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MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE: DIGITAL TRANSPARENCY AND CONSUMER TRUST IN NATURAL COSMETICS

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Abstract

This article examines how behind-the-scenes (BTS) digital storytelling shapes perceived transparency and consumer trust in the natural cosmetics sector. Drawing on an exploratory qualitative study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with thirteen Tunisian consumers who regularly use natural or organic cosmetics and follow at least one natural cosmetics brand on social media. Using short BTS clips from Floraison, a Tunisian natural cosmetics brand, as elicitation material, the analysis identifies three interrelated themes: process-based storytelling as a basis for “making production visible”, the role of clarity, detail, and cross-channel coherence in evaluating disclosure, and the emergence of a calibrated form of trust that remains conditional and reflexive. The findings show that consumers do not passively receive transparency claims but actively interpret narrative, visual, and contextual cues to decide whether BTS content constitutes meaningful openness or merely another branding device. Perceived transparency functions as a narrative pathway through which beliefs about brand competence, integrity, and benevolence are constructed, yet trust remains fragile when curation and selectivity are made salient. The study contributes to research on digital storytelling, perceived transparency, and brand trust by conceptualizing BTS videos as narrative disclosure and by foregrounding consumers’ interpretive work in a credence-driven category

Keywords: digital storytelling; perceived transparency; brand trust; natural cosmetics; behind-the-scenes videos

1. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary digital marketplace, consumers expect more than polished images and scripted endorsements; they look for verifiable narratives that reveal the material and human work behind products (McCarthy, 2016; Pandey et al., 2024). This demand is especially strong in the natural and organic cosmetics sector, where claims about ingredient origin, artisanal methods and ethical labor have both moral and purchasing implications (Pandey et al., 2024). As a scholar working at the intersection of marketing communication, digital marketing and consumer behavior, this research examines behind-the-scenes (BTS) digital storytelling, video content that documents sourcing, formulation and packaging, as a strategic form of narrative disclosure that can strengthen consumer trust and perceived authenticity (Herskovitz & Crystal, 2010; Lundqvist et al., 2013).

BTS videos combine documentary-style visual evidence with narrative structure, offering indexical cues such as hands-on craft, raw materials and production locales that consumers use to evaluate the sincerity of brand claims (Feng, 2018). Recent work on digital transparency and narrative authenticity suggests that such grounded storytelling can reduce information asymmetry and generate stronger credibility than highly mediated endorsements (Portes et al., 2020; Montecchi et al., 2024). At the same time, the effectiveness of influencer marketing is increasingly questioned when endorsements appear repetitive, overly commercial or detached from demonstrable production practices (De Veirman, 2017; Audrezet et al., 2020). By contrast, BTS content, when perceived as coherent and relatively unvarnished, serves as a form of narrative evidence that makes ethical and sensory claims observable (Fleischmann & Wallace, 2005; Lundqvist et al., 2013).

Within beauty and sustainability contexts, empirical studies indicate that process-oriented stories on social platforms can mediate trust when they convincingly demonstrate alignment between brand discourse and actual practice (Kapitan et al., 2021; Bulmer, 2024; Karimkhan, 2024). Nevertheless, the intersection of BTS storytelling, perceived transparency and consumer trust remains under-explored, particularly in markets where artisanal heritage and local production practices shape consumer judgement (Sudibyo & Boros, 2024; Pandey et al., 2024).

Against this backdrop, this research asks: How does behind-the-scenes digital storytelling, videos documenting sourcing, formulation and packaging, shape perceptions of transparency and foster trust among consumers of natural cosmetics?

Through an exploratory qualitative approach, this research investigates how consumers interpret BTS narratives and identifies the conditions under which such content is experienced as credible, meaningful and trust-building.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Digital Narrative Storytelling

Digital narrative storytelling has become a central lens for understanding how brands communicate and create meaning in contemporary marketplaces. Rather than viewing marketing communication as a sequence of isolated claims or functional messages, narrative approaches conceptualize brands as ongoing stories that consumers interpret, appropriate and sometimes co-create across digital touchpoints (Abbott, 2002; Woodside et al., 2010; Mills & John, 2021). Within this perspective, brand communication is not simply about describing product attributes

but about constructing plotlines, characters and settings that situate the brand within broader cultural narratives and everyday life. Digital environments amplify this process by enabling multi-platform story diffusion, remixing and participation, from long-form videos to short-form reels and interactive formats (Delgado-Ballester & Fernández-Sabiote, 2016).

Storytelling theory in marketing posits that consumers process brand information narratively. They draw on stories to make sense of their experiences, to integrate brands into their self-concept, and to evaluate the credibility and relevance of brand claims (Escalas, 2004; Escalas & Bettman, 2005). When exposed to a compelling narrative, individuals may experience narrative “transportation”, a state in which attention, imagery and emotions are focused on the story, reducing counter-arguing and increasing persuasion. Empirical work shows that such narrative processing can strengthen emotional bonds, enhance memorability and foster brand attachment, especially when stories resonate with consumers’ own values and life projects (Herskovitz & Crystal, 2010; Karampournioti & Wiedmann, 2022).

Recent work on digital brand storytelling emphasizes that narrative is also a way to perform and signal authenticity, ethics and transparency in increasingly skeptical markets. Brands use narrative structures to stage not only aspirational lifestyles but also the backstage of production, decision-making and responsibility, turning processes into story material (König, 2016; Karampournioti & Wiedmann, 2022). Digital storytelling campaigns that highlight process details, relational efforts or ethical deliberations can function as strategic vulnerability, showing imperfections, constraints and trade-offs rather than only polished outcomes, which may enhance perceived honesty and credibility (Woodside, 2010). In this sense, narrative storytelling is not merely decorative, it structures how transparency is communicated, what is shown, from whose perspective, and in what order, thereby shaping whether consumers interpret disclosures as meaningful openness or as scripted performance (König, 2016).

Within beauty and skincare, digital narratives increasingly revolve around process, provenance and care rather than only end-results, which intersects directly with transparency and trust. Studies on online product narratives and digital brand content indicate that when stories provide concrete, sensory and contextual information about how products are made and by whom, they can reduce perceived uncertainty and support the development of brand trust, particularly in categories such as skincare where perceived risk and information asymmetry are high (Karampournioti & Wiedmann, 2022). In natural cosmetics, where expectations around ingredient integrity, ethical sourcing and sustainability are especially salient, digital narrative storytelling that foregrounds production processes and human actors can therefore be understood as a narrative route to perceived transparency, laying the groundwork for the trust dynamics examined in this research.

2.2. Transparency in Digital Brand Narratives

Transparency has become a central theme in contemporary debates on brand–consumer relationships. It is widely regarded as a precondition for trust and ethical legitimacy, yet its conceptualization remains fragmented and is often treated from an organizational or normative standpoint rather than from the consumer’s subjective experience. As Portes et al. (2020) note, the literature still lacks a unified understanding of how transparency is perceived, interpreted and evaluated by consumers in real contexts of digital brand communication.

Most studies have approached transparency as an objective characteristic of organizational behavior, focusing on the amount, accuracy or accessibility of information disclosed to the public. This perspective, however, overlooks the subjective nature of transparency perception. As Helme-Guizon & Magnoni (2016) emphasize, transparency is not limited to the transmission of data; it depends on individuals' ability to interpret and make sense of the information provided. Thus, two consumers exposed to the same brand content may perceive its transparency very differently, depending on their prior beliefs, expectations and degree of trust in the brand.

In the digital age, this perceptual dimension becomes particularly important. The abundance of data and communication channels has created a situation in which consumers are not merely recipients of information but active interpreters who decode brand intentions, sincerity and ethical alignment (Martin et al., 2017). Transparency should therefore be viewed as a socially constructed perception rather than an absolute organizational feature (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016).

Transparency contributes to reducing information asymmetry in the exchange process, enabling consumers to make better-informed decisions (Fleischmann & Wallace, 2005). In markets such as natural cosmetics, where key product attributes such as quality, origin or ecological impact are often credence attributes that consumers cannot easily verify, transparent communication becomes a mechanism for compensating uncertainty. According to Jain & Jain (2018), by enhancing the accessibility and intelligibility of relevant information, transparency helps rebalance power dynamics between brands and consumers, creating the conditions for a more equitable relationship.

Yet transparency extends beyond a simple flow of information. Portes et al. (2020) argue that it functions both as a strategic mechanism through which brands attempt to re-establish a social contract with consumers and as an informal norm imposed by consumers themselves to influence corporate behavior. This dual nature highlights that transparency operates simultaneously as a top-down and a bottom-up process. Brands seek to manage perceptions, while consumers use transparency as a criterion to evaluate authenticity and ethical consistency.

The advent of digital technologies has profoundly transformed how transparency is practiced and perceived. Brands increasingly use online video, social media and traceability tools to make production processes visible, from raw-material sourcing to packaging, thereby embodying transparency through visual and process-based storytelling. Such narrative content acts as tangible proof of ethical engagement, allowing consumers to witness a curated version of the "behind-the-scenes" reality of production.

However, as Mandung (2024) notes, while digital media enable brands to showcase their ethical and environmental commitments, they also expose them to heightened consumer scrutiny. The key challenge lies in maintaining coherence between what is shown and what is done. If digital transparency appears overly orchestrated or superficial, it may backfire, generating skepticism rather than trust (Etter et al., 2019).

Transparency and ethical considerations thus play an essential role in shaping consumer perceptions, especially in sensitive sectors such as natural cosmetics. Consumers increasingly expect brands to demonstrate moral integrity rather than merely claim it (Mandung, 2024). Transparency becomes a key determinant of

brand trust, signaling honesty, responsibility and commitment to sustainable practices.

Digital transparency practices, such as brands' responsiveness to consumer feedback on social media, further reinforce this process. As Andriadi and Sofyan (2024) observe, responsiveness and openness in online communication positively influence consumer trust by creating a sense of dialogue and accessibility. The interactive nature of digital media allows brands to display accountability and responsiveness in real time, strengthening perceptions of sincerity.

In this research, transparency is approached as both a narrative and experiential construct. The focus lies not only on what brands reveal (information disclosure) but also on how they narrate and visualize transparency through digital storytelling, particularly in videos that depict harvesting, production and packaging processes. These visual narratives are not neutral; they actively participate in constructing the brand's moral identity and shape how consumers interpret its authenticity and reliability.

2.3. Consumer Trust

Consumer trust, often conceptualized as brand trust in marketing, refers to the willingness of a consumer to rely on a brand based on the expectation that it will deliver reliable performance and act in the consumer's best interest (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Alemán, 2001). This willingness rests on beliefs about the brand's competence (its ability to provide safe and effective products), integrity (honesty and consistency between words and actions) and benevolence (concern for consumers' welfare beyond short-term transactions) (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Sirdeshmukh et al., 2002). In this sense, trust is both cognitive and affective: it involves an evaluation of functional reliability and a feeling of confidence and security in the relationship with the brand (Delgado-Ballester, 2004; Martínez & Del Bosque, 2013).

Relationship marketing research has long highlighted trust as a central mechanism linking marketing actions to long-term outcomes such as commitment, loyalty and advocacy. The commitment-trust theory of relationship marketing posits that trust and commitment are key mediators through which relational investments translate into cooperative behaviors and durable relationships (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Empirical work shows that when consumers trust a brand, they are more likely to accept short-term negative experiences, remain loyal in the face of alternatives and engage in positive word-of-mouth (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Sirdeshmukh et al., 2002). Trust also reduces perceived risk and cognitive effort, making consumers more comfortable with repeated purchases and with paying price premiums for brands they consider reliable and value-congruent (Delgado-Ballester, 2004; Martínez & Del Bosque, 2013).

In digital environments, the role of trust becomes even more salient due to heightened uncertainty, information asymmetries and the intangibility of many interactions. Early work in e-commerce underlined that familiarity with an online vendor and institutional trust mechanisms are crucial for overcoming perceived risk and encouraging online transactions (Gefen, 2000; McKnight et al., 2002). Subsequent studies have extended these insights, showing that interface quality, clarity of information, responsiveness and perceived security all contribute to the formation of trust in digital brands and platforms (Gefen, 2000; McKnight et al., 2002). In social media settings, additional factors such as credibility of

content, consistency across touchpoints and perceived authenticity of communication further condition whether consumers regard a brand as trustworthy.

Recent work has begun to connect trust more explicitly to organizational transparency. Schnackenberg & Tomlinson (2016) conceptualize transparency as a multidimensional antecedent of trust, composed of information disclosure, clarity and accuracy, and argue that stakeholders' perceptions of transparency shape their willingness to be vulnerable in relationships with organizations. Empirical studies indicate that when firms are perceived as open about their practices, honest about limitations and clear in their explanations, trust is strengthened; conversely, perceived opacity or manipulative disclosure can undermine trust, even when the amount of information is high (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016; Martínez & Del Bosque, 2013). In this respect, transparency does not mechanically create trust but provides a context in which trust becomes more or less likely depending on how information is framed, narrated and aligned with actual behavior.

In sectors such as cosmetics, and particularly natural and organic cosmetics, consumer trust is further complicated by the prevalence of credence attributes and by intensified sustainability and ethical claims. Many product properties, such as long-term safety, true naturalness or environmental impact, cannot be directly verified by consumers, who must therefore rely on brands' communication, certifications and third-party signals (Martínez & Del Bosque, 2013). In this context, trust becomes closely intertwined with perceived responsibility and integrity. Consumers look not only for functional performance but also for evidence that brands act consistently with claimed values regarding ingredient sourcing, labor conditions and environmental stewardship (Sirdeshmukh et al., 2002; Martínez & Del Bosque, 2013).

Within this research, consumer trust is thus approached as a relational, perception-based construct that emerges from consumers' interpretations of brand conduct in digital environments. It is considered an outcome of perceived transparency, shaped by how brands disclose, explain and narrate their practices in ways that appear competent, honest and benevolent in the eyes of consumers (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016). In the specific context of natural cosmetics, where transparency about processes and values is increasingly demanded, trust provides a crucial lens through which to understand how behind-the-scenes digital storytelling contributes to or undermines the perceived credibility of brand claims.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research design

This research adopts a qualitative research design to explore how consumers make sense of digital transparency and trust when exposed to behind-the-scenes (BTS) brand storytelling in the natural cosmetics sector. Rather than treating transparency and trust as purely measurable attitudinal variables, the study approaches them as meanings constructed through consumers' narratives, evaluations and emotions in response to digital brand content. A qualitative, meaning-centered approach is therefore appropriate to capture the nuances of how participants interpret visual cues, process information and articulate their judgements in their own words (Belk et al., 2013; Patton, 2015).

3.2. Empirical context and brand material

The empirical context is the market for natural and organic cosmetics, a sector characterized by heightened expectations around ingredient integrity, ethical sourcing and environmental responsibility. In this category, many relevant product attributes (such as long-term safety, "naturalness" or ecological impact) are credence attributes that consumers cannot easily verify on their own. As a result, digital communication plays a central role in shaping perceptions of whether brands are transparent and trustworthy.

The study focuses on brand-generated digital content that depicts the "backstage" of production processes. Short videos showing harvesting, formulation and packaging of natural cosmetics were selected as stimuli because they make brand practices visible and explicitly claim transparency. The selected videos were obtained from the social media channels and websites of natural cosmetics brands that position themselves around ethical sourcing, artisanal production and sustainability. The material includes scenes such as ingredient collection in fields, manual preparation of oils and creams, and small-scale packaging operations.

3.3. Participants and recruitment

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling in order to engage consumers who are both familiar with natural cosmetics and accustomed to encountering beauty brands in digital environments. The sample consists of thirteen Tunisian participants who regularly purchase or use natural or organic cosmetics and who follow at least one natural cosmetics brand on platforms such as Instagram, Facebook or TikTok. This ensured that participants had prior exposure to digital beauty content and were able to reflect on issues of transparency and trust in an informed way.

Variation in age, gender and socio-professional background was sought to capture a range of perspectives on natural cosmetics and digital communication. While the sample is not statistically representative, it offers sufficient diversity to explore different ways of interpreting transparency and trust in the narratives presented. All participants were based in the same national context, which provides a shared cultural background regarding consumption norms, digital media use and perceptions of ethical consumption.

3.4. Data collection

Data were generated through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. This format allowed participants to develop their own stories and evaluations while ensuring that key topics, such as transparency, trust, perceptions of processes and reactions to BTS storytelling, were systematically addressed across interviews. The interview guide began with open questions about participants' general use of natural cosmetics and their expectations of honesty, ethics and responsibility from brands. It then moved to more focused questions on their experiences with digital communication, including skepticism, perceived greenwashing and information needs.

The stimulus set consisted of short behind-the-scenes clips (30-40 seconds) taken from the official Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok accounts of Floraison, a Tunisian natural cosmetics brand. These process-based videos depicted key stages such as harvesting, distillation, and manual packaging, and were explicitly presented by the brand as evidence of transparency and quality. Using short-form BTS content similar to what consumers typically encounter on social media enabled the study to examine how participants

interpret everyday digital storytelling rather than polished campaign material.

During each interview, participants viewed a curated selection of these BTS clips illustrating the sourcing, formulation, and packaging phases. The videos served as elicitation material, prompting participants to explain how they interpreted visual cues in terms of transparency and trustworthiness. After viewing, they were encouraged to describe their thoughts, feelings, and impressions of the brand's practices, as well as how the content shaped their willingness to trust or purchase. Follow-up questions further explored perceptions of sincerity, credibility, and the overall coherence between the brand's narrative and the production practices shown.

3.5. Data analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis proceeded in several stages. First, an initial open coding phase identified segments where participants referred to transparency, opacity, honesty, doubt, reassurance, evidence or proof, as well as explicit mentions of trust, confidence or skepticism. Particular attention was paid to how participants linked these perceptions to concrete elements in the videos (e.g., showing hands-on work, naming ingredients, revealing imperfections).

In a second phase, codes were grouped into broader themes that captured patterns in how participants interpreted digital transparency and how these interpretations related to trust. Theoretical sensitizing concepts drawn from the literature on organizational transparency and brand trust, such as information disclosure, clarity, integrity and benevolence, were used to refine and organize emerging themes, without forcing the data into predefined categories (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). This iterative process led to the identification of key thematic dimensions, such as process visibility as a basis for trust, the role of imperfections as honesty cues, and the conditions under which transparency narratives are perceived as credible or staged.

4. FINDINGS

4.1. Process-Based Storytelling and Perceived Transparency

Participants consistently described behind-the-scenes videos as convincing when these offered structured, step-by-step insight into how products were actually made rather than simply displaying finished items. Process-oriented storytelling, showing sourcing, formulation and packaging in sequence, was interpreted as a core vehicle for transparency, because it provided access to what several interviewees called "the real work behind the cream" or "what happens before the jar". When the narrative made production stages intelligible, participants felt they were granted a form of access that went beyond standard promotional discourse, which they associated with a greater sense of openness and honesty.

This perception hinged on the impression that the brand was not only telling but also demonstrating its claims. One interviewee, for example, noted that written references to "natural ingredients" had become almost meaningless due to overuse, but that watching workers harvest plants and prepare small batches "made it easier to believe that the brand actually does what it says" (P7, female, 32). Another participant described a similar shift from slogans to "evidence", explaining that seeing raw materials, simple tools and manual operations "felt like a form of proof", in contrast with more

conventional beauty advertising that remains at the level of images and taglines (P3, male, 41). In these accounts, transparency is less about the amount of information and more about the quality of access provided to processes.

Process storytelling also helped participants to connect disparate elements, ingredients, places, people, into a coherent picture of the brand's practices. Several interviewees emphasized that videos which clearly linked scenes (for example, from fields to laboratory to packaging table) "helped to connect the dots" and to understand how the brand positions itself as ethical or artisanal. By contrast, content that focused only on aesthetic close-ups or abstract values without showing how products were actually made was described as "nice to watch but not really transparent". In this sense, the narrative structure of the video, what is shown first, what is explained, what is left implicit, plays a central role in whether consumers interpret it as an act of transparency or merely as another layer of branding.

Overall, this theme suggests that for these consumers, perceived transparency emerges when digital storytelling transforms production into a visible, intelligible process. Process-based narratives thus operate as a form of evidential transparency; by sequencing scenes that reveal how natural cosmetics are produced, they provide the basis on which participants decide whether a brand is worth trusting.

4.2. Coherence Consumers' Assessment of Disclosure Quality

Beyond simple process visibility, participants evaluated transparency in terms of how clearly and coherently information was presented in the videos. They did not treat every behind-the-scenes sequence as equally transparent; instead, they distinguished between content that "really explains what is going on" and content that merely gestures towards openness without providing meaningful detail. Videos that combined concrete visuals with clear explanations, for example, naming ingredients, indicating quantities, or briefly describing why certain steps are taken, were more readily interpreted as transparent than those that relied on vague captions or repeated slogans.

Several interviewees emphasized the importance of clarity in narration. One participant observed that when a voice-over or on-screen text "actually tells you what they are adding and why", it "feels like proper information, not just mood" (P5, female, 30). Another noted that transparency was linked to the ability to "follow the story" of the product from start to finish, without feeling lost or overloaded (P9, male, 36). In their accounts, too much technical jargon or fragmented editing could undermine the sense of openness. When explanations were either too superficial or too complex, participants felt that the brand was not really trying to make things understandable. Transparency, in this sense, depended on whether the narrative helped them to make sense of what they were seeing.

Coherence across different elements of communication also played a crucial role. Participants compared what they saw in the videos with other brand signals, such as website information, packaging claims, and their prior knowledge of the brand, and they evaluated transparency partly based on how well these elements lined up. When the style and content of the BTS videos matched what they had previously read or heard about the brand, they described the communication as "consistent" and "reassuring," which reinforced their sense of transparency and credibility. One participant noted,

for example, that “when the video, the website, and the label are telling the same story, it feels like you can believe them more,” highlighting how alignment across touchpoints strengthened their trust (P5, female, 30). Another interviewee explained that this coherence created a feeling of familiarity: “You see the same values and the same way of talking about ingredients everywhere, so you start to feel you know the brand and can rely on it” (P9, male, 36).

Taken together, these insights suggest that perceived transparency depends not only on showing processes, but also on how those processes are narrated and embedded in the broader brand story. Clear explanations, an appropriate level of detail, and coherence across touchpoints shape whether consumers interpret disclosure as a genuine effort to inform or as a curated story. In turn, these judgments determine how much trust they are willing to extend to natural cosmetics brands that rely on digital behind-the-scenes content.

4.3. The Role of Perceived Transparency in Trust Formation

Participants’ accounts indicate that perceived transparency acts as a central mechanism through which consumer trust is built, even though transparency on its own is not enough to fully secure that trust. When process-based videos and clear explanations gave the impression that brands were genuinely “opening the door” to their practices, interviewees described feeling more confident relying on these brands for safe, ethical, and high-quality products. In those moments, transparency was directly tied to key dimensions of trust such as competence (“they know what they are doing”), integrity (“they are honest about how they work”), and, to a lesser extent, benevolence (“they seem to care about what they put on our skin”). Together, these perceptions provided the basis on which participants felt able to trust the brand.

Several participants explicitly linked this trust to a reduction in perceived risk. One interviewee explained that after watching detailed BTS content, she felt “less worried about hidden chemicals or shortcuts,” because the brand “shows enough of the process to make you feel they take it seriously” (P6, female, 34). Another suggested that transparency made it easier to commit to one brand in a crowded market; “If I see how they produce and it looks coherent with what they claim, I’m more likely to stick with them and not keep switching all the time” (P10, male, 39). In these narratives, trust emerges as a relatively stable confidence grounded in the perception that the brand’s behavior is consistent with its digital storytelling.

At the same time, the analysis shows that this trust remains conditional rather than absolute. Some participants appreciated the effort to “show more” while still questioning how selective the content might be. For these interviewees, transparency was understood as partial and curated: BTS videos were seen as “a window” rather than full access. As one participant put it, “I like that they explain and show things, but I know it’s still a chosen angle. There are always parts of the story we don’t see, so I trust to a point, but I stay a bit cautious” (P1, female, 31). In such cases, transparency increased understanding and reduced some uncertainties, but did not completely eliminate skepticism.

Overall, this theme suggests that perceived transparency shapes the conditions under which trust can take hold, by offering consumers narratives and visuals that make brand practices more legible and accountable. When process storytelling and coherent disclosure

align with consumers’ expectations and prior knowledge, participants are inclined to extend trust and to view natural cosmetics brands as credible and responsible partners. Yet the trust that emerges is calibrated rather than blind, awareness of the constructed nature of digital content leads consumers to interpret even transparency-oriented communication through a critical lens, and to adjust the level of trust they are willing to grant.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this research contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how digital narrative storytelling operates as a pathway from perceived transparency to consumer trust in the context of natural cosmetics. Rather than treating transparency and trust as abstract, decontextualized constructs, the analysis shows that they are actively constructed by consumers as they interpret behind-the-scenes stories about sourcing, formulation and packaging. In this sense, the research extends narrative perspectives in marketing by demonstrating how process-based storytelling not only shapes brand meaning and authenticity, but also structures how openness and reliability are perceived in digital environments (Escalas, 2004; Woodside, 2010; Mills & John, 2021).

First, the results refine existing work on brand storytelling by highlighting the specific role of process narratives in generating perceived transparency. Prior research has emphasized that stories can build emotional connections and embed brands into consumers’ life projects, but has paid comparatively less attention to how stories about operations, labor and material flows inform judgements about openness and credibility (Fog et al., 2005; Herskovitz & Crystal, 2010; Lundqvist et al., 2013). The three themes identified here show that when digital stories make production processes visible, intelligible and coherent across touchpoints, they are reinterpreted by consumers as a form of disclosure rather than mere decoration. Process-oriented storytelling thus acts as a form of “story-showing” that provides what participants experience as evidence to evaluate the brand’s claims, especially in credibility-sensitive categories such as natural and organic cosmetics (Bhrammanachote, 2024; Gupta, 2022; Mehdiabadi, 2026).

Second, this research enriches the literature on organizational and digital transparency by grounding it in consumers’ interpretive work. Conceptual models often define transparency in terms of information disclosure, clarity and accuracy, assuming that greater openness will straightforwardly enhance stakeholder trust (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016; Portes et al., 2020; Montecchi et al., 2024). The findings here nuance this assumption in two ways. On the one hand, they confirm that visibility and clarity are central: participants interpret detailed, well-explained BTS content as genuine efforts to share information and reduce information asymmetry, especially in a credence-driven category such as natural cosmetics (Fleischmann & Wallace, 2005; Jain & Jain, 2018). On the other hand, they show that transparency remains a perception, filtered through prior beliefs and cross-checked against other sources, echoing work that conceptualizes transparency as a socially constructed, relational phenomenon rather than a purely objective property (Helme-Guizon & Magnoni, 2016; Portes et al., 2020).

Consumers in this study actively assess whether narratives are consistent with packaging, websites and broader brand reputations, and can reframe ostensibly transparent content as selective or

strategic. This aligns with research showing that digital transparency functions both as a managerial tactic and as a norm enforced by consumers who use it to evaluate firms' authenticity and ethical consistency (Portes et al., 2020; Mandung, 2024). Transparency, therefore, is not a stable property of communication but a fragile, negotiated outcome of narrative interpretation, particularly in markets where sustainability, ethics and ingredient integrity are highly scrutinized (Pandey et al., 2024; Sudibyo & Boros, 2024).

Third, the analysis advances understanding of brand trust by demonstrating that trust emerging from digital transparency is both enabled and bounded. In line with relationship and brand-trust research, the themes indicate that perceived transparency fosters trust by supporting beliefs in brand competence and integrity: seeing and understanding processes reassures consumers that the brand knows what it is doing and is not hiding critical information (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Delgado-Ballester, 2004; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). At the same time, participants' accounts underscore the conditional nature of this trust. Awareness of curation and staging in digital media leads some consumers to adopt a cautious stance, where transparency increases confidence but does not fully eliminate skepticism, echoing work suggesting that transparency can both build and jeopardize trust depending on how it is perceived (Sirdeshmukh et al., 2002; Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016; Martin et al., 2017).

Finally, placing these insights in the specific context of natural and organic cosmetics shows how behind-the-scenes storytelling intersects with ethical and sustainability expectations. Prior studies highlight that consumer in this sector increasingly demand proof of responsible sourcing and production, and that transparency about ingredients and supply chains can reinforce confidence in "green" and "clean" claims (McCarthy, 2016; Pandey et al., 2024). The present research adds that such proof is not only factual but also narrative: it must be embedded in stories that are process-based, clear and coherent with other brand signals if it is to support trust rather than fuel suspicion of greenwashing (Mehdiabadi, 2026; Montecchi et al., 2024).

6. Theoretical and Managerial Implications

6.1. Theoretical implications

This research advances theoretical understanding at the intersection of brand storytelling, transparency and trust in several ways. First, it enriches narrative approaches in marketing by conceptualizing process-based digital storytelling as a specific form of "narrative disclosure" through which brands render their practices visible and intelligible. Whereas prior work has largely emphasized how stories build emotional engagement and authenticity (Escalas, 2004; Herskovitz & Crystal, 2010; Lundqvist et al., 2013), the present findings show that behind-the-scenes narratives also function as vehicles for perceived transparency when they sequence production steps, explain decisions and connect ingredients, places and people.

Second, this article contributes to transparency research by grounding the construct in consumers' interpretive processes. Rather than treating transparency as a fixed organizational attribute defined by the quantity of information disclosed, the results support conceptualizations that frame it as a perception shaped by clarity, specificity and coherence (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016; Portes et al., 2020). Participants' accounts illustrate that

consumers actively evaluate whether digital stories make it easier to "connect the dots" and whether they align with other brand signals, thereby confirming that transparency is a fragile, relational outcome rather than a simple function of disclosure volume (Helme-Guizon & Magnoni, 2016; Montecchi et al., 2024).

Third, the study nuances existing models of brand trust by showing that trust derived from digital transparency in credence-heavy categories is inherently conditional. Consistent with commitment-trust and relationship marketing perspectives (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Sirdeshmukh et al., 2002), perceived transparency supports beliefs in brand competence and integrity, but participants also maintain a residual awareness of curation and staging. Trust therefore appears as a calibrated confidence that is strengthened when process storytelling and broader brand discourse are coherent, yet remains open to revision in the face of inconsistencies or perceived greenwashing (Martínez & Del Bosque, 2013).

6.2. Managerial implications

For managers of natural and organic cosmetics brands, the findings underline both the potential and the risks of relying on behind-the-scenes storytelling as a transparency strategy. First, the results suggest that simply increasing the quantity of BTS content is insufficient; what matters is showing production as a structured, comprehensible process. Brands should therefore design videos that clearly link sourcing, formulation and packaging, using concise explanations and concrete details (e.g., naming key ingredients, indicating origins, briefly justifying choices) so that consumers can follow the narrative and perceive it as an authentic effort to inform.

Second, managers need to ensure coherence across touchpoints. Participants in this study systematically compared what they saw in videos with information on packaging, websites and external signals such as labels or certifications. This implies that BTS narratives must be consistent with factual disclosures about ingredients, sourcing and sustainability practices; otherwise, transparency efforts risk being reinterpreted as selective story management and may undermine, rather than enhance, trust (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016; Montecchi et al., 2024). Integrating traceability tools, third-party certifications and responsive communication on social media can help sustain the credibility of transparency claims over time.

Finally, the research indicates that transparency-oriented storytelling should be approached as part of a long-term relational strategy rather than a one-off campaign. Because trust remains conditional, brands benefit from maintaining an ongoing dialogue in which they update, clarify and sometimes correct information in response to consumer questions and concerns. This relational orientation, which combines narrative openness with visible accountability, is likely to be particularly important in the natural cosmetics sector, where consumers are attentive to ethical, environmental and health-related issues and may scrutinize brands closely when evaluating whether transparency truly justifies their trust (Pandey et al., 2024; Mehdiabadi, 2026).

7. Limitations and future research

This research is subject to a few limitations that open avenues for future work. First, the empirical analysis relies on behind-the-scenes content from a single natural cosmetics brand, Floraison, which constrains the variability of storytelling styles, positioning strategies, and organizational practices considered. This brand-

specific focus is appropriate for an in-depth, interpretive study, but it limits the extent to which the findings can be generalized to other types of actors, such as mass-market brands, international groups, or retailers that also use process-based transparency narratives. Future research could therefore adopt comparative designs including multiple brands with different sizes, market positions, and degrees of “artisanal” identity, in order to examine how alternative forms of BTS storytelling are interpreted and how far the storytelling–transparency–trust chain holds across contexts.

Second, the analysis is based on a cross-sectional, interview-based design that captures consumers’ interpretations at a specific moment in time. Longitudinal and mixed-method approaches could investigate how perceptions of transparency and trust evolve as consumers repeatedly encounter BTS content, experiment with products, and integrate third-party information such as reviews, labels, or controversies. Experimental studies could also manipulate key features of BTS narratives; for example, the level of process detail, the visibility of imperfections, or the degree of coherence with other brand signals, to test their differential effects on perceived transparency, skepticism, and trust formation in natural cosmetics and related credence-driven categories.

8. Conclusion

This research set out to understand how digital narrative storytelling, and specifically behind-the-scenes videos, shapes perceived transparency and consumer trust in the natural cosmetics sector. Drawing on a qualitative, interpretive study, it showed that consumers do not simply react to isolated claims but actively construct meanings of transparency and trust as they interpret process-based stories about sourcing, formulation, and packaging. Across the three themes, the analysis demonstrated that when storytelling makes production processes visible, clear, and coherent with other brand signals, consumers are more likely to perceive brands as open, competent, and honest, which in turn supports the formation of trust.

At the same time, the findings revealed that transparency is experienced as a necessary but not sufficient condition for trust. Participants described trust as emerging from perceived transparency, yet remaining conditional and reflexive because they are aware that digital content is curated and strategically framed. Trust therefore appears as a calibrated confidence rather than a blind belief. It strengthens when process storytelling, disclosures, and broader brand discourse align, but it can weaken when consumers detect gaps or inconsistencies. By articulating this storytelling–transparency–trust chain in a credence-driven category, this research offers a consumer-centered, process-oriented perspective that enriches existing work on brand storytelling, transparency, and trust, and provides a foundation for future research and managerial strategies aimed at designing more credible transparency practices in beauty and related industries.

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