

Understanding Consumer Responses to Clickbait Advertising: Evidence from Social Media Users

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Abstract

Clickbait advertising has become a widely used digital marketing technique to attract consumers' attention and encourage interaction with online promotional content. This study examines consumer responses to clickbait advertising on social media, focusing on user engagement, purchase intention, brand trust, curiosity, advertising scepticism, and perceived credibility. The study uses a descriptive, analytical research design and relies on primary data collected from 150 social media users through a structured questionnaire. The study used convenience sampling. The study analysed the collected data using frequency and percentage analysis, descriptive statistics, the Independent-Samples t-test, Welch's One-Way ANOVA, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression analysis. The findings indicate that age, gender, daily social media usage, and the most-used social media platform do not significantly differ in their reported impact of clickbait advertisements. However, curiosity, advertising scepticism, and perceived credibility show strong and statistically significant positive relationships with the impact of clickbait advertisements. The regression model explains 61.9% of the variation in consumers' overall opinion towards clickbait advertisements, with advertising scepticism emerging as the only statistically significant independent predictor. The study concludes that while clickbait can effectively attract consumer attention, sustained consumer response depends on the credibility and relevance of the information provided after the click. The study recommends that marketers use curiosity-driven advertising ethically and transparently, ensuring consistency between advertising claims and the content delivered to consumers.

Keywords: Clickbait Advertising, Consumer Behaviour, Social Media, Curiosity, Advertising Scepticism, Perceived Credibility, Consumer Response.

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary digital era, the marketing and consumer engagement landscape has radically transformed. The shift from traditional media to a digital-first approach has made social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube the primary battlegrounds for consumer attention. In this "Attention Economy," where users are bombarded with thousands of pieces of content every minute, advertisers no longer need to present a product; they need to secure a few seconds of a user's focused

attention. This intense competition has led to the widespread adoption of “Clickbait” advertising—a strategy designed to lure users into clicking a link through provocative, sensationalised, or intentionally vague headlines and thumbnails. On platforms that dominate the Indian market today, especially with the surge in short-form content like Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts, these clickbait tactics have become a defining feature of the user experience.

Clickbait operates primarily on the psychological principle known as the “Information Gap Theory.” Humans have an innate desire to resolve curiosity; when a headline presents a mystery or a shocking claim, it creates a mental itch that only clicking the link can scratch by revealing the missing information. In India’s current digital ecosystem, where Instagram and YouTube are the most-consumed video platforms, scrolling speed is incredibly high. To pause this rapid scrolling, advertisers use “hooks” that are often emotional or superlative. Headlines such as “You won’t believe the results of this product” or “The secret everyone is hiding about online shopping” are crafted to bypass the rational mind and trigger an impulsive, curiosity-driven response. This mechanism is now a fundamental tool for digital marketers aiming to drive traffic to e-commerce websites and landing pages.

However, the effectiveness of clickbait as a long-term marketing tool is highly debatable, especially concerning its impact on “Purchase Intention.” Purchase intention is the probability that a consumer will actually buy a product after being exposed to an advertisement. While clickbait is exceptionally successful at driving initial website traffic—measured as Click-Through Rate (CTR)—the quality of that traffic is often low. When an Indian consumer clicks an ad expecting a revolutionary discovery but finds a mediocre product or misleading content, it can lead to what psychologists call “Cognitive Dissonance.” This creates mental discomfort and a sense of betrayal. For the consumer, the initial curiosity is replaced by skepticism and frustration, which can severely damage the brand’s credibility.

The impact of such advertising is particularly significant among Indian social media users, who represent one of the world’s largest and most active digital audiences. As e-commerce continues to penetrate even rural areas, digital ads profoundly influence buying behaviour. If a brand consistently uses deceptive clickbait on popular platforms like Facebook or Instagram, it might gain short-term views but permanently lose consumer trust. Trust is the foundation of any purchase decision; without it, the high engagement numbers clickbait generates remain superficial and fail to convert into actual sales. Therefore, understanding whether clickbait acts as a persuasive bridge or a deceptive barrier is crucial for the future of ethical digital marketing in India.

This study, therefore, explores the intricate relationship between the curiosity-driven “click” and the final “purchase.” It examines how users perceive these sensationalised ads and whether the emotional manipulation in clickbait translates into genuine purchase intent. By focusing on the current digital ecosystem dominated by Instagram and YouTube, this research aims to provide a comprehensive look at the modern consumer’s psychological journey from passive scroller to active buyer in the age of clickbait.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The rapid growth of social media and digital advertising has fundamentally transformed how businesses communicate with consumers. In an increasingly competitive digital environment, advertisers frequently employ attention-grabbing strategies to attract users and encourage immediate interaction with promotional content. Clickbait advertising, characterised by sensational, exaggerated, curiosity-inducing, or sometimes misleading headlines and visual elements, has emerged as one such strategy. Although these techniques may generate clicks and initial user engagement, their ability to influence purchase intention

and build sustainable relationships with consumers remains an important area of investigation.

The present study is significant because it examines clickbait advertising beyond its immediate ability to attract attention. It investigates important consumer-related dimensions such as user engagement, purchase intention, brand trust, curiosity, advertising skepticism, and perceived credibility. By examining these factors, the study provides a broader understanding of the psychological and behavioural processes through which consumers respond to clickbait advertisements.

The study is particularly relevant to marketers and advertisers because high levels of online engagement do not necessarily translate into favourable purchase decisions. An advertisement may stimulate curiosity and generate clicks while also creating skepticism or reducing trust when the content fails to meet the expectations set by the headline. Understanding this relationship can help marketers determine whether clickbait is an effective, sustainable digital advertising strategy or merely produces short-term engagement at the expense of credibility and long-term brand relationships.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

While social media engagement is increasing, the “conversion rate” (clicks turning into sales) often remains low for clickbait-heavy campaigns. A visible gap exists between getting a user’s attention and winning their wallet. The problem lies in determining whether clickbait is a sustainable strategy or ultimately alienates the modern consumer, who values authenticity. Against this background, the central problem of the present study is to examine the impact of clickbait advertisements on consumer purchase intention among social media users and to understand the factors that shape consumers' responses to such advertisements. Specifically, the study seeks to assess user engagement, purchase intention, and brand trust; examine the role of curiosity, advertising skepticism, and perceived credibility; and determine the extent to which selected clickbait advertising factors predict consumers' overall opinion towards clickbait advertisements. The study therefore addresses the critical question of whether clickbait can function as an effective and sustainable digital marketing strategy or whether excessive reliance on sensational and potentially misleading advertising ultimately undermines consumer credibility, trust, and favourable behavioural responses.

Objectives of the Study

1. To assess the impact of clickbait advertisements on user engagement, purchase intention, and brand trust among social media users.
2. To examine how curiosity, advertising skepticism, and perceived credibility influence consumers' responses to clickbait advertisements.
3. To examine whether the impact of clickbait advertisements differs significantly across selected demographic and social media usage characteristics of respondents.
4. To determine the extent to which selected clickbait advertising factors predict consumers' overall opinion towards clickbait advertisements.

HYPOTHESES OF THE STUDY

Based on the objectives of the study, the following null hypotheses are formulated:

H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between clickbait advertisements and consumers' user engagement, purchase intention, and brand trust.

H₀₂: There is no significant relationship between curiosity, advertising scepticism, perceived credibility, and consumers' responses towards clickbait advertisements.

H₀₃: There is no significant difference in the impact of clickbait advertisements across selected demographic and social media usage characteristics of respondents.

H₀₄: Selected clickbait advertising factors do not significantly predict consumers' overall opinion towards clickbait advertisements.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design to examine consumers' perceptions and responses towards clickbait advertisements on social media platforms. The descriptive component describes consumers' responses to clickbait advertising, particularly user engagement, purchase intention, brand trust, curiosity, advertising skepticism, and perceived credibility. The analytical component examines the relationships between the selected variables, differences across respondent groups, and the predictive influence of clickbait advertising factors on consumers' overall opinion.

The study uses both primary and secondary data. Primary data are collected directly from social media users through a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire includes questions on respondents' demographics and social media usage, along with statements measuring user engagement, purchase intention, brand trust, curiosity, advertising skepticism, perceived credibility, and overall opinion towards clickbait advertisements. The major constructs are measured using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Secondary data are collected from relevant academic journals, research articles, books, reports, magazines, and credible websites to provide the study's conceptual and theoretical foundation.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Data analysis and interpretation are an important stage of the research process, as they transform respondents' raw responses into meaningful findings. The present analysis is based on primary data collected from 150 social media users to examine the impact of clickbait advertisements on consumer responses and overall opinion. The data were coded, classified and analysed using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques.

Frequency and percentage analyses described respondents' demographics and social media usage profiles. Inferential techniques included the Independent-Samples t-test, Welch's One-Way ANOVA, Pearson correlation analysis, and multiple linear regression. The results are presented in an objective-oriented manner so that the statistical evidence can be directly related to the hypotheses and research objectives.

Table No. 1 Demographic and Social Media Usage Profile

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Age	Below 18	8	5.33
	18–25	79	52.67
	26–35	48	32.00
	36–45	10	6.67
	46+	5	3.33
Gender	Female	67	44.67
	Male	83	55.33
Daily usage	Less than 1 hour	21	14.00

	1–3 hours	51	34.00
	3–5 hours	48	32.00
	More than 5 hours	30	20.00
Most used platform	Facebook	25	16.67
	Instagram	78	52.00
	YouTube	36	24.00
	Others	11	7.33

Interpretation: The sample is predominantly young, with 52.67% of respondents aged 18–25 and 32.00% aged 26–35. Male respondents constitute 55.33% and female respondents 44.67%. Most respondents use social media for one to five hours daily, while Instagram is the most used platform (52.00%), followed by YouTube (24.00%). The profile therefore represents a sample with substantial exposure to social media advertising.

Objective-wise Analysis: Differences in the Impact of Clickbait Advertisements

Objective 1: To assess the impact of clickbait advertisements on user engagement, purchase intention and brand trust among social media users and to examine whether the impact differs across selected demographic and social media usage characteristics.

Table No. 2 consolidates the four group-comparison tests reported in the study.

Variable / Test	Statistic	df	p-value	Decision at 5%
Age – Welch's ANOVA	F = 1.010	4, 18.2	0.427	Not significant; H_0 retained
Gender – Independent t-test	t = -1.910	148	0.058	Not significant; H_0 retained
Daily usage – Welch's ANOVA	F = 0.146	3, 63.4	0.932	Not significant; H_0 retained
Most-used platform – Welch's ANOVA	F = 2.430	3, 37.3	0.080	Not significant; H_0 retained

Table No. 3 Descriptive statistics of the impact of clickbait advertisements:

Grouping variable	Category	N	Mean	SD
Age	18–25	79	3.83	0.588
	26–35	48	3.89	0.666
	36–45	10	3.80	0.559
	46+	5	4.16	0.321
	Below 18	8	3.93	0.694
Gender	Female	67	3.76	0.582
	Male	83	3.95	0.618
Daily usage	Less than 1 hour	21	3.84	0.662
	1–3 hours	51	3.88	0.577
	3–5 hours	48	3.90	0.632

	More than 5 hours	30	3.80	0.607
Platform	Facebook	25	3.87	0.675
	Instagram	78	3.78	0.601
	YouTube	36	4.08	0.551
	Others	11	3.75	0.571

Interpretation: Welch's ANOVA for age was not significant ($F=1.010$, $p=0.427$), indicating that the impact scores did not differ significantly across age groups. The gender comparison was also not significant ($t = -1.910$, $p = 0.058$). Although males reported a higher mean score (3.95) than females (3.76), the difference was not statistically significant at the 5% level. Similarly, daily social media usage was not significant ($F=0.146$, $p=0.932$), showing that time spent on social media did not produce statistically significant differences in impact.

The platform-wise analysis also did not reach statistical significance ($F=2.430$, $p=0.080$). YouTube users recorded the highest mean impact score (4.08), but the observed differences among platforms were insufficient to reject the null hypothesis at the 5% significance level. Thus, all four group-difference hypotheses are retained.

Relationship among Curiosity, Advertising Scepticism, Perceived Credibility and Clickbait Impact

Objective 2: To examine the influence of curiosity, advertising scepticism and perceived credibility on consumers' responses towards clickbait advertisements.

H_0 : There is no significant relationship between curiosity, advertising scepticism, perceived credibility and the impact of clickbait advertisements. Pearson's correlation analysis examined the direction and strength of these relationships.

Table No. 4 Selected Pearson Correlations with the Impact of Clickbait Advertisements

Variable	r with Clickbait Impact	p-value	Interpretation
Curiosity	0.908	<0.001	Very strong positive; significant
Advertising Skepticism	0.914	<0.001	Very strong positive; significant
Perceived Credibility	0.901	<0.001	Very strong positive; significant
Overall Opinion	0.825	<0.001	Very strong positive; significant

Table No. 5 Interrelationships among the three explanatory variables:

Variable Pair	Pearson r	p-value	Interpretation
Curiosity – Advertising Skepticism	0.797	<0.001	Strong positive
Curiosity – Perceived Credibility	0.809	<0.001	Very strong positive
Advertising Skepticism – Perceived Credibility	0.849	<0.001	Very strong positive

Interpretation: The results demonstrate statistically significant positive relationships between all three selected psychological factors and the impact of clickbait advertisements. Curiosity has a very strong positive association with impact ($r=0.908$, $p<0.001$), indicating that respondents reporting greater curiosity also tend to report higher impact scores. Advertising scepticism shows the strongest association ($r=0.914$, $p<0.001$), while perceived credibility also has a very strong positive association ($r=0.901$, $p<0.001$).

The three explanatory constructs are also strongly interrelated: curiosity correlates with advertising scepticism ($r=0.797$), curiosity with perceived credibility ($r=0.809$), and advertising scepticism with perceived credibility ($r=0.849$), all significant at $p<0.001$. Therefore, the null hypothesis of no relationship is rejected. The findings indicate that these psychological variables are closely associated with consumers' responses to clickbait advertising.

Multiple Regression Analysis: Predicting Overall Opinion

Objective 3: To determine whether selected clickbait advertising factors significantly predict consumers' overall opinion towards clickbait advertisements.

H₀: Selected clickbait advertising factors do not significantly predict consumers' overall opinion towards clickbait advertisements. We used multiple linear regression, with overall opinion as the dependent variable and the selected clickbait-related factors as predictors.

Model Summary

Model	R	R ²	Sample Size
1	0.787	0.619	150

The regression model produced $R = 0.787$ and $R^2 = 0.619$. Thus, the model explains 61.9% of the variance in consumers' overall opinion towards clickbait advertisements, indicating substantial explanatory power within the sample.

Regression Coefficients for Overall Opinion

Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p-value	Decision
Intercept	1.0351	0.1972	5.248	<0.001	Significant
Clickbait & User Engagement	0.0185	0.0639	0.290	0.772	Not significant
Clickbait & Purchase Intention	0.0823	0.0877	0.938	0.350	Not significant
Clickbait & Brand Trust	0.0529	0.0876	0.603	0.547	Not significant
Curiosity	0.0856	0.0924	0.926	0.356	Not significant
Advertising Skepticism	0.3341	0.0999	3.346	0.001	Significant
Perceived Credibility	0.1825	0.1010	1.808	0.073	Not significant

Interpretation: Advertising scepticism is the only statistically significant predictor in the regression model (estimate=0.3341, $t=3.346$, $p=0.001$). Its positive coefficient indicates that, within this model, higher advertising scepticism is associated with higher overall opinion scores. Perceived credibility has a positive coefficient but is not statistically significant at the 5% level ($p=0.073$). User engagement, purchase intention, brand trust, and curiosity are also not statistically significant predictors, with p-values of 0.772, 0.350, 0.547, and 0.356, respectively.

Accordingly, the hypothesis that selected clickbait advertising factors do not significantly predict overall opinion is rejected only for advertising scepticism; the other predictors do not make statistically significant independent contributions in the estimated model.

Consolidated Findings and Statistical Conclusions

The statistical analysis of 150 respondents provides an integrated picture of consumers' responses to clickbait advertisements. The major findings from the descriptive and inferential analyses are consolidated below.

Analysis	Key result	Statistical conclusion
Age-wise comparison	$F=1.010, p=0.427$	No significant difference
Gender comparison	$t=-1.910, p=0.058$	No significant difference
Daily social media usage	$F=0.146, p=0.932$	No significant difference
Platform comparison	$F=2.430, p=0.080$	No significant difference
Curiosity vs. impact	$r=0.908, p<0.001$	Very strong positive relationship
Advertising skepticism vs. impact	$r=0.914, p<0.001$	Very strong positive relationship
Perceived credibility vs. impact	$r=0.901, p<0.001$	Very strong positive relationship
Regression model	$R=0.787; R^2=0.619$	61.9% variance explained
Advertising skepticism in regression	Estimate=0.3341, $p=0.001$	Significant predictor
Perceived credibility in regression	Estimate=0.1825, $p=0.073$	Not significant at 5%

OVERALL INTERPRETATION

The analysis indicates that the demographic and social media usage characteristics examined in the study do not differ significantly in the reported impact of clickbait advertisements. Age, gender, daily usage and most-used platform therefore do not independently differentiate respondents' impact scores at the 5% significance level.

In contrast, the correlation analysis shows very strong and statistically significant positive relationships between clickbait impact and curiosity, advertising scepticism, and perceived credibility. These findings indicate that psychological perceptions are closely associated with consumers' responses to clickbait advertising. However, correlation alone does not establish causation.

The regression model further shows that the selected predictors collectively explain 61.9% of the variance in overall opinion. Among the predictors included, advertising scepticism is the only factor that makes a statistically significant independent contribution. Perceived credibility has a positive but statistically non-significant coefficient at the 5% level. At the same time, user engagement, purchase intention, brand trust and curiosity are not significant independent predictors in the estimated model.

MAJOR FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

1. The respondents were predominantly young social media users. About 52.67% of respondents were in the 18–25 age group, followed by 32% in the 26–35 age group.
2. Instagram was the most commonly used social media platform, used by 52% of respondents, followed by YouTube (24%) and Facebook (16.67%).
3. Most respondents had substantial daily exposure to social media. About 34% used social media for 1–3 hours per day and 32% for 3–5 hours.
4. Age did not significantly influence the impact of clickbait advertisements (Welch's ANOVA, $p = 0.427$). Thus, respondents from different age groups did not differ significantly in their reported impact of clickbait advertisements.

5. Gender did not produce a statistically significant difference in the impact of clickbait advertisements ($t = -1.910$, $p = 0.058$), although male respondents recorded a somewhat higher mean score than female respondents.
6. Daily social media usage did not significantly affect the impact of clickbait advertisements (Welch's ANOVA, $p = 0.932$).
7. The social media platform predominantly used by respondents did not significantly influence the impact of clickbait advertisements (Welch's ANOVA, $p = 0.080$). Although YouTube users reported the highest mean impact score (4.08), the difference was not statistically significant.
8. Curiosity had a very strong positive and significant relationship with the impact of clickbait advertisements ($r = 0.908$, $p < 0.001$).
9. Advertising skepticism showed the strongest correlation with the impact of clickbait advertisements ($r = 0.914$, $p < 0.001$), indicating a very strong positive association.
10. Perceived credibility was also very strongly and positively related to clickbait impact ($r = 0.901$, $p < 0.001$).
11. The three psychological factors were strongly interrelated. Curiosity was positively associated with advertising skepticism ($r = 0.797$) and perceived credibility ($r = 0.809$), while advertising skepticism and perceived credibility showed a strong relationship ($r = 0.849$); all relationships were significant at $p < 0.001$.
12. The regression model explained 61.9% of the variation in consumers' overall opinion towards clickbait advertisements ($R = 0.787$; $R^2 = 0.619$).
13. Advertising skepticism was the only statistically significant independent predictor of overall opinion in the regression model ($\beta/\text{estimate} = 0.3341$, $p = 0.001$).
14. Perceived credibility, although positively associated with overall opinion, was not a statistically significant independent predictor at the 5% level ($p = 0.073$).
15. User engagement, purchase intention, brand trust, and curiosity did not emerge as statistically significant independent predictors of overall opinion in the regression model.
16. Overall, the findings indicate that psychological factors—particularly curiosity, advertising skepticism, and perceived credibility—are strongly associated with consumers' responses to clickbait advertisements. In contrast, the demographic and social-media usage characteristics examined in the study did not produce significant group differences.

Recommendations of the study

Based on the study's findings, marketers should adopt ethical, transparent, and consumer-oriented clickbait advertising practices. Since curiosity, advertising skepticism, and perceived credibility are strongly associated with consumers' responses, advertisements should use attention-grabbing headlines without misleading claims, exaggerated promises, or deceptive visuals. The content displayed after the click should accurately match the headline and the expectations created by the advertisement. Marketers should provide clear product information, verifiable claims, transparent disclosures, and credible supporting information to address consumer skepticism and strengthen brand trust. Clickbait should therefore be used as a creative attention-generating technique, not a deceptive practice. Organisations should also regularly collect consumer feedback through surveys, comments, reviews, and social media interactions to evaluate whether advertisements are perceived as engaging, credible, informative, or misleading. Because no significant differences emerged across age, gender, social media usage, or preferred platform, responsible

advertising standards should apply across consumer segments and platforms. Social media platforms should also strengthen mechanisms for identifying misleading advertisements, deceptive headlines, false claims, and inadequately disclosed sponsored content. Finally, future researchers should use larger, more diverse samples and consider additional variables such as perceived deception, emotional response, advertising irritation, brand attitude, impulsive buying behaviour, and actual purchase behaviour.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that clickbait advertising can attract consumer attention and generate engagement, but its effectiveness depends considerably on consumers' psychological and perceptual responses. Based on the responses of 150 social media users, age, gender, daily social media usage, and preferred social media platform did not significantly influence the perceived impact of clickbait advertisements. In contrast, curiosity, advertising skepticism, and perceived credibility showed strong and statistically significant relationships with clickbait advertising impact. The regression analysis further revealed that the selected variables explained 61.9% of the variation in consumers' overall opinion, with advertising skepticism emerging as the only statistically significant independent predictor. The findings therefore suggest that obtaining clicks or initial engagement alone should not be considered sufficient evidence of advertising effectiveness. The long-term effectiveness of clickbait advertising depends on whether the curiosity it generates is supported by accurate, relevant, credible, and trustworthy content. Consequently, marketers should balance attention-generating creativity with transparency and credibility, ensuring that the content delivered after the click fulfils the expectations created by the advertisement. This approach can help turn initial attention into meaningful consumer engagement and support sustainable consumer-brand relationships.

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