

“Evaluating the impact of advertising strategies on rural brand building: Insights from the personal care FMCG sector”

AUTHORS

Vinod Sharma 



Chandan Maheshkar 

Yogesh Mahajan 

Sándor Remsei 

Manohar Kapse 



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Yogesh Mahajan, Sándor Remsei,
Manohar Kapse, 2025

Vinod Sharma, Dr, Associate Professor,
Symbiosis Centre for Management
and Human Resource Development,
Symbiosis International (Deemed
University), India.

Chandan Maheshkar, Dr, Associate
Professor, Department of Management,
CDGI, Indore, India, East Nimar
Society for Education, India.

Yogesh Mahajan, Dr, Associate
Professor, Symbiosis Centre for
Management and Human Resource
Development, Symbiosis International
(Deemed University), India.

Sándor Remsei, Dr, Professor,
Széchenyi István University, Hungary.
(Corresponding author)

Manohar Kapse, Dr, Associate
Professor, Jaipuria Institute of
Management, India.



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Vinod Sharma (India), Chandan Maheshkar (India), Yogesh Mahajan (India),
Sándor Remsei (Hungary), Manohar Kapse (India)

EVALUATING THE IMPACT OF ADVERTISING STRATEGIES ON RURAL BRAND BUILDING: INSIGHTS FROM THE PERSONAL CARE FMCG SECTOR

Abstract

This study examines how advertising strategies, namely, content, media, and design, influence brand-building efforts in rural markets, with a specific focus on the mediating role of content relevance. Anchored in the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), the research recognizes that rural consumers often process advertising through the peripheral route, relying on visual, linguistic, and cultural cues rather than rational evaluation. Data were collected through a structured survey of 498 rural consumers across thirteen towns in Madhya Pradesh. Using covariance-based structural equation modelling, the study finds that advertising content ($\beta = 0.353$), media ($\beta = 0.253$), and design ($\beta = 0.298$) significantly affect brand perceptions. More importantly, content relevance emerges as a key mediator, with indirect effects ranging from $\beta = 0.180$ to 0.243 ($p < 0.01$), indicating that rural consumers are more likely to engage with advertising that aligns with their values, language, and lifestyle. Theoretically, the study extends the ELM framework to low-involvement consumer settings and highlights the nuanced role of cultural relevance in shaping brand engagement. Practically, the findings offer marketers a roadmap for creating locally adapted and emotionally resonant campaigns that move beyond urban-centric models. This research underscores the importance of designing inclusive advertising strategies that build lasting brand relationships with India's diverse rural population.

Keywords

rural branding, advertising strategies, content relevance,
fmcg marketing, consumer engagement, elaboration
likelihood model

JEL Classification

M31, M37

INTRODUCTION

The global beauty and personal care market continues to experience significant growth, underscoring its rising relevance in consumers' everyday routines (Wu & Liang, 2025). Valued at approximately USD 529.5 billion in 2024, the market is projected to reach USD 802.6 billion by 2033, growing at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 4.2% (Statista, 2025). In emerging economies, this expansion is shaped not only by premiumization and sustainability trends but also by region-specific factors such as income growth, urbanization, and a growing focus on personal wellness (IMARC, 2025; Statista, 2025).

India represents a unique case in this global context. With a personal care market valued at USD 29.6 billion in 2024 and projected to reach USD 48.5 billion by 2033 (IMARC, 2025), the country offers immense opportunities across both urban and rural segments. While urban consumers are increasingly drawn to digital-first and aspirational messaging, rural India, home to over two-thirds of the population,

poses a complex and often underserved frontier. The organic personal care segment in rural India alone is forecasted to grow from INR 83.68 billion in FY 2024 to INR 236.34 billion by FY 2029 (IMARC, 2025), pointing to a rising preference for natural, affordable, and trustworthy brands.

However, accessing this market is fraught with challenges. India's rural population is dispersed across more than 600,000 villages, with nearly 90% living in settlements of fewer than 2,000 people (Chand, 2020). This dispersion creates significant infrastructural and media access limitations. Additionally, rural consumers tend to be influenced more by content that resonates with their cultural identities, values, and language, rather than by celebrity endorsements or urban aesthetics (World Bank, 2020).

Historically, many advertising campaigns in India have adopted an urban-centric approach. This often results in content that lacks localization, cultural alignment, and relevance, diminishing its effectiveness in rural markets (Sinha & Katiyar, 2021). Rural consumers, contrary to common assumptions, are brand-aware and increasingly value content that reflects their lived experiences, family values, and socio-economic realities (Spielmann, 2021; Kumar & Gupta, 2021).

To understand how rural consumers respond to advertising, this study adopts the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). The model distinguishes between the central route (logical, content-driven processing) and the peripheral route (cue-based, affective processing). In low-involvement contexts such as rural India, peripheral cues, such as visuals, spokespersons, or message familiarity, often drive consumer responses (Petty & Briñol, 2015). Therefore, culturally resonant advertising content and locally accessible media become essential.

Against this backdrop, the present study investigates how advertising strategies, specifically content, media, and design, affect brand-building in India's rural personal care FMCG market (Fast Moving Consumer Goods). It also explores the mediating role of content relevance, which captures the perceived alignment between ad messages and rural consumer contexts. This approach contributes to both theoretical understanding and practical guidance for building stronger, more culturally attuned brand relationships in rural India.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

Advertising has long been considered a cornerstone of brand communication, with its ability to stimulate awareness, shape brand identity, and drive purchase intent (Keller, 2021; Stephen & Galak, 2012). It functions as a persuasive mechanism that informs, reminds, and influences consumers through various channels and content formats. Effective advertising integrates visual, emotional, and rational appeals to connect with the target audience and establish brand associations. However, for advertising to successfully engage rural consumers, it must overcome barriers related to literacy, media access, and message relevance (Kumar & Gupta, 2021). Generic or aspirational messaging, often designed for urban audiences, may have limited effectiveness in rural contexts due to socio-cultural incongruence (Spielmann, 2021).

Brand awareness represents the foundation of the branding hierarchy and refers to the extent to which consumers recognize and recall a brand (Homburg et al., 2010). In rural markets, awareness is influenced not only by exposure but also by factors such as language familiarity, visual cues, and media accessibility (Maheshkar et al., 2018). Advertising can create top-of-mind awareness, but its success depends heavily on the message's cultural relevance and frequency of exposure. The use of local dialects, culturally resonant images, and region-specific themes enhances familiarity and recall among rural consumers (Romaniuk et al., 2004).

Brand image refers to the consumer's perception of a brand based on accumulated associations from advertisements, user experience, and social influence (Dobni & Zinkhan, 1990; Keller, 1993). While urban advertising often capitalizes on aspirational imagery and modern aesthetics, rural

consumers tend to evaluate brands based on value for money, trustworthiness, and cultural compatibility (Sinha & Katiyar, 2021). Advertising that fails to reflect rural realities, such as depicting urban lifestyles or employing celebrity endorsements with limited local appeal, can weaken brand image and consumer identification (Malik et al., 2013). Effective brand image-building in rural India requires relatable situations, practical benefits, and avoidance of overt urban elitism (Spielmann, 2021).

Brand personality reflects human-like traits attributed to a brand, such as reliability, simplicity, or warmth (Aaker, 1997). In rural contexts, brand personality is conveyed through tone, voice, spokespersons, and visual storytelling. Advertising that portrays a brand as “caring,” “honest,” or “community-oriented” aligns closely with rural consumer values (Sung & Kim, 2010). Given rural audiences’ reliance on word-of-mouth and social references, personality traits emphasizing integrity and familiarity tend to resonate more than exclusivity or status (Wojdyski & Evans, 2020; Lee et al., 2016).

Brand equity, the culmination of brand-building efforts, encapsulates the perceived value and emotional bond consumers develop with a brand (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 2003). In rural India, brand equity is built slowly and organically, relying heavily on repeated exposure, community feedback, and product performance (Kumar et al., 2016; Shukla et al., 2016). Advertising contributes to equity when it reinforces credibility and reliability. Inconsistent messaging or failure to adapt to rural values can hinder equity formation despite initial awareness or positive brand image (Yoo et al., 2000; Tellis, 2009; Anderson et al., 1994).

The media used to deliver advertisements significantly influences their effectiveness, particularly in rural environments (Craig et al., 2011). Despite growing digital penetration, many rural consumers depend on traditional media such as radio, regional TV, and local print due to infrastructure limitations, digital literacy, and cost (Nielsen, 2022). Media choices must consider accessibility, affordability, and regional consumption habits. An integrated approach combining traditional reach with targeted digital strategies, where

feasible, often proves most effective (Sahu et al., 2023). The mismatch between media selection and target audience remains a persistent challenge (Singh, 2012; Opeodu & Gbadebo, 2017; Bishnoi & Sharma, 2009).

Content relevance, defined as the degree to which advertising messages resonate with the linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic context of rural consumers, is a critical mediator influencing advertising effectiveness (Kumar & Gupta, 2021). It functions as a mechanism by which advertising strategies affect brand awareness, image, personality, and equity. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) offers a theoretical foundation for this mediating role, suggesting that persuasion occurs via central and peripheral routes (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). While urban consumers often engage in central processing by critically evaluating advertising content, rural consumers may rely more on peripheral cues, such as culturally relevant visuals, language, and source credibility, that align with their socio-cultural realities (Petty & Briñol, 2015).

Empirical evidence indicates that when advertising content aligns with rural consumers’ lived experiences and values, it increases engagement and favorable brand evaluations, thus enhancing brand equity (Qader et al., 2022). This mediation effect has been observed in studies within emerging markets, where tailored messaging bridges the gap between urban-centric advertising and rural consumer expectations (Rahman, 2012). Advertising content that highlights practical benefits, trust-building narratives, and family-centric themes generates stronger emotional connections compared to abstract or aspirational themes (Qader et al., 2022). Therefore, understanding and leveraging content relevance is essential to developing effective advertising strategies that resonate with rural consumers and drive brand performance (Ali et al., 2012).

The integration of content relevance as a mediating construct enhances the explanatory power of advertising models in rural markets. As Figure 1 illustrates, the conceptual framework posits that content relevance mediates the relationship between advertising strategies (message, media) and brand outcomes (awareness, image, personality, equity). This framework builds on the theoretical

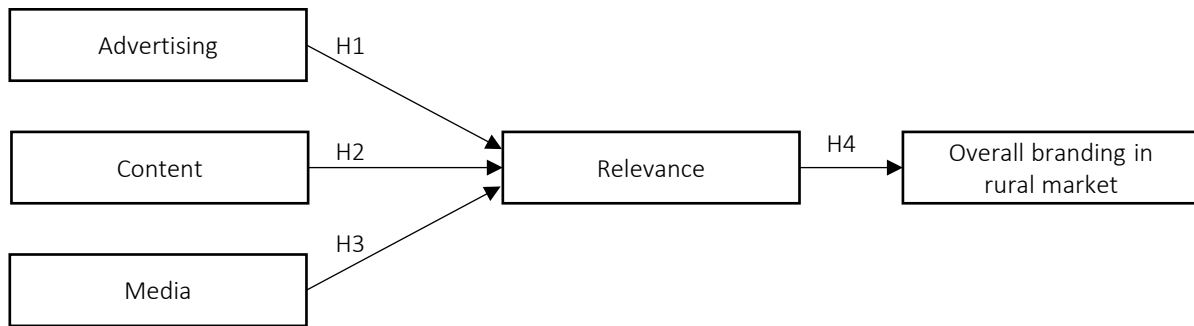


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

foundations of the ELM and brand equity models, offering practical guidance for advertisers to redesign campaigns to suit rural lifestyles and aspirations.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate how advertising strategies, including both content and media, affect brand-building outcomes, specifically brand awareness, brand image, brand personality, and brand equity, within India’s rural personal care FMCG market. This investigation is grounded in the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), which provides a robust theoretical framework for understanding the dual routes of persuasion and their relevance in rural consumer contexts.

Based on the theoretical insights and empirical evidence reviewed, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H01: Advertising has no considerable influence on overall branding in rural markets.*
- H02: Advertising content has no considerable influence on overall branding in rural markets.*
- H03: Advertising media has no considerable influence on overall branding in rural markets.*
- H04: The influence of advertising on brand-building is mediated by content relevance.*

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a cross-sectional, quantitative research design to examine the influence of advertising and its components, content and media, on

branding in rural markets, specifically within the personal care product segment. The research was conducted in Madhya Pradesh, a centrally located Indian state, using a structured questionnaire administered face-to-face. This method ensured clarity and participation despite varying literacy levels in rural populations.

A purposive sampling technique was adopted to select participants who were users of personal care products and had exposure to advertising. The final sample comprised 498 usable responses, obtained after removing inattentive respondents based on criteria such as straight-lining, extremely short completion times, and illogical response patterns (Steel et al., 2025). Initially, 2,000 respondents were approached, and 569 completed the questionnaire, yielding a usable rate of 24.8%.

Respondents were from 13 rural towns (e.g., Bhikangaon, Banswara, Kukshi, Sehore), chosen based on accessibility and socio-cultural diversity. The demographic profile included 64.6% male and 35.4% female, and a broad range of age groups, education levels, and occupations, ensuring representativeness of rural consumer diversity. Respondents participated voluntarily, with informed consent obtained prior to data collection. The anonymity and confidentiality of all responses were ensured throughout the study.

The questionnaire was developed based on validated scales from prior literature (see Table 1). A five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) was used. The instrument was pretested on 25 rural consumers (~5% of the sample) to ensure clarity, reliability, and contextual relevance. Based on feedback, minor adjustments were made.

Table 1. Questionnaire

Construct	Code	Items	Source
Advertising content	AC1	The message in rural advertisements is clear and easy to understand.	Petty et al. (1986)
	AC2	The content in advertisements reflects local values and culture.	Escalas & Bettman (2005)
	AC3	Advertising stories or visuals capture my attention effectively.	Petty et al. (1986)
	AC4	I can relate to the characters or situations shown in rural advertisements.	Escalas and Bettman (2005)
Advertising media	AM1	I often notice advertisements on radio, TV, or local events in my area.	Singh (2012)
	AM2	I trust information more when I see it on familiar media.	Shavitt et al. (1998), Yoo et al. (2000)
	AM3	The medium of advertising affects how much attention I pay to the brand.	Singh (2012)
	AM4	The choice of media makes it easier for me to remember the brand.	Keller (1993);
Content relevance (mediator)	CR1	I feel that the advertisements are made for people like me.	Escalas and Bettman (2005)
	CR2	The information in ads relates to my needs or lifestyle.	Andrews et al. (1990), Escalas and Bettman (2005)
	CR3	I find the content of the advertisements useful or helpful.	Andrews et al. (1990)
	CR4	Relevant advertisements help me trust the brand more.	Yoo et al. (2000)
Overall branding	BR1	I am familiar with the brand because of its advertisements.	Keller (1993), Aaker (1996)
	BR2	I trust this brand more after seeing its advertisements.	Yoo et al. (2000), Aaker (1996)
	BR3	I prefer this brand over others because of what I've seen or heard in its ads.	Keller (1993)
	BR4	The brand seems more valuable or credible due to its advertisements.	Aaker (1996), Yoo et al. (2000)

3. RESULTS

Post-collection, the data were screened for missing values, outliers, and response bias. The final dataset was analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) via AMOS 26. This approach is suitable for testing complex mediation models and assessing construct validity.

To examine the underlying factor structure of the constructs related to advertising strategies and rural brand building, an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was initially performed using the Principal Component Analysis (PCA) method with Varimax rotation, assuming factors to be orthogonal. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was applied to assess the appropriateness of the data for factor analysis. A KMO value exceeding 0.80 indicated satisfactory sampling adequacy (Cerny & Kaiser, 1977). Additionally, Bartlett's test of sphericity confirmed that the data were suitable for structure detection (Hair et al., 2019).

To determine the number of factors to retain, the Guttman-Kaiser criterion (eigenvalues > 1)

and the cumulative variance explained threshold (>70%) were used, ensuring that the extracted components accounted for a substantial amount of total variance. The use of orthogonal rotation via Varimax supported the assumption that extracted dimensions were uncorrelated.

Following EFA, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted using AMOS version 21 to validate the dimensionality, as well as to test the convergent and discriminant validity of the measurement model. Data from 498 respondents were analyzed using the maximum likelihood estimation method. The reliability of each construct was examined using Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE), the results of which are summarized in Table 2.

To assess the overall model fit, a comprehensive set of fit indices was employed. The Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI) was used to determine the proportion of variance explained by the estimated model. Besides, the Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Index (AGFI) was applied, which refines the GFI by adjusting for the model's degrees of freedom, thereby accounting for model complexity. The

model's robustness was further examined using the Normed Fit Index (NFI) and the Comparative Fit Index (CFI). These indices assess how well the proposed model fits the data in comparison to a null model, with CFI also adjusting for sample size to provide a more accurate estimate (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Furthermore, the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) was utilized, where values less than 0.08 are indicative of a reasonably good fit. Lastly, the Chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio (χ^2/df) was evaluated, with values below 5.0 considered acceptable, signifying a low discrepancy between the observed and estimated covariance matrices (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

The mediating role of content relevance in the relationship between advertising strategies and rural brand building was assessed through bootstrapping procedures. Bias-corrected bootstrapping with 2,000 resamples and a 90% confidence interval was employed, as recommended for structural equation modeling to handle issues such as multivariate non-normality and limited sample size (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Although the dataset was found to be normally distributed, bootstrapping provided a robust estimation of indirect effects and reduced the likelihood of Type I errors.

To cross-validate the mediation findings, the Sobel test was also performed, offering an additional significance check for the indirect pathways. AMOS was selected for its intuitive graphical interface, which simplifies the process of model specification and interpretation compared to other tools such as R, LISREL, PLS-SEM, or MPLUS.

The potential influence of common method bias (CMB), which arises when the measurement instrument itself, rather than the theoretical constructs, artificially inflates or deflates observed relationships in SEM studies, was assessed. Harman's single factor test, performed using principal axis factoring, served as primary diagnostic. This test revealed that CMB was unlikely to be a major issue, as the variance accounted for by a single factor incorporating all observed variables remained below 40%. While we applied Harman's test, other indicators like Variance Inflation Factors (VIFs) exceeding 3.3 and latent factor correlations surpassing 0.90 (Podsakoff et al., 2012) are also commonly used to flag potential CMB concerns.

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy yielded a value of 0.945, indicating excellent suitability for factor analysis. Additionally, Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($p = 0.000$), confirming the appropriateness of proceeding with factor extraction. The Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) using Varimax rotation converged in seven iterations, resulting in the identification of five factors with eigenvalues exceeding 1, collectively accounting for 78.401% of the total variance.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) revealed a satisfactory model fit, primarily due to several items demonstrating standardized factor loadings below 0.50, which indicated weak item contributions and affected the overall goodness-of-fit of the model.

The model fit statistics for the measurement model used to assess advertising strategies in the rural personal care FMCG sector. Chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio stood at 2.944, indicating a reasonable fit. Additional fit indices such as GFI (0.906), AGFI (0.851), NFI (0.925), CFI (0.943), and RMSEA (0.078) fell within acceptable ranges, confirming the adequacy of the model.

The reliability analysis confirmed the robustness of the constructs, with statistically significant values ($p < 0.05$ and t -values > 1.96), indicating that the items were reliable indicators of their respective latent constructs.

As shown in Table 2, the composite reliability (CR) scores for the examined dimensions, including advertisement, content, media, content relevance, and overall branding, all surpassed the acceptable benchmark of 0.70, ranging from 0.79 to 0.94, confirming internal consistency. Additionally, the factor loadings for each observed variable exceeded the threshold of 0.70, demonstrating strong indicator reliability in line with the recommendations of Nunnally (1970).

To assess convergent validity, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values were analyzed. All constructs reported AVE values above 0.50, ranging from 0.640 to 0.760 (refer to Table 2), indicating that a significant portion of the variance is captured by the constructs themselves (Hair et al.,

Table 2. Validity analysis

Dimensions	CR	AVE	MSV	MaxR(H)	Advert	Media	Relevance	Brand	Cont
Advertisement	0.877	0.640	0.541	0.878	0.800				
Media	0.909	0.719	0.555	0.945	0.655***	0.848			
Relevance	0.927	0.760	0.571	0.930	0.736***	0.668***	0.872		
Branding	0.891	0.673	0.555	0.899	0.674***	0.745***	0.690***	0.821	
Content	0.910	0.718	0.571	0.917	0.683***	0.629***	0.756***	0.569***	0.847

2019). Discriminant validity was verified through a comparison of the squared inter-construct correlations with their corresponding AVE values. Since the AVE for each construct exceeded the squared correlations with other constructs, discriminant validity was established (Hair et al., 2019).

Table 3. HTMT analysis

Dimensions	Advert	Media	Relev	Brand	Cont
Advertisement					
Media	0.684				
Relevance	0.742	0.708			
Branding	0.678	0.815	0.709		
Content	0.685	0.662	0.748	0.59	

Furthermore, master validity tool developed by Gaskin and Lim (2016) was utilized to comprehensively examine the measurement model's validity. The HTMT analysis results further supported discriminant validity, as all HTMT values remained below the conservative threshold of 0.85, indicating that the constructs are empirically distinct. These results collectively validate the reliability and discriminant validity of the model used to explore the influence of advertising mechanisms on rural brand perception and loyalty in the personal care FMCG space. Table 3 presents HTMT results.

The model fit indices presented in the table provide strong evidence for the adequacy of the structural equation model. The Chi-square statistic (CMIN) is 8.013 with 3 degrees of freedom (DF), resulting in a CMIN/DF ratio of 2.671, which is well below the recommended threshold of 5.0, indicating an acceptable fit between the hypothesized model and the observed data. The Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI) value is 0.971, and the Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Index (AGFI) is 0.912, both of which exceed the commonly accepted benchmark of 0.90, suggesting that a high proportion of variance is explained by the model while accounting

for model complexity. Normed Fit Index (NFI) and Comparative Fit Index (CFI) are also above the 0.90 threshold, with values of 0.921 and 0.958, respectively, indicating a strong comparative fit of the model against a null model. Finally, Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) is 0.065, which falls within the acceptable range (less than 0.08), further confirming the model's good fit. Overall, the reported fit indices collectively demonstrate that the structural model is statistically sound and well-specified.

The results of the direct effect analysis, as presented in Table 4, highlight significant relationships among the constructs in the context of evaluating advertising strategies and their impact on rural brand building in the personal care FMCG sector. Advertisement Design (AD) demonstrated a positive and significant effect on content relevance (CR) with a standardized estimate of 0.298 ($p < 0.001$), indicating that visually appealing and well-crafted advertisements play a crucial role in shaping customer perceptions. Thus we reject $H01$. Advertisement content (AC) showed the strongest direct influence on content relevance with an estimate of 0.353 ($p < 0.001$), emphasizing the importance of message relevance and cultural alignment in rural markets. Thus we reject $H02$.

Table 4. Direct effect

Relationship	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P	Results
AD → CR	0.298	0.042	7.745	0.000	Supported
AC → CR	0.353	0.042	9.264	0.000	Supported
AM → CR	0.253	0.033	6.658	0.000	Supported
CR → BR	0.64	0.04	18.549	0.000	Supported

Similarly, advertisement media (AM) significantly impacted content relevance with an estimate of 0.253 ($p < 0.001$), suggesting that the choice of communication channels also matters. Thus, we reject $H03$. Furthermore, content relevance (CR) exhibited a strong and statistically significant effect on Brand Recognition (BR), with an esti-

Table 5. Mediation effect table (content relevance as mediator)

Path	Indirect effect	Standardized indirect effect	95% CI lower	95% CI upper	p-value
AM → CR → BR	0.177	0.141	0.117	0.215	0.001
AC → CR → BR	0.228	0.180	0.18	0.278	0.001
AD → CR → BR	0.304	0.243	0.243	0.243	0.001

mate of 0.640 ($p < 0.001$), confirming that positive customer reactions to advertising efforts directly contribute to stronger brand identity and recall in rural areas. All hypothesized relationships were supported at a high level of statistical significance, reinforcing the model’s theoretical soundness.

The mediation analysis was conducted to examine whether content relevance (CR) plays a mediating role in the relationship between advertising strategies, namely, advertising media (AM), advertising content (AC), and advertising design (AD), and branding (BR). The bootstrap estimates for indirect effects, based on 2,000 samples, indicate statistically significant mediation pathways for all three advertising variables. Specifically, the bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals for the indirect effects of AM, AC, and AD on BR via CR do not contain zero, confirming the significance of the mediated relationships. The lower and upper bounds for the indirect effects were found to be 0.117–0.215 for AM, 0.228–0.355 for AC, and 0.177–0.304 for AD, respectively (refer to Table 5). Corresponding standardized indirect effects ranged from 0.117 to 0.211 (AM), 0.180 to 0.278 (AC), and 0.141 to 0.243 (AD). All p-values associated with these indirect paths were less than 0.01, further substantiating the robustness of the mediating role of content relevance ($H04$). These findings suggest that rural consumers’ perception of content relevance substantially enhances the effectiveness of advertising strategies in fostering branding within the personal care FMCG sector. Thus, tailoring advertising content to resonate with rural consumers’ contextual needs and cultural values emerges as a critical mechanism for strengthening brand-building outcomes.

4. DISCUSSION

This study set out to evaluate how advertising content, media, and design influence brand-building among rural consumers in India’s personal care FMCG sector, with content relevance acting as a

mediating factor. The findings strongly support the hypothesis that culturally resonant advertising, delivered through locally appropriate media, enhances rural brand engagement, particularly when the messaging is perceived as relevant to consumers’ lives.

The results validate and extend the elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) by demonstrating that rural consumers, typically characterized by lower involvement levels due to infrastructural, linguistic, and educational constraints, are more responsive to peripheral cues such as familiar imagery, language, and relatable spokespeople. This aligns with the assertion by Petty and Briñol (2015) that in low-involvement contexts, persuasive communication is processed more effectively through peripheral pathways.

Advertising content had the strongest direct effect on content relevance ($\beta = 0.353$), confirming earlier findings by Kumar and Gupta (2021), who emphasized that rural consumers respond more favorably to advertisements embedded with local language, family-oriented narratives, and relatable visuals. The importance of content relevance as a mediating factor aligns with (Rahman, 2012), who found that emotional storytelling and contextual fit significantly enhance recall and brand trust in rural markets.

Similarly, the positive and significant effect of advertising media on content relevance ($\beta = 0.253$) corroborates prior work by (Johnson, 2001), who argued that traditional media, such as radio, local television, and vernacular newspapers, remain influential in rural India due to their accessibility and trustworthiness. This finding underscores the need for media planners to align channel strategies with rural consumption habits, as suggested by Singh (2012) and Opeodu and Gbadebo (2017).

The mediation analysis revealed that content relevance significantly enhances the relationship between advertising strategies and brand outcomes.

This mediating role echoes insights by Escalas and Bettman (2005) and Yoo et al. (2000), who emphasized that when consumers perceive advertisements as relevant, it builds emotional resonance, increases message acceptance, and reinforces brand equity. This extends the work of Homburg et al. (2010) and Keller (1993), who highlighted the pivotal role of familiarity and recall in brand development, especially in fragmented markets.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the rural branding literature by integrating ELM with branding constructs such as awareness, image, personality, and equity (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 2003), and empirically demonstrates how context-sensitive advertising can drive positive brand outcomes. It also supports the argument by Spielmann (2021) that advertising authenticity and relevance are critical for engagement in emerging markets.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how advertising content, media, and design influence brand-building in rural India's personal care FMCG sector, with content relevance acting as a mediator. Applying the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), the research provides evidence that rural consumers process advertising primarily through peripheral cues, favoring familiar visuals, culturally aligned content, and accessible media.

The findings show that among the three components, content has the most substantial impact on brand perception, both directly and through the lens of content relevance. Media and design also contribute meaningfully, particularly when the message resonates with the consumer's context and values. From a theoretical standpoint, the study extends ELM to rural, low-involvement settings and integrates it with branding constructs like awareness, image, and equity. It also highlights the importance of perceived relevance in enhancing consumer engagement, an underexplored dimension in rural branding literature.

For practitioners, the message is clear: rural campaigns must go beyond translation and embrace localization. Effective advertising strategies in these markets must reflect regional culture, language, and communication habits to build lasting brand relationships. As rural markets grow in economic and strategic importance, brands must invest in culturally authentic and context-aware communication. Doing so will not only increase engagement but also strengthen brand equity in India's most diverse and dynamic consumer segment.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization: Chandan Maheshkar, Sándor Remsei.

Data curation: Yogesh Mahajan.

Formal analysis: Chandan Maheshkar.

Funding acquisition: Sándor Remsei.

Investigation: Sándor Remsei.

Methodology: Yogesh Mahajan, Manohar Kapse.

Project administration: Manohar Kapse.

Resources: Vinod Sharma.

Software: Yogesh Mahajan.

Supervision: Yogesh Mahajan, Sándor Remsei, Manohar Kapse.

Validation: Vinod Sharma, Chandan Maheshkar.

Visualization: Vinod Sharma, Manohar Kapse.

Writing – original draft: Vinod Sharma, Yogesh Mahajan.

Writing – review & editing: Chandan Maheshkar, Manohar Kapse.

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