
ETHICAL ADVERTISING PRACTICES IN DIGITAL MEDIA

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Abstract

Digital media has transformed advertising into an interactive, data-driven and highly personalised form of communication. Search engines, social media platforms, mobile applications, connected television, influencer networks and automated advertising systems enable brands to reach consumers at scale and in real time. At the same time, these systems can obscure the commercial purpose of a message, collect and infer personal information, and shape consumer choices through opaque targeting practices. Ethical advertising therefore requires more than the technical delivery of a campaign; it requires truthful communication, meaningful transparency, respect for privacy, fair treatment and accountability for harmful outcomes.

This study examines ethical advertising practices in digital media through a structured review of scholarly literature, advertising codes, consumer-protection guidance and digital-platform governance principles. The analysis focuses on the ethical responsibilities of advertisers, agencies, content creators and platforms in relation to disclosure, substantiation of claims, consent, behavioural targeting, algorithmic decision-making, children and other vulnerable audiences, online reviews and artificial intelligence-enabled advertising. Particular attention is given to the difference between formal compliance and genuine consumer understanding.

The findings indicate that ethical digital advertising depends on clear and prominent identification of advertising, accurate and evidence-based claims, proportionate data collection, accessible privacy choices and safeguards against discriminatory or exploitative targeting. In influencer and native advertising, disclosures must be placed where audiences can notice and understand them. In programmatic and AI-supported systems, organisations must be able to explain material targeting criteria, test for unfair impacts and provide effective routes for correction and complaint.

The paper proposes a framework that combines transparency, privacy, fairness, protection of vulnerable users and accountability. It supports responsible campaign planning, platform design and long-term consumer trust.

Keywords: Ethical Advertising, Digital Media, Online Behavioural Advertising, Consumer Privacy, Influencer Disclosure, Algorithmic Targeting, Transparency, Data Protection, Dark Patterns, Responsible Marketing

1. INTRODUCTION

Digital advertising is now embedded in everyday information environments. Consumers encounter promotional messages while searching for information, watching short videos, reading news, using navigation services, shopping online and interacting with creators on social platforms. Unlike many traditional advertisements, digital promotions can be dynamically selected, personalised and delivered through complex chains involving advertisers, agencies, data brokers, ad exchanges, platforms, publishers and content creators. This scale and flexibility improve marketing efficiency, but they also make it difficult for consumers to recognise who is attempting to persuade them, what data has

been used, and why a particular message has been shown.

The ethical challenge is not that digital advertising persuades; persuasion is a normal part of market communication. The concern arises when persuasion becomes deceptive, intrusive, exploitative or impossible to evaluate. Hidden commercial relationships, misleading sustainability claims, fake reviews, manipulative subscription journeys, opaque recommendation systems and excessive behavioural profiling can weaken consumer autonomy. These practices may produce short-term performance gains, but they can also damage trust, create legal exposure and contribute to a less reliable digital public sphere.

Ethical advertising practices begin with the principle that audiences should be able to identify advertising and make informed choices without unreasonable pressure. Advertisers should present claims that are truthful, capable of substantiation and expressed in a way that does not mislead through omission, visual framing or ambiguous language. Digital environments make this obligation especially important because attention is limited and interfaces may place disclosures, terms or opt-out controls where users are unlikely to see or understand them. A statement may be technically available while still being ethically ineffective. Data-driven personalisation presents an additional challenge. Personalised advertising can increase relevance and reduce exposure to irrelevant messages, yet it depends on the collection, combination and interpretation of user information. When people do not understand the scope of tracking, the identity of data recipients or the consequences of profiling, consent cannot meaningfully support ethical practice. Responsible targeting therefore requires data minimisation, contextual relevance, user control and strong safeguards for sensitive data, children and individuals in situations of heightened vulnerability.

This paper investigates ethical advertising practices in digital media and develops a practical framework for responsible decision-making. It reviews the development of ethical advertising principles, identifies key risks across prominent digital formats and considers how organisations can operationalise transparency, privacy, fairness and accountability throughout the advertising lifecycle. The purpose is to show that responsible advertising is not a separate compliance task; it is a core condition for sustainable consumer relationships and credible digital communication.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on advertising ethics has long emphasised the importance of truthful claims, consumer welfare and respect for autonomy. The persuasion knowledge model explains that consumers draw on their understanding of advertising tactics to interpret attempts at influence. When commercial intent is concealed or disclosures are unclear, audiences have fewer opportunities to apply this knowledge. Research on manipulative advertising similarly shows that consumers may react negatively when they infer that a tactic is designed to control rather than inform their choices (Friestad & Wright, 1994; Campbell, 1995).

Digital media adds new layers to these concerns. Online behavioural advertising can combine browsing histories, inferred interests, location signals and social connections to select messages for particular users. Studies of privacy and personalised advertising show that relevance may soften perceptions of intrusion, but relevance does not remove the need for informed data practices and user control. Marketing scholarship therefore treats data privacy as a central responsibility, rather than a purely operational or legal concern (Martin & Murphy, 2017; Boerman, Kruijemeier & Zuiderveen Borgesius, 2017).

Influencer marketing and native advertising have intensified the disclosure problem because paid promotion can appear similar to personal advice, entertainment or editorial content. Experimental and large-scale observational research indicates that clear sponsorship disclosures improve advertising recognition, whereas short, vague or distant notices may not provide meaningful understanding. Regulatory guidance, including the revised FTC Endorsement Guides and the ICC Advertising and Marketing Communications Code, reflects the same principle: material connections and commercial intent should be clear, prominent and understandable to the intended audience.

TABLE 1: SUMMARY OF KEY LITERATURE ON ETHICAL ADVERTISING IN DIGITAL MEDIA

S. No.	Author(s)	Year	Methodology	Key Focus	Major Findings
1	Friestad & Wright	1994	Theoretical model	Persuasion knowledge	Consumers need to recognise persuasive intent in order to evaluate advertising critically.
2	Campbell	1995	Experimental	Manipulative intent	Attention-getting tactics can reduce trust when audiences infer undue manipulation.
3	Nairn & Fine	2008	Ethical analysis	Advertising to children	Children require stronger protection because persuasion knowledge may be less developed.
4	Martin & Murphy	2017	Literature review	Marketing privacy	Privacy governance is a strategic and ethical responsibility for marketers.
5	Boerman et al.	2017	Literature review	Online behavioural advertising	Transparency and control are essential to reduce risks associated with behavioural targeting.
6	Evans et al.	2017	Experiment	Influencer disclosures	Clear paid-ad labels improve advertising recognition and shape consumer responses.
7	Mathur et al.	2018	Platform audit + user study	Affiliate disclosures	Many social-media disclosures are absent or poorly understood by users.
8	Boerman	2020	Experiment	Standardised disclosure	A visible paid-partnership label can increase advertising recognition.
9	Zhu & Chang	2016	Survey research	Personalised ads	Relevance may reduce perceived privacy invasion but does not remove ethical obligations.
10	FTC	2023	Regulatory guidance	Endorsements and reviews	Material connections and endorsements must not mislead consumers.
11	ICC	2024	Self-regulatory code	Digital, AI and influencer ads	Responsible marketing requires legality, decency, honesty and social responsibility.
12	European Union	2022	Regulatory framework	Online-platform advertising	Advertising transparency and additional safeguards for minors are central platform duties.

3. OBJECT OF STUDY

The object of this study is ethical advertising in digital media. The study examines how advertisers, platforms, agencies, publishers and content creators design, target, label, distribute and evaluate advertising in online environments. It focuses on the ethical quality of advertising practices rather than on

campaign performance alone. The central question is whether a digital advertising practice gives consumers sufficient information, control and protection to make a voluntary and informed response.

The research considers multiple formats, including search advertising, display advertising, social-media promotion,

influencer marketing, native advertising, programmatic advertising, behavioural targeting, branded content, review-based advertising and AI-generated promotional materials. These formats differ in delivery technology, but they share common ethical requirements: commercial intent should be identifiable, claims should be accurate, data practices should be proportionate and targeting should not create avoidable harm.

The study also considers the interaction between organisational processes and consumer outcomes. Ethical advertising requires policies and controls before campaign launch, continuous monitoring during delivery and accessible remedies when a message, targeting decision or data practice causes harm. The aim is to identify a framework that balances commercial communication with fairness, dignity and trust.

KEY POINTS OF OBJECT OF STUDY

- To examine how commercial intent is disclosed across digital advertising formats.
- To assess whether advertising claims are truthful, substantiated and easy to understand.

- To analyse consumer privacy, consent and data-minimisation practices in behavioural targeting.
- To evaluate algorithmic targeting for unfair exclusion, stereotyping or exploitative vulnerability targeting.
- To study the ethical responsibilities of advertisers, agencies, platforms, publishers and influencers.
- To examine reviews, endorsements, affiliate links and sponsored creator content for disclosure integrity.
- To identify risks associated with dark patterns, manipulative interface design and hidden subscription terms.
- To consider special protections for children, teenagers and other vulnerable audiences.
- To evaluate accountability, auditability and complaint mechanisms in programmatic and AI-supported advertising.
- To develop a practical framework for responsible digital advertising governance.

TABLE 2: OBJECT OF STUDY FRAMEWORK

S. No.	Study Component	Description	Purpose
1	Advertising transparency	Identification of paid, sponsored, affiliate and native content.	Enable consumers to recognise commercial intent.
2	Truthfulness of claims	Accuracy, substantiation and context of promotional statements.	Reduce deception and misleading omission.
3	Privacy and consent	Collection, use and sharing of data for advertising decisions.	Protect informational self-determination.
4	Targeting fairness	Review of segmentation and algorithmic eligibility criteria.	Avoid discriminatory or exploitative outcomes.
5	Influencer accountability	Disclosure of relationships, incentives and brand control.	Support authentic and transparent endorsements.
6	Vulnerable audiences	Special attention to minors and consumers in sensitive contexts.	Prevent undue influence and avoidable harm.
7	Interface integrity	Assessment of defaults, prompts, consent flows and subscription journeys.	Prevent dark patterns and coercive design.

S. No.	Study Component	Description	Purpose
8	Organisational governance	Policies, audits, training, monitoring and complaint handling.	Create responsibility across the advertising lifecycle.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative, document-based research design. It combines normative analysis of advertising ethics with a comparative review of peer-reviewed studies, regulatory frameworks, industry codes and official consumer-protection guidance. This approach is suitable because the research question concerns the principles, governance structures and practical safeguards that make advertising ethically defensible across changing digital platforms. Rather than claiming statistical generalisation from a proprietary campaign dataset, the paper synthesises evidence and requirements that can guide advertisers and platforms in evaluating current and proposed practices.

4.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

- Study Type: Qualitative and document-based analysis
- Approach: Normative ethical evaluation supported by comparative content analysis
- Unit of Analysis: Digital advertising practices, disclosures, targeting systems and governance controls
- Source Categories: Scholarly literature, regulatory instruments, advertising codes and official guidance
- Core Ethical Dimensions: Transparency, truthfulness, privacy, fairness, autonomy, vulnerability protection and accountability
- Analytical Goal: Develop a practical framework for responsible campaign design and oversight

4.2 METHODOLOGICAL STEPS

- Step 1: Define digital advertising formats and ethical risk categories.
- Step 2: Review academic literature on disclosure, persuasion knowledge, privacy, targeting and consumer responses.
- Step 3: Examine laws, codes and regulator guidance relevant to deceptive advertising, data protection and platform transparency.
- Step 4: Develop an analysis matrix covering disclosure, evidence, consent, targeting, protection of minors, accessibility and redress.

- Step 5: Compare the ethical implications of search, display, social, influencer, native, programmatic and AI-supported advertising.
- Step 6: Identify high-risk practices such as hidden sponsorship, false urgency, fake reviews, non-transparent profiling and dark patterns.
- Step 7: Formulate governance controls, review questions and monitoring responsibilities for organisations.
- Step 8: Interpret results in relation to consumer autonomy, market fairness and long-term trust.

5. DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis is based on thematic comparison of the ethical issues identified in the literature and regulatory guidance. The analysis evaluates how different digital advertising practices affect the consumer's ability to recognise persuasion, understand claims, control personal information and avoid discriminatory or manipulative treatment. The themes are interrelated: weak disclosure may hide commercial influence; extensive data collection may enable intrusive targeting; and opaque algorithms may reproduce unequal outcomes without clear responsibility.

5.1 TRANSPARENCY AND DISCLOSURE ANALYSIS

Transparency is the foundation of ethical advertising because it allows a consumer to distinguish commercial persuasion from independent information, personal opinion or editorial content. A disclosure is ethically effective only when it is presented close to the advertising claim, in language that the intended audience can understand, and in a format that remains visible on the device and platform where the content is consumed. A buried disclosure in a profile biography, a long list of hashtags or a separate terms page does not provide the same protection as a clear on-screen label such as "Advertisement," "Paid partnership," or an equivalent plain-language notice. The analysis indicates that digital advertising often relies on blended formats.

Sponsored creator posts may imitate ordinary lifestyle content, native advertisements may resemble news articles, and search advertisements may appear next to organic results. In each case, ethical practice requires the commercial nature of the message to be readily apparent before or at the time the consumer engages with the claim. Visibility, placement, contrast, timing and wording should be assessed together. The purpose is not merely to satisfy a formal disclosure rule; it is to ensure that consumers are not required to search for information that is material to their decision.

KEY OBSERVATION:

- Disclosure should be clear, prominent, proximate to the claim and understandable to the intended audience.
- Native, influencer and affiliate advertising require stronger review because commercial intent can be easily obscured.
- Platform labels should support, not replace, advertiser and creator responsibility for transparent communication.

5.2 PRIVACY, CONSENT AND DATA-USE ANALYSIS

Digital advertising systems commonly use cookies, device identifiers, location data, browsing activity, inferred interests and engagement signals to select advertisements. These practices may offer relevance, but ethical use depends on whether data collection is necessary, proportionate and communicated in a way that enables genuine choice. Consent should not be manufactured through confusing interface design, pre-selected options or a refusal process that is substantially more difficult than acceptance. Consumers should be able to understand what categories of data are used, for what purpose, and whether information will be shared or combined across services.

A privacy-respecting advertising strategy should prefer data minimisation and contextual relevance where these options can achieve the campaign objective. Organisations should avoid using sensitive information or inferred vulnerabilities to exploit fear, financial distress, health concerns or personal insecurity. They should also apply retention limits, access controls and vendor oversight to reduce the likelihood that advertising data

becomes a broader surveillance resource. Ethical privacy practice is therefore not limited to a notice; it includes lifecycle governance of collection, inference, storage, sharing and deletion.

KEY OBSERVATION:

- Meaningful consent requires understandable choices and a practical ability to refuse or withdraw.
- Relevance does not justify unnecessary tracking, excessive inference or poorly controlled data sharing.
- Contextual advertising and data-minimisation approaches can reduce privacy risk while preserving communication value.

5.3 ALGORITHMIC TARGETING AND FAIRNESS ANALYSIS

Programmatic advertising systems can determine who sees an advertisement, how frequently it appears and which creative variation is delivered. These decisions may be influenced by predictive models, audience segments, bidding strategies and optimisation goals. Ethical risk arises when the criteria create unjustified exclusion, reinforce stereotypes or target people because they are likely to be susceptible to pressure. For example, an advertising system may unintentionally limit exposure to housing, employment, credit or educational opportunities for certain groups, or repeatedly present high-cost products to consumers inferred to be financially vulnerable.

Fairness analysis should examine both the input data and the outcomes of campaign delivery. Organisations should document material targeting criteria, identify high-impact categories, test for disparate delivery patterns and establish escalation routes when outcomes appear harmful. Human oversight is especially important where automated systems make or materially influence decisions that affect access, cost, opportunity or dignity. Explainability in this context does not require public disclosure of trade secrets; it requires sufficient internal and external clarity to assess whether the system is acting in a defensible manner.

KEY OBSERVATION:

- Targeting should be assessed for unequal access, exclusion, stereotyping and exploitation of vulnerability.

- Material targeting logic should be documented and subject to periodic ethical review.
- Optimisation metrics should include harm prevention and fairness, not only clicks, conversions or return on spend.

TABLE 3: ETHICAL ADVERTISING EVALUATION MATRIX

Ethical Dimension	Primary Risk	Responsible Practice	Evidence / Control
Transparency	Hidden or unclear commercial intent	Use clear, visible and proximate ad and sponsorship labels.	Creative review checklist; platform preview; disclosure testing.
Truthfulness	Exaggerated, unsupported or misleading claims	Substantiate claims and present material conditions clearly.	Claim substantiation file; legal and compliance review.
Privacy	Excessive tracking or unclear data sharing	Apply data minimisation and understandable consent controls.	Data map; consent logs; vendor due diligence.
Fairness	Discriminatory delivery or exploitative segmentation	Assess targeting criteria and delivery outcomes for harm.	Bias testing; audit trail; high-risk targeting approval.
Vulnerability	Undue influence on minors or people in sensitive contexts	Apply age-appropriate design and sensitive-category restrictions.	Audience safeguards; age assurance; exclusion lists.
Accountability	No remedy for harmful content or system outcomes	Assign owners, monitor campaigns and provide complaint pathways.	Governance policy; incident log; periodic board reporting.

5.4 INFLUENCER, REVIEW AND AI-GENERATED ADVERTISING ANALYSIS

Influencer advertising can be valuable when it combines relevant expertise, authentic experience and transparent commercial relationships. The ethical concern arises when compensation, gifts, affiliate commissions, brand control or other material connections are concealed. Reviews and testimonials present a related risk. Incentivised, filtered or fabricated reviews can distort the information consumers use to evaluate a product or service. Organisations should prohibit fake reviews, identify material connections, avoid selective editing that changes meaning and ensure that endorsement claims reflect honest experience. AI-generated advertising creates new disclosure and accountability questions. Synthetic images, cloned voices, virtual influencers and automated copy can be persuasive even when their origin is not obvious. Ethical use requires safeguards against deception, impersonation,

discriminatory representation and unverifiable claims. Advertisers should maintain records of material AI involvement, review outputs for accuracy and harmful bias, protect intellectual-property and personality rights, and use clear notices when a synthetic element could reasonably affect consumer understanding. Human review remains necessary for claims, targeting choices and creative representations with meaningful social impact.

KEY OBSERVATION:

- Material relationships in endorsements must be understandable before consumers rely on the recommendation.
- Reviews should reflect genuine experiences and should not be fabricated, suppressed or misleadingly incentivised.
- AI-generated advertising requires human accountability for claims, representations, targeting and disclosure.

5.5 CONSUMER WELL-BEING AND PROTECTION OF VULNERABLE AUDIENCES

Ethical advertising must consider the different capacities and circumstances of its audience. Children and teenagers may have less developed ability to recognise persuasive tactics, particularly when advertising is embedded in games, entertainment and creator content. People facing financial hardship, addiction, bereavement, health anxiety or other sensitive circumstances may also be more vulnerable to high-pressure or emotionally exploitative advertising. Ethical practice therefore requires more than a generic age gate; it requires appropriate restrictions on profiling, frequency, claims, prompts and product categories.

The analysis suggests that responsible organisations should define high-risk audiences and contexts before campaign launch. They should avoid targeting based on sensitive personal data or inferred vulnerabilities, use language that does not exploit distress, and establish stricter review for advertising involving health, finance, gambling, alcohol, body image and children's products. Accessibility should also be treated as an ethical requirement. Captions, readable contrasts, clear language and non-deceptive interaction design help ensure that consumers with different abilities can understand material information and exercise choice.

KEY OBSERVATION:

- Protection should be proportionate to the audience's vulnerability and the potential severity of harm.
- Sensitive targeting and high-pressure design demand stronger review, restrictions and monitoring.
- Accessible disclosure and choice design support equal participation in digital markets.

6. DISCUSSION

The analysis shows that ethical advertising in digital media cannot be reduced to a single disclosure, privacy notice or approval stage. Digital advertising is a system of interconnected decisions involving creative design, data collection, targeting, interface architecture, platform rules, business incentives and post-campaign measurement. A campaign may contain a truthful claim but

remain ethically weak if the claim is delivered through hidden sponsorship, manipulative urgency, intrusive profiling or discriminatory targeting. Conversely, strong ethical practice integrates consumer understanding and foreseeable harm into each decision point.

Transparency is particularly important because it enables the consumer to activate persuasion knowledge. When an audience can recognise a message as advertising, identify the advertiser or sponsorship relationship and understand material conditions, it is better placed to evaluate the message on its merits. This does not eliminate persuasion; it makes persuasion contestable. Ethical advertising therefore supports a market in which influence is visible rather than disguised as independent advice or neutral information.

Privacy and fairness are equally central. The ability to reach a person with a tailored message creates obligations that go beyond traditional media buying. Advertisers and platforms should ask whether the information used is necessary, whether the individual has meaningful control, and whether the resulting targeting may disadvantage or exploit particular groups. The growing use of AI intensifies these obligations because automated systems can produce high-volume decisions that are difficult to observe without intentional monitoring. Ethical governance must therefore include documentation, auditability, escalation and human accountability.

A responsible organisation should embed ethical review into campaign governance. At minimum, this means maintaining claim substantiation records; reviewing disclosures on the actual device and platform; documenting data sources and targeting logic; applying restrictions for sensitive categories and vulnerable audiences; monitoring delivery outcomes; and offering a route for complaints and correction. These controls should not be viewed only as risk mitigation. They help brands build credibility by demonstrating that commercial success will not be pursued through deception, unnecessary surveillance or avoidable harm.

There is also a collective responsibility across the advertising ecosystem. Advertisers are accountable for the messages they commission; agencies for the strategic and

creative choices they recommend; platforms for interface design, labelling systems and delivery controls; creators for transparent endorsements; and regulators and self-regulatory bodies for clear, enforceable standards. Coordinated responsibility matters because consumers usually experience advertising as a single message, even though that message may have passed through many organisations before it reached them.

7. CONCLUSION

Ethical advertising practices in digital media are essential for maintaining consumer trust, fair competition and the legitimacy of the digital marketplace. The study finds that the most important principles are transparent identification of advertising, truthful and substantiated claims, privacy-respecting data use, fair targeting, protection of vulnerable

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audiences, accessible choices and clear accountability. These principles apply across social media, search, display, programmatic, influencer, review-based and AI-generated advertising.

The research confirms that compliance is necessary but not always sufficient. A disclosure may satisfy a technical requirement while remaining too hidden, complex or distant to inform a real consumer decision. A consent banner may collect a click without enabling meaningful choice. A targeting model may optimise conversions while producing unequal or exploitative delivery. Ethical practice therefore requires organisations to evaluate not only whether a campaign is permitted, but also whether consumers can understand it, control it and respond to it without unreasonable pressure or harm.

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