



Converting Research into Practice

(LCDB7010)

“Modelling the Effects of Digital Marketing on Business Sustainability: The Mediating Role of Consumer Scepticism in the UK Context”

DBA Level 7

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Modelling the Effects of Digital Marketing on Business Sustainability: The Mediating Role of Consumer Scepticism in the UK Context

1. Introduction

1.1 Background: The Business Problem UK Organisations Cannot Explain

UK organisations are spending more on digital marketing than at any point in history, and brand loyalty is falling. This is not a coincidence. It is a signal that something fundamental is wrong with how digital marketing investment is being understood, evaluated, and deployed.

Total UK digital advertising expenditure exceeded twenty-seven billion pounds in 2024, with programmatic, social media, and influencer channels accounting for the overwhelming majority of that spend (Chowdhury et al., 2026). Marketing departments have restructured entirely around these channels, treating them as the primary mechanisms for customer acquisition, relationship building, and competitive advantage. The underlying assumption driving all of this investment is straightforward: more digital presence generates more consumer engagement, and more engagement generates more loyalty.

This assumption is not holding. Brand loyalty metrics across major UK consumer categories are weakening. Consumer trust in digital advertising has fallen for four consecutive years according to independent tracking studies. Ad avoidance among eighteen to thirty-four year olds, the demographic that UK digital brands most urgently need to reach, has reached its highest ever recorded rate. And organisations that are spending the most on digital channels are not necessarily experiencing the strongest brand relationships.

The business problem this study addresses is not primarily about advertising performance. It is about business sustainability. A brand that generates impressive quarterly engagement metrics while accumulating consumer scepticism is not a sustainable brand. It is consuming its own future effectiveness, spending down the trust reserves that make future marketing investment work. When organisations cannot explain why their digital marketing is producing engagement data that looks healthy while brand loyalty continues to decline, they are missing the mechanism that connects those two observations. This study proposes that the missing mechanism is consumer scepticism, and that understanding it is the most commercially consequential challenge UK marketing directors currently face.

1.2 Why Digital Marketing Must Preempt Future Challenges

The business problem described above is not a transient correction that better execution will resolve. Three structural developments are actively intensifying it, and organisations that are not building strategies around them now will face progressively worse outcomes.

The first is the proliferation of artificial intelligence in digital marketing content generation and delivery. AI-generated content is moving from a specialist capability to a mainstream practice. As it does, it introduces a new and distinct scepticism trigger: provenance uncertainty. When consumers cannot determine whether a brand communication was written by a person who genuinely believes the message or generated by an algorithm optimised for persuasion, they apply scepticism to the entire interaction.

The second is the deepening of data privacy awareness. Repeated high-profile data scandal coverage has educated a generation of UK consumers about the mechanics of algorithmic targeting. A consumer who understands that they are being shown an advertisement because their browsing, location, and purchase history has been profiled brings fundamentally different cognitive equipment to that encounter than a consumer encountering broadcast advertising in an earlier media environment. That equipment is called persuasion knowledge, and it is the foundation of scepticism.

The third is the consolidation of commercial intent concealment as a standard digital marketing practice. Native advertising, influencer endorsement with inadequate disclosure, and sponsored content disguised as editorial have made the detection of commercial intent into a daily cognitive task for UK consumers. Organisations that continue relying on format-embedded commercial intent without disclosure transparency are not just generating present-day scepticism. They are training their audiences to become more resistant to all of their future communications.

1.3 The Problematisation: What Four Deep Problems Reveal

The surface-level observation of declining brand loyalty despite rising digital spend points toward four deeper structural problems that current marketing practice has not resolved.

The first is that digital marketing evaluation frameworks measure the wrong things. Clickthrough rates, impressions, and short-cycle conversion metrics measure nothing about what is happening to a consumer's long-term relationship with the brand. A campaign that generates fifty thousand clicks while simultaneously raising scepticism across the audience is not a successful campaign in any sustainability sense.

The second is that scepticism has been mispositioned in the causal architecture of digital marketing theory. The majority of academic and practitioner frameworks treat scepticism as a downstream consequence of poor marketing execution. This positioning is causally inverted. In the contemporary UK digital environment, scepticism precedes marketing evaluation as a standing cognitive state that consumers bring to every digital encounter.

It does not wait to assess content quality. It determines whether content quality can be assessed at all.

The third is the absence of long-term sustainability thinking from digital marketing investment logic. Quarterly KPIs and monthly campaign reporting create structural incentives to optimise for the period measured, regardless of what that optimisation is doing to brand relationships beyond the measurement window. Scepticism accumulates gradually and makes itself commercially visible only after sustained accumulation.

The fourth concerns the future trajectory of digital marketing technology. AI-generated content, algorithmic targeting without meaningful consent, and the normalisation of undisclosed commercial relationships are all structural developments that will intensify the scepticism challenge for UK brands over the next three to five years.

These four problems converge on a single fundamental question: is the current conceptual and evaluative architecture of digital marketing adequate for understanding and managing the relationship between digital marketing investment and business sustainability? The answer this study argues for is no, and the specific conceptual correction required is the repositioning of consumer scepticism from a background condition into the central mediating mechanism that determines whether digital marketing can produce sustainable outcomes at all.

1.4 Research Questions

RQ1: What is the prevalence and antecedent structure of consumer scepticism among UK digital marketing audiences, and does the observed pattern support the Gateway Mechanism hypothesis?

RQ2: What is the relationship between consumer scepticism levels and brand loyalty behaviours among UK adults, and is that relationship consistent with scepticism operating as an upstream gateway rather than a downstream moderator?

RQ3: How do scepticism levels vary across digital marketing channel types, and what does this channel-specific variation imply for how UK organisations should allocate digital marketing budgets?

RQ4: What managerial frameworks can be derived from scepticism evidence to enable UK organisations to make better strategic decisions about digital marketing channel allocation, content governance, and brand sustainability measurement?

1.5 Research Objectives

Objective 1: To generate preliminary empirical evidence about the prevalence and antecedent structure of consumer scepticism in the UK digital marketing environment using a pilot survey instrument designed for subsequent scale-up into a full mediation study.

Objective 2: To assess whether the pattern of scepticism and loyalty responses observed in the pilot data is consistent with the Gateway Mechanism, the theoretical reframing of scepticism as an upstream cognitive filter rather than a downstream attitudinal response.

Objective 3: To identify channel-specific scepticism profiles that differentiate between social media, influencer, search, and email marketing formats and provide a preliminary evidence base for scepticism-adjusted channel allocation decisions.

Objective 4: To translate the preliminary findings into a concrete set of managerial frameworks that UK organisations can begin applying to digital marketing strategy, performance evaluation, and brand sustainability planning without waiting for full-scale confirmatory research.

1.6 Significance of the Study

The academic significance of this research lies in its contribution to a gap documented by Chaudhary, Sharma and Kalro (2019), whose systematic review of over one hundred scepticism studies found that no published research had ever positioned consumer scepticism as a mediating mechanism between digital marketing and business sustainability outcomes. This study provides the first UK pilot data specifically designed to test that relationship.

The managerial significance is more immediately practical. UK organisations are currently making multi-million pound digital marketing decisions without any evidence about what scepticism is costing them in loyalty terms. This study begins to quantify that cost and provides managers with the conceptual framework to understand why their digital marketing investments may be underperforming in brand relationship terms even when they appear to perform well on conventional metrics.

1.7 Scope and Limitations

This pilot study focused on fifty UK adult consumers exposed to digital advertising across at least two channels. Its findings are directional rather than confirmatory, and statistical precision will be addressed in the full study using a minimum sample of three hundred and PROCESS Model 4 bootstrapped mediation analysis with 5,000 resamples. The cross-sectional design cannot observe scepticism accumulation over time, which a longitudinal extension will address.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Digital Marketing and Business Sustainability: The Gap Between Spend and Outcome

The academic literature on digital marketing and business sustainability shares an assumption that functions less like a testable proposition and more like an unexamined axiom: that the primary barrier to effective digital marketing is execution quality. Authenticity helps, personalisation helps, relevance helps, and emotional resonance helps. This is a reasonable research programme for an environment where the primary

barrier to effectiveness is content quality. It is entirely inadequate for an environment where the primary barrier is activated scepticism that closes the evaluation process before content quality can be assessed.

Ebrahim (2020) provides one of the most important UK-specific demonstrations of this dynamic. Through structural equation modelling with a UK consumer sample, Ebrahim showed that trust fully mediates the social media marketing to brand loyalty relationship. When trust is present, the positive pathway functions as the engagement literature predicts. When trust is absent, the same marketing activities fail to produce loyalty outcomes. This finding is important but it stops one stage too early. It shows that trust is necessary for loyalty without explaining what determines whether trust can form. Consumer scepticism is the answer to that prior question, and it is the answer this study is built around.

Fetis et al. (2023) extend this picture by demonstrating that emotional mediation is necessary for social media marketing to produce brand loyalty, and that scepticism-triggering content closes the emotional pathway before any loyalty benefit can form. Martins et al. (2022), in a meta-analysis drawing on data from more than 34,000 participants, confirm that when credibility and trust fall below consumer expectations, the social media influence effect does not merely weaken. It reverses. None of these studies models what creates the trust deficit in the first place. That explanatory gap is the precise position this study occupies.

2.2 Consumer Scepticism: Definition, Causes, and Acceleration

Consumer scepticism in the advertising context is the stable dispositional tendency to question and disbelieve advertising claims (Obermiller and Spangenberg, 1998). Scepticism is a tendency, meaning it is relatively stable across encounters rather than being entirely reactive to specific content. It is a disposition, meaning it is carried into each marketing encounter before evaluation begins.

Three categories of antecedent reliably generate or intensify scepticism in digital marketing contexts. Perceived inauthenticity is consistently the strongest scepticism predictor across multiple studies (Kothari et al., 2025; Banerji and Singh, 2024). Transparency deficit, specifically the failure to clearly disclose commercial relationships, sponsorship arrangements, and AI-generated content origins, has become a primary trigger in the UK regulatory context (Bundtzen and Hartwig, 2024). Data manipulation beliefs, the perception that brands use personal data to engineer purchasing decisions rather than deliver genuine value, represent a third and rapidly growing dimension that distinguishes the contemporary digital environment from earlier advertising contexts (Xu et al., 2024).

The trajectory of scepticism in the UK is accelerating. AI-generated content creates provenance uncertainty that functions as a scepticism trigger independent of content quality. The concentration of digital advertising through a small number of platform operators means consumers encounter the same targeting logic repeatedly, accelerating the persuasion knowledge development that the theoretical framework predicts.

2.3 Theoretical Framework: Three Models That Structure This Study

This study is built on three interrelated theoretical models whose combination produces the analytical architecture that neither model alone can provide.

The Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad and Wright, 1994) is the foundational contribution. The model proposes that consumers accumulate, through repeated exposure to persuasion attempts, a set of intuitions and beliefs about how persuasion operates. When commercial intent is detected, these accumulated intuitions activate automatically as a defensive coping response. The critical insight is that this capacity is universal and developmental: every consumer has it, and it grows progressively more sophisticated with exposure. This means the most digitally experienced UK consumers are simultaneously the most commercially valuable and the most scepticism-resistant audiences.

The Integrative Trust Model (Mayer, Davis and Schoorman, 1995) provides the structural mechanism through which scepticism translates into brand loyalty consequences. Trust, in this framework, requires the trustor to perceive three attributes in the trusted party: ability, benevolence, and integrity. When scepticism is activated, it simultaneously suppresses all three components. The brand's claims are suspected of being motivated rather than factual, removing ability perception. The brand's communications are perceived as commercially self-serving, removing benevolence. And the detection of concealed commercial intent is interpreted as deception, destroying integrity. This simultaneous collapse of all three trust components explains why scepticism-driven loyalty loss is asymmetrically fast and severe relative to trust-driven loyalty gain.

The Gateway Mechanism proposed in this study is a theoretical reframing of where scepticism sits in the causal sequence connecting digital marketing to business sustainability. Existing models position scepticism as a moderating variable that weakens the strength of positive marketing pathways. The Gateway Mechanism holds that this positioning is causally incorrect. Scepticism does not moderate the marketing-to-loyalty relationship. It determines whether that relationship can exist at all. When scepticism is above a threshold, the entire sequence from digital marketing exposure to trust formation to emotional attachment to repurchase commitment is structurally blocked. This reframing changes the primary strategic question from how to make digital marketing more effective within the existing framework to how to manage the conditions that determine whether any digital marketing can be effective.

Together, these three models form a coherent explanatory chain: the PKM explains how scepticism accumulates, the Mayer et al. trust model explains what scepticism destroys when activated, and the Gateway Mechanism explains the causal position of scepticism in the marketing to sustainability sequence. No prior study has integrated all three models into a single analytical framework applied to UK digital marketing conditions.

2.4 Research Gap

Chaudhary, Sharma and Kalro (2019) reviewed over one hundred empirical scepticism studies and found that no published research had ever positioned consumer scepticism as a mediating mechanism between digital marketing and business sustainability outcomes.

Alnawas and Alsharif (2021) came closest with a partial mediation finding in a Jordanian sample, but used general consumer behaviour rather than multidimensional brand loyalty as their outcome variable. No UK replication of their study exists.

Dwivedi et al. (2021), drawing on expert consensus from 54 scholars across 46 countries, formally identified UK scepticism research and long-run loyalty measurement as the two highest priority gaps in the digital marketing field. This study fills both simultaneously.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Philosophy, Ontology, Epistemology, and Axiology

This study is grounded in a post-positivist research philosophy. Post-positivism accepts that an objective social reality exists independently of the researcher's perceptions, while acknowledging that our measurement of it is always partial and subject to revision. Classical positivism, rooted in the logic of the natural sciences, holds that social phenomena can be measured with precision equivalent to physical observation. Postpositivism modifies this position by accepting that the social world introduces complexity, individual variation, and context-dependence that resists perfectly precise measurement. In the context of this study, consumer scepticism and its effects on brand loyalty are treated as real phenomena that exist outside the researcher's interpretation, observable through systematic empirical measurement, but not with the absolute certainty classical positivism claims. This philosophical position is appropriate for a doctoral study that simultaneously proposes a new theoretical positioning and tests it against structured data, because it allows the researcher to be genuinely open to disconfirming patterns without abandoning the commitment to rigorous, replicable, empirically-grounded enquiry.

The ontological position of the study is critical realist. Ontology concerns the nature of what exists: whether the entities and mechanisms a study investigates have independent existence or are entirely constructed through the act of studying them. Critical realism, as developed by Bhaskar (1975) and extended into social science by Archer (1995), holds that social structures and causal mechanisms are real and operate independently of whether they are observed or named, but that their effects are realised through the actions and interpretations of social actors in specific contexts. Consumer scepticism, trust, and brand loyalty are treated as real mechanisms operating in the social world, not as constructs that exist only in the categories chosen to measure them. The Gateway Mechanism is ontologically a claim about how the social world is structured: scepticism causally precedes and conditionally blocks the trust formation pathway. This is an assertion about the nature of a real causal relationship, not merely

a statistical association between survey responses, and the critical realist position commits the researcher to seeking the generative mechanism rather than simply mapping the surface correlation.

The epistemological stance is empiricist and positivist in its data collection orientation. Epistemology concerns how knowledge is generated and what counts as valid evidence. The empiricist position holds that reliable knowledge is derived from observation and measurement of the observable world rather than from pure theoretical reasoning. Knowledge about the prevalence and antecedent structure of scepticism in this study is generated through structured survey measurement, standardised Likert-scale instruments derived from validated scales in the advertising scepticism literature, and systematic pattern analysis across the full sample. This epistemological orientation is consistent with the deductive logic of the study: the Gateway Mechanism generates specific directional predictions, and the data is examined to assess whether the observed patterns are consistent with those predictions. Subjective consumer interpretation is acknowledged but contained within validated item structures so that findings can be compared, aggregated, and replicated across future samples. The pilot design reflects an epistemological humility appropriate to the preliminary stage: claims are directional and pattern-based rather than statistically confirmatory, and the full study will employ bootstrapped mediation analysis to generate more robust inferential knowledge.

The axiological position of the study is transparent and practically oriented. Axiology concerns the role of values in research: whether researchers can or should eliminate value commitments from the enquiry process, and what the researcher's values contribute to or subtract from the validity of findings. A strictly positivist axiology would require the researcher to pursue complete value neutrality and treat any professional or practical interest as a contaminating variable. Post-positivism rejects this requirement as both impossible and misleading: all researchers bring value commitments to their choice of topic, framing, and interpretation, and pretending otherwise does not eliminate those values but merely conceals them from critical scrutiny. The researcher in this study brings a declared professional interest in resolving the gap between digital marketing spend and sustainable brand outcomes. This value commitment shapes the research questions toward managerially actionable findings rather than purely theoretical contribution, and shapes the interpretation of findings toward strategic implications that organisations can act upon. In post-positivist research, this value transparency is treated as a source of rigour rather than contamination: stating the value orientation allows readers to assess the extent to which it shapes the analytical framework and recommendations. The study's commitment to practical managerial utility is explicit, and the findings are designed throughout to connect to organisational decision-making rather than remain at the level of theoretical abstraction.

3.2 Research Design and Pilot Justification

This study adopts a pilot research design using a structured questionnaire, and that choice is deliberate rather than pragmatic. A pilot serves a specific and distinct purpose from a full-scale confirmatory study. It tests whether the research instrument captures

what it is intended to capture, generates preliminary directional findings that justify the investment of full-scale data collection, and identifies the effect size estimates needed for the power calculations the full study will require. Hayes (2022) establishes that a minimum sample of approximately two hundred is required for stable PROCESS Model 4 bootstrapped mediation estimates. The pilot provides the preliminary evidence that makes full-scale investment justified and methodologically sound. The research design is post-positivist and deductive. The Gateway Mechanism generates specific directional predictions about the pattern of data a UK adult sample should produce if the theoretical reframing is accurate.

3.3 Data Collection

Data was collected through a structured questionnaire comprising twenty-three items across six thematic blocks. The first block confirmed UK residency and captured demographic characteristics. The second measured digital marketing exposure intensity and platform usage. The third assessed scepticism antecedents across four dimensions: perceived inauthenticity, transparency deficit, data manipulation beliefs, and suspicion of commercial intent. The fourth assessed brand loyalty behavioural intentions across three dimensions: switching behaviour, advocacy, and loyalty commitment. The fifth captured channel-specific trust profiles. The sixth assessed the trajectory of scepticism over the preceding twelve months. Likert scale items used a five-point response format.

3.4 Sampling

Fifty UK adult respondents were recruited through purposive convenience sampling via professional and personal networks. All respondents confirmed UK residency through the opening screening question. The sample was intentionally age-diverse within the eighteen to fifty-five range, with conscious representation from the younger demographic identified theoretically as both the highest-scepticism and the highest-digital-exposure segment.

3.5 Limitations

The pilot sample of fifty is sufficient for preliminary pattern detection and directional analysis but not for mediation testing or population-level generalisation. The purposive recruitment approach introduces potential selection bias. The cross-sectional design cannot observe how scepticism accumulates over time. Each of these limitations is addressed in the full study design through stratified random sampling, a minimum n of three hundred, and a longitudinal extension that tracks scepticism and loyalty over a sustained campaign period.

4. Data Analysis and Findings

4.1 Who Responded and Why It Matters

All fifty respondents confirmed UK residency. The age distribution showed the largest group in the eighteen to thirty-four bracket, with strong representation across the

twentyfive to forty-four range and smaller proportions in older groups. The gender split was approximately equal. Employment covered full-time, part-time, students, and selfemployed respondents. This demographic spread matters because it prevents the findings from reflecting a single consumer context, and the younger skew is theoretically appropriate given that this group represents the highest digital marketing exposure, highest scepticism propensity, and highest commercial value for UK digital brands simultaneously.

4.2 Digital Marketing Exposure: What Consumers Are Actually Experiencing

Findings from the exposure questions revealed that the overwhelming majority of respondents encounter sponsored content or digital advertisements every time they go online. This near-universal exposure intensity is significant because the PKM predicts that repeated exposure accelerates persuasion knowledge development, progressively lowering the scepticism activation threshold with each successive encounter. When exposure is effectively constant, the UK consumer population is not encountering advertising from a neutral cognitive baseline. It is operating in a state of persistently activated defensive awareness.

Most respondents also reported using digital marketing as their primary route to discovering new brands, and the majority noticed the same advertising messages appearing across multiple platforms simultaneously. This cross-platform recognition is particularly scepticism-generating because it makes the algorithmic commercial infrastructure behind digital advertising visible in a direct and personal way. Instagram and TikTok emerged as the most widely used platforms, followed by Facebook and YouTube.

4.3 Scepticism Antecedents: How Deeply Embedded the Problem Is

The scepticism antecedent questions produced findings that, taken together, describe a consumer base that has moved well beyond incidental advertising scepticism into a state of systemic distrust toward digital marketing as a whole.

The large majority of respondents agreed that brands use sustainability claims primarily for commercial rather than genuinely environmental purposes. Research by Mohammed et al. (2025) demonstrates that scepticism generated by perceived greenwashing does not stay bounded by the category. It propagates upward to brand-level scepticism, meaning a single deceptive sustainability claim can undermine consumer trust in everything a brand communicates.

Most respondents reported difficulty distinguishing organic content from paid advertising. This is the precise condition the PKM identifies as most intensely scepticism-generating: when commercial intent is embedded rather than declared, detection activates a compounding sceptical response in which the concealment itself becomes a trust violation separate from and additional to whatever concerns exist about the content's honesty.

A large proportion of respondents reported having purchased products based on digital advertising that appeared significantly different from what was delivered. Prior deceptive experience is among the strongest predictors of elevated baseline scepticism because it provides the lived personal evidence base upon which persuasion knowledge builds most effectively.

Most respondents reported actively skipping or blocking digital advertisements most of the time or always. If the majority of the target audience is actively filtering out digital advertising before the message can be processed, the gap between delivered impressions and genuinely engaged audiences is not a targeting quality problem. It is a scepticism problem that standard reach metrics cannot detect.

The majority of respondents treated limited-time offers as marketing tactics rather than genuine scarcity signals, and most found it difficult to trust five-star reviews shown in social media advertisements. When the social proof mechanism and the urgency persuasion mechanism have themselves become scepticism triggers, the conventional approach to digital persuasion has been structurally undermined.

The most significant single finding came from the data manipulation question: the large majority of respondents believe that brands use their personal data to manipulate their purchasing choices. This is not scepticism toward a particular advertisement or a specific brand. It is systemic distrust of the entire commercial relationship between brands and consumers in the digital environment, operating as a standing cognitive filter through which every marketing encounter is evaluated before content quality can make any difference.

4.4 Brand Loyalty Consequences: What Scepticism Is Actually Costing UK Businesses

The loyalty-related questions produced findings that translate the scepticism evidence directly into commercial terms that any business leader can understand.

The overwhelming majority of respondents stop purchasing from brands they feel have misled them through digital marketing. This is brand avoidance, not reduced loyalty. It represents active commercial disengagement that reverses whatever relationship investment the brand had previously made. For any business operating in a high customer acquisition cost environment where lifetime value is the primary commercial metric, brand avoidance generated by digital marketing scepticism is a direct destruction of the commercial asset that marketing investment is supposed to build.

Most respondents only recommend brands whose online presence feels authentic and transparent. A brand that generates scepticism is not simply losing the consumer's individual purchase. It is losing the advocacy through which that consumer would have introduced the brand to their network. The large majority of respondents directly link their long-term brand loyalty to honesty in digital advertising. This finding most clearly supports the Gateway Mechanism: these consumers are describing honesty as the prerequisite for loyalty rather than a feature of it.

Most respondents are willing to pay a price premium for brands they experience as transparent about their practices. This directly challenges the assumption that transparency is a cost that erodes commercial competitiveness. For the majority of this sample, transparency generates price premium willingness.

4.5 Channel Trust Profiles: Where the Budget Should Not Be Going

The channel trust data reveals a specific and practically important finding. Brand websites and email marketing attract the highest trustworthiness ratings, followed by search advertising. Social media advertising and influencer marketing are rated as the least trustworthy channels.

This hierarchy is theoretically coherent. The channels rated most trustworthy are characterised by explicit or expected commercial intent: nobody visiting a brand's website expects to encounter anything other than brand-curated commercial content, and this transparency of purpose is itself a trust signal. The channels rated least trustworthy are characterised by embedded or disguised commercial intent. When consumers detect the disguise, the concealment itself becomes the primary scepticism trigger.

The managerial implication is direct and uncomfortable. The channels that attract the largest share of UK digital advertising spend are precisely the channels rated as least trustworthy by UK consumers. The channels rated most trustworthy attract comparatively small budget allocations. This may be the commercial consequence of an evaluation framework that has been optimising for reach and engagement without measuring the trust and scepticism dynamics that determine whether reach and engagement convert into sustained brand relationships.

4.6 Scepticism Is Accelerating, Not Stabilising

The scepticism trajectory question produced one of the most strategically significant findings in the pilot. The majority of respondents reported that their scepticism toward online advertising had increased over the preceding twelve months, with a substantial proportion describing that increase as significant. Only a small minority reported no change, and an even smaller group described any reduction.

This acceleration matters more than any individual finding about current scepticism levels. It means that UK brands are not operating in a stable scepticism environment that better execution can gradually improve. They are operating in a deteriorating trust environment that is being driven by structural developments: AI content proliferation, algorithmic targeting opacity, influencer disclosure failures, and regulatory amplification of consumer awareness. Organisations that are not actively managing scepticism now are not simply failing to address a current problem. They are creating a future strategic liability at an accelerating rate.

5. Discussion

5.1 What the Evidence Actually Means for Business Sustainability

The pilot findings describe a consumer environment in which the foundational assumptions of digital marketing effectiveness have been substantially invalidated for a large proportion of the UK adult audience. The conventional model assumes that digital marketing reaches a receptive audience, delivers content evaluated on its merits, and produces proportional engagement and loyalty when executed competently.

The data from this study describes a different reality. Most respondents encounter advertising with a standing defensive orientation. Most are actively filtering out the messages being delivered. Most have direct personal experience of commercial deception. And most are making long-term brand relationship decisions based primarily on whether they experience the brand's digital communications as honest. This is not a consumer population that needs better-targeted advertising. It is a consumer population that has developed extensive persuasion knowledge and is deploying it continuously as a defensive filter. The Gateway Mechanism hypothesis is supported directionally across every measurement block in the pilot data.

5.2 How Managers Should Use This Study to Change Strategic Decisions

The managerial contribution of this research is most practically expressed through four strategic decisions that the findings directly inform.

Channel allocation redesign. The pilot data demonstrates that social media advertising and influencer marketing are generating the highest scepticism among UK consumers while attracting the largest share of digital advertising budgets. Brand websites and email marketing attract the highest trust ratings while receiving comparatively small budget allocations. Marketing directors should commission the full-scale study that allows these calculations at a statistically robust level, and in the interim should begin critically examining whether current allocation ratios can be justified by any evidence that accounts for loyalty cost rather than just engagement return.

Content governance and transparency strategy. The finding that most respondents cannot reliably distinguish organic from paid content, combined with the willingness of the majority to pay a price premium for transparent brands, indicates that proactive disclosure is not a cost to manage. It is a commercial opportunity. Managers should redesign disclosure practices as a strategic trust instrument rather than a compliance exercise, explicitly communicating the origins of AI-generated content, the commercial relationships behind influencer partnerships, and the data usage practices behind personalised targeting.

Performance measurement redesign. The finding that the majority of respondents skip or block advertising most or all of the time means that reach and impression figures used to justify digital marketing investment are materially overstating actual audience

engagement. Managers should integrate validated scepticism measurement into quarterly brand health tracking alongside net promoter scores and brand equity metrics. The Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998) scale, adapted for digital channel contexts, provides the validated instrument. Scepticism levels should be treated as the leading indicator of loyalty risk that they are: the signal that precedes the commercial consequence.

Future-proofing against structural scepticism intensification. The scepticism acceleration finding requires managers to treat the current environment not as a stable challenge to be managed but as a deteriorating trajectory to be preempted. This means specific investment in three areas: authentic human-created content for consumer-facing communications rather than AI-generated material presented without attribution; transparent data use policies communicated directly to consumers; and influencer relationship management that treats commercial disclosure as a brand asset, because consumers who discover concealed commercial arrangements become sceptical about the brand, the platform, and every subsequent communication from all three.

5.3 Linking Findings to the Theoretical Framework

The pilot findings align with the three-model theoretical framework in specific and confirmatory ways. The PKM predicts that repeated exposure to digital advertising builds persuasion knowledge and accelerates scepticism activation. The near-universal exposure frequency combined with the majority ad avoidance behaviour confirms this dynamic. The Mayer et al. trust model predicts that scepticism simultaneously suppresses ability, benevolence, and integrity perceptions. The finding that the large majority of respondents link long-term loyalty to honesty and stop purchasing from brands that mislead them confirms that the loyalty consequences of scepticism are commercial, severe, and consistent with the simultaneous collapse of all three trust components the model predicts. The Gateway Mechanism predicts that scepticism operates as an upstream filter rather than a downstream moderator. The finding that consumers describe their scepticism as a pre-evaluative orientation brought to every encounter, rather than a reactive response to specific poor content, is the most direct evidence available at pilot scale for the Gateway Mechanism's theoretical positioning.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1 Summary

This pilot study has built a coherent argument from a real commercial paradox to preliminary empirical evidence. The paradox is the simultaneous reality of record UK digital marketing investment and declining brand loyalty. The argument is that this paradox is not explained by execution failures or content quality deficits. It is explained by the structural position of consumer scepticism as an upstream cognitive gateway that determines whether digital marketing can produce sustainable outcomes at all.

The pilot evidence supports this argument across every dimension measured. Scepticism is prevalent, its consequences for brand loyalty are severe and commercially direct, its intensity varies across channels in the direction the Gateway Mechanism predicts, and it is accelerating, meaning the strategic environment for UK digital marketing is becoming more resistant over time.

6.2 Answering the Research Questions

RQ1 is answered affirmatively. Consumer scepticism is highly prevalent, with data manipulation beliefs, embedded commercial intent detection, and suspicion of aggressive advertising all confirmed at very high rates consistent with the Gateway Mechanism hypothesis.

RQ2 receives directional support. Brand avoidance, advocacy withdrawal, and loyalty conditional on honesty are the behavioural signatures of a gateway closure mechanism, consistent with scepticism operating upstream rather than as a downstream moderator.

RQ3 is answered through the channel trust data. Social media and influencer channels generate the highest scepticism; brand websites and email generate the lowest. Budget allocation inverted against this trust hierarchy represents a structural misalignment between investment and commercial return.

RQ4 is addressed through the four strategic frameworks: channel allocation redesign, content governance reform, performance measurement redesign, and future-proofing strategy.

6.3 Recommendations

For UK marketing practitioners: implement scepticism measurement as a standard brand health indicator, conduct channel allocation audits against scepticism profiles rather than engagement metrics alone, redesign disclosure practices as a strategic trust investment, and develop a specific strategy addressing AI content transparency before regulatory requirements force a reactive response.

Converting Research into Practice: Reflective Account

What I Did and Why

The starting point for this assignment was not a gap I had found in the literature. It was a problem I had lived with professionally for long enough to know that the standard explanations were not adequate. In any organisation that makes digital marketing investment decisions regularly, the logic used to justify those decisions, engagement metrics, reach figures, conversion rates, does not seem to connect reliably to the longerterm brand outcomes the investment is supposed to produce. Campaigns perform well by every measurable standard and then brand loyalty does not follow in the way the

investment should justify. I had not had a name for what was intercepting the relationship between spend and outcome. This research gave me one.

The professor's emphasis on value and feasibility as the twin tests for any good research question shaped every decision from the start. On value, the question of why record digital marketing investment is not producing proportional brand loyalty outcomes is not a niche academic puzzle. It is a problem that UK marketing directors are actively sitting with, often without an adequate explanatory framework. On feasibility, a pilot study with fifty respondents and a structured questionnaire was a realistic scope for the constraints of this assignment. These two criteria are not just assignment requirements. They are the right criteria for any research that aspires to be genuinely useful.

The Challenge of Problematising Before Concluding

The instruction to problematise first and then let the problems lead to research questions rather than deriving questions mechanically from a literature gap was the most intellectually demanding aspect of this assignment. What this approach requires is closer to how a practitioner encounters a real problem: something is clearly wrong, identify what it actually is before deciding what to measure.

Following this approach changed the shape of the paper significantly. Instead of beginning with a gap statement, the paper begins with a commercial paradox: record spend, declining loyalty, and the question of what structural problem could produce both simultaneously. That question led to the causal architecture of digital marketing effectiveness and the realisation that scepticism's position in that architecture is wrong in the existing literature. Scepticism is modelled as a downstream response to poor execution when it actually operates upstream as a standing cognitive state. Once that was identified as the problem, the research questions followed naturally from it. They were derived from the problem, and the literature was assessed against the problem rather than the problem being derived from the literature.

This is a genuinely different intellectual posture than summarising what the field does not know and proposing to fill the gap. It requires confronting what the field has been getting wrong and designing research that can correct it. That is uncomfortable in a productive way because it requires committing to a theoretical position before the data is collected. The discomfort is a reliable signal that the thinking is going somewhere genuinely new.

Broadening Beyond Scepticism: The Business Problem Came First

One of the most important revisions I made to my initial draft was pushing the business problem to the front rather than allowing scepticism to dominate from the opening. The topic of this study is digital marketing and business sustainability, with scepticism as the mediating mechanism. But it is easy to write a paper that reads as though scepticism is the topic and digital marketing sustainability is the application. That inverts the priority.

The business problem is simple and urgent: UK organisations cannot explain why record digital marketing investment is producing declining brand loyalty. That is the problem. Scepticism is the mechanism responsible for the paradox, and the Gateway Mechanism is the theoretical framework that explains the mechanism's operation. But the reader, and the manager, needs to understand that the purpose of this research is to solve a commercial problem, not to advance scepticism theory for its own sake. Getting that ordering right required multiple revisions and a willingness to subordinate the theoretical contribution to the practical problem it is designed to address.

What the Data Collection Process Taught Me

The survey design and data collection process produced lessons that were not available from the literature. The most important was discovering that consumers, when asked directly about their experience of digital marketing, do not primarily describe poor advertising. They describe a structural relationship problem. The feeling of being tracked, targeted, and commercially manipulated is not a reaction to specific bad campaigns. It is a standing orientation brought to every digital encounter. This is exactly what the Gateway Mechanism predicts, and seeing it confirmed in natural survey responses rather than only in theoretical propositions was genuinely clarifying.

It also reinforced something about research design that is easy to underestimate. The questions that produce the most strategically useful responses are the ones that ask about behaviour rather than attitudes. Not "do you trust digital advertising?" but "have you purchased a product that appeared significantly different from the advertisement?" The behavioural question produces an answer that connects directly to commercial consequence. The attitudinal question produces an answer that is easier to dismiss as subjective.

How Managers Will Actually Use This

Writing the managerial implications section required thinking through not just what the findings mean but how a marketing director would encounter them on a working day and make a different decision as a result. This is the DBA test. It is not enough to demonstrate scholarly validity. It is necessary to show that the knowledge produced has a route into organisational decision-making.

The four managerial frameworks in the paper reflect this thinking. Channel allocation redesign requires budget managers to account for scepticism cost per impression alongside engagement return per pound. Content governance reform requires campaign teams to treat disclosure as a trust investment rather than a compliance checkbox. Performance measurement redesign requires marketing directors to defend reach figures without any mechanism for measuring whether those impressions reached receptive or resistant audiences. And future-proofing strategy requires leadership teams to make AI transparency decisions now, before regulatory pressure forces a reactive

response and before consumer scepticism about AI-generated content has become so embedded that proactive disclosure can no longer recover credibility.

These are not abstract recommendations. They are specific changes to specific decisions that managers in specific roles can action. Getting to that specificity required me to stay in the tension between the academic framework and the managerial application rather than resolving it by retreating into either pure theory or pure prescription.

What I Would Do Differently

I would design the survey instrument with explicit numerical labels from the beginning so that precise percentages could be reported rather than directional descriptions. I would include a small qualitative component alongside the survey to capture how consumers describe the scepticism experience in their own language, because verbatim consumer descriptions often reveal theoretical dynamics more precisely than Likert items alone. And I would recruit a more systematically stratified sample to reduce the age skew that purposive convenience sampling introduced.

What I would not change is the intellectual ambition of the research question. Challenging the causal architecture of a field that has significant commercial and academic investment in its existing framework is uncomfortable, but DBA research that stays safely within existing frameworks does not meet the standard the qualification is designed to represent. The discomfort of proposing that scepticism has been fundamentally mispositioned in the causal architecture of digital marketing theory is not a reason to soften the claim. It is a reason to ensure that the evidence is as robust as the argument.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

Section A: Participant Information

Q1. Are you currently residing in the UK?* (*Please tick one*)

☐ Yes ☐ No

Q2. Age Group* (*Please tick one*)

☐ 18–24 ☐ 25–34 ☐ 35–44 ☐ 45–54 ☐ 55+

Q3. Gender (*Please tick one*)

☐ Male ☐ Female ☐ Non-binary ☐ Prefer not to say

Q4. Employment Status* (*Please tick one*)

☐ Full-time ☐ Part-time ☐ Self-employed ☐ Student ☐ Other

Section B: Digital Ad Exposure & Awareness

For questions 5–7, please circle a number from 1 to 5.

1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree

5. I encounter sponsored content or digital ads every time I go online.*

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

6. Digital marketing is the primary way I discover new brands.*

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

7. I see marketing messages for the same products across multiple different apps.*

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

Q8. Which digital platform do you use most frequently?* *(Please tick one)*

☐ Instagram ☐ TikTok ☐ Facebook ☐ LinkedIn

☐ Google / Search Engines ☐ YouTube

Section C: Scepticism Towards Digital Marketing

For questions 9–20, please circle a number from 1 to 5.

1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree

9. I believe brands often use "Green" or "Sustainable" claims just to sell more products.*

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

10. I find it difficult to tell the difference between an organic post and a paid advertisement.*

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

Q11. Have you ever purchased a product from a digital ad that looked significantly different from the advertisement?* *(Please tick one)*

☐ Yes, multiple times ☐ Yes, once ☐ No, never ☐ I do not remember

Q12. How often do you "skip" or "block" ads when browsing online?* *(Please tick one)*

☐ Always ☐ Frequently ☐ Occasionally ☐ Rarely / Never

13. I assume most "limited time offers" in digital ads are marketing tactics rather than reality.*

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

14. I find it difficult to believe the 5-star customer reviews shown in social media advertisements.*

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

15. I believe brands use my digital data to manipulate my purchasing choices.*

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

16. I am naturally suspicious of brands that advertise aggressively on social media.*

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

Section D: Brand Loyalty & Consumer Behaviour

17. I stop buying from brands if I feel their digital marketing has misled me.*

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

18. I only recommend brands whose online presence feels authentic and transparent.*

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

19. My long-term loyalty to a brand depends on their honesty in digital advertising.*

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

20. I am willing to pay more for a brand that is transparent about its business practices.*

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

Section E: Channel Trust

Q21. Which digital marketing channel do you find the MOST trustworthy?* *(Please tick one)*

- ☐ Email Marketing ☐ Search Engine Ads ☐ Influencer Recommendations
☐ Brand Websites ☐ Social Media Ads

Q22. Which digital marketing channel do you find the LEAST trustworthy?* *(Please tick one)*

- ☐ Instagram / TikTok Ads ☐ Email Newsletters
☐ YouTube Video Ads ☐ Pop-up Advertisements

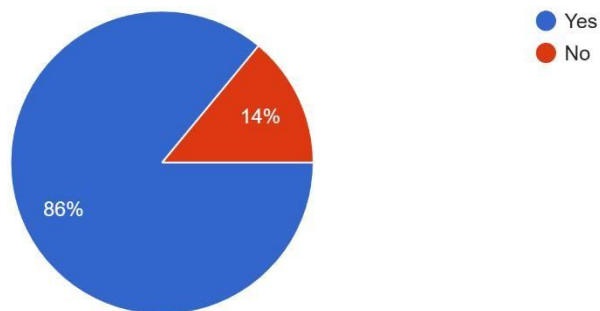
Q23. Overall, how much has your scepticism toward online ads increased in the last 12 months?* *(Please tick one)*

- ☐ Increased Significantly ☐ Increased Slightly ☐ Stayed the Same
☐ Decreased

Data Analysis

Q1. Are you currently residing in the UK?

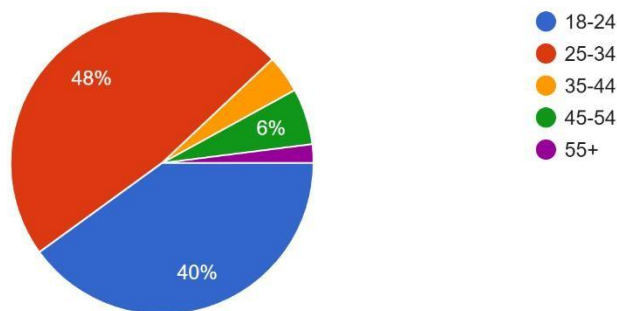
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- UK Residency: 86% reside in the UK, 14% do not. The sample is strongly UK-based, supporting the study's geographic focus.

Q2. Age Group

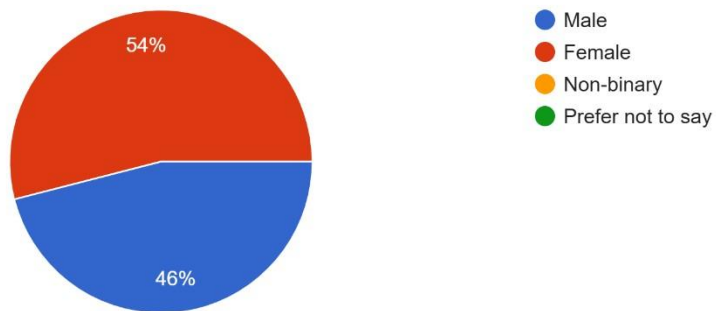
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- Age Group: Heavily skewed young around 40% aged 18 to 24 and 48% aged 25 to 34, together making up 88% of respondents. Older groups (35+) are minimal (6% combined). This limits generalisability to older demographics.

Q3. Gender

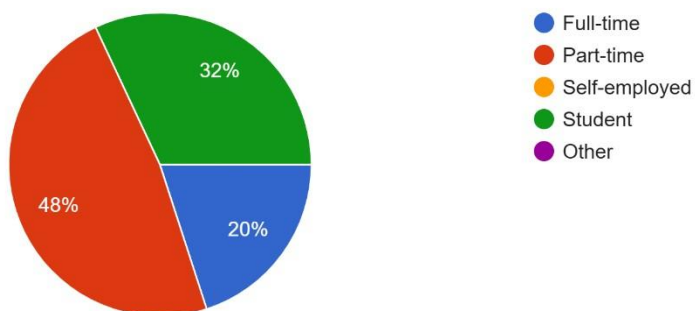
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- Gender: Nearly balanced with 54% Female, 46% Male. No non-binary or "prefer not to say" responses recorded. Good gender representation.

Q4. Employment Status

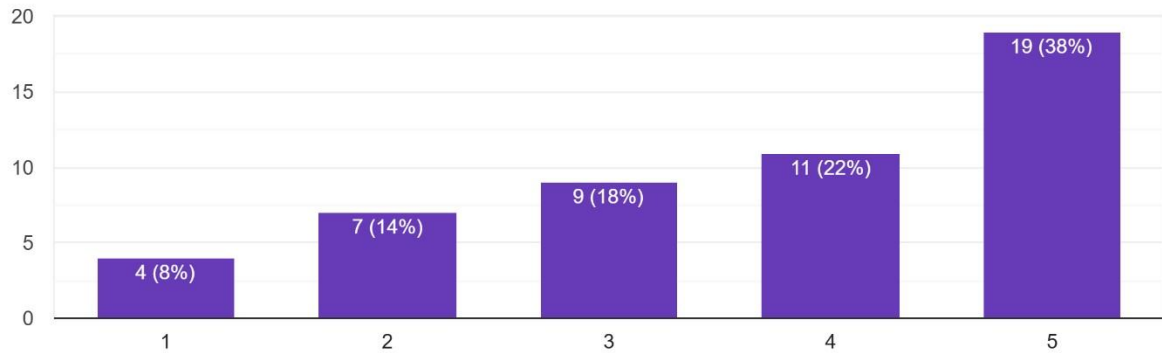
50 responses



- Employment Status: Part-time workers dominate at 48%, followed by Students at 32% and Full-time at 20%. The high proportion of students and part-timers aligns with the young age profile.

5. I encounter sponsored content or digital ads every time I go online.

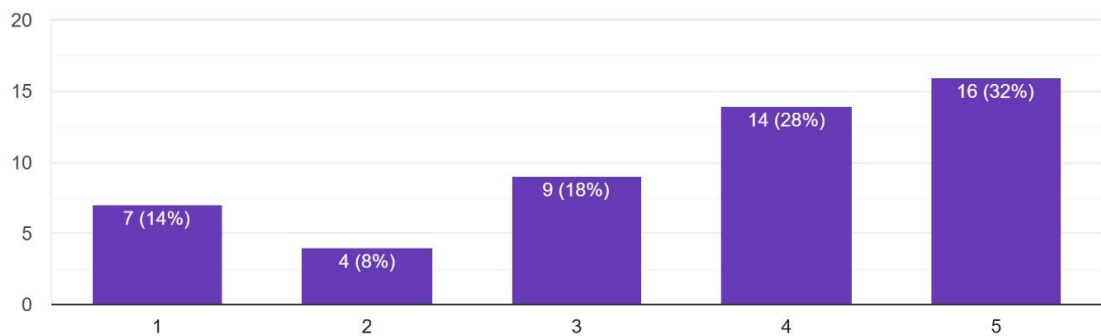
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- Encounter ads every time: Strong agreement where 60% (38% + 22%) agree or strongly agree that they see ads every time online. Only 8% strongly disagree. Confirms digital ad saturation among this sample.

6. Digital marketing is the primary way I discover new brands.

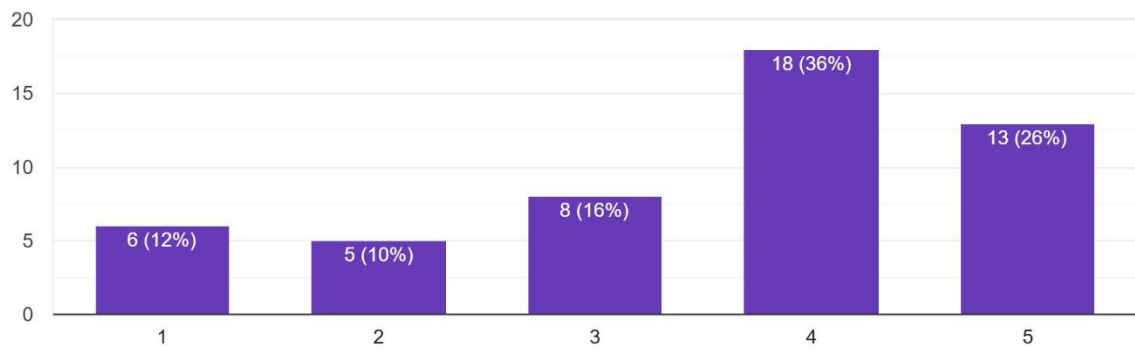
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- Digital marketing as primary brand discovery: 60% (32% + 28%) agree or strongly agree. This is a key finding is that digital channels are the dominant brand discovery route for this demographic.

7. I see marketing messages for the same products across multiple different apps.

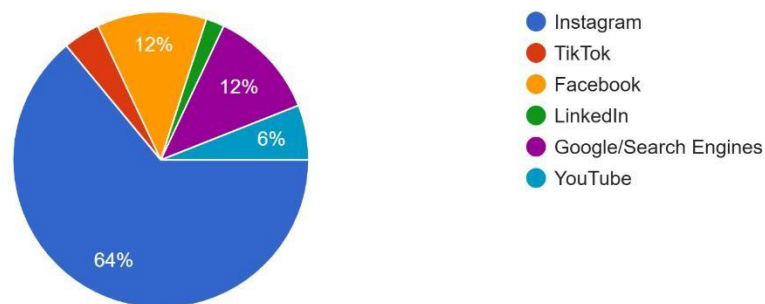
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- Same ads across multiple apps: 62% (36% + 26%) agree or strongly agree. Confirms retargeting and omnichannel repetition are highly noticeable to users.

Q8. Which digital platform do you use most frequently?

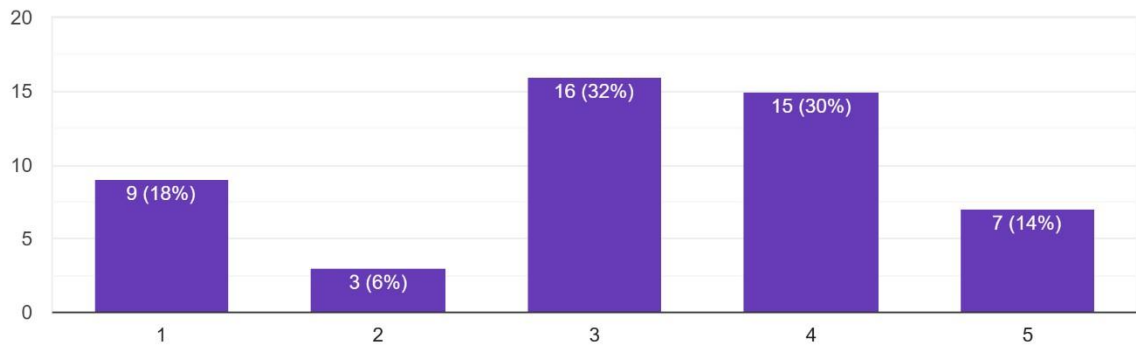
50 responses



- Most used platform: Instagram dominates at 64%, far ahead of all others. TikTok and Google/Search tie at 12% each. LinkedIn and YouTube are minimal (6% each). Instagram is the critical platform for reaching this audience.

9. I believe brands often use "Green" or "Sustainable" claims just to sell more products.

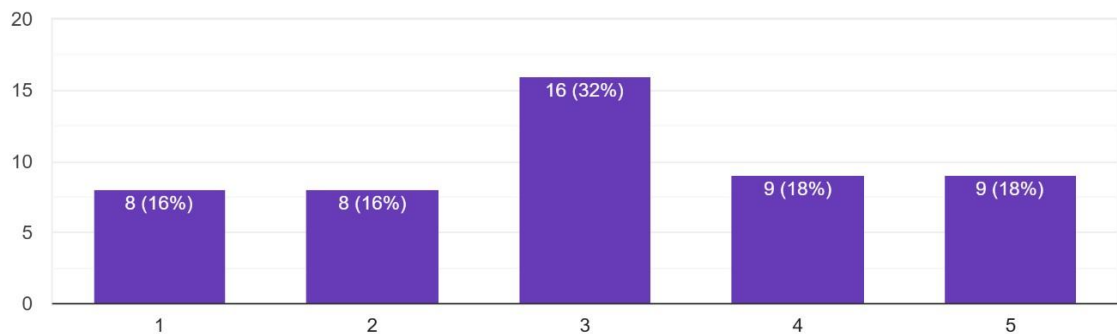
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- Greenwashing scepticism: 44% (30% + 14%) agree or strongly agree that brands use "green" claims just to sell. Only 6% strongly disagree. Combined with 32% neutral, this shows moderate to high scepticism about sustainability marketing.

10. I find it difficult to tell the difference between an organic post and a paid advertisement.

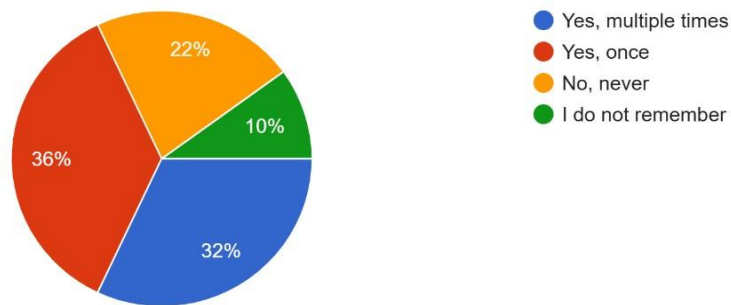
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- Difficulty distinguishing organic vs paid posts: Responses are evenly split showcasing 32% neutral, 18% each for both agree and disagree sides. This indicates the boundary between organic and sponsored content is blurred for many users.

Q11. Have you ever purchased a product from a digital ad that looked significantly different from the advertisement?

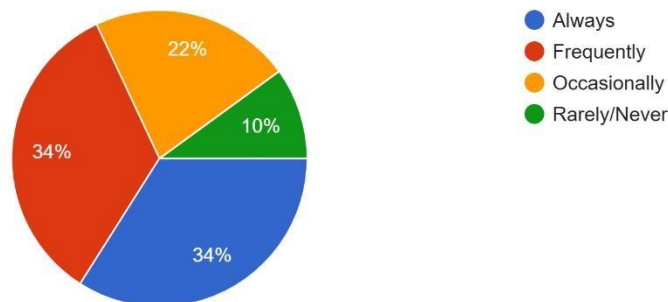
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- Purchased from misleading ad: 68% (32% + 36%) say yes at least once. Only 22% say never. This is a significant finding is that the majority have experienced misleading advertising, which directly feeds scepticism.

Q12. How often do you "skip" or "block" ads when browsing online?

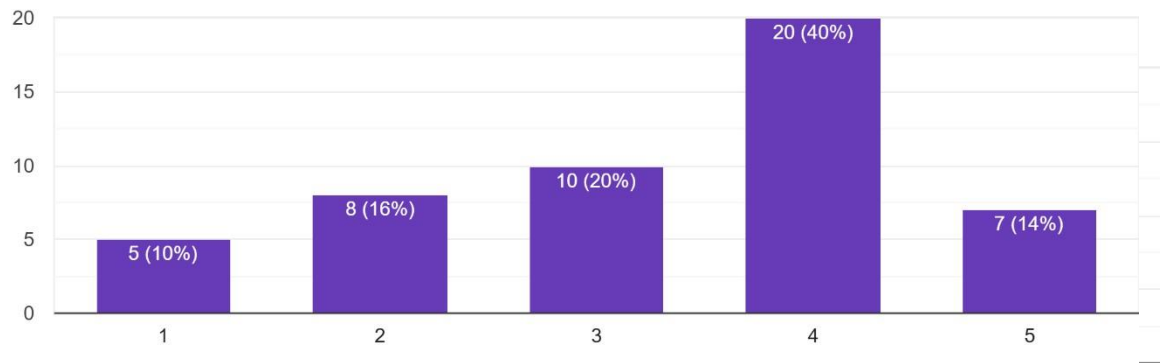
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- Skip or block ads: 68% (34% Always + 34% Frequently) actively avoid ads. Only 10% rarely or never skip. This shows high ad avoidance behaviour, suggesting banner blindness and ad fatigue are prevalent.

14. I find it difficult to believe the 5-star customer reviews shown in social media advertisements.

50 responses



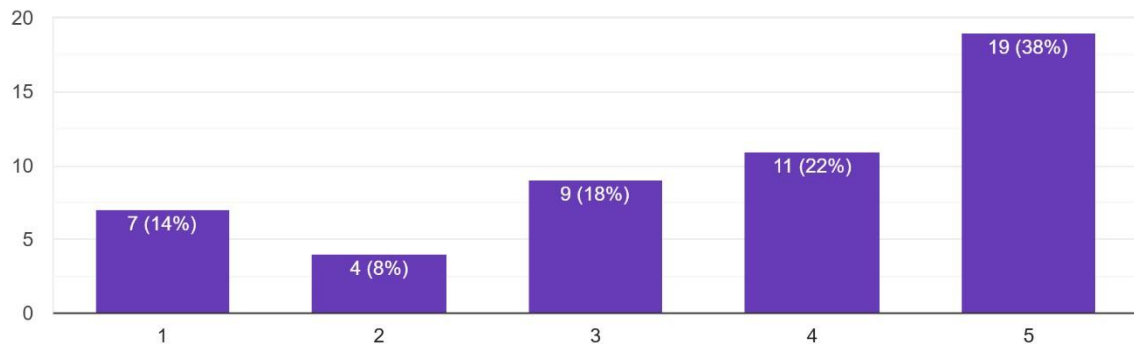
➤ Difficulty believing 5 star reviews in ads: 54% (40% + 14%) agree or strongly agree.

➤ Limited time offers are marketing tactics: 60% (32% + 28%) agree or strongly agree. Only 8% strongly disagree. Respondents clearly view urgency tactics as artificial, not genuine scarcity.

This is the highest agreement rate in this section. Social proof in ads is widely distrusted by this audience.

15. I believe brands use my digital data to manipulate my purchasing choices.

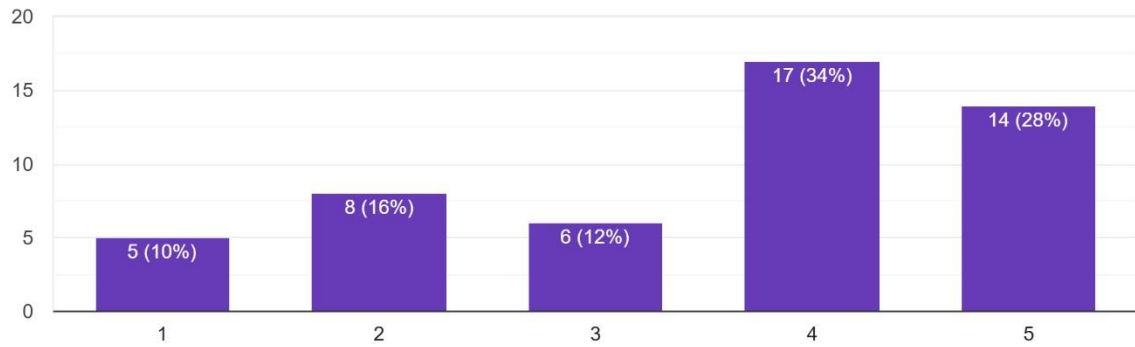
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➤ Brands use data to manipulate purchasing: 60% (38% + 22%) agree or strongly agree. This confirms a strong belief that personal data is weaponised for behavioural influence. A key driver of scepticism.

16. I am naturally suspicious of brands that advertise aggressively on social media.

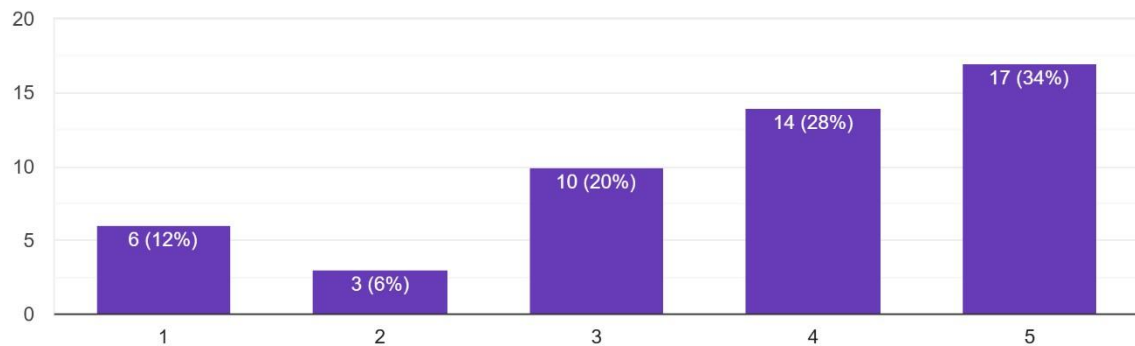
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- Naturally suspicious of aggressively advertising brands: 62% (34% + 28%) agree or strongly agree. Aggressive social media advertising actively damages brand perception rather than building it.

17. I stop buying from brands if I feel their digital marketing has misled me.

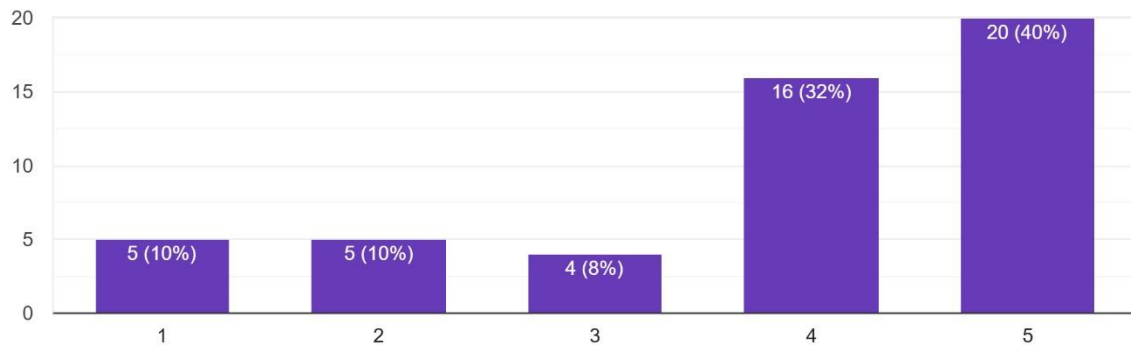
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- Stop buying from brands that mislead: 62% (34% + 28%) agree or strongly agree. Misleading marketing has real consequences for customer retention — it drives people away permanently.

18. I only recommend brands whose online presence feels authentic and transparent.

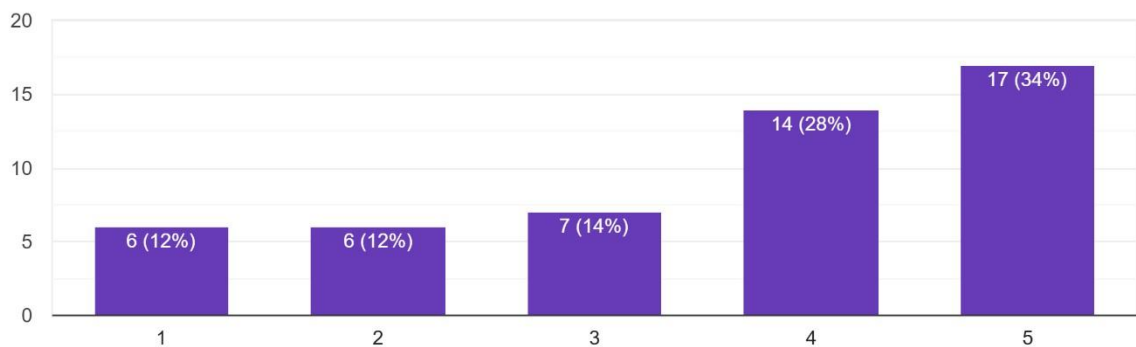
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- Only recommend authentic and transparent brands: 72% (40% + 32%) agree or strongly agree. This is the highest agreement rate across all charts. Word of mouth is tightly tied to perceived authenticity.

19. My long-term loyalty to a brand depends on their honesty in digital advertising.

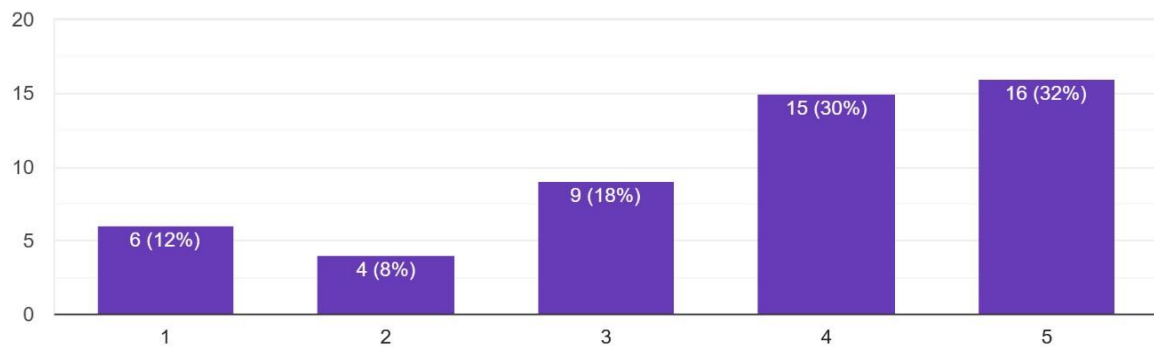
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- Long term loyalty depends on honesty in ads: 62% (34% + 28%) agree or strongly agree. Honesty is not a nice to have but it is a core driver of brand loyalty for this group.

20. I am willing to pay more for a brand that is transparent about its business practices.

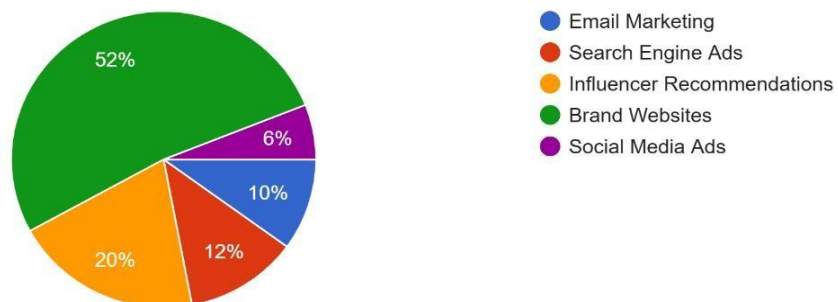
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- Willing to pay more for transparent brands: 62% (32% + 30%) agree or strongly agree. Transparency has monetary value as consumers are prepared to pay a premium for it.

Q21. Which digital marketing channel do you find the MOST trustworthy?

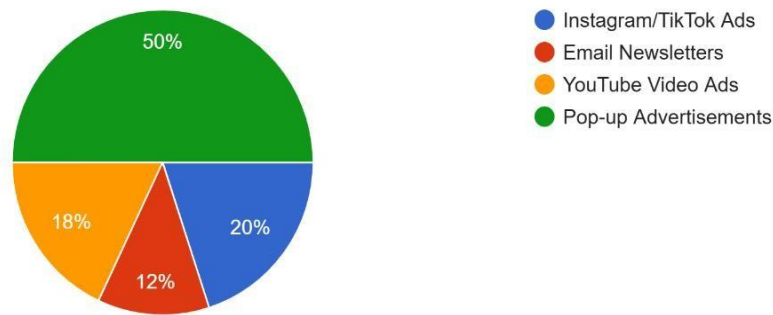
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- MOST trustworthy channel: Brand Websites dominate at 52%, followed by Influencer Recommendations at 20% and Search Engine Ads at 12%. Social Media Ads are the least trusted at only 6%. Owned channels are trusted far more than paid channels.

Q22. Which digital marketing channel do you find the LEAST trustworthy?

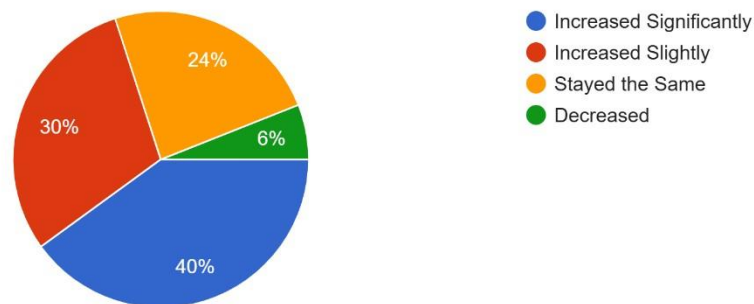
50 responses



- LEAST trustworthy channel: Pop-up Advertisements at 50%, followed by Instagram/TikTok Ads at 20% and YouTube Video Ads at 18%. Email Newsletters are seen as the least intrusive at 12%. Pop-ups are overwhelmingly the most disliked format.

Q23. Overall, how much has your scepticism toward online ads increased in the last 12 months?

50 responses



- Scepticism increased in last 12 months: 70% (40% + 30%) report increased scepticism, with 40% saying it increased significantly. Only 6% say it decreased. This is the strongest evidence that digital marketing scepticism is a growing, accelerating trend.