

Cultural Identity as an Interpretive Lens in Advertising Trust: Evidence from a Multicultural Market

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Abstract:

This paper examines how cultural identity shapes the formation of trust in advertising in multicultural emerging markets, using South Africa as the empirical context. While standardised English-language advertising dominates diverse markets for efficiency, growing evidence suggests it may generate tolerance rather than genuine trust among culturally diverse audiences. Drawing on validated empirical data ($n = 704$) from four major South African linguistic groups, this study synthesises descriptive, structural, and inferential statistics through a cultural interpretive lens to explore how ethnic self-identification and generational differences influence advertising responses.

The findings reveal that ethnic self-identification mediates the relationship between advertising cues and trust outcomes, with cultural congruence—not linguistic comprehension alone—driving trust formation. Structural analysis demonstrates that while English advertising weakly influences ethnic identification ($\beta = 0.12$, $p = 0.04$), ethnic self-identification strongly predicts advertising trust ($\beta = 0.09$, $p < 0.001$). Highly significant age-based differences (Welch's $F = 334.096$, $p < 0.001$) highlight within-market cultural heterogeneity, with older consumers exhibiting stronger ethnic commitment than younger consumers who display hybrid cultural identities.

This research contributes theoretically by positioning advertising trust as a culturally embedded phenomenon rather than a universal psychological response. Methodologically, it demonstrates that cultural interpretation is a valuable complement to hypothesis testing in cross-cultural research. In practice, the study offers a strategic framework for culturally adaptive marketing that distinguishes between tolerance and trust, and provides actionable guidance on multilingual campaigns, authentic cultural representation, and generational segmentation strategies essential for building meaningful brand relationships in diverse emerging markets.

Keywords:

Cultural identity, advertising trust, ethnic self-identification, multicultural marketing, South Africa, emerging markets.