



CONSUMER AWARENESS OF DIGITAL ADVERTISING FRAUD AND BRAND TRUST IN THE SKINCARE INDUSTRY: AN ATTRIBUTION THEORY PERSPECTIVE

Consciência sobre Fraudes em
Publicidade Digital e Confiança na Marca
no Setor de Skincare: Uma Análise
à Luz da Teoria da Atribuição

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ABSTRACT | Purpose: This study examines how consumer awareness of digital advertising fraud in the skincare industry influences brand trust, trust in digital platforms, and consumer attribution processes. Grounded in Attribution Theory, the research explores whether awareness of fraudulent advertising practices weakens or, alternatively, strengthens trust when brands and platforms demonstrate transparency and accountability. **Design/Methodology/Approach:** A quantitative, cross-sectional research design was employed. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to regular online skincare consumers in North India. Using convenience and snowball sampling techniques, 250 valid responses were retained for analysis. The constructs analyzed included advertising fraud awareness, brand trust, trust in digital platforms, and consumer attribution. Data analysis involved descriptive statistics, reliability testing using Cronbach's alpha, Pearson correlation analysis, linear regression, and mediation testing. **Findings:** The results indicate that consumer awareness of skincare advertising fraud has a positive and statistically significant effect on brand trust, trust in digital platforms, and attribution tendencies. Furthermore, brand trust was found to partially mediate the relationship between fraud awareness and consumer attribution. These findings suggest that informed consumers are capable of distinguishing between deceptive and ethical market actors, thereby reinforcing trust when transparency and responsible advertising practices are present. **Originality/Value:** This study contributes to the literature by extending Attribution Theory to the context of digital advertising fraud in an emerging market.

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It offers empirical evidence that consumer awareness does not necessarily erode trust, but may function as a credibility filter that rewards ethical brands and platforms. The findings provide valuable managerial and regulatory implications for improving trust and accountability in digital marketing.

KEYWORDS | Digital advertising fraud; Brand trust; Consumer attribution; Skincare industry; Attribution theory; Consumer awareness.

RESUMO | **Objetivo:** Analisar como a consciência do consumidor sobre fraudes em publicidade digital de produtos de skincare influencia a confiança na marca, a confiança nas plataformas digitais e os processos de atribuição de responsabilidade, à luz da Teoria da Atribuição, no contexto do mercado do Norte da Índia. **Método:** A pesquisa adota abordagem quantitativa, de corte transversal. Os dados foram coletados por meio de questionário estruturado aplicado a consumidores regulares de produtos de skincare que realizaram compras online nos últimos seis meses. A amostra final compreendeu 250 respondentes válidos, selecionados por conveniência e técnica de bola de neve. As variáveis analisadas incluíram consciência sobre fraudes publicitárias, confiança na marca, confiança na plataforma digital e atribuição do consumidor. Os dados foram examinados por meio de estatística descritiva, análise de confiabilidade (Alfa de Cronbach), correlação de Pearson, regressão linear e teste de mediação. **Resultados:** Os resultados indicam que a consciência sobre fraudes em publicidade digital exerce influência positiva e estatisticamente significativa sobre a confiança na marca, a confiança nas plataformas digitais e os processos de atribuição do consumidor. Verificou-se, ainda, que a confiança na marca atua como mediadora parcial na relação entre consciência sobre fraude publicitária e atribuição do consumidor. Os achados sugerem que consumidores mais informados tendem a diferenciar marcas e plataformas éticas daquelas envolvidas em práticas enganosas, fortalecendo a confiança quando há transparência e responsabilização. **Conclusão:** Conclui-se que a consciência do consumidor sobre fraudes em publicidade digital não necessariamente reduz a confiança, podendo, ao contrário, fortalecê-la quando associada a práticas éticas. O estudo contribui teoricamente ao aplicar a Teoria da Atribuição ao contexto da fraude publicitária digital e oferece implicações gerenciais e regulatórias para marcas e plataformas no setor de skincare.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE | Fraude em publicidade digital; Confiança na marca; Atribuição do consumidor; Skincare; Marketing digital; Consciência do consumidor.

1 INTRODUCTION

The high rate of digitalization of the marketing process has significantly changed consumer-brand relationships, especially in the personal care and skin care market. The web has become the most powerful channels through which products are discovered and bought and provides unprecedented accessibility and convenience. Simultaneously, though, digital advertising credibility has been undermined with the spread of fraudulent behavior. Advertisements that are common to skincare and are often overstated, manipulative, fake endorsements, and fake consumer reviews have come under the specific attention of consumers. These activities not only destroy the sanctity of the online markets but also jeopardize the consumer trust which is a non-negotiable asset in terms of brand survival in the digital age.

Consumer trust is not merely a functional product of marketing communications, but a psychological contract, to which consumers are attached to brands and platforms. When this contract is put to test, through fraudulent advertising, then cognitive evaluations are done by consumers to establish the cause of deception. Attribution theory is a useful theoretical framework to understand how consumers will attribute blame, be it to the brand, the platform, or other external forces. Although this study is topical, there is a paucity of empirical studies that can be used to apply the attribution theory to the online advertising fraud context, especially in the emerging



economies where online trading is fast on the rise. Majority of the previous researches focus on the adverse effects of deception but rarely concern the effects of consumer awareness of ad fraud on trust development and attribution decisions.

A perfect setting to test this question would be the market of North Indian skincare. It represents an area with a growing population of young consumers, the increasing use of digital platforms, and the increased exposure to the broad range of skincare products such as serums, sunscreens, various types of face-masks, skincare creams, and anti-aging products. With the industry relying on the persuasive digital marketing, there is a high likelihood of misleading information. However, not much is known in terms of how informed consumers in this sort of markets react to fraudulent advertising strategies, and whether awareness can strengthen or weaken trust on brands and platforms.

This research seeks to investigate the influence of the consumer awareness of skincare advertising fraud on the formation of brand trust, trust in digital platforms, and consumer attribution tendencies. Moreover, it addresses the mediation of brand trust in the relationship between fraud awareness and attribution results. In this way, this study does three things; to begin with, it applies the attribution theory to the digital marketing and advertising fraud context; second, it offers empirical data in a growing market environment where consumers are highly vulnerable to deceptive messages; and third, it gives practical recommendations on how skincare companies and online platforms can ensure high credibility by being transparent, advertising in a way that is verifiable, and engaging in ethical online marketing and advertisement.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Attribution theory describes the way that people attribute events, especially when events defy expectations (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1967). In marketing, attribution represents where consumers look when they experience deception-in order to assign the blame – brands, platforms or actors outside of the company. Once an ad fraud situation has happened, consumers may place the blame on either the brand (e.g., they apply dubious marketing methods), the publishing site (e.g., the site is full of scam), or other sources (e.g., hackers are the culprits). In digital environments, we find that initial trust is determined by cues like platform credibility; in contrast, continuous trust is formed through repeated interactions (McKnight et al., 2002). The combination of attribution and trust theories implies that when skincare scams are involved, causal attribution reasoning leads consumers directly towards trust judgment.

Online ad fraud can be both technical (e.g. bots, click-farms, domain spoofing, etc.) and message manipulation (e.g. overstated claims, fake testimonials). According to a report, ad fraud is more difficult for consumers to pinpoint than conventional media fraud because it is so subtle and scalable (Sadeghpour et al., 2021). As for the types of fraud, the impact of visuals and testimonials benefiting the fraudster, their fraudulent promotions affecting the perceived authenticity, and inflated claims appealing to a person's anxiety about their own look results in different reactions in people's minds (Chen and Lin, 2019).



One of the most researched types of deception are fraudulent online reviews. Manipulated reviews influence consumers' assessments so much that empirical evidence demonstrates that these reviews impact firm performance (Luca & Zervas, 2016). Likewise, low brand trust and significantly higher negative word-of-mouth communication are accompanied by substantially lower purchase intentions and incorporate negative emotions among consumers when the company engages in misleading claims (Darke & Ritchie, 2007; Romani et al., 2012). Regarding influencer advertising, it is found that genuinely unpublicised sponsorship lowers both influencer and brand confidence. Transparency, the right side approach, reduces negative perceptions (Waltenrath, 2024). The results are also extremely applicable to skincare marketing, as influencer promotion wins the majority.

Trust in platforms (such as social media and e-commerce websites) and trust in brands are two notionally separate but inter-dependent concepts. In situations where fraudulent advertising photos are prevalent, blame shifts to the platform and advertisers are seen as acting negligently or complicit (Gefen, 2000). However, a sense of trust of a brand may help mitigate induced skepticism on the platform as consumers may forgive the shortcomings if they are on a positive impression of the brand (McKnight et al., 2002). The ethics of advertising skincare, discussed by Friedman (2024) provide a more broad-based understanding of the struggles that brands encounter to stay trusted by consumers as the field of false advertising continues to grow.

Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) defined a classical model, which connects brand trust and brand affect to brand loyalty and, eventually, to brand performance. According to their research, trust is one of the key contributing factors to consumer loyalty and loyalty enhances the brand performance in the long run. Trust is essential in other industries such as skincare, the choice to buy where decisions depend on individual health, looks and safety. In the digital advertising space of North India, any form of fraud in advertising is misleading and thus poses a direct threat to this trust, hence undermining consumer loyalty and negatively affecting the brand performance. Trust theory serves to complement this view as the readiness of consumers to believe in the ability, integrity and goodwill of a brand is what constitutes trust. The element of "Trust" is viewed as the foundation of consumer-brand relationships and positively related to loyalty, customer referral and purchase behaviour.

Khan, Sheeraz, and Siddiqui (2024) also examined the impact of misleading advertisements on consumer behaviour when it comes to use of personal care products. They discovered that overstated assertions and doctored images might produce short-term sales success but consumer faith and loyalty will be hurt over time leading to dissatisfaction and negative WOM. This holds particularly true of skincare in North India region where claims of fairness, anti-aging, or acne-free appearance are very persuasive. Their conclusion gives an argument of the relevance of the ad fraud in diminishing brand credibility as one of the main issues in evaluating the long-term consequences of such lying marketing in this sector.

Skincare products do not only have practical use but are also a symbol of beauty, self-esteem and confidence. Whilst consumers develop an emotional tie to skincare products, it also leaves them vulnerable to misleading advertising. The qualitative phenomenological study by Sari, Soediro, and Rochman (2018) shows the reasons behind the decisions consumers make when purchasing fake cosmetics. Interestingly, love of original brand (e.g., POND'S) might make high consumer loyalty to buy imitates. The paper has concluded that low to middle income consumers tend to buy counterfeit products because they are unable to afford genuine products.



Among online purchases, the effect of false advertising has been demonstrated and a survey of 588 Malaysian customers has shown that there are three crucial dimensions of false advertising: unethical advertising, misleading information, and deception (Ahmed and Othman, 2024). It was found by analyzing data using SPSS that deceptive marketing is a vital factor that influences consumer perception and judgment with regards to making purchases online. The other serious consequences of the research were loss of finances, dissatisfaction with the purchased items, and less trust of the online stores.

Abu-Rahme et al. (2025) researched the effects of false skincare-adverts and how they affect the perception of skincare products among consumers in social media. Their findings have proved that misleading information used in advertisements does not only damage the reputation of the skincare brands, but the online sites where the adverts are posted are also significantly undermined.

Zard (2023) is a critical examination of the increase in online behavioural advertising (OBA) – advertising practices in which online services like Google and Meta utilise our user information, browsing history and psychological profiles to serve us personally-targeted adverts. As much as it is being sold as easy to use, the practice raises more concerns as unethical based on behavior vulnerabilities and ethical concerns of manipulation and intrusion of privacy. Notably, the researchers conclude that after consumers are informed of such targeting mechanisms, desensitisation has a subsequent negative effect of reducing consumer trust on both the brand and the platform.

Ghanbarpour et al. (2022) investigated consumer responses to online behavioral advertising (OBA) through the prism of a social media platform perspective and subsequently suggested the notion of perceived ad complicity – individuals thinking that the brands and the media collude to target them. Their research found that greater perceptions of ad complicity add to intrusiveness, which in turn has a detrimental effect on attitudes toward both (the platform and brand).

The CueSphere model, introduced by Mai, Nguyen, Thuan, and Ngo (2025), explains how consumers evaluate authenticity of influencer with the help of extrinsic cues such as disclosure of sponsorships, follower-engagement, and transparency of the content. In the skincare context, influencers that don't offer genuine cues – by using bots, fake engagement or undisclosed promotions to boost reach and popularity – fuel ad fraud and undermine consumer trust.

Friestad and Wright (1994) Persuasion Knowledge Model, which emphasizes that consumers accrue knowledge by learning, over time, in a marketplace and become knowingly unresponsive to any form of manipulation. Backed by some authors: In skincare advertising, consumers often choose to blame brand opportunism for false claims (e.g., fairness/acne treatment), which can decrease consumers' trust. Fulgoni (2016) characterized ad fraud as a multibillion-dollar "black hole" with economic and reputational risk. In the case of skincare companies, such a deceptive ecosystem spikes both expenses and undermines consumer confidence when false marketing of a good or service lack in delivering its promised benefits or results.

Recent research has mainly spent time investigating the financial implications of ad fraud or its methodology of detection. The impact of fraud awareness on consumers and the intervening effect by brand trust in determining consumer attribution and platform trust have received less attention. Specifically, little research focuses on these processes in aspirational markets, such as skincare, or in regional areas such as North India.

3 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

3.1 Overview of the Framework

Based on the attribution theory, consumer awareness of skincare advertising fraud has been conceptualized in this study to be one of the key drivers of trust and attributional reactions in the online market. It is suggested that awareness affects brand trust and trust in digital platforms positively since consumers with transparency and accountability within the advertising practice are more likely to value it. Moreover, the level of awareness should also have a direct impact on the attribution patterns, as customers who are aware of the fraudulent activities are more likely to attribute it to the brand or the platform. Brand trust is also postulated to mediate, in the sense that when trust is higher negative attribution is less and when trust is lower negative attribution is greater. On this, the awareness of advertising fraud is placed as an antecedent to trust and attribution, and brand trust in the framework is a mechanism where consumer perceptions and blame attribution are determined in the North Indian skincare market.

3.2 Key Constructs

Awareness of Ad Fraud (IV): how the consumers perceive the misleading skincare ads on the Internet **Brand Trust (Mediator):** the trust that a consumer has in a skincare brand about its honesty and reliability, **Consumer Attribution (DV¹):** placing the responsibility of fraudulent advertising and **Trust in Platform (DV²):** being a belief in the online platform where skincare advertisements are placed.

3.3 Conceptual Model

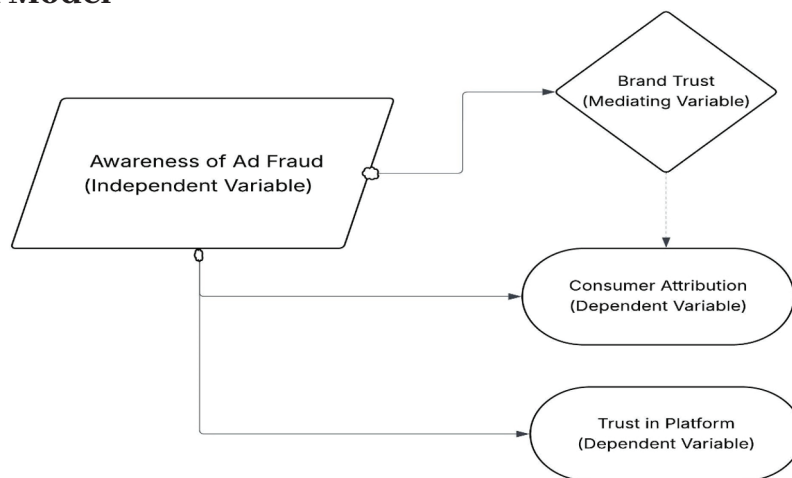


Figure 1. “Ad Fraud Awareness–Brand Trust Mediation Model”

Conceptual Model In Figure 1, we suggest that awareness has a direct effect on attribution and platform trust, with brand trust mediating these two variables.

3.4 Hypotheses

- **H1:** Awareness of skincare ad fraud positively influences brand trust.
- **H2:** Awareness of skincare ad fraud positively influences trust in the digital platform.
- **H3:** Awareness of skincare ad fraud significantly influences the Consumers Attribution.
- **H4:** Brand trust mediates the positive relationship between awareness of skincare ad fraud and consumer attribution towards the brand.

3.5 Research Objectives

1. To analyze the effect of awareness of skincare ad fraud on brand trust.
2. To examine the impact of awareness of skincare ad fraud on trust in digital platforms & consumer attribution.
3. To investigate the mediating role of brand trust between awareness of skincare ad fraud and consumer attribution towards the brand.

4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research design used in the present study was a quantitative cross-sectional survey (Creswell, 2014; Saunders et al., 2019) to test the relationship between awareness of skincare ad fraud, brand trust, consumer attribution, and platform trust. The data were collected using a well-designed Google Formed questionnaire with three screening questions, demographic questions and 4 construct measures with a five-point Likert scale. The information was gathered via a convenience method (colleagues, academic connections, online skincare users) and followed up by the snowball approach to contact other skincare consumers. The screening was also relevant: the respondents needed to be those located in North India, who have already bought skincare product online in the last six months, and frequency of using social media & surfing internet . Out of 374 total sample; 12, 78, and 34 were filtered out respectively, resulting in 250 valid sample (considered for all statistical analysis) and meeting the adequacy requirement of the multivariate analysis. Cronbach Alpha was analyzed to determine reliability, descriptive statistics, correlation, as well as regression with the assistance of Google spreadsheets, Microsoft Excel and SPSS.

5 RESULTS

5.1 Reliability Analysis

In order to determine the reliability of the measurement instrument, a reliability analysis of the measuring instrument which is done using the Cronbach alpha coefficient. There were 17 questions in the questionnaire and questions were grouped into four broad constructs; also described in the table below.



Table 1. Reliability Analysis

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha (α)
Awareness Of Ad Fraud (IV)	0.85
Brand Trust (M)	0.84
Consumer Attribution (DV ¹)	0.88
Trust in Platform (DV ²)	0.74

The outcomes of this particular test provided in above table show that all the constructs employed in this research recorded an acceptable level of internal consistency. The values of Cronbach's Alpha of Awareness of Ad Fraud ($\alpha = 0.85$), Brand Trust ($\alpha = 0.84$) and Consumer Attribution ($\alpha = 0.88$) are greater than 0.70 which is the recommended value (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994) and this indicates high reliability. The minimum acceptable level of reliability is also satisfied in the construct Trust in Platform ($\alpha = 0.74$), which proves that the measurement items are sufficient to reflect the underlying construct. Generally, the results verify that scales in this study are acceptable and can be used during further analysis.

5.2 Demographic profile of the respondents

Frequency distribution table was used in collecting and analysing the demographic variables including gender, age, occupation, location and the average skincare product purchased online by the respondents. The results are as shown below.

Table 2. Demographic information of the respondents

	Sample Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	82	32.80
	Female	168	67.20
Total		250	100.00
Age	18-24	179	71.60
	25-34	61	24.40
	35-45	10	04.00
Total		250	100.00
Residence Area	Urban	131	52.40
	Rural	119	47.60
Total		250	100.00
Location	Punjab	137	54.80
	Delhi	23	09.20
	Chandigarh (UT)	20	08.00
	Haryana	15	06.00
	Himachal Pradesh	11	04.40
	Uttar Pradesh	11	04.40
	Jammu & Kashmir	13	05.20
	Rajasthan	11	04.40
	Uttrakhand	09	03.60
Total		250	100.00

	Sample Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Occupation	Student	166	66.40
	Working Professional	46	18.40
	Business	29	11.60
	Homemaker	09	03.60
Total		250	100.00
On Average Basis, Purchase Online Skincare Products	Once or more in 1 Month	99	39.60
	Once in 2-3 Months	76	30.40
	Once in 6 Months	47	18.80
	Once in Year	28	11.20
Total		250	100.00

Table 2 summarizes the demographic aspects of the 250 valid cases. The sample consisted 32.8 percent men and 67.2 percent women, or in other words, more women are represented, which can be attributed to the increased involvement of women with the use of skincare products. Age wise, a significant proportion of contributors were in the age bracket of 18-24 years (179), then 25-34 years (61), and the last 10 were in the age category (35-45) implying the prevalence of the youth in the skincare market. With respect of residence, the ratio of the participants in the urban and rural areas were 52.4 and 47.6 respectively indicating equal participation of the two segments. Regionally, the state of Punjab was the most commonly represented at 54.8% and in a dispersed manner extending to Delhi (9.2%); Chandigarh UT (8.0%); Haryana (6.0%); Jammu and Kashmir (5.2%); Himachal Pradesh (4.4%); Uttar Pradesh (4.4%); Rajasthan (4.4%) and Uttarakhand 3.6% thus demonstrating a wide representation geographically across the whole of North India. The sample, occupation wise, consisted predominantly of students (66.4% of the total sample), working professionals (46), business persons (29) and homemakers (9). As far as purchase frequency of skincare products is concerned, 39.6% bought once or twice a month, 30.4% bought once or twice in 2-3 months, 18.8% bought once or twice in six months, and 11.2% bought once in a year, which implies that a significant percentage of the respondents is a frequent buyer.

5.3 Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics was used therefore to give an overview of the data distribution of the study variables before the hypothesis of relationships was tested. The measures of awareness of Ad Fraud, Brand Trust, Consumer Attribution, and Trust in Platform investigated the mean, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis as they demonstrate the central tendency, variability, and normality of the data-important conditions to the correlation and regression analyses.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics showing various variables of study

Variables	Mean	Standard Deviations	Skewness	Kurtosis
Awareness Of Ad Fraud	3.33	1.09	-0.44	-0.39
Brand Trust	3.06	1.09	0.01	-0.42
Consumer Attribution	3.31	1.06	-0.31	-0.23
Trust in Platform	3.20	1.07	-0.03	-0.47

Above table shows the descriptive statistics of the main constructs of this study, i.e., Awareness of Ad Fraud, Brand Trust, Consumer Attribution and Trust in Platform. The average of the variables is 3.06 to 3.33, which shows that there was moderate level of agreement among respondents in all the constructs. The highest mean of Awareness of Ad Fraud (M = 3.33, SD = 1.09) was the highest result, as it indicates that consumers are comparatively more aware of the fraudulent advertisements in skincare than of other variables. On the other hand, the lowest mean was found in Brand Trust (M = 3.06, SD = 1.09), which indicated apprehension about reliability and credibility of brands in the case of fraud. The skew values of all constructs lie in the range of -0.44 to 0.01 and the kurtosis values in the range of -0.47 to -0.23, which are well within the acceptable limit (George and Mallery, 2010), confirming that the data is normally distributed. This normality is necessary in order to perform additional tests of parameter, e.g. correlation and regression analysis to test the proposed relationship. In general, the descriptive findings indicate that the consumer awareness reasonable about ad fraud is in place, but the problems of brand trust and platform trust are relatively lower. These results can preliminarily confirm the research hypotheses that brand awareness affects attribution patterns and brand trust mediates between platform fraud awareness and platform trust.

5.4 Correlation Analysis

To explore the connection between the study variables, Pearson correlation analysis was performed between Awareness of Ad Fraud, Brand Trust, Consumer Attribution and Trust in Platform. The analysis offers initial evidence on the direction of relationships, as well as their strength before testing hypothesis using regression and mediation models.

Table 4. Correlation Matrix of Study Variables

Variables	IV	M	DV ¹	DV ²
Awareness Of Ad Fraud (IV)	1	0.61**	0.66**	0.65**
Brand Trust (M)		1	0.52**	0.71**
Consumer Attribution (DV ¹)			1	0.58**
Trust in Platform (DV ²)				1

As presented in Table 4, all correlations were found to be positive and statistically significant at the 0.01 level. Awareness of Ad Fraud exhibited significant associations with Brand Trust (r = 0.61), Consumer Attribution (r = 0.66), and Trust in Platform (r = 0.65). Similarly, Brand Trust demonstrated

positive correlations with both Consumer Attribution ($r = 0.52$) and Trust in Platform ($r = 0.71$). Finally, Consumer Attribution was also demonstrates a positive relationship with DV² ($r = 0.58$). These results provide initial empirical support for the hypothesized model. The findings suggest that the consumers who are highly aware of ad fraud are more likely to decide whom to blame (brand vs platform) directly, even without fully relying on trust. But since Brand Trust also matters (0.52), trust changes the intensity of this blame:

- If brand trust is high \Rightarrow consumers blame the platform more.
- If brand trust is low \Rightarrow consumers blame the brand more.

Moreover, the significant intercorrelations among Awareness, Brand Trust, and Consumer Attribution establish the statistical preconditions necessary for testing the mediating effect of Brand Trust, which will be further examined in the subsequent regression analysis.

5.5 Regression Analysis

Regression analysis was then used to test the hypotheses proposed, with awareness of skincare advertising fraud (IV), brand trust (M), consumer attribution (DV¹), and trust in the platform (DV²) the variables. Table 5 is presented with the results.

Table 5. Regression Analysis

H	DV	Pred.	B	SE	β	T stat.	P	R ²	Result
H ¹	Brand Trust	IV	0.61	0.05	0.61	12.26	<.001	0.377	Supported
H ²	DV ²	IV	0.64	0.05	0.65	13.37	<.001	0.420	Supported
H ³	DV ¹	IV	0.66	0.05	0.66	14.00	<.001	0.440	Supported
H ^{4a}	DV ¹	IV	0.53	0.06	0.53	9.14	<.001	0.460	Supported*
H ^{4b}		Med.	0.19	0.06	0.19	3.21	.002		Supported

*Partial mediation (Sobel $z = 3.14$, $p = .002$)

Firstly, the results show that brand trust is positively influenced by awareness of skincare ad fraud with a significant positive value ($\beta = 0.61$, $p < .001$), which accounts 37.7% of the variance ($R^2 = .377$). The finding confirms the hypothesis that the level of brand awareness will increase the state of brand trust in cases where fraud has been detected. In 2nd Hypothesis, the results were that awareness is a significant predictor of trust in digital platform ($B = 0.64$, $\beta = 0.65$, $p < .001$), with an explanatory power of 42.0 ($R^2=.420$). It indicates that the consumer awareness does not only influence the view of the brand but also affects the trust to the sites on which the advertisements are posted. In the case of H3, consumer attribution was also significantly directly affected by awareness ($\beta = 0.66$, $t = 14.00$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .440$). This proves that the more consumers are alerted to the existence of fraudulent skincare advertisements, the higher the chances of imposing the burden of determining the outcomes associated with the brands. Lastly, the brand trust mediated role was tested. The addition of brand trust to the model, however, made awareness ($\beta = 0.53$, $t = 9.14$, $p < .001$) and brand trust ($\beta = 0.19$, $t = 3.21$, $p = .002$) both significant predictors of consumer attribution, with



the model accounting for 46% of the variance (R^2). Notably, the awareness coefficient declined between 0.66 (H3) and 0.53 (H4a), which proves that brand trust is a partial mediator. The Sobel test also supported the importance of the indirect effect ($z = 3.14, p = .002$), in favor of H4. All the proposed hypotheses (H1-H4) are, overall, supported by the results of the regression. They point out that consumer awareness of skincare ad fraud is a key factor affecting trust in the brand and platforms, and brand trust is an intermediate in the mediation of the role of consumer awareness in consumer attribution.

6 DISCUSSION

This research investigated the effects of awareness of skincare advertising fraud on consumer trust and attribution in online settings, and brand trust was measured as an moderator. Highly relative questions was set initially in google form questionnaire as screening questions to collect refined data. Basing on the 250 valid responses, the analysis established that the awareness of fraudulent advertisements of skincare is a key factor in the process of consumer evaluations of brands and online platform.

6.1 Interpretation of Findings

The findings suggest that the image of brands and online platforms are not always affected negatively by the awareness of consumers concerning the skincare advertising fraud. Instead, they punish fake and deceptive brands and platforms and reward transparent brand, when they are capable of detecting frauds. By this, awareness serves as a kind of screen, not with a diluting effect on trust, but consumer can distinguish between participants in the market that are misleading and truthful. As a result, awareness will help in the development of trust in the brand, a belief in the digital platforms that actively control fraudulent advertising, and consumer attribution processes.

6.2 Role of Demographics

These findings further can be cognized on the basis of demographic characteristics of the respondents. Being mostly composed of young and digitally active consumers, the sample is representative of a highly exposed to online advertisement and more competent in detecting fraudulent content. Their awareness level must have positively related to trust because of their high level of digital literacy. In addition, the gender and the education level played an essential role: women respondents and individuals with higher education were more appreciative of the fraudulent activity and were more focused on the sense of trust when making judgments. All these trends are indications that the advertising fraud awareness is engaging with the demographic variables, which produces disparities in the way the consumer understands the nature and responds to fraudulent acts.



6.3 Theoretical Implications

There are three significant theoretical contributions in this research. First of all, it will widen the knowledge base on advertising ethical processes and trust among consumers. Earlier studies (e.g., Gefen, 2000; Pavlou, 2003) have shown that trust plays a major role as a determinant to consumer behavior in online space. What our findings add to this is that awareness of fraudulent advertising can strengthen, rather than break trust provided that the brands and platforms are authentic. This changes the discussion of considering awareness as an entirely negative driver to considering it as a positive filter in consumer decision making. Second, the research illustrates the conditional intervening nature of brand trust, which is consistent with previous studies (e.g., Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001) that recognized trust as the factor in influencing brand-related performance. By defining the concept of trust as both a result of the awareness and as a process that affects the attribution, the findings enrich the attribution theory (cf. Kelley and Michela, 1980) and verify that trust is a mechanism that helps consumers to interpret the signals in the marketplace. Third, the research has a demographic aspect in the trust-attribution model. Although some previous research (e.g., Prendergast et al., 2009) has already recognized consumer mistrust of advertising, not much studies have shown how age, gender, and education influence attitude to fraudulent practices. As we find, more vulnerable to misleading assertions are digitally literate, younger, and female consumers, which extends attribution theory to demographical settings.

6.4 Managerial Implications

The results have important implications to managers as well. The outcomes in the case of the brands show that it is also essential to be transparent and communicate in an ethical manner. Consumers trust the company and brand equity is preserved by taking proactive steps to oppose and distance themselves with fraudulent advertisements. With digital platforms, consumer awareness may not be seen as a weakness but as an opportunity: investing in the fraud detection system, user education system, and ad verification, platforms can build user trust. Also, the segmented strategies should be developed with demographic differences in mind, i.e. the younger, digital-literate consumers should be provided with the authenticity and ethical sourcing, the older consumers or those with no digital experience should be provided with the simplified signal of fraud awareness.

6.5 The Policy and Societal Implications

These outcomes are favourable on the policy front and are also leaning towards tighter regulation of digital advertising. The consumer protection agencies and regulators are to enforce superior labelling termed as more vigorous monitoring regulations and make it compulsory third party checking of skincare adverts. Trust in digital commerce and ensuring that more equitable market practices can also be made by conducting public awareness campaigns that inform consumers on fraudulent practices across different demographic strata.



6.6 Limitations and Future Scope

The study has shortcomings despite its contributions. First, its cross-sectional design is a limitation to causal inferences. Longitudinal or experimental designs could be used in the future of work. Second, the sample of North-India does not allow generalisations; cross-cultural study would add to the knowledge. Third, the research depended much on the young digitally active respondents; research needs to consider the older or less digitally literate consumers. Fourth, the concern with advertising fraud of skincare makes applicability more specific; applying the model to other industries, such as food, electronics, or financial services, may result in tests of robustness. Lastly, though brand trust was tested as an intermediary, other constructs like skepticism, risk perception or perceived authenticity may be enhancing future models.

7 CONCLUSION

Overall, the existing study demonstrates that the consumer awareness of advertising fraud in skincare enhances the trust and attribution processes in online settings. Instead of eroding the trust, vigilance creates trust in brands and platforms particularly where there is transparency and accountability. The findings establish that the brand trust is a partial mediating factor and demographic factors such as age, gender and education determine consumer responses. When used together, the findings contribute to the existing knowledge base in the field of trust and attribution and offer managers and policymakers valuable tools of mitigating the risks of digital advertising fraud. Awareness, in the end, is a credibility force, which helps to propel relationships between the consumer and brand and the platform in a changing digital market.

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