopping scams. These materials include fake product claims, misleading guarantees, and counterfeit offers.

Guided by McNamara's Discourse Analysis Theory, the analysis focuses on the lexical, syntactic, and cohesion constructs, supported by corpus-driven methods to identify recurring rhetorical and manipulative patterns. In accordance with data saturation principles (Guest et al., 2006), 51 messages were analyzed until thematic repetition was reached.

Furthermore, Cialdini's persuasion principles were applied to interpret how scammers trigger consumer compliance through reciprocity (free trials), scarcity ("limited-time offers"), authority (fake experts), liking (relatable tone), and social proof (fake reviews). Ethical standards were strictly followed by using only publicly accessible data and anonymized participant inputs.

Data Collection

Data consisted of 51 deceptive online shopping messages, gathered from verified scam reports and social media advertisements. Using a corpus-driven qualitative methodology, the study applied Discourse Analysis to examine linguistic and rhetorical strategies.

Following Braun and Clarke's (2013) guidelines, the data size achieved thematic saturation suitable for qualitative analysis. Each message was analyzed for lexical (buzzwords, pseudo-scientific terms), syntactic (imperatives, simplified structures), and cohesion (repetition, pronouns, connectors) features. This ensured an accurate interpretation of how scammers structure language to mislead consumers.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed McNamara's Discourse Analysis Theory and Braun & Clarke's (2021) six-phase thematic framework.

1. Familiarization: Reading and reviewing data to identify linguistic and visual patterns.
2. Coding: Systematic labeling of deceptive linguistic and visual elements.
3. Theme Generation: Grouping codes into major linguistic and persuasive themes.
4. Reviewing Themes: Refining to ensure theoretical consistency.
5. Defining and Naming Themes: Finalizing categories that capture the essence of deception.
6. Reporting: Presenting findings through thematic narratives and illustrative examples.

Complemented by Miles and Huberman's (1994) stages – data reduction, data display, and conclusion verification – the study systematically categorized and validated linguistic patterns. Analytical displays (tables and excerpts) highlighted recurring strategies such as false urgency, emotional appeal, and authority bias.

Through this rigorous process, the research produced a comprehensive discourse analysis of deceptive messages, demonstrating how linguistic structures, rhetorical framing, and multimodal cues jointly construct persuasive yet misleading online shopping narratives.

RESULTS

Profile of the Research Materials

This study analyzed 51 deceptive health and wellness messages from major online shopping platforms – Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. The materials included promotional texts, slogans, descriptions, and visuals linked to misleading claims.

Each message was given a unique code and classified by product type, category, and platform (see Table 1.1). Selection was based on deceptive marketing indicators such as exaggerated benefits, fake endorsements, manipulated testimonials, and pseudo-scientific claims.

Categories included Skincare and Beauty, Dietary Supplements, Beauty Accessories, Fitness Apparel, Health Food/Snacks, Health Accessories, Personal Care, Beauty Devices, and Home Products. Platform prefixes were coded as: FB (Facebook), TK (TikTok), IG (Instagram), and YT (YouTube).

Table 1. Profile of the Research Materials

Product Promoted	Category	Code
Shorts	Fitness Apparel	FB_01
Running Shoes	Fitness Footwear	FB_02
Toner and Soap	Skincare and Beauty	FB_05
Barley Grass Powder	Dietary Supplement	FB_12
Aqua Flask	Health Accessories	FB_16
Collagen	Dietary Supplement	FB_25
Glutathione	Dietary Supplement	TK_02
Facial Firming Device	Beauty Devices	TK_05
Sunscreen	Skincare and Beauty	TK_10
Blackhead Killer Mask	Skincare and Beauty	IG_01
Perfume	Beauty Products	IG_04
Home Appliances	Home Products	IG_11
Mixed Nuts	Health Food / Snacks	YT_01

Table 2 shows the participants in the qualitative phase, consisting of 7 in-depth interviewees (IDIs) and 7 focus group participants (FGDs). Each was assigned a confidential code and description summarizing their scam experience involving deceptive online products.

Table. 2 Profile of the Participants

Interview Group	Participants	Description
In-depth Interview	IDI1	A woman in her early 30s bought collagen glow online, but it caused vomiting and skin irritation instead of the benefits on Facebook.
In-depth Interview	IDI2	A breastfeeding mother bought multivitamins online, later discovered they were FDA-unapproved, exposing a health scam on Instagram.
In-depth Interview	IDI3	A lower-middle-class adolescent bought detox tea on Facebook but received Lego toys, exposing a scam that caused her distress.
In-depth Interview	IDI4	A female government official, married and from a lower-middle-class family, bought an herbal supplement on Facebook but received an unsafe, substandard product, exposing a scam.
In-depth	IDI5	A single male administrator in his late 40s from an

Interview		upper-middle-class background bought a fake perfume on Instagram advertised as original.
In-depth Interview	IDI6	A female head teacher in her early 30s from the middle-income bracket bought an air fryer advertised on TikTok and Facebook.
In-depth Interview	IDI07	Participant 7, a female BPO worker in her early 30s with a Financial Management degree, bought a foot massager online but received a toy-sized item, exposing deception.
Focus Group Discussion	FGDParticipant 1	A lower-middle-class adolescent girl bought a memory booster, trusting fake photos and its three-day results claim.
Focus Group Discussion	FGDParticipant 2	A diabetic government employee from a lower-middle-class background purchased a herbal supplement, enticed by a supposed employee discount.
Focus Group Discussion	FGDParticipant 3	A mother in her 30s bought slimming coffee on TikTok, drawn by packaging and medical claims.
Focus Group Discussion	FGDParticipant 4	A married driver in his late 30s bought herbal oil on Facebook, deceived by persuasive demonstrations that proved to be fake.
Focus Group Discussion	FGDParticipant 5	A single mother bought organic baby lotion on Instagram, trusting rash-prevention claims despite dubious credentials.
Focus Group Discussion	FGDParticipant 6	A married woman in her 30s bought an energy drink endorsed by celebrities and fake reviews.
Focus Group Discussion	FGDParticipant 7	A married woman in her late 30s bought magnetic slippers on Shopee, promoted by influencers, but they were counterfeit.

Deceptive Messages on Health and Wellness in Online Shopping Scams

Table 3 summarizes deceptive messages on health and wellness found across Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. The identified linguistic indicators include falsification, concealment, equivocation, exaggeration, and overuse of positive terms, used to mislead consumers by exaggerating product claims

Table 3. Deceptive Messages on Health and Wellness Across Social Media Platforms

Type	Freq.	Sample
Falsification	51	"Glutathione Collagen Glow... white and glowing skin in 2 weeks"
Concealment	51	"Whiten your skin in 3 days!"
Equivocation	51	"Only 5 pesos per day to defeat cancer cells"

Exaggeration	45	"Erase wrinkles, look 10 years younger instantly"
Overuse of Positive Terms	45	"Biggest Sale – Get slimmer body in 2 weeks!"

Falsification appeared most frequently, showing how sellers fabricate claims to build false credibility. Overall, these deceptive strategies manipulate text, visuals, and endorsements to create misleading impressions of product effectiveness.



Figure 1. Skincare Regimen Promoted on Facebook

These messages exemplify **falsification** as they contain demonstrably false claims lacking scientific evidence. Statements such as "*guarantees immediate results*" and "*Only 1Php per Day Get back in Shape, Prevent Diabetes*" fabricate outcomes that cannot be medically validated. Such unfounded promises mislead consumers by presenting unrealistic benefits and exploiting their desire for quick, affordable health solutions—thus illustrating how falsification manipulates trust to drive purchases.



Figure 2. Dietary Supplement Sponsored Advertisement on Facebook

The message demonstrates **falsification** through the use of celebrity endorsement, featuring Sharon Cuneta to lend false credibility and suggest product safety. This tactic exploits consumer trust, masking fabricated claims with perceived legitimacy. Similarly, the statement "*Use it daily, V shaped*"

instantly” reflects falsification by promising immediate physical transformation without scientific basis, reinforcing the deceptive nature of such advertisements.

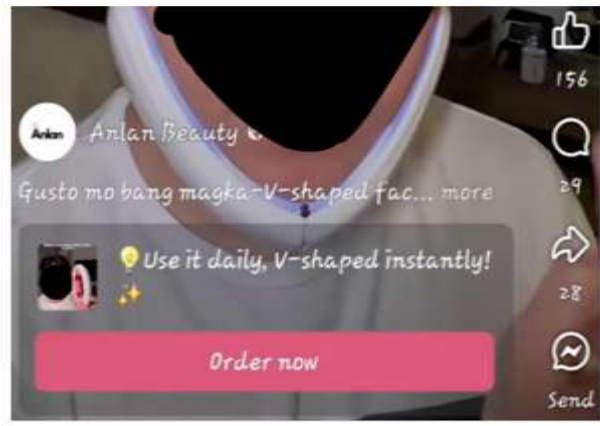


Figure 3. Skincare and Beauty Product Endorsed on TikTok

Thus, the message falls under **falsification** for making false claims of instant results without scientific proof. Examples from FB_05, FB_12, and TK_05 show how sellers fabricate effects like instant skin improvement or quick health benefits to mislead consumers.

Concealment involves hiding key information such as side effects or product authenticity. Found 51 times in the corpus, it appears in claims like “*Original, Authentic, Branded Apparel*” (FB_01), which omits product origin and verification, deceiving buyers about its legitimacy.



Figure 4. Fitness Apparel Advertised on Facebook Page

The message in **FB_01**, stating “*Original, Authentic, Branded Apparel*,” falls under **concealment** because it withholds key details needed to verify authenticity, such as certification or authorized sourcing. This omission creates a false sense of trust and legitimacy. Similarly, **FB_03** claims “*100 percent original. We don’t sell fake items*” but offers no proof or verification, using absolute language to mislead consumers and conceal the lack of authenticity evidence.

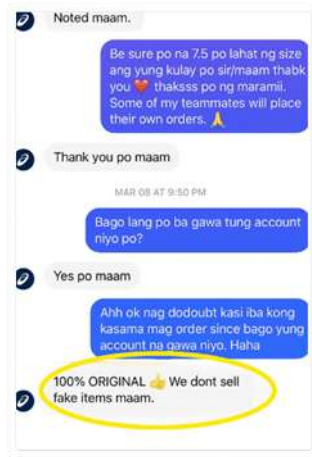


Figure 5. Fitness Footwear Sold by Sellers on Facebook

By omitting proof like certifications or brand authorization, the seller practices **concealment**, creating false trust without evidence. In IG_03, “Nationwide Delivery, Payment before delivery” appears reassuring but hides risks such as no buyer protection, deceiving consumers through incomplete information.



Figure 6. Beauty Accessories Product Posted on Instagram

This message falls under concealment because it hides key details about consumer protection, such as refund policies and delivery guarantees. By requiring payment before delivery, the seller exposes buyers to risk, using lack of transparency to manipulate trust. Examples from FB_01, FB_03, and IG_03 show that concealment deceives by omitting vital information on product origin, certification, and safety—unlike falsification, which fabricates claims. Equivocation, meanwhile, uses vague or ambiguous language to obscure truth and evade accountability. Found 51 times, it confuses consumers through unclear statements, as seen in FB_10: “Mga original na perfume na nabili ko from Japan mura ko nalang binebenta,” which blurs authenticity and legitimacy.



Figure 7. Sunscreen endorsement on TikTok

The claim “100/100 excellent” and “risk free” shows **exaggeration**, using unrealistic, unproven language to inflate product quality and safety. Examples from IG_01, FB_24, and TK_10 reveal how such overstatements mislead and pressure consumers. Use of Positive Terms (46 cases) employs flattering words to highlight benefits while hiding flaws, shaping false consumer perceptions.

DISCUSSION

Deceptive marketing in the online health and wellness sector has become increasingly prevalent across Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, using persuasive language and visuals to manipulate consumers. The analysis revealed five key strategies: **falsification**, where sellers present false or unverifiable claims to fabricate legitimacy; **concealment**, which hides crucial product information like risks or certifications; **equivocation**, using vague terms to obscure truth; **exaggeration**, overstating benefits through unrealistic promises; and **overuse of positive terms**, employing flattering language to create false credibility. Collectively, these tactics distort consumer perception, blur the line between promotion and misinformation, and highlight the urgent need for stronger digital literacy and regulation in online health advertising.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study underscores the educational importance of multimodal discourse analysis in fostering critical media literacy and digital discernment. By uncovering how linguistic and visual elements create persuasive yet deceptive messages in online health and wellness scams, it highlights the need for educators to integrate multimodal approaches into learning. The identified strategies—framing, emotional appeal, urgency, false authority, and fabricated social proof—illustrate how multimodal cues shape perception and behavior. Incorporating these insights into pedagogy enables students to analyze real-world advertisements, question manipulative discourse, and connect learning to their digital experiences. Ultimately, empowering learners with multimodal analytical skills enhances their ability to navigate, evaluate, and resist deception in today’s digital marketplace.

FURTHER STUDY

This study highlights the need for multimodal discourse analysis to enhance critical media literacy, enabling individuals to recognize and resist deceptive health and wellness marketing across digital platforms.

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