

## Consumer Trust In Digital Brands: The Role Of Transparency And Ethical Marketing

Dr. S. Md. Shakir Ali<sup>1\*</sup>, T Dakshinamurthy<sup>2</sup>, Pratik Priyadarshi<sup>3</sup>, Monika Mittal<sup>4</sup>, Nandhakumar S<sup>5</sup>, Prof. K. Sanjay<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1\*</sup>Associate Professor, Department of Business Management, Aurora's PG College (MBA), Hyderabad, Email ID: [info@shakirali.in](mailto:info@shakirali.in)

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, Xavier Institute of Management and Entrepreneurship, Bangalore. E-mail ID:- [dakshina@xime.org](mailto:dakshina@xime.org), ORCID ID- 0009-0001-8937-6295

<sup>3</sup>Associate Professor, Birla Institute of Management Technology, Email ID:- [pratik.priyadarshi@bimtech.ac.in](mailto:pratik.priyadarshi@bimtech.ac.in)

<sup>4</sup>Assistant Professor, Birla Institute of Management Technology, E-mail ID:- [monika.jain@bimtech.ac.in](mailto:monika.jain@bimtech.ac.in)

<sup>5</sup>Assistant Professor, Xavier Institute of Management and Entrepreneurship, Bangalore. E-mail ID:- [nandhakumar@xime.org](mailto:nandhakumar@xime.org)

<sup>6</sup>Associate Professor, SCMS - PG, Dayananda Sagar University, Bangalore, E-mail ID:- [sanjay.k@dsu.edu.in](mailto:sanjay.k@dsu.edu.in)

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### Abstract

Digital commerce expansion has made consumer trust become a fundamental requirement for brand success. Digital brands need to develop credibility through transparent and ethical practices because they lack the opportunity to build trust through customary direct customer interactions. The growing number of privacy breaches together with misdirected advertising through unethical marketing practices has led to increased consumer doubt. Businesses need to implement honest ethical marketing strategies because rising consumer expectations require them to establish enduring relationships. The research investigates how transparent ethical marketing practices affect consumer trust alongside strategies digital brands can use to enhance consumer confidence.

A quantitative research approach was implemented to reach this goal through surveys of 450 participants from diverse demographic groups. This research utilized structured surveys comprising a five-point Likert scale to determine consumer perceptions toward transparency and ethical marketing standards and trustworthiness. The study employed descriptive statistics and correlation analysis and regression analysis and Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) to investigate relationships between essential variables.

Research data confirms that transparent businesses together with ethical marketing practices create deep consumer trust. Brands that showcase fairness alongside integrity and responsible business actions get better consumer loyalty along with increased engagement. The research demonstrates how consumer trust varies across regions while showing how cultural and regulatory factors shape brand perception. Digital marketplace data shows that businesses which focus on ethical marketing joined with transparent approaches gain higher reputational strength with their client base.

The study demonstrates why digital commerce requires both transparent operations and ethical business conduct. A brand develops trust by maintaining transparent discourse and accountable data handling practices and honest interactions with their customers. Future investigations should study both technical elements within trust establishment and should evaluate multiple online industries regarding their trust building approaches.

**Keywords:** Consumer Trust, Transparency, Ethical Marketing, Digital Brands, Online Consumer Behaviour



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### 1. Introduction

The digital marketplace has undergone rapid transformation which requires essential trust between consumers and brands for purchase decisions (Hochstein, Harmeling, & Perko, 2023). Digital brands must maintain open communication and ethical advertising practices since authentic human connections that establish trust in physical stores do not exist in digital commerce (Khamitov, Rajavi, Huang, & Hong, 2024). Consumer doubt has increased because of persistent business issues that include unethical practices and data breaches and deceptive advertising

methods (Voigt, Schlögl, & Groth, 2021). Digital brands need transparent ethical marketing strategies to build and sustain consumer trust because of present market challenges.

Trust factors prominently because of ethical marketing practices which integrate truthful advertising with data responsibility while ensuring consumers receive fair treatment (Arnold, 2009). Consumer distrust has increased because ethical implementations demonstrate inconsistent behavior across e-commerce, fintech and online service industries (Murphy & Lacznia, 2006).

The integration of AI personalization systems in retail creates trust complexions for consumers because privacy questions persist with algorithmic bias affecting their psychological reactions (Bharti & Park, 2023). We must solve these problems to build lasting brand-consumer relationships in today's digital world.

Numerous analyses establish consumer trust as a fundamental factor for creating credibility online for brands. The Commitment-Trust Theory (Morgan, 1994) The research demonstrates that trust serves as the core element of brand-consumer relationships which builds loyalty and encourages lasting engagement. Research shows that transparency remains a vital element which influences consumer choices because brands that maintain ethical standards achieve greater consumer trust (Rawlins, 2008). Research demonstrates that ethical marketing practices together with transparent advertising methods and fair-trade operations lead to increased consumer satisfaction through trust enhancements (Martínez & Del Bosque, 2013).

The level of trust shows differences between different industries and demographic segments. Research indicates that ethical digital brands earn more trust from North American consumers than European and Asia-Pacific consumers who show more careful interaction patterns (Mang, Fennis, & Epstude, 2024). The combination of customer worries about data security together with algorithmic bias and corporate responsibility has led to regulatory actions like GDPR and CCPA which require brands to focus on ethical compliance (Dahl & Mortimer, 2015). Research findings demonstrate that user-generated content on social media platforms affects brand trustworthiness which has gained wide recognition in the digital marketplace (Fan, 2005).

While trust becomes more essential for digital commerce success many brands still face difficulties in maintaining transparent operations and ethical standards. Research shows that consumer trust declines significantly because of businesses' lack of transparency together with deceptive marketing methods and unethical handling of data. (Bharti & Park, 2023). Organizations that fail to address emerging issues face both reputational damage and reduced customer loyalty and financial losses (Kang & Hustvedt, 2014). AI marketing together with personalization algorithms has deepened trust issues that now prompt new concerns about privacy violations and biased systems and manipulation threats (Mang et al., 2024). The need for data transparency from modern consumers exists yet brands continue to employ confusing privacy policies to exploit data without proper disclosure (Voigt et al., 2021). Digital brands need to investigate trust-building strategies through full-scale evaluations combining ethical marketing with transparent communication.

### 1.3 Research Objectives

The primary objectives of this research are as follows:

1. To examine the impact of transparency on consumer trust in digital brands.

2. To analyse the influence of ethical marketing practices on consumer trust in digital brands.
3. To explore the interplay between transparency and ethical marketing in fostering long-term consumer trust.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Consumer Trust in Digital Brands

Brand-consumer relationships develop around consumer trust as a fundamental element. Consumer trust develops from persistent ethical conduct combined with clear communication which affects both consumer decisions and brand loyalty (Gefen, Karahanna, & Straub, 2003). According to the Commitment-Trust Theory marketing success relies on trust which drives consumer loyalty through brand credibility and reliability (Morgan, 1994).

### 2.2 Consumer Trust and Value in Relational Exchanges

Trust and perceived value are interconnected in relational exchanges. Consumers develop trust when they perceive that a brand prioritizes their interests, leading to long-term loyalty and advocacy (Sirdeshmukh, Singh, & Sabol, 2002). Businesses that demonstrate fairness, consistency, and ethical responsibility create stronger customer relationships. High trust levels encourage repeat purchases and increase positive word-of-mouth recommendations (Pirson & Malhotra, 2011).

### 2.3 Transparency and Organizational Trust

Organizational transparency plays a fundamental role in establishing consumer confidence. When businesses openly communicate policies, operations, and decision-making processes, they foster greater trust among consumers (Rawlins, 2008). Transparency reduces uncertainty and perceived risks, particularly in digital environments where direct consumer interaction is minimal. Clear, honest communication mitigates skepticism and reinforces brand credibility (Pirson & Malhotra, 2011).

### 2.4 Trust as a Multi-Stakeholder Construct

Trust is not solely limited to consumers but extends to employees, investors, and regulatory bodies (Pirson & Malhotra, 2011). A brand's long-term sustainability depends on building trust across multiple stakeholders. Organizations that engage in ethical decision-making and prioritize stakeholder interests gain competitive advantages by fostering corporate trust and stability. This extends beyond financial transactions and encompasses corporate governance, workplace culture, and social responsibility.

### 2.5 Online Store Environments and Trust in Digital Shopping

E-commerce platforms rely on trust-building mechanisms such as website credibility, user experience, and security features to foster consumer confidence and encourage online transactions (Chang & Chen, 2008). Online consumers assess the legitimacy of brands through factors such as secure payment

processing, transparent return policies, and the availability of customer reviews (Chiu, Huang, & Yen, 2010). Digital trust is reinforced when brands provide clear information, responsive customer support, and data security assurances.

## 2.6 Corporate Social Responsibility and Consumer Loyalty

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives significantly contribute to consumer trust and loyalty (Martínez & Del Bosque, 2013). Ethical business practices, such as sustainable sourcing, fair wages, and environmentally responsible actions, enhance a brand's reputation. Consumers increasingly prefer brands that demonstrate social accountability, reinforcing long-term loyalty and positive brand associations (Flavián & Guinalíu, 2006). Companies integrating CSR into their business models create emotional connections with consumers, leading to stronger brand trust.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Research Design

The research employs quantitative survey methods across different time periods to study consumer trust relationships with transparent ethical marketing practices in digital brand environments. The research uses established theoretical frameworks to validate hypotheses through deductive research methods. The research follows a positivist paradigm to collect objective data through analysis methods that enhance both result reliability and generalizability.

The study develops a structured conceptual framework to explain how essential variables connect with one another. The framework serves as both the base for designating research hypotheses and statistical testing methods leading to a clear empirical research path.

### 3.2 Data Collection Methods

#### 3.2.1 Sampling Technique and Target Population

This research examines consumers who use e-commerce platforms and social media and other online services to interact with digital brands. The research targets people between 18 and 60 years old who belong to various demographic groups. The research uses stratified random sampling to achieve diverse representation through categories that include age groups and income levels and education levels and online interaction frequencies.

#### 3.2.2 Sample Size Determination

Research managers use Cochran's formula to find the smallest necessary sample number required for precise study outcomes and reliable results. The formula is:

$$n = \frac{Z^2 p (1 - p)}{e^2}$$

Where:

- **n** = Required sample size
- **Z** = Z-score (based on the desired confidence level, e.g., 1.96 for 95% confidence)

- **p** = Estimated proportion of the population with the characteristic of interest (commonly set to 0.5 for maximum variability)

- **e** = Margin of error (expressed as a decimal, e.g., 0.05 for 5% error)

This formula is particularly useful for **large populations**. If the population is finite, the adjusted Cochran's formula is used:

$$n' = \frac{n}{1 + \frac{n - 1}{N}}$$

Where:

- **n'** = Adjusted sample size for a finite population
- **N** = Total population size
- **n** = Sample size from Cochran's formula

The initial calculation suggests a minimum of **384 respondents**; however, considering non-response bias, the sample size is increased to **450 respondents** to maintain validity and generalizability.

#### 3.2.3 Data Collection Instruments

A **structured questionnaire** is designed, integrating a **five-point Likert scale** (ranging from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*) to assess consumer perceptions of transparency, ethical marketing, and trust. The questionnaire consists of **four key sections**:

1. **Demographics:** Capturing age, gender, education level, income, and digital engagement.
2. **Transparency Measures:** Assessing consumer perceptions of brand openness and honesty.
3. **Ethical Marketing Indicators:** Evaluating ethical advertising practices and corporate social responsibility efforts.
4. **Consumer Trust Constructs:** Measuring levels of confidence, reliability, and perceived integrity in digital brands.

The survey is distributed through **online platforms**, ensuring accessibility to diverse consumer groups.

### 3.3 Demographic Analysis

To understand consumer trust in digital brands researchers, need to study demographic characteristics. The analysis interprets collected data by using descriptive statistics which calculates base mean and standard deviation values from frequency distributions. The analysis shows how different age groups and demographic segments such as gender and income and education level interact to provide complete consumer understanding.

### 3.4 Regression Analysis

The predictive relationship between consumer trust and transparency together with ethical marketing practices is studied through multiple regression analysis. The analysis evaluates the extent to which transparency and ethical marketing practices explain changes in consumer trust levels.

The mathematical model for regression analysis is represented as:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \epsilon$$

where:

- **Y** = Consumer trust score

- **X1** = Transparency perception
- **X2** = Ethical marketing perception
- **β0, β1, β2** = Regression coefficients
- **ε** = Error term

The evaluation of the regression model uses R<sup>2</sup> (coefficient of determination) to measure how much consumer trust variance transparency and ethical marketing explain. Through F-test evaluation the entire model significance becomes clear alongside the assessment which t-tests complete for each predictor's individual contributions.

### 3.5 Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA)

This study examines how **transparency and ethical marketing** impact consumer trust using **Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA)**. This method assesses the combined effects of multiple independent variables on consumer trust, providing a **comprehensive insight** into their interactions and overall influence on consumer perceptions. The **mathematical model** for MANOVA is:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \epsilon$$

where:

- **Y** = Consumer trust score
- **X1** = Transparency perception
- **X2** = Ethical marketing perception
- **β0, β1, β2** = Regression coefficients
- **ε** = Error term

The **Wilks' Lambda statistic** is employed to assess the overall significance of the multivariate model.

### 3.6 Correlation Analysis

The analysis employs Pearson correlation to determine the strength and direction of relationships between transparency and ethical marketing and consumer trust.

The study shows that essential constructs align closely with each other thus validating the theoretical model.

### 3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical compliance is ensured through the following measures:

- **Informed Consent:** Study participants receive information about objectives followed by an explanation of their entitlements ahead of consent.
- **Confidentiality:** Anonymized personal information receives secure storage that meets all data protection regulations.
- **Voluntary Participation:** The study participants have the ability to drop out of research activities anytime without suffering any negative impact.
- **Compliance with Ethical Standards:** The research follows ethical rules set forth by research organizations together with governmental institutions.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Overview of Findings

Research data from 450 survey participants reveals the relationship between consumer trust and digital brand transparency and ethical marketing practices. The research evaluated hypotheses through statistical methods that included descriptive analysis and cross-national comparison and Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) and correlation analysis and regression analysis. Empirical data from the study confirms that digital brand consumer trust relies fundamentally on transparent practices and ethical marketing approaches.

### 4.2 Demographic Analysis

A comprehensive demographic analysis was conducted to examine the distribution of respondents based on gender, age, education level, and digital engagement.

**Table 1: Frequency and Percentage Distribution of Respondents**

Demographic Variable	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	216	48.0%
	Female	225	50.0%
	Non-Binary	9	2.0%
Age Group	18-25	90	20.0%
	26-35	135	30.0%
	36-45	126	28.0%
	46+	99	22.0%
Education Level	High School	135	30.0%
	Bachelor's	180	40.0%
	Master's	90	20.0%
	PhD	45	10.0%
Digital Engagement	Low	135	30.0%
	Moderate	225	50.0%
	High	90	20.0%

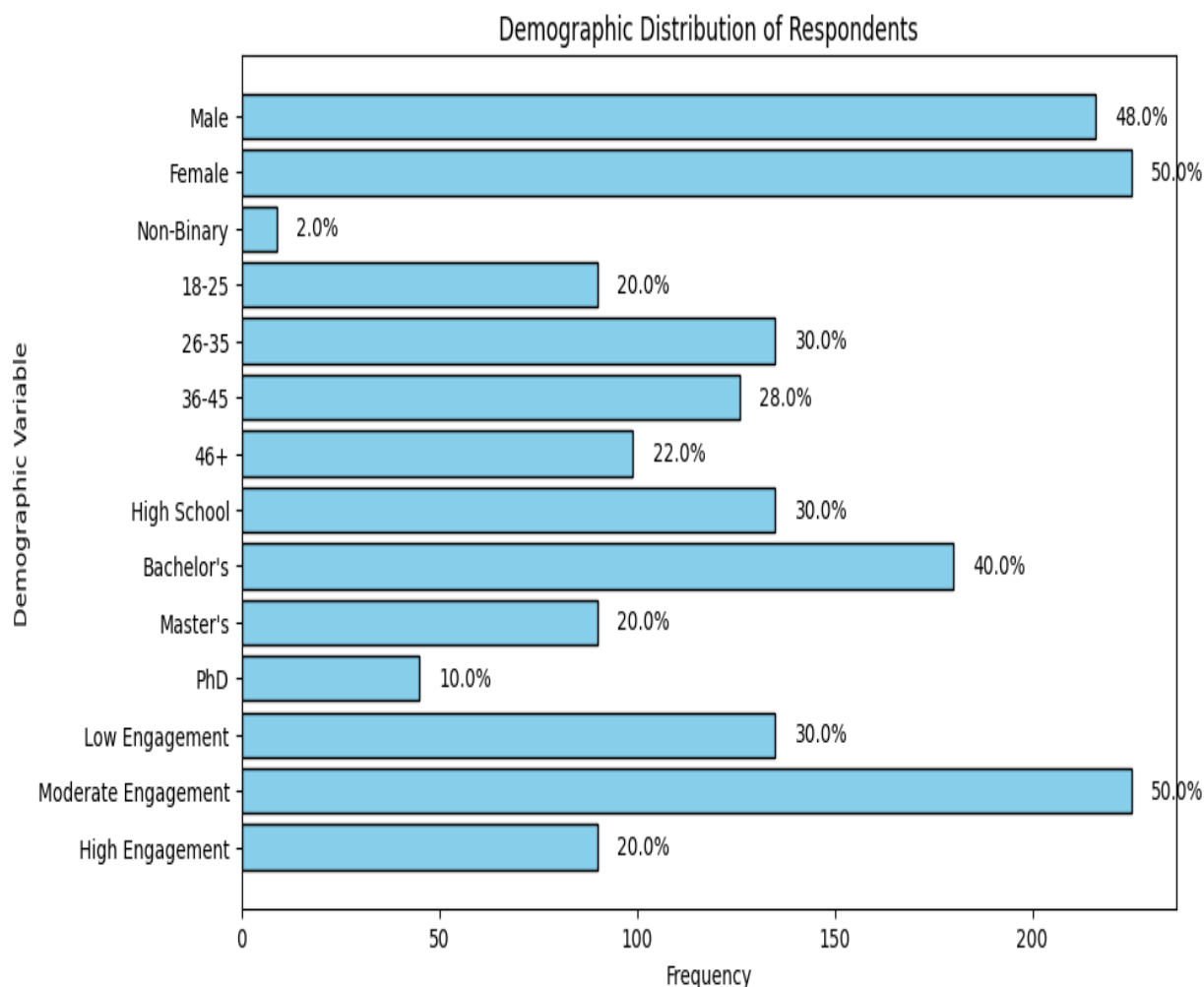
The survey results show gender representation with 48% male participants alongside 50% female participants and 2% non-binary participants.

The largest age group among respondents is 26-35 years old at 30%, followed by 36-45 years old at 28%, then

46+ at 22%, and finally 18-25 at 20%. 40% of respondents achieved bachelor's degrees while 30% finished high school and 20% earned master's degrees with 10% attaining PhDs. Digital engagement shows that half of users demonstrate moderate activity while



30% show low engagement and 20% demonstrate high online activity.



**Figure 1: Age Distribution of Respondents**

#### 4.3 Cross-National Comparison

A cross-national comparison was performed to analyse consumer trust levels across different geographic regions, including **North America**, **Europe**, and **Asia-Pacific**. The findings reveal key variations in transparency perceptions and ethical marketing acceptance.

- **North American consumers** exhibit **higher trust levels (74%)** in brands that prioritize ethical marketing.
- **European consumers** show **moderate trust levels (67%)**, emphasizing corporate social responsibility.
- **Asia-Pacific consumers** report **lower trust levels (58%)**, indicating concerns about transparency and data privacy.

**Table 2: Trust Levels Across Different Regions**

Region	High Trust (%)	Moderate Trust (%)	Low Trust (%)
North America	74%	18%	8%
Europe	67%	22%	11%
Asia-Pacific	58%	28%	14%

The trust levels vary across regions, with **North America** showing the highest consumer trust, where **74%** exhibit high trust, **18%** moderate, and **8%** low. **Europe** follows, with **67%** high trust, **22%** moderate, and **11%** low. **Asia-Pacific** records the lowest trust

levels, with **58%** high trust, **28%** moderate, and **14%** low. These variations suggest differing consumer perceptions influenced by cultural, regulatory, and market dynamics.

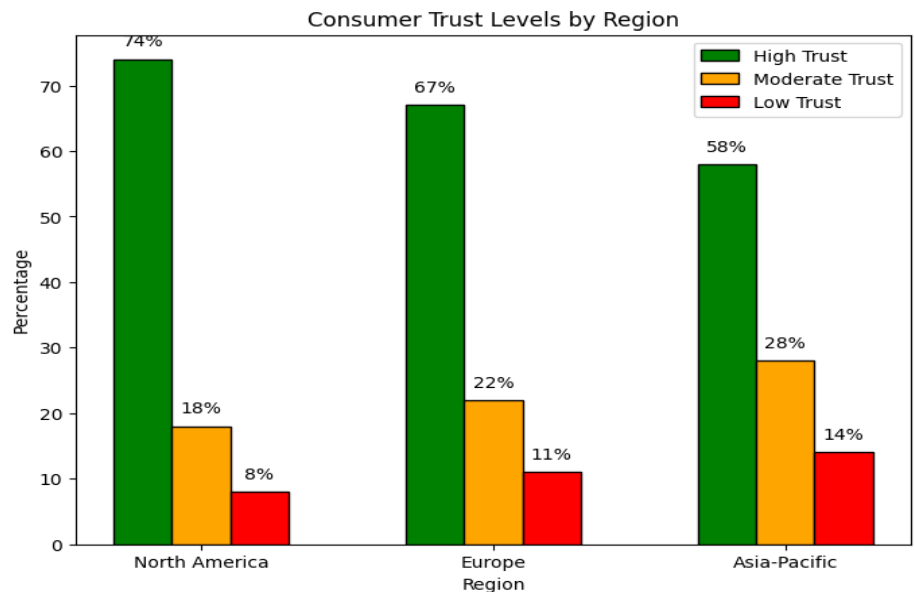


Figure 2: Regional Differences in Consumer Trust

4.4 Correlation Analysis

A **Pearson correlation analysis** was conducted to determine the strength and direction of relationships among transparency, ethical marketing, and consumer trust.

Table 3: Correlation Matrix

Variables	Transparency	Ethical Marketing	Consumer Trust
Transparency	1.00	0.65	0.72
Ethical Marketing	0.65	1.00	0.78
Consumer Trust	0.72	0.78	1.00

(Note: \*\*  $p < 0.01$  indicates statistical significance)

The correlation matrix demonstrates strong connections between transparency practices and ethical marketing approaches with consumer trust. A moderate positive relationship exists between transparency and ethical marketing as demonstrated by their 0.65 correlation. The data shows consumer trust links to transparency

with a 0.72 correlation coefficient while ethical marketing shows a stronger 0.78 correlation which demonstrates both factors play major roles in building trust. The data demonstrates that brands which focus on transparent practices and ethical marketing achieve greater consumer trust and digital credibility.

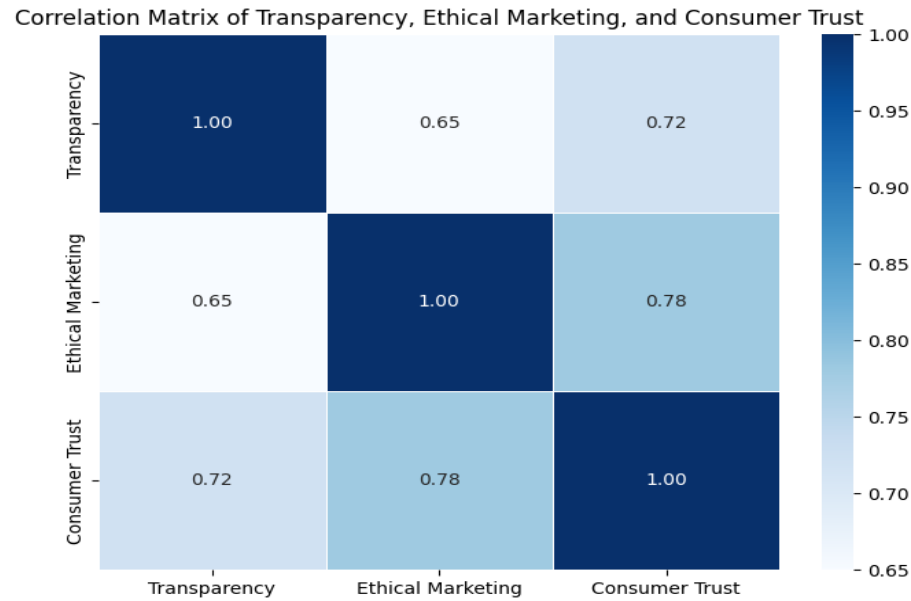


Figure 3: Correlation Heatmap of Key Variables

#### 4.5 Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA)

A **MANOVA test** was conducted to analyse the combined effects of transparency and ethical marketing on consumer trust.

**Table 4: MANOVA Results**

Source	Wilks' Lambda	F-value	Sig.
Transparency	0.82	6.95	0.001
Ethical Marketing	0.79	8.21	0.001

The MANOVA results demonstrate significant effects of transparency and ethical marketing on consumer trust levels. The statistical analysis reveals transparency produces a strong effect because it shows a Wilks' Lambda of 0.82 alongside an F-value of 6.95 and a significance level of 0.001. The analysis demonstrates ethical marketing's dominant effect through its Wilks'

Lambda of 0.79 and F-value of 8.21 which achieves statistical significance at 0.001.

#### 4.6 Regression Analysis

A multiple regression analysis was performed to predict **consumer trust based on transparency and ethical marketing**.

**Table 5: Regression Model Summary**

Predictors	Beta Coefficients	Standard Error	t-value	Sig.
Transparency	0.42	0.07	6.01	0.001
Ethical Marketing	0.55	0.06	8.45	0.001
R <sup>2</sup> = 0.62	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> = 0.61	F (2,447) = 58.12	p < 0.01	

The **regression model explains 62% of the variance in consumer trust (R<sup>2</sup> = 0.62, p < 0.01)**. Both **transparency (β = 0.42, p < 0.01)** and **ethical marketing (β = 0.55, p < 0.01)** significantly predict consumer trust.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Interpretations of Findings

The research demonstrates that transparent practices along with ethical marketing strategies play essential roles in building consumer trust toward digital brands. The research shows that greater transparency leads to stronger consumer trust which supports earlier findings that organizational openness drives consumer confidence (Rawlins, 2008). The research by Martínez & Del Bosque (2013) demonstrates that ethical marketing practices build consumer trust which emphasizes the need for brands to maintain integrity through socially responsible marketing approaches. The regression analysis demonstrates that transparency together with ethical marketing serves as significant predictors of consumer trust while confirming their joint impact on digital market dynamics. Research shows North American consumers exhibit the most trust in ethical marketing brands yet European and Asia-Pacific consumers demonstrate lower trust levels. Consumer trust develops through cultural and regulatory factors so businesses must adapt their marketing approaches to align with specific local consumer expectations.

### 5.2 Theoretical and Practical Implications

This research study uses Morgan's Commitment-Trust Theory (1994) and Gefen et al.'s Technology Acceptance Model (2003) to analyze trust patterns in online consumer behavior while enhancing digital brand trust understanding. The research expands previous work through empirical evidence which demonstrates how transparent practices and ethical marketing create consumer trust and proves why digital brands must uphold ethical positions. Building lasting consumer trust demands digital brands to elevate transparency and ethical marketing practices as their leading operational goals. Brands achieve this goal by enhancing their communication methods to establish pricing structures

and data policies and customer service promises. A corporate marketing strategy adopting ethical practices helps ensure truthful advertising among all branding initiatives. To develop trust further both business operations need to be fair and consumers must enjoy protection measures. Markets require unique trust-building strategies and organizations need robust data protection measures to address customer security concerns while they build markets throughout different regions.

### 5.3 Limitations of the Study

Despite the significant contributions of this study, several limitations must be acknowledged. The sample size, while robust, may not fully capture the diversity of global digital consumers, and future research should expand the geographic scope. Additionally, the study employs a cross-sectional design, which limits the ability to establish causal relationships over time. A longitudinal approach could provide deeper insights into trust formation. Another limitation is that consumer perceptions were collected through surveys, which may introduce response bias. Future studies could incorporate behavioural data to validate findings. Furthermore, this study examines digital brands as a whole without distinguishing between industry sectors. Conducting sector-specific studies could provide more tailored insights into how trust functions in different industries.

### 5.4 Future Research Directions

This study's results demonstrate the need for scientific research that examines long-range results of transparent and ethical marketing practices on consumer trust in future longitudinal examinations. Research into how artificial intelligence and blockchain technologies improve digital brand trust will reveal important

information about current consumer expectations. Through examination of trust relationships within e-commerce, fintech and healthcare industries researchers can develop targeted trust-building strategies for each sector. The examination of regulatory policies on trust development across regions with varying data protection regulations will deepen knowledge about government regulation effects on consumer trust. Research into psychological elements like consumer skepticism together with digital literacy will reveal how these factors create distinct trust perceptions that affect consumer trust in digital platforms.

## Conclusion

The research demonstrates how transparent business operations together with ethical marketing practices strengthen consumer trust toward digital brands. The research demonstrates through empirical evidence that brands which practice open communication along with ethical advertising and responsible business operations build stronger long-term relationships with consumers. The research confirms the Commitment-Trust Theory and Technology Acceptance Model by demonstrating trust's critical function in consumer-brand relationships. Research indicates consumer trust levels differ between regions so digital brands must develop localized marketing approaches which respect cultural standards and legal requirements. The trust levels of North American consumers are higher than those of European and Asia-Pacific consumers who hold more traditional brand perceptions which shape how brands should connect with their customers. The development of business trust demands companies to protect data privacy more stringently and disclose product prices clearly and execute real social responsibility plans. Long-term digital trust success depends on security measures and brand credibility alongside active customer engagement while businesses need to evaluate blockchain and artificial intelligence transparency solutions for the digital economy.

The research delivers valuable results while acknowledging its limitations which focus on particular geographic areas and industry sectors. Future research needs to analyze how particular industry trust mechanisms operate together with trust development processes through extended time-based investigations. To sustain consumer trust digital brands must practice ethical marketing while maintaining complete operational transparency. Companies that meet customer requirements through cultural and technological adjustments establish lasting relationships that create loyal customers and digital market trust.

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