

# The Application and Implications of Fear Appeals in Short Videos for Beauty E-commerce

Jinrui Feng

School of Economics and Management, Chongqing University of Posts and Telecommunications, Chongqing 400065, China

**Abstract:** Short video advertising in e-commerce is rapidly gaining popularity, especially in the beauty industry. Many video creators rely on experience and intuition to strategically evoke user emotions in order to achieve effective marketing. This paper, framed within the theory of fear appeals, aims to explore the application of fear emotions in short videos for beauty e-commerce. It seeks to elucidate the inherent marketing logic of such videos and analyzes six commonly used forms of fear appeals from the perspective of video content composition. The study reveals that fear close-ups and the use of fear-inducing language are the most frequently employed techniques in this genre.

**Keywords:** Fear Appeals, E-commerce Short Videos, Beauty Industry Short Videos.

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the internet short video industry has experienced vigorous growth. According to a report released by the China Internet Network Information Center in 2023, as of June 2023, the number of internet users in China reached 1.079 billion, with an internet penetration rate of 76.4%. The user base for short videos reached 1.026 billion, constituting 95.2% of the overall internet users[1]. Data from the "2022 China Mobile Internet Annual Report" published by QuestMobile indicates a further increase in the stickiness of short video users, with monthly average usage time and frequency reaching 177.3 hours and 2633 times, respectively[2]. The substantial user base and extended usage time in short video platforms have attracted numerous self-media video creators. These creators, by producing high-quality video content, aim to capture user attention. Upon reaching a certain number of followers, their accounts gain considerable monetization value. The primary monetization methods on short video platforms include advertising, content payments, commercial live streaming, and e-commerce traffic diversion[3]. Notably, the development of e-commerce traffic diversion is swift, injecting fresh vitality into the traditional e-commerce landscape. As opportunities gradually diminish in the traditional e-commerce era, short video creators collaborate with businesses to produce and publish short videos with embedded product links, realizing a novel e-commerce model where users can make purchases while watching. According to the head of content governance for Douyin e-commerce, the content scale of e-commerce short videos on Douyin continued to exhibit robust growth in 2022, with a monthly addition of over 340,000 e-commerce authors, more than 200 million teaser videos, and over 9 million e-commerce live broadcasts. The annual Gross Merchandise Volume (GMV) reached 1.41 trillion yuan. The rise of e-commerce-driven short videos signifies the innovative convergence of e-commerce and short video domains. The close connection between the dissemination characteristics of short videos and the marketing demands of e-commerce fully leverages the situational and entertaining aspects of short video content while exploiting the amplifying effect of multi-level dissemination. This synergy, complementing the high conversion rate and low risk of social e-commerce, positions

e-commerce-driven short videos as an unstoppable trend. Short video platforms no longer merely provide entertaining videos for user leisure. Through e-commerce empowerment, users can directly make purchases within short videos, shortening the transaction process and seamlessly connecting content, information, services, and marketing. The e-commerce transformation of short videos enriches the forms of e-commerce in China, and its significant commercial value has been recognized by the market. Short video live-streamed sales and e-commerce-driven short videos have become the primary arenas for online shopping.

Cosmetics, as an independent and niche field, are highly sought after by young female audiences. In this diverse content ecosystem, short videos for beauty e-commerce have emerged as a prominent category, becoming one of the mainstream forms of e-commerce short videos. Featuring practical makeup techniques, product trials, and fashion trend sharing, these videos have successfully attracted a wide audience and formed a distinctive stream of short video content. This trend not only provides users with more personalized and targeted beauty guidance but also offers brands and businesses a more direct and vivid promotional channel, fostering the vigorous development of the beauty industry on short video platforms. In November 2022, the daily average views of e-commerce short videos in the beauty industry on Douyin reached 330 million, with over 100 million new users placing orders in 2021. Scholarly research has identified "personal experience," "product name," and "usage effects" as three essential elements in beauty e-commerce short videos, while "product texture," "product advantages," and similar aspects are considered optional. Moreover, the videos exhibit abundant rhetorical devices, such as exaggeration, metaphor, and frequent use of exclamatory, imperative, and interrogative sentences[4]. The prevalence of rhetorical devices and the emphasis on sentence structures suggest a clear emotional orientation in beauty e-commerce short videos. The emphasis on personal experience, product advantages, and efficacy explanations indicates a wealth of efficacy information in the videos, aligning perfectly with the theory of fear appeals. It can be argued that beauty e-commerce short videos enhance a sense of fear through exaggeration, metaphor, and emphasis on sentence structure, triggering fear in users. Subsequently, through

methods like product trials and ingredient explanations, they increase user response efficacy and self-efficacy awareness, motivating users to accept the proposed solution of purchasing the product to reduce their fear.

Therefore, the application of fear appeals theory in beauty e-commerce short videos has already occurred, although there is currently no detailed research by scholars. This paper, building on previous research, will provide specific coding definitions for the forms of fear appeals observed in beauty e-commerce short videos, laying the foundation for future studies in this area.

## 2. Fear Appeals

Fear appeal is a commonly used emotional appeal in advertising, fundamentally serving as a persuasive strategy. It involves presenting the audience with threats, often in the format of "if you don't..., then..." copy, encouraging them to choose and implement the recommended measures in the

advertisement. The research on fear appeal theory in the West can be traced back to the 1950s when scholars initially focused on fear, exploring the impact of the magnitude of fear in information on audience behavioral intentions. As cognitive research gained popularity, the cognitive perspective began to be favored in the study of fear appeals, with the fear variable gradually fading into the background. In recent years, research on the role of emotions as a driving force in behavior change theory has made a comeback, and attention to fear emotions has once again returned to the study of fear appeal theory[5].

Currently, scholars generally agree on the Extended Parallel Process Model (EPPM) in fear appeal research. According to this model, the audience evaluates fear appeal information twice (threat appraisal/efficacy appraisal). When both evaluations are high, the audience will consider and adopt the recommended measures in the information, resulting in the most effective fear appeal. The specific process is illustrated in the diagram below:

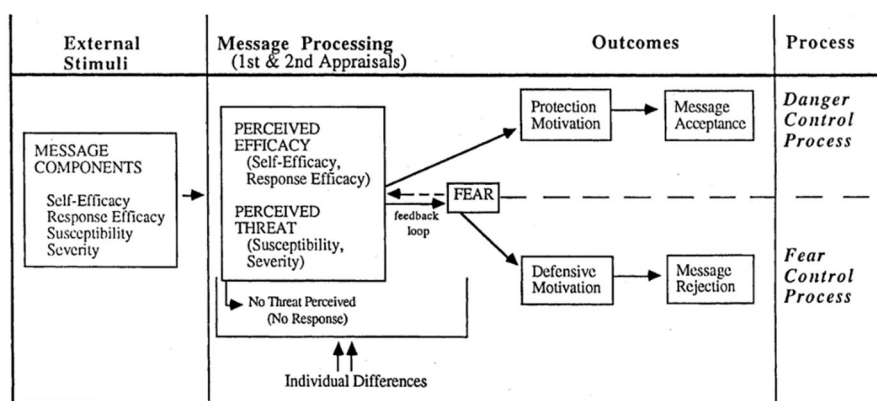


Figure 1. The Extended Parallel Process Model

Research on the application of fear appeals indicates that traditional mainstream applications are in public welfare and persuasive campaigns, such as anti-smoking, AIDS prevention, and anti-drunk driving public service advertisements. With the development of the theory, more scholars have discovered the significant role of fear appeals in the marketing domain. According to fear appeal theory, when users perceive a threat and experience fear, the probability of them adopting a solution to alleviate that fear is greatly increased if an immediate solution is provided. Therefore, in e-commerce short videos, presenting relevant threats directly and subsequently offering products as solutions can maximally induce users to engage in purchasing behavior. It is evident that fear appeal theory can be a part of marketing, unlike campaigns primarily focused on persuasion, such as anti-smoking advertisements or toothpaste commercials.

In domestic research, scholar Sun Beibei was among the first to recognize the application of fear appeals in e-commerce short videos. Specifically, through tactics such as pre-sale, flash sale, limited quantity, and limited-time discounts, creating a sense of scarcity marketing to enhance users' desire to purchase. This, in turn, generates a fear of missing out, prompting users to make purchases in order to alleviate that fear[6]. Building on this, Yang Ao and Wu Huixian used Li Jiaqi's live-streamed sales on the night of October 31, 2020, as an example to delve into the forms of fear appeals in Li Jiaqi's live-streamed sales and the reasons stimulating consumers to experience "fear"[7].

The aforementioned scholars innovatively approached the analysis from the perspective of fear appeals, combined with contemporary marketing models, and arrived at valuable conclusions. However, both analyses focused on the realm of live-streamed e-commerce. Currently, the specific forms of fear appeals in marketing remain at the semantic level, lacking more detailed forms for video creators to reference. Building upon the aforementioned analysis, this paper poses the following questions: What is the application logic of fear appeals in beauty e-commerce short videos? What are the existing forms of fear appeals in beauty e-commerce short videos?

## 3. The Application Logic of Fear Appeals in Beauty E-commerce Short Videos

Based on the persuasive nature of fear appeals, marketing applications continue to adopt the pattern of "if you don't..., then...". This paper posits that the Extended Parallel Process Model (EPPM) can effectively elucidate the marketing logic of fear appeals in beauty e-commerce short videos. Over an extended period of development, beauty short videos have evolved from initial 15-second formats to gradually extending to 1 minute. The increase in video duration implies richer content, and from the perspective of the EPPM model, it is evident that video content incorporates both fear and efficacy information.

Audiences initially assess the fear information in the videos,

such as swollen pimples or blackheads on the face. When the assessment results are high, it triggers the arousal of fear emotions. Subsequently, the efficacy information (related to the product) in the videos is evaluated, and the marketing

effectiveness of the short video is optimized when the efficacy assessment results are high. This process can be summarized by referring to the EPPM framework as follows.

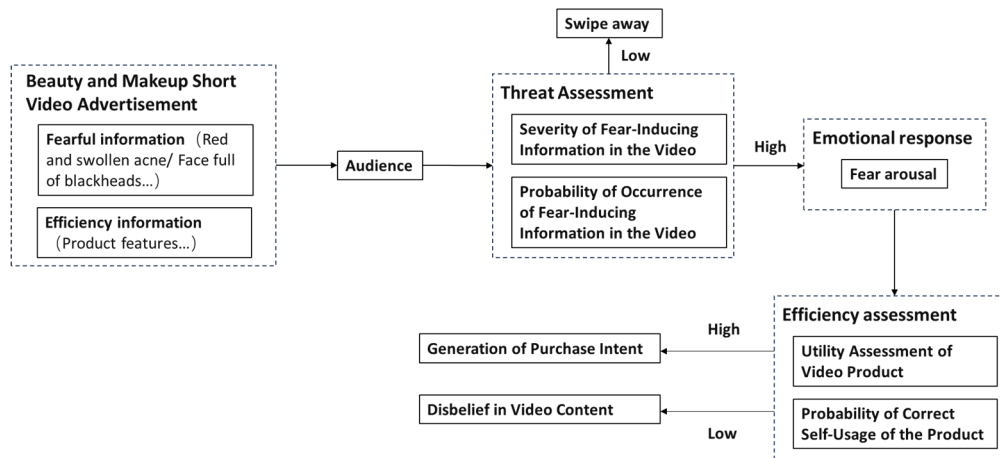


Figure 2. Fear appeal marketing logic of beauty short videos

#### 4. The Forms of Fear Appeals in Beauty E-commerce Short Videos

Fear is a psychological state inherent in humans and other organisms, representing one facet of emotions. It typically manifests as a natural and intense response to potential dangers, threats, or harm. From a psychological perspective, fear is a complex topic, and the factors that can induce fear vary from person to person. Some individuals experience fear towards animals, such as arachnophobia or ophidiophobia. Others may fear heights, experiencing significant tension even in secure environments, while some may fear confined spaces, eliciting substantial anxiety in enclosed environments. Thus, fear is ubiquitous.

In the realm of e-commerce short videos, elements of fear are meticulously crafted by creators as a "tool" to evoke psychological fear in the audience, thereby achieving effective marketing outcomes. This paper, drawing inspiration from the coding process of fear in magazines by Boris Bartikowski[8] and others, attempts to define fear appeals in e-commerce short videos and delineate the forms in which fear appeals manifest.

Firstly, studying the relevant classic literature on fear and fear appeal advertising, internalizing the definitions of fear and fear appeal advertising. Combining the usage environment and user characteristics of e-commerce short videos, a standard for fear appeal e-commerce short videos is derived. Scholars like Zahra[9] posit that fear is a primal instinct that occasionally guides and activates human behavior. Summarizing classic fear appeal studies, they found contradictory conclusions regarding the forms of fear-inducing information (low fear information; high fear information)[10-12]. That is, there is no optimal fear level that universally persuades all individuals. In terms of fear appeal advertising, Chung and Ahn suggest that fear appeal ads aim to stimulate audience anxiety, expecting viewers to reduce this anxiety through behaviors like adopting, continuing, stopping, or avoiding[13]. Anti-smoking ads aim to induce viewers to stop or avoid smoking behavior through fear appeals; public service ads aim to reinforce viewers adopting or continuing behaviors beneficial to society; and marketing ads hope to prompt viewers to adopt a product or continue

paying attention to a brand through fear appeals. Specifically, fear appeal marketing ads showcase the risks of using or not using specific products or services, illustrating dire consequences if the viewer does not make a purchase. In summary, from classic literature, it is understood that fear's guidance on audience behavior is contingent, with no specific optimal fear level universally effective; fear appeal marketing ads, by presenting risks related to products or services, evoke viewer anxiety to encourage product adoption or continued viewership. Considering the mass appeal and entertainment nature of e-commerce short videos, this paper posits that fear appeals in e-commerce short videos manifest in portraying the consequences of not using the related product or service, aiming to prompt user adoption or continued video viewing. Additionally, in the portrayal of fear, mild fear predominates, often employed to create a sense of urgency and anxiety, rarely genuinely inducing fear or a desire to escape in the audience. In identifying such videos, due to the contingent nature of fear's guidance on audience behavior and the mild nature of fear content in videos, it is not appropriate to rely solely on overtly frightening information (e.g., gory pictures or "your face is covered in pimples") as a discriminative criterion. This paper suggests that any information in the video that guides viewer anxiety (e.g., "The autumn-winter season is windy and dry," implying: skin cracking and peeling) can be considered an e-commerce short video with a fear appeal. For ease of subsequent discussion, this paper collectively terms various skin, hair, and cosmetics issues that appear in the beauty industry as beauty concerns.

##### 4.1. Fear Close-Up Encoding

A close-up is a commonly used cinematographic language to express the inner activities, thoughts, and emotions of characters. It strengthens the audience's emotional resonance by magnifying details physically. In this paper, we define "Fear Close-Up" as a cinematographic technique in videos that focuses on and magnifies a common beauty concern, such as "swollen pimples," "enlarged pores," "oily and messy hair," and others. The Fear Close-Up is not limited to a specific form; it can be a demonstration of the issues by the video creator or other relevant individuals, an enlargement of a photo depicting beauty concerns, or even a short animated segment

highlighting beauty issues. As a crucial element in e-commerce short videos, Fear Close-Up serves to evoke emotional resonance with users, possessing a unique and powerful impact. It is a visual representation, making it the core content in contemporary e-commerce short videos. Therefore, it is a direct expression of fear. In this type of shot, the audience experiences a more profound sense of the video's

fearful atmosphere through a visually impactful presentation, enhancing emotional effects. For the identification of Fear Close-Up, this paper considers it to be present when beauty concerns dominate the overall video frame or when a photo featuring localized beauty issues is displayed. Specific examples of Fear Close-Up are illustrated in the accompanying figures.



Figure 3. Fear close-up example1

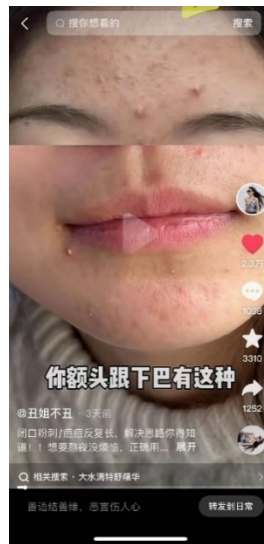


Figure 4. Fear close-up example2

## 4.2. Fear Discourse Encoding

"Discourse serves as the most direct method of expression, carrying emotions, information, and intentions that can directly touch the depths of individuals, guiding consumer emotions and prompting them to take action. Drawing upon the linguistic analysis results in beauty e-commerce short videos by Chen Kangjing [4], this paper defines 'Fear Discourse' as verbal expressions by content creators through elevated speech, tone, and intonation, containing explicit fear or guiding the audience towards fear. Examples include phrases like 'Do you find your makeup cakey, with constant blackheads and whiteheads...' and 'You're in big trouble if you don't use it!' Fear discourse primarily impacts the audience's auditory senses, inducing a relatively mild psychological effect without causing excessively intense shock. In

identifying fear discourse, it is essential to comprehensively evaluate the content creator's speech, tone, intonation, and textual content. Typically, the speech, tone, and intonation heavily rely on sentence structures, thus emphasizing declarative sentences, interrogative sentences, and rhetorical questions in the recognition process.

It's important to note that in beauty e-commerce short videos, other verbal elements may exist, such as keywords displayed on-screen and artistic text. These silent textual elements on the screen may also convey fearful information. However, for the purposes of this study, fear discourse is confined to spoken expressions by content creators, and no discussion is conducted regarding silent on-screen text. Specific instances of fear discourse are illustrated in the accompanying figures."



Figure 5. Fear discourse example1



Figure 6. Fear discourse example2

### 4.3. Fear Sound Encoding

"Fear Sound Effects" are a specific type of audio design aimed at eliciting tension and fear among the audience. In the context of beauty e-commerce short videos, the application of fear sound effects replaces traditional startling scenes and focuses more on creating a tense and stimulating atmosphere to evoke audience interest and curiosity. At the beginning of short videos, fear sound effects can pique the audience's curiosity and create a sense of mystery. Sudden intense sounds, rhythmic breathing, or heartbeat sound effects can capture the audience's attention in a very short time, making them interested in what will come next. In promotional campaigns, fear sound effects can be used to initiate countdowns or reveal intervals, increasing the sense of urgency and sparking the desire to shop. At the end of the video, fear sound effects can once again focus the audience's attention, reinforcing the impression of the beauty e-commerce short video in their minds. Fear sound effects convey fear through auditory means and have a very short duration, making it challenging to evoke fear emotions in the audience when presented alone. Therefore, fear sound effects often accompany fear close-ups or fear-inducing dialogues in beauty e-commerce short videos. For the identification of fear sound effects, the author, through watching numerous beauty e-commerce short videos with fear appeals, has summarized two most commonly used fear sound effects: one is an "explosion sound," and the other is the "beep" sound when a TV malfunctions, often accompanied by a glitchy screen appearance. This strategic use of sound effects makes beauty e-commerce short videos more engaging and enhances the effectiveness of fear appeals.

### 4.4. Fear Background Music Encoding

Background Music (BGM), also known as "ambient music" or "wallpaper music," refers to music played to create a specific environmental ambiance. Its functions include masking environmental noise and establishing an atmosphere that aligns with the surroundings[14]. In short videos, background music serves as a crucial means of arousing emotions. While evoking individual emotions, background music also amplifies specific emotional fluctuations, making them more intense during the dissemination process[15, 16]. Based on the definition of background music, it often appears as a supporting role to create an atmosphere. Therefore, this paper defines "Fear Background Music" as the music in e-commerce short videos that enhances the atmosphere of fear, suspense, or tension. Regarding the identification of fear background music, the paper suggests a judgment based on a 15-second duration. The initial time limit for Douyin short videos was set at 15 seconds, disrupting the fluidity of the music but simultaneously expanding the associative space for the audience. In the current stage, the duration of e-commerce short videos is around 60 seconds, allowing for the portrayal of various emotional atmospheres. Fear background music often serves as an introduction and backdrop to the atmosphere of fear, enhancing the video's texture and appeal.

### 4.5. Fear Color Encoding

Color has profound effects in psychology and art, and specific color choices can enhance emotions such as fear, tension, or mystery. In this paper, "Fear Colors" in e-commerce short videos are defined as specific color combinations or tones that evoke fear or unease in the visual expression of the video. Some common fear colors include dark green (a sense of eeriness and danger), deep red (a feeling of danger and tension), and deep blue (a sense of loneliness and sinking). However, it is essential to pay special attention to the influence of different cultural backgrounds in identifying fear colors. For example, deep red often represents festivity and warmth in China; thus, color may have different emotional associations for individuals from different backgrounds. Therefore, the recognition and application of fear colors need to consider the specific cultural context. Currently, the frequency of using colors to convey fear information in e-commerce short videos is not very high. This may be attributed to the fact that colors, as core elements in videos, require careful selection to avoid triggering negative emotions or causing viewers to stop watching the video. As creativity and e-commerce short video marketing become more professional, fear colors are likely to be applied effectively in specific sales scenarios and within certain cultural or festive contexts.

### 4.6. Fear Effect Encoding

"Video effects" refer to the technical means of enhancing or altering the content of a video by adding various visual effects, animations, or graphics during the video editing process. These effects can make the video more engaging, lively, or be used to express specific emotions and themes. In the context of short-form e-commerce videos, video effects differ from traditional video effects. Traditional effects have a broader meaning and involve more complex technology. In e-commerce short videos, the focus of effects is more centered on facial transformations achieved through technical means. These effects are often built-in functionalities provided by short video platforms, allowing users to directly apply them during the video creation process without relying on professional video editing software. "Fear effects" represent one category among the various effects in videos, such as the Hulk effect, facial aging effect, devil effect, etc. Due to the inherently entertaining nature of short video platforms, fear effects tend to induce a relatively mild sense of fear in practical use. Additionally, content creators, for reasons such as showcasing product effects or enhancing audience trust, use fear effects less frequently in videos.

### 4.7. Summary of Fear Appeals Forms

In summary, through the analysis of numerous short videos in the beauty and cosmetics e-commerce domain, six existing forms of fear appeals have been identified, namely: Fear Close-ups, Fear Discourse, Fear Sound Effects, Fear Background Music, Fear Colors, and Fear Special Effects, as explained in detail in the table below.

**Table 1.** Summary of fear appeal forms in beauty e-commerce short videos

Manifestations	Specific Explanation
Fear close-up	In the video, close-ups are used to highlight and enlarge details of human body parts or things that can easily cause users to feel nervous, anxious, etc., such as enlarging red and swollen acne on the face.
Fear discourse	In the video, the blogger's voice, tone and intonation are likely to cause anxiety among users, such as "If you don't use it, you'll be finished!".
Fear sound	Short-term sound effects (within 3 seconds of playback time) that may cause user anxiety are played in the video, such as explosions.
Fear background music	Play background music in the video that may cause user anxiety (playing time exceeds 15 seconds), such as suspenseful music.
Fear color	The video shows color-matching images that can easily cause anxiety among users, such as eerie green.
Fear effect	In the video, the blogger uses video special effects that can easily cause anxiety among users, such as devil face special effects.

## 5. Conclusion

According to the previous theoretical analysis, we have identified a traceable effectiveness of fear appeals in beauty and cosmetics e-commerce short videos. Simultaneously, through the analysis of video content, we have identified six specific forms of fear appeals in beauty and cosmetics e-commerce short videos, providing valuable reference for video creators in composing fear elements. Currently, many video creators rely on experience and commercial inspiration to incorporate fear appeals in videos, but the actual usage often results in cluttered content that fails to achieve the desired effect. Among the six identified forms, the first two are direct fear appeals, while the latter four are auxiliary fear appeals. Considering the mass entertainment nature of beauty and cosmetics e-commerce short videos, we recommend a combination of at least two direct fear appeals and one auxiliary fear appeal, utilizing a dual-stimulus of visual and auditory elements to ensure the arousal of audience fear emotions, thereby achieving the best marketing results.

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