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FROM REACH TO AWARENESS: ONLINE BRAND AWARENESS OF A NICHE HUNGARIAN SKINCARE BRAND – THE CASE OF ELYN'S LAB

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Introduction: A large online reach does not automatically become brand awareness, which is a particular problem for niche brands competing with established ones. Elyn's Lab, a young Hungarian manufacturer of active-ingredient skincare, illustrates this: a TikTok video of the brand was seen 5.2 million times, yet few consumers know the brand.

Aim: The aim of this paper is to examine why reach does not become awareness for a niche skincare brand and to derive from the literature and the data an online campaign design that can be evaluated.

Materials and Methods: An exploratory single-case study combined an online questionnaire (N = 31, convenience sample, January–February 2026) with secondary data on the retail turnover of cosmetics and toiletries in Hungary (2006–2025), deflated with the price index of personal care products. Awareness was estimated with Wilson confidence intervals; trend and seasonality were estimated from real values. SWOT, Porter's five forces, and PESTEL were used as contextual tools.

Results: Aided awareness was 12.9% (4 of 31; 95% CI 5.1–28.9%), and price and customer reviews were the most important choice factors. Real turnover grew by 3.4% per year in 2006–2025 but only by 1.7% per year in 2019–2025, and most of the nominal growth in 2022–2023 reflected higher prices. Sales peak in the fourth quarter (seasonal index 1.15). Three propositions (reach is not sufficient for awareness; educational content from credible sources supports awareness; reviews and an incentive support the first purchase) are the basis of an ex ante campaign design with indicators and a sample-size-based evaluation plan.

Conclusion: Niche brands should aim at relevant, memorable, and credible exposure of the primary target group rather than at reach alone. The propositions and the campaign design are untested and require a larger sample and a pilot.

Keywords: brand awareness; online marketing; skincare; retinol; edutainment

INTRODUCTION

Background and research problem

Brand awareness is a precondition for a brand to be considered at the moment of purchase (Keller, 1993; Hoyer & Brown, 1990). For small and niche brands, it is also a difficult goal: they have fewer buyers than established brands, and their buyers tend to be slightly less loyal (Ehrenberg et al., 1990), and small firms manage their brands with fewer resources and in a different way than large ones (Berthon et al., 2008). Online channels make it possible to reach large audiences at a low cost, but exposure does not guarantee that

the brand is noticed, remembered and recognised by the people who could actually buy it.

Elyn's Lab illustrates this problem. It is a Hungarian manufacturer of active-ingredient-focused cosmetics, established in 2022 (Elyn's Lab, n.d.), and its main product in this study is a serum with 0.5% retinol. Retinol is one of the best-documented active ingredients against the signs of skin ageing (Mukherjee et al., 2006; Zasada & Budzisz, 2019), but it is photosensitive, so the serum is meant for the night-time routine and has to be used regularly for several months (Mukherjee et al., 2006). A TikTok video of the brand was seen 5.2 million times, whereas in the questionnaire of this study only 4 of 31 respondents had heard of the brand. This gap between reach and awareness is the research problem of the paper.

Aim and research questions

The aim of this paper is to examine, in the case of Elyn's Lab, why a large online reach does not become brand awareness for a niche skincare brand in the Hungarian market, and to derive from the literature and the data an online campaign design that can be evaluated. The following research questions are asked:

- RQ1: How high is the aided awareness of Elyn's Lab in an exploratory sample, and how precisely can it be estimated?
- RQ2: Which factors do the respondents consider when choosing skincare products?
- RQ3: How has the retail turnover of cosmetics and toiletries in Hungary developed in real terms, what is its seasonal pattern, and what does it mean for the timing of marketing activities?
- RQ4: Which characteristics of content and channels could, according to the literature, explain the gap between reach and awareness, and how can they be built into an evaluable campaign design?

The scientific contribution of the paper is a conceptual model of the path from reach to awareness and first purchase for niche brands in a small market, together with a deflated and seasonally analysed picture of the Hungarian cosmetics market in 2006–2025. The practical contribution is a campaign design for Elyn's Lab with measurable indicators and an evaluation plan that states the sample size needed to detect the intended change.

Theoretical background and propositions

Brand awareness and reach

Awareness is the first element of customer-based brand equity: consumers have to be able to recognise or recall the brand in a purchase situation (Keller, 1993). Awareness influences choice, especially for common, repeat-purchase products where consumers tend to choose brands they know (Hoyer & Brown, 1990; Macdonald & Sharp, 2000). Reach (the number of people exposed to a message) is only a measure of exposure; whether the exposure turns into recognition or recall depends on whether the message is noticed, is relevant for the person, and is remembered. This leads to the first proposition: P1: Reach is necessary but not sufficient for brand awareness in the target group.

Edutainment and branded content

Entertainment-education messages combine information with a narrative, and the narrative form can lower resistance to persuasion (Moyer-Gusé, 2008). In branded entertainment, the brand is integrated into the content, and memory for the brand depends on how it is connected to the plot (Russell, 2002). For a product that needs explanation,

such as a retinol serum, an educational narrative is therefore a plausible way to make the brand memorable without direct advertising.

Influencers, eWOM and social proof

The credibility of the source is an important element of social media communication: the value of the message and the credibility of the influencer influence the trust in branded content (Lou & Yuan, 2019), and the effect of influencer posts depends on characteristics such as the number of followers and how distinctive the advertised product is (De Veirman et al., 2017). Electronic word of mouth, such as customer reviews, influences purchase decisions and sales (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004), and consumers' perception of brands is shaped both by communication created by the company and by communication created by other users (Schivinski & Dąbrowski, 2016). This leads to two further propositions: P2: Awareness among the target group is more likely if the content has informational or narrative value and comes from credible sources. P3: The step from awareness to first purchase is supported by customer reviews and an incentive that lowers the perceived risk of the first purchase.

Conceptual model

The propositions are summarised in the conceptual model shown below. The model adds the constraints of niche brands (small budget, low market share and the loyalty of consumers to established brands) as a condition that makes the path from reach to awareness more difficult.

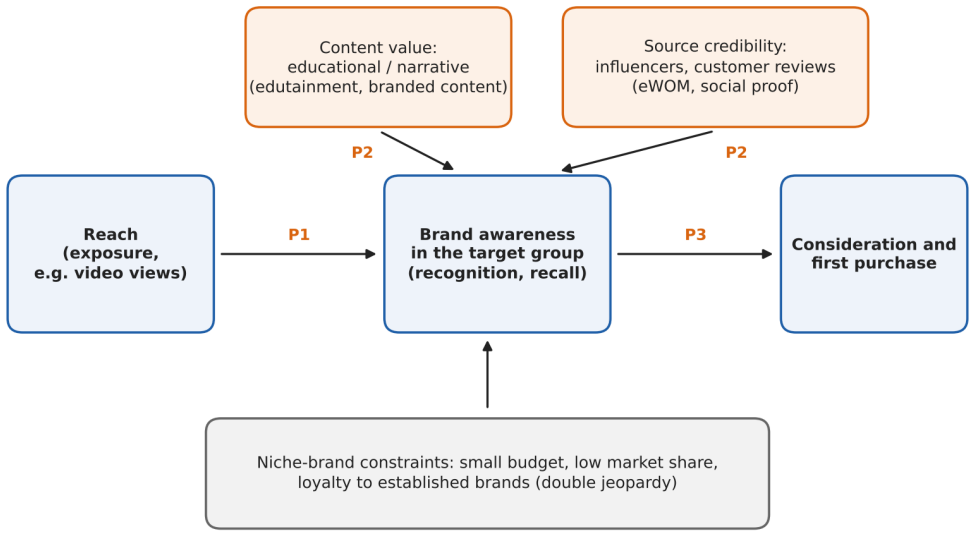


Figure 1 Conceptual model: from reach to awareness and first purchase (P1–P3: propositions)

Target group

The target audience consists of women aged 20–45 who are interested in skin health and consciously choose their skincare products. Two groups are distinguished within this audience, and the division is used throughout the paper: the primary target group is

women aged 30–45, who are already concerned with ageing and wrinkles, and the secondary target group is women aged 20–29, who start to explore skincare and for whom retinol serves as prevention.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research design

The study is an exploratory single-case study. It combines primary data from a short online questionnaire with secondary market data, and it uses the literature to formulate propositions that are compared with the data in a descriptive way. The case was chosen because the gap between reach and awareness is visible in it. The research was carried out ex ante: the data were collected in January–February 2026, and the proposed campaign is planned for the period 1 March–28 June 2027. The campaign has not been implemented, so the paper reports no campaign results, and all campaign values (goals, costs, estimated reach) are planned values.

Primary data

The questionnaire covered the age and gender of the respondents, the frequency of using skincare products, the factors considered when choosing them, monthly spending on skincare, the brands used, and awareness of Elyn's Lab (whether the respondent had ever heard of it, which is aided awareness), together with the way the brand was encountered. It was distributed online in target user groups on Facebook, and the data were collected in January–February 2026. The sample consisted of 31 respondents (N = 31) and was a convenience sample (Etikan et al., 2016): respondents were not selected randomly, and women aged 20–29 were over-represented. The data were analysed descriptively, with absolute numbers and percentages, and the precision of the proportions was estimated with 95% Wilson confidence intervals (Brown et al., 2001). Because of the sample size and the lack of cross-tabulated data, no tests of differences between groups were carried out.

Secondary data

Secondary data were the retail turnover of cosmetics and toiletries (current prices, million HUF), yearly for 2006–2025 and quarterly for 2022–2025 (Hungarian Central Statistical Office [KSH], n.d.-a, n.d.-b). The quarterly data are published separately and may differ slightly from the yearly data (the 2025 quarterly sum is 0.3% higher than the yearly value). To obtain real values, the nominal values were deflated with the annual (or quarterly) average of the monthly harmonised index of consumer prices (HICP) for personal care products in Hungary (Eurostat, 2026), expressed in 2025 prices. The trend was described with compound annual growth rates and a log-linear trend, and the existence of a monotonic trend was checked with Kendall's rank correlation. Seasonality was estimated from the real quarterly values by the ratio to the centred moving average, a standard classical decomposition (Hyndman & Athanasopoulos, 2021); the seasonal indices are normalised so that their average is 1. The quarterly series is short (16 quarters), so seasonal indices are based on three observations per quarter and are only indicative.

Contextual analysis

The position of the brand was described with a SWOT analysis, Porter's five forces (Porter, 1980, 2008) and PESTEL. They were used as structured checklists: each factor is

recorded as an observation together with its implication for building awareness, without scoring.

RESULTS

Exploratory survey

Of the 31 respondents, 24 (77.4%, 95% CI 60.2–88.6%) are between the ages of 20 and 29, and 26 (83.9%, 95% CI 67.4–92.9%) are female. Most females aged 20–29 use skincare products daily, and for them the most important factors when deciding which skincare product to buy are price and other customers' reviews (RQ2). The respondents seem to be price-sensitive: 11 respondents (35.5%) spend less than HUF 5,000 per month on skincare products, 13 (41.9%) spend between HUF 5,000 and HUF 10,000, and 7 (22.6%) spend more than HUF 10,000. The big spenders belong to different age groups; only those who are above 50 or under 20 do not spend over HUF 10,000.

The respondents mostly use bigger brands (such as La Roche-Posay, Vichy, Bioderma, CeraVe), while smaller brands similar to Elyn's Lab (such as Geek&Gorgeous, Revox B77, Purito) are less known. Only 4 of 31 respondents (12.9%) had ever heard of Elyn's Lab (RQ1). Because of the small sample, this estimate is imprecise: the 95% confidence interval is 5.1–28.9%, i.e., even its upper bound means that most of the sample did not know the brand. Those who knew the brand encountered it mainly in social media and other online advertisements. This may mean that the online presence of the brand is not strong enough, or that the offline presence (e.g., in dm-drogerie markt stores) needs more emphasis; the questionnaire did not examine purchases in stores, so the second explanation should be tested in further research.

Market demand in real terms

Nominal retail turnover of cosmetics and toiletries rose from HUF 186.5 billion in 2006 to HUF 775.7 billion in 2025, which is a compound annual growth rate of 7.8%. After deflating with the HICP for personal care products, the real turnover rose from HUF 408.6 billion to HUF 775.7 billion (in 2025 prices), a growth rate of 3.4% per year (RQ3; Figure 2). The log-linear trend gives 8.1% per year in nominal terms ($R^2 = 0.98$) and 4.2% per year in real terms (95% CI 3.6–4.8%; $R^2 = 0.93$; Kendall's $\tau = 0.90$, $p < 0.001$). Since consecutive years are correlated (Durbin–Watson = 0.63), the interval is probably too narrow and should be read as indicative.

The real growth was not even. It was 4.2% per year in 2006–2019, but only 1.7% per year in 2019–2025. Real turnover fell in 2019 (−2.1%), 2020 (−2.2%), 2021 (−0.4%) and 2023 (−1.0%). The steepest nominal increases came in 2022 (21.6%) and 2023 (17.1%), but the prices of personal care products rose by 14.8% and 18.3% in these years, so the real growth was 6.0% in 2022 and negative in 2023. In 2024 and 2025, the real growth was 6.6% and 1.8%. The pandemic that started in 2020 can explain only part of the stagnation, because the real decline started already in 2019.

The quarterly data for 2022–2025 show a clear seasonal pattern (Figure 3). The fourth quarter was the highest in each year and the first quarter the lowest. The seasonal indices of the real values are 0.91 for the first, 0.97 for the second, 0.97 for the third and 1.15 for the fourth quarter, i.e., the fourth quarter is about 15% above the average level. A possible explanation is gift buying before Christmas, which has not been tested here.

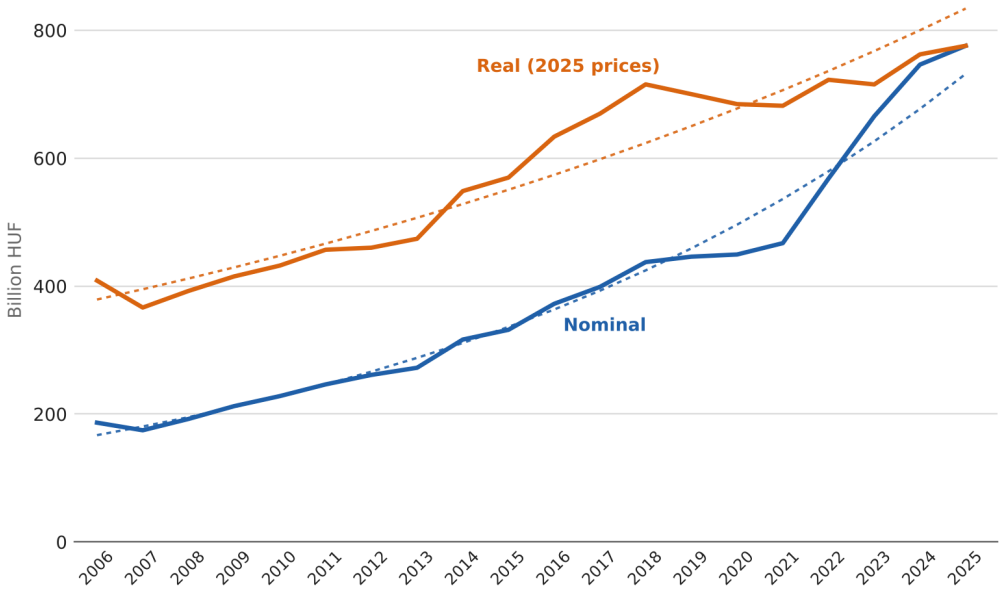


Figure 2 Retail trade turnover of cosmetics and toiletries, yearly, nominal and real values (2025 prices), billion HUF; dotted lines show log-linear trends (KSH, n.d.-a; Eurostat, 2026)

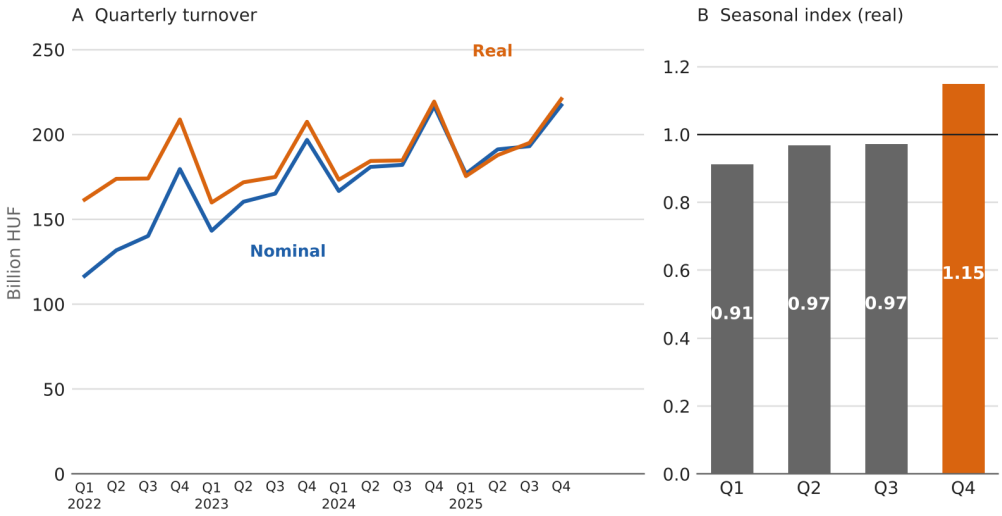
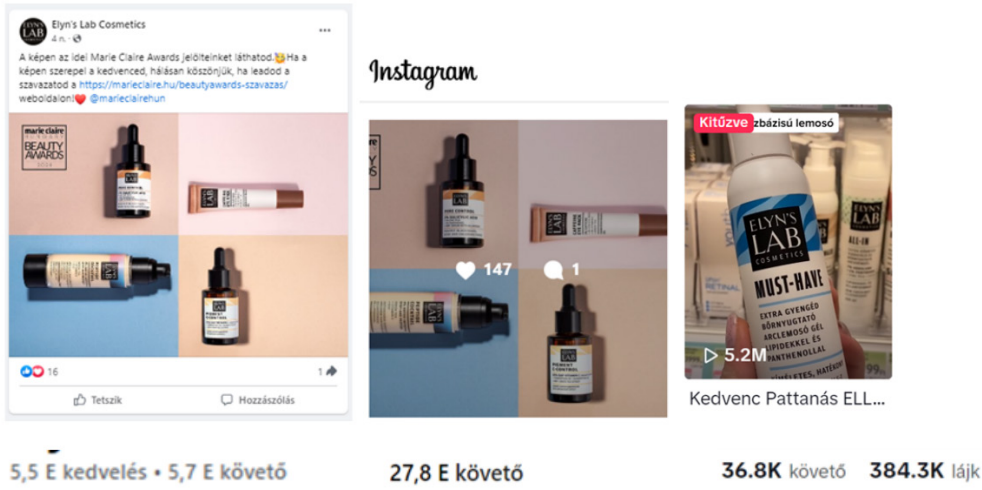


Figure 3 Retail trade turnover of cosmetics and toiletries, quarterly, 2022–2025: (A) nominal and real values (2025 prices), (B) seasonal indices of the real values (KSH, n.d.-b; Eurostat, 2026)

Reach and awareness of Elyn's Lab

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
research-based active ingredients	new small company, not known
water-based products	photosensitivity – can only use retinol at night
TikTok presence – better statistics and engagement	Instagram presence – many followers but not much engagement
very transparent and informative	Facebook presence – even worse engagement
product range – focused	less financial background for R&D
not tested on animals	
price	
webshop is easy to use	
OPPORTUNITIES	**THREATS**
to grow the fanbase	many strong competitors
product range could be expanded (body, hand etc.)	economic instability
vegan products	trends change quickly
sustainable operation	need for constant innovation
dm – special display, special campaign	

Table 1 Elyn's Lab position (SWOT)



(Facebook) – 16 likes, 1 share
(Instagram) – 147 likes, 1 comment
(TikTok) – seen by 5.2 million

Figure 4 Elyn's Lab social media presence

The online presence of the brand is uneven (Figure 4). The TikTok video was seen 5.2 million times, whereas the Instagram post has 147 likes and 1 comment, and the Facebook post has 16 likes and 1 share. The number of views is not the number of unique people, and the views are not limited to Hungary or to the target group. Compared with the 12.9% aided awareness (95% CI 5.1–28.9%), this shows the gap between reach and awareness described in the research problem. Several explanations are possible and cannot be separated with the present data: the video may have reached

people outside the target group or outside Hungary; viewers may have seen it without remembering the brand; the respondents, who were recruited in Facebook groups, may differ from the TikTok audience; or the small sample does not represent the people reached. The data are consistent with P1 (reach does not guarantee awareness), but they do not show why.

Contextual analysis

The contextual analysis is summarised in Table 2. Its main implication is that the brand competes in a market with many alternatives and loyal buyers of established brands, so its communication has to explain why a retinol serum is needed, to use credible sources and to support the first purchase. The primary target group (women aged 30–45) is concerned with ageing and wrinkles and may have a higher willingness to invest in skincare, while the secondary group (women aged 20–29) is influenced by trends, social media and peer recommendations. Most respondents (24 of 31) belong to the secondary group, so the survey results mainly reflect their behaviour.

Factor	Observation	Implication for awareness
Threat of new entrants	Entry needs capital for R&D, manufacturing and regulatory compliance; established brands have loyal customers (Porter, 2008).	Loyalty to established brands has to be overcome by a niche brand.
Substitutes	Other anti-ageing ingredients (vitamin C, peptides, hyaluronic acid), cosmetic procedures and multi-purpose products.	Communication has to explain why retinol is needed.
Suppliers' power	Few suppliers of high-quality retinol could increase their power (assumption, not tested).	Affects costs rather than awareness.
Buyers' power	Informed consumers, many alternatives; respondents are price-sensitive and rely on reviews.	Reviews, social proof and price competitiveness matter.
Rivalry	Many players, from international brands to local start-ups; differentiation is the suggested strategy (Porter, 1980).	Differentiation (water-based formula, active ingredients) has to be made known.
Political	No direct effect on awareness identified in this study.	–
Economic	Spending power affects non-essential purchases; real market growth is moderate (Results).	Price sensitivity; awareness has to be built at a low cost.
Social	Interest in health and wellness and in conscious consumption; some customers may prefer Hungarian brands.	Ingredient transparency and local origin can be communicated.
Technological	Advances in formulation and manufacturing; digital channels.	Digital channels allow measurable communication.
Environmental	Growing demand for animal-friendly and sustainable products.	Can support the message, if true for the product.
Legal	EU Regulation 1223/2009 on cosmetic products (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2009).	Claims must stay within the regulation.

Table 2 Contextual analysis: observations and implications for building awareness (Porter, 1980, 2008; European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2009)

DISCUSSION

Interpretation of the main results

The results are consistent with the propositions in a limited, descriptive way. Regarding P1, the gap between 5.2 million views and 12.9% aided awareness in a small sample suggests that reach alone does not create awareness, in line with the view that awareness requires that the brand is noticed and remembered by the right people (Keller, 1993). Regarding P3, price and customers' reviews were the most important choice factors in the sample, which is in line with research showing that customer reviews influence sales (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006). P2 could not be tested with the present data, because the questionnaire did not measure exposure to specific content; it is therefore built into the campaign design as a proposition to be tested.

The market data add two points. First, real growth of the market is moderate (4.2% per year in the long run and 1.7% per year since 2019), so a brand cannot expect to grow only because the market grows; most of the growth of a small brand has to come from a larger share of the market, which is difficult because consumers are loyal to established brands (Ehrenberg et al., 1990). Second, because of the seasonal pattern, the planning horizon of March–June is a low-demand period (seasonal indices 0.91 and 0.97 for the first and second quarters), so the campaign is expected to build awareness and a customer base before the peak, and its direct effect on sales is expected to be smaller than in the fourth quarter. These interpretations come from a small sample and a short quarterly series and have to be treated with caution (see Limitations).

Practical implications: proposed campaign design

This section translates the propositions into a campaign design. It is an ex ante plan for a four-month period (planned for 1 March–28 June 2027) and has not been implemented or tested. The available budget is EUR 50,000. The design is not a prediction of results but a set of testable assumptions.

Goals and indicators

Awareness goal: aided awareness in the target group increases by 30% in relative terms, from 12.9% to approximately 16.8% (3.9 percentage points). This value is a planning assumption, not a forecast, because the baseline comes from a small sample (95% CI 5.1–28.9%). It is therefore to be measured again before the campaign.

Sales goal: sales of the retinol serum are 20% higher in relative terms than a seasonally comparable baseline, i.e., the same months of the previous year if available. Since the real market growth is only about 2–4% per year, most of such an increase would have to come from a larger market share, which makes the goal ambitious and again a hypothesis to be tested.

Indicators: aided awareness in the target group (survey), website visits, click-through rate of the ads, views and completion of the film, coupon use by source, conversion rate (orders divided by visits) and cost per first purchase (spending divided by the number of first purchases).

Strategy and channels

The strategy follows from the insights in Table 3 and the conceptual model: content with educational and narrative value (P2), credible sources (P2, P3) and a trigger for the first purchase (P3). The channel structure is shown in Figure 5.

• Insights	Strategy
Young adults are not concerned about ageing yet	To educate young adults and persuade them that it pays to take care of skin from their 20s
Adult women (30–45) are concerned with ageing and may struggle with mid-life crisis	To focus on adult women as a primary target audience and provide solutions to their problems
Many people already have their favourite skincare products and stay loyal to the brands they like	A powerful trigger for the first purchase is needed

Table 3 Insights and strategy

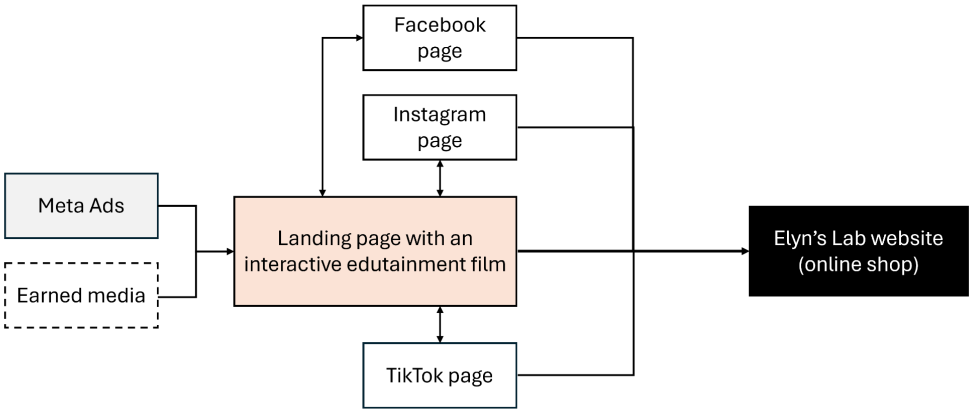


Figure 5 Campaign channel structure

- Interactive educational film: a 15–20 minute film about a woman from the primary target group who is worried about ageing. At certain points, the film stops, and the viewer chooses how the character should proceed, and each choice is followed by a short comment from an expert (a cosmetologist for questions of skin health, a psychologist for questions of well-being). The brand is integrated into the plot in a discreet way (Russell, 2002). At the end, viewers can obtain a discount for the first purchase in exchange for an e-mail address.
- Influencers: two Hungarian beauty influencers whose audience matches the target groups, selected according to the match with the target groups and the credibility of their recommendations, not only the number of followers (De Veirman et al., 2017; Lou & Yuan, 2019). They present the film and the product in reviews and tutorials.
- Paid social media advertising (Meta Ads): promoted posts that link to the landing page with the film. The ads are planned for two of the four months, following the release of the film, to drive traffic while the film is new and to stay within the budget; in the remaining months, the campaign relies on influencers and publications. The audience is women aged 20–45 in Hungary, targeted by interests related to skincare and anti-ageing. The planned budget is EUR 30 per day for two months

(about EUR 1,800); the estimate of the advertising platform for this budget and audience is 18.7–54.2 thousand accounts reached per day, which is a platform estimate and not a result.
- Publications on beauty and lifestyle portals: sponsored articles and interviews, educational content on skincare routines with links to the webshop, and giveaways for readers.

Evaluation design

The evaluation has three parts. (1) Awareness is measured with the same questionnaire before and after the campaign on independent samples. With a baseline of 12.9%, a two-sided test at the 5% level and 80% power, detecting an increase to 16.8% needs about 1,300 respondents per wave, an increase to 20% about 430, and an increase to 25% about 165. Smaller samples can therefore detect only large changes, and the result should be reported with a confidence interval and separately for the primary target group. (2) Sales and conversions are tracked by channel with tagged links and coupon codes, and sales are compared with the same months of the previous year because of seasonality. (3) Engagement and reach indicators are used as process indicators and not as evidence of awareness (P1). A before–after design without a control group cannot completely separate the effect of the campaign from other influences, which is a limitation of the design.

Budget

The planned costs amount to EUR 45,800 out of the available EUR 50,000 (Table 4); the remaining EUR 4,200 (8.4%) is a reserve that is not allocated. The allocation follows the roles in the conceptual model: content creation (the film, EUR 15,000) provides the content value, influencers (EUR 19,000) and portals (EUR 10,000) provide credible sources and additional reach, and advertising (EUR 1,800) drives traffic to the film. The amounts are planning assumptions that have to be confirmed with price quotes and are not derived from market benchmarks.

Type	Planned cost (EUR)
Meta Ads	1,800
Influencers	19,000
Portals and Magazines	10,000
Video Production	15,000
Total	45,800

Table 4 Budget plan (planned values)

Limitations

The study has several limitations. First, the sample of the questionnaire is small (N = 31), non-random and recruited online in Facebook groups, and most respondents are aged 20–29, so the results cannot be generalised to the Hungarian market or to the primary target group, and the confidence intervals are wide. Second, only aided awareness was measured, not unaided recall, and no inferential tests of differences between groups were possible. Third, the questionnaire did not examine purchases in stores, so the conclusions about offline presence are only assumptions. Fourth, the market data cover the retail turnover of cosmetics and toiletries in general, not niche skincare; the deflator is a general price

index of personal care products, and the quarterly series covers only four years. Fifth, the propositions and the conceptual model were not tested statistically, and the explanation of the gap between reach and awareness is not proven. Sixth, the campaign is an ex ante plan: its goals, costs and estimated reach are planned values, and no campaign results exist.

Recommendations and further research

Further research should repeat the questionnaire on a larger sample that includes enough women aged 30–45 (at least about 430 respondents per wave, see above) and should use tests of differences between groups (e.g., awareness by age group) and a regression of the factors of product choice. The explanation for the gap between reach and awareness can be examined with the analytics data of the TikTok video (country and age of viewers). The campaign should first be tested in a pilot phase, and its effect should be measured as described above.

Because of the seasonality of sales, a seasonal campaign should be prepared for the fourth quarter, when demand is about 15% above average, and competition is the highest. If limited-edition products are offered, the scarcity effect (Lynn, 1991) can increase the need to buy them, and an early start of the campaign may be useful because people tend to choose the option presented first (Carney & Banaji, 2012).

CONCLUSIONS

The paper examined why a large online reach did not become brand awareness for a niche Hungarian skincare brand. In the exploratory sample, aided awareness of Elyn's Lab was 12.9% (4 of 31; 95% confidence interval 5.1–28.9%), although a video of the brand was seen 5.2 million times, and price and customers' reviews were the most important factors in choosing skincare products (RQ1, RQ2). The retail turnover of cosmetics and toiletries grew by 3.4% per year in real terms in 2006–2025, but only by 1.7% per year since 2019, and most of the strong nominal growth in 2022–2023 reflected higher prices; sales peak in the fourth quarter (RQ3).

The scientific contribution is a conceptual model with three propositions: reach is necessary but not sufficient for awareness, educational or narrative content from credible sources supports awareness, and reviews and an incentive support the first purchase. The practical contribution is a campaign design with measurable indicators and an evaluation plan that states the sample size needed to detect the intended change (RQ4). The case suggests that niche brands should aim at relevant, memorable and credible exposure of the primary target group rather than at reach alone.

The main limitations are the small convenience sample, the lack of statistical tests of the propositions and the fact that the campaign is an ex ante plan without results. The findings are therefore indicative, and the next step is to repeat the research on a larger sample and to test the campaign design in a pilot.

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