

Global Marketing and Consumer Protection Challenges in Ethical International Advertising Practices

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Abstract

The increasing speed of the globalization of markets has intensified the complexity of advertising activities in international markets, in which there is a need to balance ethics along with the cultural, legal, and regulatory environments of each market. The study examines the multi-dimensional problems that multinationals have when they plan and implement an ethical international advertising campaign and the protection of consumers, in accordance with stakeholders' theory and cross-cultural consumer behavior models. Quantitative survey research was applied with 400 samples, drawn from five regions of the world, including North America, Europe, Asia-Pacific, Latin America, and Africa/Middle East. Data were collected via a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire, which had six well-validated constructs, including Ethical Advertising Perception (EAP), Consumer Trust (CT), Regulatory Compliance Awareness (RCA), Cultural Sensitivity Index (CSI), Brand Purchase Intention (BPI), and Digital Transparency Score (DTS). The multiple regression and one-way ANOVA methods were used for inferential analysis, and the results show that only ethical advertising perception ($\beta = 0.412$, $p < .001$) and cultural sensitivity ($\beta = 0.287$, $p < .001$) have a significant influence on consumer trust and brand purchase intention. Consumers from North America and Europe are likely to possess positive expectations for consumer trust and transparency than consumers from Asia-Pacific and Latin America since regional differences are statistically significant (F -values= 5.97-7.21, $p < .001$) for all constructs. In addition, inadequate regulation, digital misinformation, and cultural insensitivity are considered the primary issues in international advertising. This study also contributes to the implications for the governing processes of marketing worldwide and indicates the essential role of having cultural intelligence that is integrated with online transparency and compliance with different worldwide regulations to build consumers' trust.

Keywords: Ethical International Advertising; Global Marketing Governance; Consumer Protection; Cross-Cultural Advertising; Digital Transparency; Regulatory Compliance; Consumer Trust.

I. INTRODUCTION

It is an age of commerce that has gone global changing how marketing communication has developed. Marketing of transnational corporations has now become a common practice crossing the boundaries of nations, culture and regulation, placing it in an unusual position of advantage to pursue market and sales, while at the same time encountering a barrage of ethical issues

(Kumar & Suthar, 2024). The marketing communications of advertising have become a subject that need to be addressed urgently (Karami et al., 2024). This is not only because the subject has been extensively used in other parts of the world, but because in the last few years spending on global advertising exceeds 700 billion US dollars (Gao et al., 2023; Rajan, 2025).

A global debate on consumer protection in advertising: There are many aspects to consumer protection in international advertising, the accuracy of advertising claims, the appropriateness of messages in target cultures, transparency in digital targeting mechanisms and compliance to myriad regulations (Widijowati & Denysenko, 2023; Pattanayak et al., 2025). All of these become all the more challenging given digital media environments, as today the use of algorithms for targeted advertising offers personalization possibilities unparalleled but also raises serious issues of privacy, manipulation and consent (Huh et al., 2023).

It is a growing field of study that marketing researchers have been starting to address but a lack of theoretical approaches to global marketing strategy and consumer protection seems to persist (Kutaula et al., 2024; Widiarty & Fahim, 2024). While much academic focus is placed on the ethics of advertising in single markets, and in homogenous environments, relatively little work addresses how firms handle the challenges and tensions derived from cultural difference, the multitude of regulations, and the variations of consumer trust across nations (Trkulja et al., 2024).

This paper seeks to bridge this gap by looking at the particular problems that multinational corporations face with implementing ethical advertising practice across various international markets and its impact on consumer trust and purchase intention. The main research questions that the study aims to address are:

RQ1: What are the primary ethical issues in international advertising practice that affect consumer protection across various international markets?

RQ2: To what extent do ethical advertising perceptions, cultural sensitivity and advertising regulatory compliance awareness predict consumer trust and brand purchase intention?

RQ3: Are there significant regional differences in consumers' perceptions of ethical advertising and advertising transparency?

The study is intended to make three main contributions to the current literature. Firstly, it offers solid empirical evidence of the impacts of various aspects of ethical advertising practice on consumer behavior across cultures. Secondly, it assists in pinpointing precise instances within consumer protection law which pose an ethical issue and how they present themselves within the realm of global advertising. Thirdly, it offers pragmatic guidelines for simultaneously meeting the requirement of operating ethically and remaining culturally aware while complying with regulations for those multinational advertisers who seek to do both. This paper proceeds as follows; Section 2 presents the literature review; Section 3 deals with methodology; Section 4 presents the results; and Section 5 discusses the findings in light of the current knowledge whereas section 6 summarizes, by highlighting the practical implications, limitations and future research.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 *Theoretical Foundations of Advertising Ethics*

Several theory approaches can be employed to address the ethical dimensions of advertising. Stakeholder theory emphasizes that companies are accountable not only to shareholders but also to consumers, regulators, communities, etc (Song et al., 2025). In the context of international advertising, this means that campaigns should consider the well-being of a broad spectrum of consumer populations across cultures and regions (Migkos et al., 2025). Deontological ethics is concerned with advertising that tells the truth and is not deceptive, viewing this to be a moral imperative regardless of consequences. Consequentialism evaluates advertising based on the net welfare it generates for consumers and society (Taiwo & Okosieme, 2024).

Virtue ethics has also been applied to advertising, arguing that ethical advertising is communication consistent with the organization's character and values, and not simply rule compliance (Kwon et al., 2024). This perspective is particularly relevant to international settings, where regulations and compliance mechanisms may be lacking, or where there is a greater emphasis on the inherent ethical responsibilities of multinational advertisers.

2.2 *Consumer Protection and Global Advertising Regulation*

Consumer protection in advertising is embodied by national regulations, self-regulation by the advertising industry and international soft-law mechanisms (Chawla & Kumar, 2022). Regulatory philosophy and enforcement differ widely across countries, presenting an ongoing challenge for multinational advertisers seeking compliance with diverse and varying legal frameworks. The tension between the need for culturally and legally appropriate campaigns, and the advantages of globally consistent brand imagery for economies of scale, remains a persistent challenge (Lim et al., 2023). Geo-targeting and personalization enable campaign customization, but can also facilitate "regulatory arbitrage" in digital advertising, where advertisers exploit jurisdictional differences to engage in practices that are illegal in other countries.

Evidence suggests a moderation effect between advertising ethics and consumer trust: consumer skepticism of advertising is higher in markets with less regulatory credibility (Lim et al., 2023; Naz & Kashif, 2025). This emphasizes the importance for multinational advertisers of maintaining brand equity across diverse regulatory environments.

2.3 *Cross-Cultural Dimensions of Advertising Ethics*

Cultural variations represent a key aspect of cross-cultural ethics. These differences in cultural context and emotional and relational appeals lead to varying consumer responses to advertising messages. Global communication has blurred national stereotypes to create "hybrid consumer identities." Cultural insensitivity through the use of stereotypes, cultural appropriation, and inappropriate imagery threatens brand equity and consumer confidence. Strategically, cultural intelligence in global marketing is vital to minimize buyer resistance and avoid regulatory scrutiny of insensitive advertising (Menziez et al., 2024).

2.4 *Digital Advertising Ethics and Consumer Privacy*

Digital introduces new issues of ethics which needs to be tackled with regulations yet to catch up. Programmatic advertising, behavioral targeting and influencer marketing: Innovation of

programmatic advertising, behavioral targeting and influencer marketing can be used to hide an advertisers true intention, reach a consumers data without true consent, reach out to vulnerable group with deceptive messages and so on. The effect of disclosure of sponsorship in digital media is strong to moderate consumer trust, clear and conspicuous disclosures increase consumers trust than unclear, implicit and no disclosures. Perceived personalization is perceived as enhancing relevance perceptions but also introducing concerns for privacy that increase or decrease purchase intention depends on whether a consumer trusts the advertising brand.

2.5 Research Gaps

Though there has been a lot of research conducted, still, many research gaps exist. Most of the research has been done in a single cultural and regulatory context and can't be generalized to a global setting. The interaction between multiple ethical constructs on consumer responses is yet to be fully explored as much of the research has only examined the effect of only one ethical construct. In addition, much less is known about the relationship between digital advertising transparency and cross-cultural consumer trust. There is a need for a multi-regional empirical study to model the effect of various ethical constructs on consumer' purchase intention and trust to fill this gaps.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The research method of this study is a quantitative research and cross sectional survey approach; it is designed according to the positivist research paradigm. Such kind of method is considered applicable as the study has objectives to measure the strength and direction of relationship between constructs of ethical advertising and outcomes on the consumers in different geographic areas. Cross sectional designs, it is an often used design for research into international marketing since it is able to gather comparative data from different population at a certain point of time in an economical and efficient way.

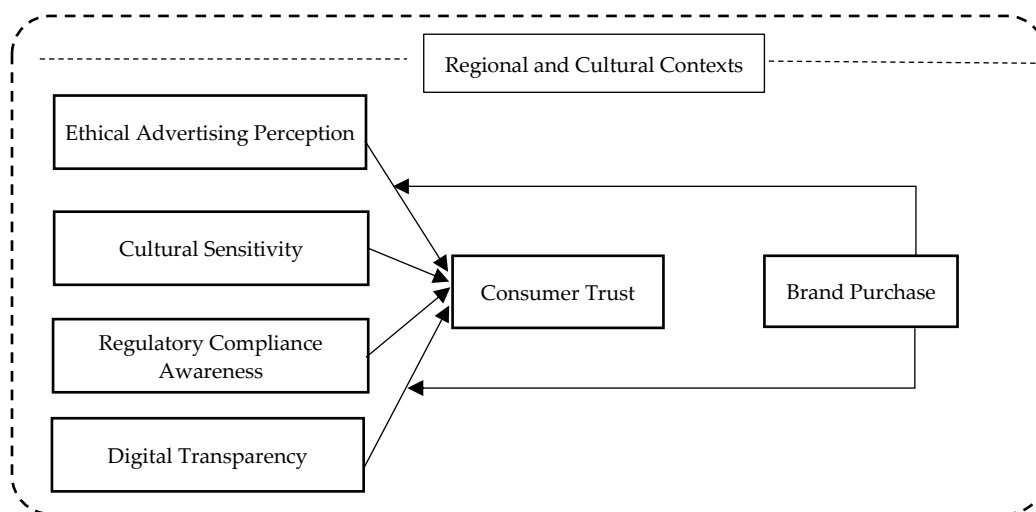


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for Ethical International Advertising and Consumer Protection

Figure 1 above is the proposed conceptual framework indicating the influence of four constructs including Ethical Advertising Perception, Cultural Sensitivity, Regulatory Compliance Awareness and Digital Transparency on Consumer Trust and Brand Purchase Intention. The framework is conditioned in terms of Regional and Cultural factors in ethical advertising outcomes:

3.2 Sample and Sampling Procedure

The target population includes adult consumers (18 years of age or older) from the five strategic regions of North America, Europe, Asia-Pacific, Latin America and Africa/Middle East. Stratified proportional sampling was adopted in order to represent geographic diversity and connectivity in terms of digital platforms as based on the level of both the population and digital connection in each region. The questionnaires were distributed via online survey tools, of which 412 respondents completed, giving 93.9% response rate; a total of 400 complete and nonoutlier responses were used for analysis (88.9% response rate) as shown in table 1.

Table 1: Sample Demographic Profile (N = 400)

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	198	49.5%
	Female	192	48.0%
	Non-binary/Other	10	2.5%
Age Group	18–25 years	87	21.8%
	26–35 years	134	33.5%
	36–50 years	112	28.0%
	Above 50 years	67	16.7%
Region	North America	104	26.0%
	Europe	96	24.0%
	Asia-Pacific	118	29.5%
	Latin America	48	12.0%
	Africa/Middle East	34	8.5%
Education Level	Undergraduate	143	35.8%
	Postgraduate	178	44.5%
	Professional/Other	79	19.7%

3.3 Instrumentation

The structured questionnaire comprising two sections was used as the research instrument. Demographic characteristics such as gender, age group, geographical location and educational level of respondents were collected in the first section of the questionnaire (Section A) while items under section B of the questionnaire were all on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree), therefore 6 latent construct were measured. The items were taken from a few

of the existing scales found in literature which had been proven reliable and valid. Expert validation based on content validation was conducted among five academics who had experience in the area of international marketing and advertising ethics. 30 respondents were used in a pilot study in order to assess the clarity of items as well as internal consistency of the questionnaire prior to the full-scale administration.

3.4 Data Collection

From March to May 2007, the data were collected through an online survey. Our research partners assisted with disseminating the questionnaires and, when appropriate, translating the questionnaire to local languages to ensure linguistic equivalence among regional samples. Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board and each respondent provided his or her informed consent prior to answering the questionnaire. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained for all participants.

3.5 Data Analysis

All the data was analyzed using SPSS version 27. To obtain an overall description of the data, mean and standard deviations were calculated for each variable. The reliability analysis was conducted by using the Cronbach alpha coefficient to establish the reliability of the items in a construct. An alpha coefficient value over 0.70 indicated good reliability as suggested by Nunnally in 1978 and also considered acceptable by the researchers. To examine the influence of ethical ads on trust and purchase intentions, multiple linear regression was conducted, and analysis was concentrated on consumers' trust, intention and some socio-demographic factors. Differences among the regions were tested using One-way ANOVA with post-hoc Tukey HSD. Significance level was set at $p < .05$.

IV. RESULTS

4.1 Descriptive Statistics and Reliability

Table 2 gives the descriptive stats and Cronbach's alpha of six constructs. They all passed the reliability test as their alpha values were between 0.82 to 0.87. For Regulatory Compliance Awareness, $\alpha=0.82$; for Ethical Advertising Perception, $\alpha=0.87$; these values were all over 0.70 based on Nunnally's 1978 test.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics and Reliability Coefficients (N = 400)

Construct	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max	Cronbach's α
Ethical Advertising Perception (EAP)	3.82	0.74	1.00	5.00	0.87
Consumer Trust (CT)	3.67	0.81	1.00	5.00	0.84
Regulatory Compliance Awareness (RCA)	3.45	0.89	1.00	5.00	0.82
Cultural Sensitivity Index (CSI)	3.71	0.77	1.00	5.00	0.85
Brand Purchase Intention (BPI)	3.59	0.83	1.00	5.00	0.86
Digital Transparency Score (DTS)	3.38	0.92	1.00	5.00	0.83

Consumer view on advertising was moderately ethical ($M=3.82$, $SD=0.914$) and culturally sensitive ($M=3.71$, $SD=0.829$). Nevertheless, on the construct of digital transparency, it received

the lowest mean ($M=3.38$, $SD=1.056$), which illustrates consumers' great concerns on transparency in digital ads.

4.2 Multiple Regression Analysis

We performed a multiple regression, with Consumer Trust as the dependent variable and Ethical Advertising Perception, Cultural Sensitivity Index, Regulatory Compliance Awareness and Digital Transparency Score as independent variables. The multiple regression model was significant ($F(4, 395) = 48.73$, $p < .001$) and it accounted for a good portion of the variance in consumer trust ($R^2 = 0.331$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.324$). The regression coefficients are presented in table 3.

Table 3: Multiple Regression Analysis of Consumer Trust

Predictor Variable	β Coefficient	Std. Error	t-value	p-value	Sig.
Ethical Advertising Perception	0.412	0.053	7.77	<.001	***
Cultural Sensitivity Index	0.287	0.061	4.70	<.001	***
Regulatory Compliance Awareness	0.193	0.058	3.33	.001	***
Digital Transparency Score	0.221	0.064	3.45	.001	***
Constant	0.748	0.142	5.27	<.001	***

All 4 independent variables positively and significantly predict consumer trust. The prediction values were, first ethical ads ($\beta = 0.412$, $p < .001$), then cultural sensitivity ($\beta = 0.287$, $p < .001$), then digital transparency ($\beta = 0.221$, $p < .001$) and then regulatory compliance perception ($\beta = 0.193$, $p < .001$). Therefore, all 4 constructs significantly positively correlated with consumer trust in line with the hypotheses. VIF values of below 2.5 indicate no multicollinearity.

The regression with the other constructs as the independent variables and BPI as the dependent variable also provided similar results ($R^2 = 0.298$, $F(4, 395) = 41.87$, $p < .001$). The strongest predictors were Ethical Advertising Perception ($\beta = 0.389$, $p < .001$) and Cultural Sensitivity Index ($\beta = 0.264$, $p < .001$).

4.3 Regional Differences (ANOVA)

Four main constructs were found to have significant differences across the various regions. Table 4 shows the mean values and statistical output for these analyses. Further post-hoc analysis using Tukey HSD confirmed that North America and Europe were the only two groups that were higher than all others at a $p < .05$ level, hence these two regions can be separated.

We observed a large difference between the perception scores for Ethical Advertising Perception among North American respondents and respondents in the Africa/Middle East regions, with North Americans scoring an average of 4.01 and Africa/Middle East scoring 3.48. This means respondents in regions where regulation is stricter tend to expect a higher level of ethical practices from advertisers. Similarly, a significant difference between Consumer Trust levels was detected among North American consumers and Latin American consumers with North Americans rating 3.88 and Latin Americans at 3.44. The results for ethical attitudes and consumer trust reveal how regulatory policy in various regions influence the perceptions of individuals.

Table 4: Regional Variations in Key Constructs

Region	Mean EAP Score	Mean CT Score	Mean CSI Score	Mean BPI Score
North America	4.01	3.88	3.94	3.79
Europe	3.97	3.81	3.88	3.71
Asia-Pacific	3.74	3.52	3.63	3.49
Latin America	3.61	3.44	3.55	3.38
Africa/Middle East	3.48	3.31	3.42	3.22
F-statistic	6.84	7.21	5.97	6.43
p-value	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001

The major ethical concerns for consumers in the survey were digital misinformation and misleading on-line advertisement (62.3%). Cultural stereotypes were the second most prominent concern (54.1%). Insufficient disclosure of sponsorship came third (48.7%) and inconsistency in enforcement of regulations across national borders was least prominent (41.2%). In this section we explore these results and their possible implications to consumers and businesses in more depth.

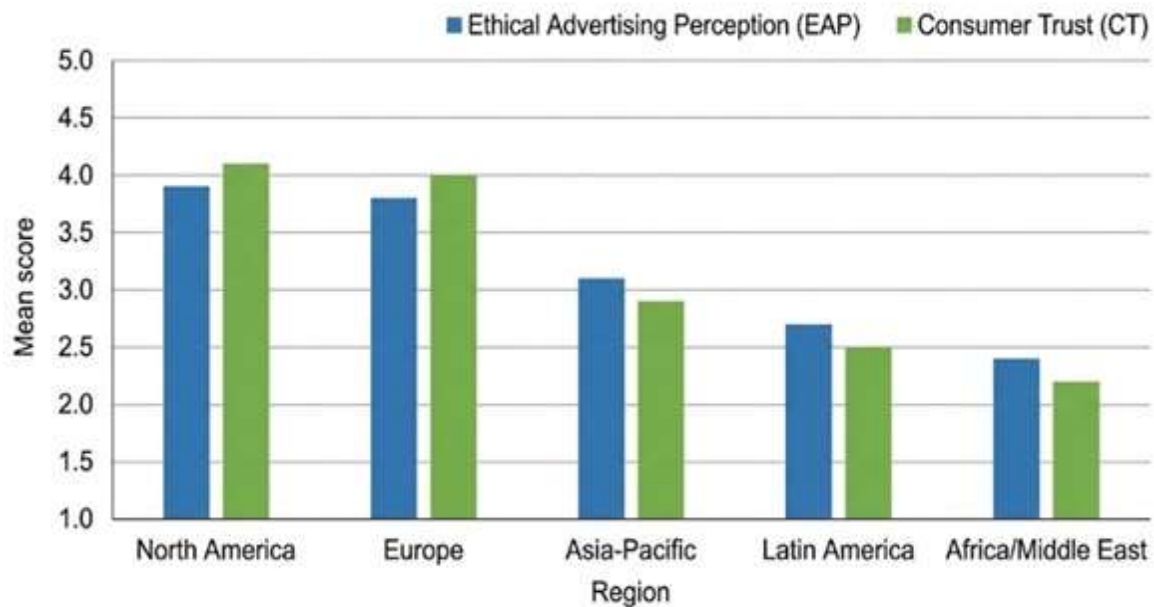


Figure 2: Regional Variations in Ethical Advertising Perception and Consumer Trust

Figure 2 depicts a comparison of mean scores for the Ethical Advertising Perception (EAP) and Consumer Trust (CT) measures across the five regions, North America, Europe, Asia-Pacific, Latin America and the Africa/Middle East. North America and Europe clearly possess the highest ethical and trust scores, while Asia-Pacific, Latin America and Africa/Middle East rank low on both these measures.

V. DISCUSSION

Ethical perceptions of advertising also had a significant influence on consumer trust ($\beta = 0.412$) so advertisements that conveyed a true & sincere image of their ethical practice/behavior will likely have higher levels of consumer trust than those that comply only with the basic legal requirements. It can be seen the application of the same principle across cultures as a way for multinational advertisers to opportunity to perform ethical practices in advertising with cultural relevance. Cultural sensitivity was also a powerful predictor of trust ($\beta = 0.287$) particularly in Asia-Pacific and Africa/Middle East; that means to be sensitive in regards of advertising to avoid confusion and have high consumer trust.

Overall Digital Transparency had influence on consumer trust ($\beta = 0.221$), but we see that the values of all the three factors were quite low because of: unclear targeting, lack of disclosure, and lack of consent for the usage of personal data, meaning that companies that go beyond the minimum legal requirements and provide additional information will have more probability to be trustworthy with their consumers. Regulatory compliance did not contribute to a signal of trustworthiness; as it was the lowest predictor of consumer trust ($\beta = 0.193$). It is important to point out that consumers differentiate legal compliance from ethical practice, high regulatory compliance may indeed increase former regulatory compliance awareness, but not consumer trust or ethical perceptions of a company.

Total Global Marketing must combine the widely- accepted ethical values, local cultural considerations and online best practice in order to develop and promote trust with consumers on a global scale and be protected even in those markets without thorough supervision of local regulatory bodies. An ethical advertising system allows marketers to protect their brands and trust of consumers while maintaining the former by making a statement in the lack of explicit rules, especially the multinational advertisers worldwide.

The result shows that cultural sensitivity had a significant relationship to the building of consumer trust with a -coefficient of 0.287, and was highly significant for Asia-Pacific and Africa/Middle East, indicating that the advertising must be culturally sensitive prior to distribution, and in doing so reduces uncertainty, thereby building consumer trust.

Digital transparency had a definite impact on building consumer trust with a -coefficient of 0.221 despite having overall low scores because of opaque targeting, nondisclosure, and inappropriate use of personal data without approval. Nonetheless, the study demonstrates that companies that exceed requirements (voluntarily provide information) are perceived by consumers to be credible. The impact of regulatory awareness had the lowest predictor ($\beta = 0.193$), which explains that legal does not guarantee that consumers will perceive the business to be ethical. Consumers are starting to distinguish between what is required by law versus ethical business operations. As the number of regulations increases, so does the level of awareness.

The research findings lead us to believe that ethical global marketing demands the implementation of both ethical and cultural approaches alongside universal ethical practices in every country; by doing so, businesses ensure brand trustworthiness among consumers across all markets, even those where formal monitoring is lacking, thus enhancing consumer trust. Businesses can foster consumer trust through strong ethical advertising system even when faced

with insufficient regulations. The results of the study demonstrated that companies with large advertising budgets, with their presence across numerous countries, are obligated to sustain the highest possible level of ethics in advertising strategies and cultural awareness; otherwise, they cannot remain competitive nor retain consumer trust.

VI. CONCLUSION

In this paper, we explore the ethics challenges that multinational companies face in international advertising and how this relates to consumer trust and purchase decisions across different countries. This study found that perceived ad ethics is viewed by consumers as the most important for building trust ($\beta = 0.412$), followed by cultural appropriateness ($\beta = 0.287$), digital transparency ($\beta = 0.221$) and awareness of regulation ($\beta = 0.193$). This is followed by cultural appropriateness ($\beta = 0.287$), then digital transparency ($\beta = 0.221$), and finally awareness of regulation ($\beta = 0.193$). Trust in companies and consumer expectations is highest among North Americans and Europeans compared to Asia-Pacific, Latin America, Middle-East-Africa people. Ethical issues of the study include digital deception, stereotyping within ads, unrevealing paid contents and inconsistent regulation. This reveals the complicity of international advertising; this is a valid six-construct model to be used as an audit mechanism for multi-market campaigns; it permits check and improve the ethic performance before it is implemented in practice. In addition, research studies have proven that consumer trust can be better established through a firm's own internal ethics standard rather than compliance to any regulatory rules; firms should thus strive for standards above those set forth by local regulations; investment in digital transparency proactively, through for example voluntary disclosure, builds trust. These findings suggest that policy makers should align international advertising practices and regulations across borders so as to reduce discrepancies among existing standards and make rules of different countries more consistent throughout the world. The Global Advertising Principles by World Federation of Advertisers should serve as a useful guide; however, this study has its own limitations on cross-section design and use of self-reported data which might have social desirable biases, sample representation in countries is also not fully across global population. These suggest us not to generalize the findings carelessly. Future research should look more into the internal differentiation among countries of the same region and apply mixed-methods or qualitative research to understand formation of ethic in consumers; it should study the dynamic of ethic issues in consumer's purchase decisions in a longitudinal context and explore more of new ethical issues that are emerging as a result of new technologies and AI in advertising.

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