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Analysis Section: Rhode

Introduction

Celebrity-founded beauty brands occupy a complex space in digital culture where authenticity functions both as a marketing strategy and emotional currency. Hailey Bieber's Rhode Skin exemplifies this duality. Launched in 2022, Rhode presents itself as minimalist, transparent, and rooted in care, values that align with the influencer era's demand for sincerity. Yet when Rhode announced a product resizing and price change in 2025, public reaction revealed the fragility of that trust. Through an email sent to subscribers, the brand justified the change as a commitment to "preserving integrity and quality." On TikTok, creators and audiences debated whether that message signaled authenticity or manipulation.

This paper analyzes the rhetorical life cycle of Rhode's 2025 price-change communication. Specifically, it examines a chain of three interconnected media acts: (1) Rhode's official "Product Update" email, (2) influencer responses that translate and reframe that message, and (3) audience comment threads that negotiate meaning in real time. Using Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, I trace how corporate language of care travels through digital affective economies, becoming sincerity, fatigue, or skepticism depending on its interpreter.

Research Questions:

1. How does Rhode encode justification for resizing and repricing?

2. How do influencers negotiate and reframe that encoded message?
3. How do audience comments accept, modify, or oppose those meanings?

Thesis:

Rhode's rhetoric of care transforms corporate necessity into moral sincerity. Through aesthetic calm, emotional language, and relational tone, the brand encodes its business decision as empathy. Influencers decode that care through empathy, fatigue, or critique, and audiences further translate those emotions through comment discourse. Across this chain, trust emerges not as belief but as a performed affect that sustains consumer attachment in digital capitalism.

Object Selection and Methodology

The primary research objects (ROs) are:

1. Rhode Skin, "Product Update" email (sent to subscribers, June 4, 2025).
2. @rachelwiseman, "Rhode's price changes make sense... but here's the problem" (TikTok, August 18, 2025).
3. @skincarewithshelbs, "I'm exhausted (from companies changing the price)" (TikTok, August 19, 2025).
4. @jaidencornista, "So Rhode raised their prices again?" (TikTok, August 21, 2025).

These artifacts were selected because they represent three rhetorical positions within the same discourse. @rachelwiseman performs negotiated empathy, @skincarewithshelbs embodies exhausted loyalty, and @jaidencornista enacts oppositional critique. Together they reveal the interpretive spectrum of digital consumer negotiation.

Analytical Framework

This analysis follows a recursive interpretive process inspired by five pedagogical steps used in communication studies:

Perceive: immersion in each artifact's tone, texture, and affect.

Code: identification of recurring rhetorical strategies.

Interpret: determining what those patterns mean within economic and affective contexts.

Argue: synthesizing findings into a coherent thesis.

Interpellate: crafting the argument for an audience of communication scholars interested in digital trust and influencer culture.

Code Key

The following codes guide the analysis. Each appears in bold when cited in examples.

- Care Framing: Language of quality, dedication, or gratitude.
- Deflected Agency: Phrasing that removes responsibility through passivity (“we have to adjust”).
- Relational Closer: Para-social gestures that build warmth (“reach out anytime <3”).
- Negotiated Empathy: Influencer agreement tempered by critique.
- Exhausted Loyalty: Emotional fatigue paired with continued brand affection.
- Oppositional Math: Quantitative critique using price-to-size ratios.
- Aesthetic Alignment: Visual similarity between brand and influencer (color, tone, calm).

- Scarcity Prompt: Urging purchase despite critique (“grab these while you can”).

Reflexivity

As a viewer of beauty and influencer content, I approach these texts as both scholar and participant. My familiarity with influencer discourse may heighten sensitivity to tone and sincerity cues. Recognizing this positionality clarifies that the following interpretations are situated readings rather than claims of objectivity.

Case Study 1: Rhode’s “Product Update” Email – Encoding Care as Integrity

Rhode’s “Product Update” email operates as the first link in the rhetorical chain, encoding economic necessity through the language of care. The message opens with lowercase typography and a lavender-gray background: “We want to give you an update on some recent changes to our skincare essentials.” This aesthetic calm mirrors Rhode’s minimalist packaging and immediately softens the tone. The inclusive “we/you” phrasing constructs intimacy rather than corporate distance.

Rhode’s core statement reads, “The net weight of Glazing Milk transitioned to 4.2oz, and on June 4th, our 5oz tube of Barrier Butter will move into a smaller size of 3.4oz and decrease by \$2 to \$36.” The brand offers precision while avoiding the word shrinkflation. Instead, verbs like “transitioned” and “move” naturalize change as evolution. This is Deflected Agency, where economic choice becomes inevitable adjustment.

The next paragraph establishes Care Framing: “Our intention is always to bring you curated, high-performance essentials... we’re dedicated to preserving the quality of the products you love.” The repetition of moralized terms, intention, dedication, preservation, transforms a

price update into an ethical statement. As Banet-Weiser argues, authenticity becomes the idiom of modern marketing. Rhode encodes virtue through diction rather than data.

The sentence “Since we’re committed to not changing our formulas or ingredients, we sometimes have to adjust our product sizing, packaging, and pricing” further performs Deflected Agency. The subordinate clause reverses causality, implying moral steadfastness necessitates price action. This moral inversion turns a commercial move into a gesture of protection. The closing line: m“As always, please reach out to us here with any questions <3” completes the Relational Closer. The heart emoji transforms customer communication into intimacy. The entire email performs stewardship rather than transaction.

Brief context grounds the message. In 2024-25, global tariffs and packaging costs rose sharply across the cosmetics industry. Rhode acknowledges this only vaguely (“as global supply chain costs continue to rise”), framing the issue not as economic pressure but as proof of integrity. Through this rhetorical pivot, the company converts structural constraint into emotional continuity.

The result is affective deflection: what could read as cost cutting instead reads as moral constancy. This dominant encoding sets the stage for how influencers will decode Rhode’s sincerity, whether by empathizing, negotiating, or rejecting it.

(Rhode Skin, “A Product Update,” email newsletter, 4 June 2025.)

Case Study 2: @rachelwiseman – The Empathetic Interpreter

Rhode’s email invites understanding; @rachelwiseman’s TikTok extends that invitation through a calm, informed delivery that performs what Hall (1980) would call a negotiated decoding of the brand’s message. Seated in front of a gray background with glowy skin—a

visual echo of Rhode’s minimalist aesthetic, Wiseman begins, “Honestly, I think Rhode made the right call.” Her tone is steady and explanatory, signaling trust in the brand while also preparing space for critique. This opening immediately establishes Negotiated Empathy, a reading that blends acceptance with subtle resistance.

Midway through her video, she shifts: “But there’s less product now, and that wasn’t communicated clearly.” The pause and change in tone mark discomfort. Through phrasing like “wasn’t communicated clearly,” Wiseman avoids direct accusation; instead, she performs what Abidin (2018) calls relational authenticity, critiquing as a fan, not a detractor. Her measured delivery keeps both brand and audience emotionally comfortable, enacting Aesthetic Alignment through tone, lighting, and diction.

Comment Decode (Video: @rachelwiseman)

The top comments reflect a spectrum of interpretations that orbit around Wiseman’s own measured tone.

- “Mind you the lip peptides used to be 16 when they came out 🤪🤪🤪” – This comment deploys humor and disbelief, performing Oppositional Math by quantifying value loss and mocking brand logic.
- “Rhode coming to Sephora is actually a win for Canadian girlies...” – Here, the user negotiates Rhode’s price hike by reframing it through accessibility. This represents Negotiated Empathy: critique coexists with optimism.
- “Shrinkflation sends me spiraling. Just increase the prices.” – This comment, later endorsed by Wiseman herself (“yeppppp agree with all”), demonstrates emotional exhaustion but aligns with her reflective stance, turning critique into collaboration.

- “The packaging is quite cheap...” – Aesthetic disappointment becomes a subtle Oppositional Reading, questioning Rhode’s value branding against competitors.

Wiseman’s own replies (“i can make one!!” and “yeppppp agree with all”) reinforce her role as both analyst and peer. She validates audience frustration while maintaining composure, demonstrating what Baym (2015) terms discursive intimacy—a space where creator and audience co-construct meaning.

In short, Wiseman’s TikTok mediates Rhode’s “rhetoric of care” through reasoned empathy. Her audience mirrors that affective moderation, producing a comment section where critique feels safe because it sounds polite.

(rachelwiseman, TikTok, 18 Aug. 2025.)

Case Study 3: @skincarewithshelbs – The Exhausted Loyalist

Unlike Wiseman’s polished calm, @skincarewithshelbs opens with urgency: “Rhode is having a shrinkflation moment and we need to talk about it.” Her tone is conversational and reactive—a “breaking news” delivery that mirrors the vernacular rhythms of beauty commentary. She situates herself as a loyal insider: “I’ve loved everything I’ve tried from Rhode. I want to work with Rhode. All the things.” This confession foregrounds affection and aspiration, marking her as what Duffy (2017) calls the “aspirational laborer,” a fan seeking partnership while navigating critique.

Her body language (hoodie, minimal makeup, warm lighting) conveys exhaustion and intimacy. She holds up a nearly empty Rhode lip peptide and sighs, “I really love Rhode. Grab

these while you can.” This juxtaposition of critique and affection performs Exhausted Loyalty, where emotional fatigue coexists with sustained attachment.

Comment Decode (Video: @skincarewithshelbs)

The top comments transform Shelbs’s emotional tone into collective sentiment:

- “Only a \$2 decrease is crazy for how much smaller it’s getting!!” – The most-liked comment exemplifies Oppositional Math, quantifying injustice through outrage. Shelbs’s simple “agree” reply solidifies her alignment with consumer frustration.
- “From 5oz to 3.4oz is CRIMINAL.” – A hyperbolic Oppositional Reading that amplifies moral stakes, translating financial critique into ethical violation.
- “I already thought Rhode was too pricey for their level of product...” – This comment reflects Oppositional Empathy: shared disappointment framed through disillusionment.
- “Honestly I’d pay \$2 more to keep the 5oz bottle.” – A nuanced Negotiated Reading acknowledging loyalty but rejecting brand logic.

Even amid critique, affection persists. Many users echo Shelbs’s phrasing (“I love Rhode but...”), reproducing her mix of care and fatigue. This shared exhaustion circulates as affective currency, what Truitt (2023) calls an affective economy of fatigue, where emotional labor replaces economic power.

By engaging with these comments (liking, replying, and agreeing) Shelbs fosters solidarity without rebellion. Her feed becomes a digital “safe space” for tired consumers, transforming complaint into community.

(skincarewithshelbs, TikTok, 19 Aug. 2025.)

Case Study 4: @jaidencornista – The Oppositional Critic

In contrast to Wiseman’s calm empathy and Shelbs’s weary affection, @jaidencornista performs Oppositional Decoding with sharp humor and disbelief. The TikTok opens with bold text—“\$29 → \$36???” and a quick zoom as she exclaims, “So Rhode raised their prices again? For what?” Her sarcastic tone converts outrage into entertainment, embodying Fisher’s (2009) observation that capitalism commodifies its own critique.

Cornista continues, “If they cared about customers, they wouldn’t make the same lip balm smaller.” This line directly inverts Rhode’s Care Framing, revealing what she positions as hypocrisy. Yet at the end she softens—“Still cute packaging though.” That throwaway compliment reintroduces aesthetic pleasure into critique, illustrating Gill’s (2007) postfeminist irony, where resistance coexists with aesthetic attachment.

Comment Decode (Video: @jaidencornista)

The top comments extend her oppositional humor into collective venting:

- “Finally someone said it.” – A Dominant Oppositional comment that celebrates Cornista as spokesperson for suppressed frustration.
- “They all pretend to care.” – A cynical Oppositional Math reading expanding the critique from Rhode to influencer capitalism itself.
- “She said that Lemontini was the first treatment that was \$20...” – A factual correction framed with empathy, representing a Negotiated Reading that tempers outrage with clarification.

Together, these comments convert critique into discourse, entertainment, and opportunity, showing how even oppositional reactions feed digital visibility. Cornista’s humor invites participation rather than alienation, transforming outrage into a shared digital performance.

(jaidencornista, TikTok, 21 Aug. 2025.)

- “Finally someone said it.” – collective Oppositional response turning dissent into shared satisfaction.
- “They all pretend to care.” – extension of Oppositional Math into moral cynicism.
- “But it’s still so aesthetic I can’t quit it.” – ironic Negotiated Empathy, acknowledging complicity.

The comments convert critique into entertainment. Even opposition feeds engagement metrics, proving Fisher’s point that capitalism absorbs its own critique.

(jaidencornista, TikTok, 21 Aug. 2025.)

Synthesis: The Chain of Rhetoric

Across this communicative chain, a consistent affective language circulates. Rhode encodes care as moral value, influencers translate it through empathy or fatigue, and audiences decode it through collective feeling. The same tone: soft, sincere, emotionally fluent, connects all three layers.

This pattern supports Banet-Weiser’s claim that authenticity is not truth but performance. What matters is not whether Rhode truly “cares,” but whether its emotional cues feel right. Influencers act as emotional translators, rendering corporate tone relatable. Audiences judge sincerity by resonance, not reason.

Interpretation: Digital Capitalism's Emotional Logic

Rhode's strategy exemplifies the evolution of soft capitalism, where empathy replaces transparency as the persuasive mode. Instead of admitting, "We raised prices due to market pressure," Rhode reframes necessity as care. Truitt's concept of affective economies explains this circulation: emotion itself becomes a medium of exchange.

Influencers extend that economy by performing sincerity; audiences sustain it through emotional participation. Even outrage remains productive, as algorithms reward engagement regardless of sentiment. Fisher's idea of capitalist realism resonates here, the critique sustains the system it opposes.

Thus, digital capitalism thrives not on persuasion through logic but on affective maintenance. Trust is not a conclusion but a feeling continually enacted across media.

Argument: Trust as Performed Affect

Rhode's controversy reveals that trust in digital capitalism functions as performance. The brand encodes care, influencers translate it, and audiences enact it through emotional response. Authenticity becomes collective labor sustained by repetition.

As Banet-Weiser and Duffy observe, authenticity now operates as both moral aspiration and market strategy. Rhode's discourse shows how these dual roles fuse seamlessly. Every emotional stance (loyalty, fatigue, or outrage) feeds the same circuit of attention, ensuring visibility and continued participation.

Limitations and Future Scope

This study analyzes four artifacts within a single platform and linguistic context. The small, English-language sample favors interpretive depth over statistical reach. Future research could compare platforms such as Instagram or YouTube, or analyze non-U.S. audiences affected by different pricing contexts. Nonetheless, this focused case reveals the mechanics of digital trust formation in microcelebrity economies.

Conclusion

Rhode's shrinkflation controversy exposes the emotional infrastructure of modern brand communication. Through tone, diction, and mediated repetition, care becomes a persuasive shield for economic logic. Influencers transform corporate necessity into empathy; audiences convert skepticism into shared feeling.

In this affective economy, sincerity, not substance, sustains loyalty. Understanding these rhetorical dynamics is essential for scholars of communication and media because they show how digital capitalism humanizes itself through emotion. Rhode's lip treatment becomes more than skincare: it is an emblem of emotional capitalism, where every "I still love Rhode" comment performs the labor that keeps the system feeling good and running smoothly.

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Rhode Skin. “A Product Update.” 4 June 2025. Email newsletter.

“I have acted with honesty and integrity in producing this work and am unaware of anyone who has not.”- Julianna Truitt